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SHORT STORY A

THE BIRD & WILLOW WALK

Twice a year the psychiatrist escapes from the demands of his work and renews his strength with a fishing vacation. Twice a year we cannot escape from the fact that our two pigs are large enough to be butchered, and that we must renew the diminishing stock of pork in the freezer. We share two things in common with the psychiatrist. Both he and we can eat the products of our efforts,

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and both he and we backed into our respective skills through learning how NOT to catch our quarry.

There are all sorts of books on trout fishing, some with yellow sou'wester waterproof covers, so that you may go right on reading when you step into a deep hole and begin feeling like a trout. I have never seen a book on catching and loading pigs into a half-ton truck. It probably wouldn't be a fast moving item in most book stores.

We keep two pigs all the time for a variety of reasons. We have a large barn at a good distance from the house. They save us money in food bills. They require a minimum of care, and most important but least understood, we like pigs.

However, twice a year they must be loaded into the truck and taken to the slaughter house. A seven-month-old pig weighs about two hundred and fifty pounds, which is distributed in such a streamlined fashion that there is nothing to hang on to. Even if you could put a halter on a pig, it cannot be pulled. The harder you pull the harder the pig pulls the other way, and the pig has the edge on most of us in weight. Shoving won't work either, even if you have another pig fancier pulling on the front end. The pig, screeching in blood-curdling tones, whether you are holding a leg or an ear, will thrash and twist out of your grasp.

The first time we were faced with this problem was ten years and forty-six pigs ago. The memory of that morning is still too painful to describe objectively. We tried to fasten ropes around the pigs, but they slithered loose. We chased them through the garden and fields. Finally, by luck rather than skill, we cornered the two pigs in the barn where they were confined, though far from being loaded in the back of the Jeep station wagon. Shaken and bruised from head to foot, George leaned against the barn door and threatened to shoot the pigs. Only the fact that he was too exhausted to move postponed their doom. Hours later, we finally dragged the shrieking floundering pigs up a wooden ramp into the wagon and set off on a limp journey to town.

In true Vermont fashion, none of our neighbors offered unsolicited advice to George. But when I described our struggle to

one friend, he told me that all you had to do was put a bucket over a pig's head and back it to whatever destination you had in mind. When he added that it helped if someone else grabbed the tail and steered the pig, I suspected that my ~~leg~~ leg was being pulled once more, and dismissed his words from my mind.

It was not until the next summer that I remembered his suggestion and offered it tentatively to George. Softened by the memory of bruises and a sprained knee, my husband agreed to let me try. I put a little grain in the bottom of a pail and climbed into the pen with the pigs. While George knocked off the boards on one side, I enticed the pig to try a bite. The moment her head was in the bucket, George grabbed her tail, while I pushed from the bucket end, and all three of us sailed out of the pig pen, up through the barnyard and were inside the Jeep in three minutes!

It couldn't be true. It was too easy; just luck. So with some doubts, the next season we once again started to load pigs.

This time it was early morning and George and I were going to load the pigs before he went to his office. We had only a half an hour. When neither pig showed any interest in the pail, George lunged at them and all was lost. He and the two pigs chased each other around making angry noises. We gave up and went in for breakfast.

After breakfast, with George at work and the children at school, I began to wonder. The Jeep was still parked half-way in the barn door. The ramp was in place on the tail gate. Could I . . . ? Would it be possible to load those two pigs by myself? When, if I got one in the station wagon, could I keep it there while I loaded the other? With pounding heart, I planned my strategy. First I put an appetizing mound of lettuce leaves in the back of the Jeep. Then I mixed some grain and water in the pail. Singing Brahms' lullaby with words improvised for pig loading, I held the pail in the pig pen and tried to act disinterested. Immediately one pig thrust her snout in the pail. I jammed it farther onto her head and backed her out of the pen. The ramp was narrow, and without George's guiding hand on the cutly rudder, she backed off the side on to the barn floor. But I stayed with her, keeping the pail

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over her head and shoving with all my strength. The air was limited in the pail. She was gasping. So was I. The thought that she was weakening gave me second wind and we plunged up the ramp into the Jeep. She immediately became engrossed in the lettuce, as I had hoped, and I crawled out to find the other pig.

He was grunting curiously at the tail gate. I slammed the pail over his head and backed him in a wide arc so that his rear end would come around to the wooden ramp. There's a lot of strength in a pig. I was losing mine rapidly along with the skin from several knuckles. My arms were quivering from exertion. Half-way up the ramp he began to fold his hind legs under him and sit down.

"Please . . ." I gasped. "PLEASE get in there!"

I shut my eyes and strained till little lights danced before my eyes. Miraculously, the pig backed up the ramp and into the Jeep. With shaking hands I closed the tail gate and leaned against it, panting. I was dripping wet. I was also streaked with a gruel of grain and water. I staggered into the front seat and slowly drove off with my shifting grunting cargo.

