

WOMAN'S HOME Companion

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... there was scarce any condition in the world so miserable, but there was... something positive to be thankful for in it

ROBINSON CRUSOE

Doing It Together

PORTIA HOWE SPERRY



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IN THE years when my husband had his own business, owned his home and had a large life insurance, if anyone had told me that, with the needs of all six of us (seven with the dog) met by an income of seventy-five dollars a month, we should have found our real riches, I should have thought him stark crazy. But that's exactly what has happened and it has been the most thrilling adventure in living that I have ever known.

The ingredients of the adventure have been a considerable amount of daring and faith, much hard work and some miracles. I can't explain some of the things that have happened any other way. Perhaps miracles after all are made up of faith and works, plus something totally unexpected that seems to be tossed in to crown and reward one's efforts.

My husband manufactured pianos. He had gone up and up in his business until he was recognized as one of the best manufacturers in this country. Trade journals both here and in Europe quoted his ideas on piano-making. We lived with a happy feeling of security. The children's education was provided for, we had everything in the way of material needs taken care of and the future, we thought, was assured. Then came radios. Ralph, seeing the way things were going, procured contracts for radio cabinets and the factory was soon working day and night shifts. But meanwhile the radio market had become overstocked. The factory was piled up with cabinets on which no money could be realized. The company went into the hands of the receivers.

That was the beginning. We curtailed expenses, began to retrench, let the cook go. Gradually investments began to be sacrificed.

AFTER a few months my husband was offered a position with a large radio concern in an eastern city. It meant just half of our former income but he decided to accept. The children and I stayed behind while he went to try out the position. Just before the holidays he wired us to be ready to return east with him immediately after Christmas. The company had recognized my husband's ability, had assured him he was to consider himself a permanent part of the organization.

That drive east was one of the most glorious experiences of our whole lives. We were hilariously happy to be together again. The country was a continuous fairyland, with snow-covered mountains, Christmas trees lighted in windows of villages and towns. It was exactly like one of those old-fashioned German Christmas cards come to life. And the spirit of Christmas was singing in each of our hearts.

Ralph had rented an old-fashioned house in a residential neighborhood for sixty dollars a month. The rent was low because the house had only one bath. But the nine rooms gave us a study for the boys and a game room. We felt ourselves lucky for all round us up-to-date houses were renting for ninety dollars.

Then, just four months after we had been told that Ralph was to consider himself a permanent part of the organization, the blow fell. He received word that his services were no longer needed. We faced the inconceivable: We had one month's salary to count on. Ralph's life business was wiped out, a large insurance premium had to be met in the spring, the house at home was empty, and we, with all our possessions, were in a distant city. More than that the strain had told terribly on Ralph. He was ill; the very smell of food made him deathly sick.

UP TO this point our story is just like thousands of others. But we faced around squarely and asked ourselves what we were going to do about it. Patch things up and try to imitate the kind of life we had before, or start all over, from scratch? We knew how little we could live on. That we had learned by adopting a cash basis. I remembered a tiny village we had often passed in the southern part of our state. The folk, hardly more than five hundred in all, seemed kindly. It was a beautifully hilly spot. Somehow my imagination took me straight there, where we could live for far less than in any city. We could have a garden and put up vegetables and fruits for winter. We could all work together in the garden and Ralph would grow strong. Then by the fall he would be able to go after a job.

So we set out on our adventure, with the unknown and the untried as our objective. We left the furniture in the east. A kind neighbor offered the loft of his barn and we stored things there. How many times in the years that have followed, at some critical turn, has there been an offer from some "kind neighbor"!

Once we knew our destination it was all a lark. For the time, at least, we were care-free as gypsies. It was April, the weather mild. A friend had long invited us to visit her in Washington; now we could accept the invitation. We landed there at cherry blossom time.

The result of that visit to Washington was a job for sixteen-year-old Charles, taking care of three boys for the summer. It came about quite casually while I was lunching with a friend, and the first interview settled it—a summer on an island in Chesapeake Bay with boating and fishing and the company of a delightful family.

The first piece of luck we had on our return was the sale of our house when everyone said it simply couldn't happen. We needed that money so badly that I think it

had to happen. We lost twenty-five hundred dollars on the deal but there was enough to pay every debt we owed and leave us a small amount. How thankful we were!