Sixty-story B

helpful Hiram and hateful Hannah

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In spite of Montgomery Ward and the Dime stores and auctions, there were still gaps in our furnishings.

Up to now we had been using a little three unit hot porch to cook on. I wanted a gas stove. The cot on the porch was quite comfortable; however, for atmosphere and the accommodation of extra guests I wanted a chaise longue. A venetian blind would improve the picture window. The fireplace had finally been completed but it needed a big brass kettle to hold wood. The wood problem had already been solved. One day while we were driving out in the country we passed a pile of pretty birch logs all about three feet in length. They were beside the road without a house or barn in sight. I read the large sign "For Sale", but slowed down to read the small print, "Please put money in mail box. Ten cents a stick." It was simple; it was practical; it was beautifully trusting but it reminded me of a time when we were visiting in Providence. My cousin Doctor Ed told us that he was going to drive us around to a service station with a sign that deserved immortality. He stopped his

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car and asked for gas so we could get a good look at the inspiring message. It read 'Rear ends greased. Ten cents a shot.'

"Did you say 'immortality'?" That's putting it mildly. I'd say immorality," Aunt Nell added.

There were many things that I wanted but most of them would have to wait. Nothing was so pressing as gray paint for the porch.

Late one afternoon we took off for Montgomery Ward's. I had been working that day. Even though vacation had begun there had been home calls to make and I did not have time to change my uniform. I figured the blue cape would cover it. In Burlington the parking situation was tough so I left my car three blocks from the store. After my purchase the salesman suggested driving to an alley where he could load the paint on for me.

I figured that it would take at least fifteen minutes to get my car but I was back in five. As I lowered the window and prepared to wait, a middle-aged man motioned for me to back into his garage. It was cool and shady there. Under her breath Aunt Nell whispered,

"What in the world do you suppose he means by motioning you into this place I'd like to know. Tell him to mind his own business."

"I think he's grand. Isn't he friendly?" Her only answer was a genteel snort. I shifted into reverse and our host stood back of the car directing me when to turn right or left.

Then he came over to my side of the car and started conversation.

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"Been shopping?"

"Yes, we have. I came into this alley because the salesman in Montgomery Ward's told me he would have some paint carried out to my car in a few minutes. It was nice of you to invite us in where it's so cool."

"Oh, that's all right. Anyhow I'm quite a hand to talk to folks. My wife died four years ago and my daughter and I have a cottage at Mallett's Bay."

"That's too bad!" I suddenly wondered if he thought I meant it was too bad his wife had died, or that he had a cottage at Mallett's Bay.

He did not seem at all embarrassed and before I could explain, continued,

"We had a fire last week. We lost just about everything we had. The only thing saved was a gas stove. I wonder if you'd care to accept it. I'll be only too glad to give it to you."

At that point Aunt Nell said sternly, "~~What~~ there comes the boy with the paint. We'd better be going along. This gentleman must have work to do."

He asked if the paint was to go in the trunk and he reached for the key. Now the conversation had to be terminated in some way. I took the lead.

"I'll be delighted to accept the stove. But first will you please tell me how you happened to pick me out. I have a cottage at the lake, miles from here and a gas stove is the one big thing I need, but this is positively psychic. How did you know?"

His lower jaw dropped, as he stammered.

"Huh? Er . . . what? I'll be darned, you ARE the

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Salvation Army, aren't you?"

"No, Public Health," I responded with a restrained little grin. As I left the alley I burst into a full-fledged laugh. There was not even a smite on Aunt Nell's face.

"~~What~~, sometimes you mortify me to death. You do certainly get yourself into ridiculous situations."

We had about an hour before it would be time to eat supper and we planned to go to a restaurant in Burlington. It has been said that Vermonters call a meal 'supper' if it is served after six P.M., even though it be a full course dinner.

To kill time we drove about Aunt Nell's 'dear old Burlington.' She had spent much of her life there and loved it.

"I'd like to see the bungalow that has been in the news," I suggested.

"It was the man who built the bungalow that made the news I say," retorted Aunt Nell. "You remind me of a Frenchman I once heard of. A friend said to him, 'I see you're not living in the same place; where did you move to, Joe?' For answer he pointed up the street and said, 'See that lamp-post? Upstair.'"

The bungalow had been built by a man who had expected to take his bride to it. He had come from down country and had been living in Vermont for three years. She was a native girl. He had furnished the home completely, had spared nothing on it. The girl had every reason to be happy and to anticipate a long, happy, married life. He was devotion itself to her.

The evening before the wedding the bridal group went

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to the church for rehearsal. A party for the attendants followed and the groom-to-be was in the best of humor. The next morning while the bride was dressing a message came to her. Her fiance' had been found dead in his room. Sometime during the night he had committed suicide with a revolver. No note had been found, nor could anyone advance a reason for the tragedy.

We made sure to get to the restaurant before the crowd, but once there, took all the time we wanted in eating. There was nothing to rush for. The ride home would be delightful because we would have a grand view of the setting sun across the lake. We had a feeling of happy and tranquil companionship.