Leaving the children with a relative, Ralph and I went to have a look at the little village. We found a log cabin on a hill and rented it for twenty dollars. But when we returned with the children and Trixie, the dog, and our belongings, the owner had been offered twenty-five for the cabin and had rented it. The tenants already had moved in. It was raining, the side roads

were deep and gummy with mud. We drove up and down through the mire and nothing could we find for less than forty dollars—an impossible sum to us at the time. That left only some one-room red shacks on a hillside overlooking a beautiful fertile valley. The hillside had garden possibilities but those shacks! Water had to be carried from across the road and drinking water a quarter of a mile from higher up the hill. But we could get two of these shacks for ten dollars a month. Should we rent them? Were we to give up at the very first difficulty? We took the shacks.

At the foot of the hill we made our garden. One day when we were all working in it Jim, in overalls and no shirt, laid down his hoe and came and sat beside me where I was resting for a little. His face was happy beneath streaks of dirt. "We are proving it isn't true, aren't we, Mother?"

"Proving what, Jim?"

"People say you have to have money to be happy; we haven't any money and we just couldn't be any happier, could we?"

THAT NIGHT when the children were asleep Ralph and I cast up accounts. If Jim felt that way about things, we were accomplishing what we had determined we would—not to spoil the children's fun just because our own world was topsy-turvy.

Many a time in those months spent in the shacks the children pulled us through. One rainy day we were all sitting on the beds playing games because it was the only thing we could do. My spirits were almost at zero. Emily looked up suddenly: "Things seem different in the country, don't they?"

Very different, I thought. "But how, Emily?" I asked.

"Oh," she said, "when we lived in the city I always hated a rainy day, but here I love it because I know it's making our garden grow and filling the cistern."

And there was the Sunday when it was so damp and cold that we put on all the sweaters we possessed, took off our shoes and crawled into bed. We had to do something to forget how dismal it was so we read Kim and from the vantage point of the damp leaky little shack, with our clothes flapping like dreary ghosts all about the walls, we went adventuring through far-off India. What a blessing books were in those days. We always had a plentiful supply on hand from the tiny library

which got them on order through the state library. How much more we appreciated them than when we were surrounded with them and all the other excitement of city life.

Our family fortunes were varied. We were determined we would support ourselves with our earnings and not touch a cent of the small emergency fund. Ralph found a foreman was needed in a large apple orchard near by. It paid only twenty-five cents an hour but at least that helped buy the staple groceries. Our garden was generous in size and we grew everything in it from sweet and Irish potatoes to popcorn and peanuts. We sold vegetables to a neighboring camp and canned hundreds of quarts of fruits and vegetables. The hills, fortunately, were profuse with blackberries, and by picking peaches ourselves we got them for twenty-five cents a bushel.

WHEN WE first came down to our little community to look things over we had noticed the sign of a girls' camp. I made a mental note of it with the hope of being able to teach something in return for having the two little girls in camp. So as soon as the owner arrived, in late June, I went to see her and she was only too glad to take the children in exchange for my services to teach swimming one hour a day. The girls were to eat and sleep at home but to have all the advantages of music, dramatics, dancing and the good times that go with camp life. The walk back and forth in the hot sun for noon lunches, however, was too much for them. Emily was just ten and Posie only eight. I noticed that the steps down to the creek had been washed away and were badly in need of repair. I asked the camp director if she would like Ralph to mend them in exchange for Emily's and Posie's noon meal. It was happily arranged.

People began to learn that we were not afraid of honest work. I had offered my services to the manager of the country hotel and I told her I would do anything. One day she came running to our shack with the news that the cook had left. Would I come down and cook for a week? Right then and there was a turning point in my life. I had never even seen a coal range, much less cooked on one. I swallowed hard. "Yes," I said, "I'll report at seven o'clock in the morning."

The horrors of that week I could never describe, standing over an enormous coal range through hot June days from seven in the morning till eight at night. Even the hour off in the afternoon I was afraid to take for fear the fire would go out and the roast might not get done. Never as long as I live shall I have the courage to go into a country inn and ask for a meal at an off hour. I'd go hungry first any time.

The following week the manager asked me to take her place so that she might have a vacation. That second week was a different story. I met many charming people and I learned something about running the shop which is an adjunct to the hotel.

After my two weeks' duties at the hotel were over I was asked to take care of an invalid from eight to six, with an hour off in the afternoon for the swimming lesson, for nine dollars a week. That left Jim, who was twelve,

on his own, but there was nothing else to do. If after twelve years of training he couldn't be trusted—well, he just had to measure up, that was all.

And then one night Jim came proudly home to announce that he too had a job.

"What in the world are you going to do?" we all exclaimed at once as he stood in the midst of us beaming.

"Oh, I didn't want to be the only lazy one so I went down to the hotel and told Miss J—(the manager) that I wanted to work and I could do most anything. She said I could work from eight to three. She'll give me my dinner and a dollar a week. Isn't that swell?"

The day started for me at a quarter to six with Ralph's breakfast to cook, for by six-thirty he was off. Then there were the preliminaries for the evening supper, the children's breakfast at seven-fifteen, with all of us taking a hand at washing the dishes, and by a quarter to eight we were all off on our several ways. With a note left on the kitchen table to tell the children what to do, the girls and Jim got things started for supper when they got home and by the time I trudged home, at six-fifteen, vegetables were cooking, berries were washed or apple-sauce made. It was teamwork every step of the way. By eight we were all in bed. Sundays Ralph and I did the family washing, carrying the water from across the road. But only the mornings were free, for the swimming lesson had to be given in the afternoon the same as on weekdays.

The garden was our joy. The vegetables and the melons seemed to know how much we needed them and to reward us for all our trouble.

AS FALL approached, the manager of the hotel asked me if I would take over the shop during the three busy months of September, October and November. I had always thought I'd rather scrub floors than sell anything, but following my general principle of accepting the thing at hand I didn't hesitate a second.

We were at a loss now what to do about living quarters. The shacks would be too cold when the fall days set in. It was the season when cottages were most in demand and forty dollars was out of the question for us. There was a cottage we had had our eyes on, which had long been unoccupied. The fact that we got it at the absurd rent of eight dollars a month I look on as one of our miracles. It spelled luxury to us after those awful shacks. There was no running water but there was a cistern and closets and an air-tight stove! No one who hasn't had to live with his clothes swinging around the walls from nails can possibly imagine the luxury of closets. Once I had thought it impossible to live in a house without the graciousness of a fireplace but how grateful we were for that ugly air-tight stove.

We had all looked to a job as an absolute essential by fall. But there was no job in sight and even later when I was offered one in Chicago I simply couldn't face the thought of the return to the city to live on a pittance, with Ralph wandering about looking for something to do. What can a man do in a city if he hasn't a regular job? While in the country there are literally dozens of things he can do from chopping wood for fuel to hunting quail and mending fences. Ralph

did innumerable jobs around the countryside after his orchard work was over.

We had another problem to face. Charles, whose summer had netted him two hundred dollars, was offered an opportunity to stay on in Washington with the family with whom he had spent the summer months and go to school there. But after careful consideration we decided to stick it out as a family and it is a decision we have never regretted. The children went to the village school and we know now they have gained something they could never have got in city schools. Charles says not once in that year was there any need of discipline among the high school pupils; they were all so glad to be in school that they worked in earnest. That alone is something to come in contact with.

WHILE I was considering the Chicago position, the manager of the hotel asked me to stay on and keep the shop all winter, at the same salary. It was small, but here is where opportunity bloomed. I was to see what I could do to develop native industries.

This meant that we were going to settle down here for real living; but the house we were in, although a vast improvement over the shacks, gave us little elbow room. There was a perfect Cape Cod house on the top of a beautiful hill, with white clapboards and green shutters, and red rambler roses all over the fence. It had long been vacant. The inside accounted for that. The plaster was off, the roof leaked, chickens had roosted upstairs. But it had possibilities. It was a hundred years old, with hand-hewn doors, a fine fireplace and modern plumbing! Fortunately our summer had prepared us to tackle obstacles. We learned who the owner was and found she would be glad to rent it if we would do the repairs, with materials furnished by her. Ralph and Charles set to work. They mended, plastered, painted and even turned paper-hangers. By the first of December it was all finished and ours to take possession of.

What we pay for this house of eight rooms on a sweet hilltop, with large barn, garage and numerous out-buildings, is absurd. There are heavy woods, beautiful valleys and streams, redbud and dogwood as well as apple trees, which, sprayed and cared for, are now giving us a good yield of apples.

Ralph converted an old henhouse into a workshop that is the envy of all the men and boys in the community. One of his chores that first winter was to recondition a very choice old piano for the university.

As soon as the first dull months set in I started the initial experiment with native industries. I began with something I felt fairly sure of; knowing my own children loved their rag dolls far better than any other more beautiful ones, I decided it might just as well be a doll that told a story and served a purpose. So the one we designed wore the dress of a pioneer woman of a hundred years ago; the clothes were so made that children could dress and undress it, and by doing so learn to do those things for themselves.

Being a stranger among the native women I was not sure whether I could win their coöperation but once things got under way they were soon asking for work. Then came the more difficult [CONTINUED ON PAGE 83]



I now began to consider seriously my condition, and the circumstance I was reduced to—ROBINSON CRUSOE

Doing It Together

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 15]

job of selling. Summoning all my courage I tucked the doll under my arm and went to the best-known department store in one of our largest midwestern cities. We had named the doll "Abigail." Wanting to pack her in some convenient and unusual way I had taken two large round boxes, pasted them together, covered them attractively and put a handle on the "portmanteau."

The department store buyers were enthusiastic about Abigail. They gave an order at once, but almost as much as Abigail, they liked the case she came in. Then I was in a quandary. I went to a dozen firms to buy cartons and the cost for a small number was prohibitive. Finally I went direct to the head of a cereal company and told my story, asking if I could buy cartons from him.

"But we don't sell cartons," he explained, puzzled by this unusual request.

"I know you don't, but do you suppose you could, just this once?"

He called in a man and asked if the knives could be set to make boxes twice as long. The workman said they could.

"How many would you need?"

"Just a hundred to begin with," I answered. He asked my name and address. Then I began to be afraid of the cost. "Wait a minute, maybe I can't afford them," I said hastily.

The man smiled. "I want to give you these cartons to help you get started." He not only sent the cartons but paid the freight. The same thing happened when I went to buy leather scraps for the doll shoes.

So Abigail had a propitious beginning. Those gifts were an enormous help but much more was the encouragement those two men gave me. Soon Abigail made the acquaintance of some of the heads of progressive schools and now she is installed as a regular part of the equipment in many of these.

By the time the first Christmas came round the natives had been paid two thousand dollars for making the dolls. A genuine industry was now under way, and the products of the Brown County Folks were becoming known in many parts of the country. Calling upon Ralph's skill, we worked out a desk-bookcase and chair for children which from the very start has been a success. It is designed with every proportion and measurement carefully considered. It has no sharp corners and is just right for posture. Made of solid maple and with skilled workmanship, it is a substantial and worthy piece of furniture.

There have been other things in the way of furniture for children which have been developed out of children's actual needs. For instance, a little maple stool with chintz cover, called

a "step-up," which adds to their inches when they want to use the family wash basin or reach things in the closet. It has holes just fitted to their hands so that even the tiny ones can carry it about. There is doll furniture patterned after old-fashioned designs. And now out of the mud found in Knaw Bone Creek we are developing some very lovely pottery known as Brown County Pottery. Recently the natives have started weaving.

How glad I am that I lived through that week of cooking in the hotel the first summer! We have now a worthwhile venture which anchors us to this peaceful little community which we have all learned to love. We do not dream of great profits for we have discovered that happiness does not lie in that, but we hope to turn back the surplus to the benefit of the natives who are our neighbors and to whom it means so much.

Life had gone on expanding for the children in these two years. Charles had a job selling hot dogs at the Fair in Chicago last year and he had it again this summer. It seems wonderful that, living in this little village, he should have got it when so many right in Chicago, much closer at hand, tried and failed. And he has won a scholarship for college and paid all his own expenses this first year. He considers himself the luckiest boy on the entire campus.

Last fall Emily learned to make brown bread, all by herself on Saturday mornings, and brought it down to the shop to sell. She earned enough to buy winter shoes for Posie and herself and all her Christmas presents.

As I look back on what has happened I am amazed to think how completely our world used to revolve about Ralph's job before the cyclone of the depression struck us. And I wonder if what has happened to us isn't typical of what we have all been going through—getting shaken out of our limited way of looking at this whole question of livelihood. I've found that there is no problem that is put up to us, not anything, for which there isn't a solution right close at hand, exactly as there is always an answer to the problem in mathematics.

At the approach of the third year of this adventure in living we find ourselves the proud possessors of a cow and she gives plenty of milk. The garden is yielding plentifully and the cellar still holds some of last year's canned fruits and vegetables. The bluebirds and the cardinals are singing in the apple trees. Ralph has got back his health and spirits and we are all hale and hearty. We look forward to having a little more this year than last. If anyone should ask us whether we would go back to the old way of living I am sure we would one and all unanimously vote "No."