

YOU SHOULD LIVE SO, WALDEN POND

UP the rolling ridge of Giggles Hill, a mile back from the Pennsylvania bank of the Delaware River, stands a modest stone house, pretty much as it stood during the last century. It is approached through a majestic avenue of large yellow signboards, placed there at ruinous expense and with no conviction whatever that he who runs will read. Beginning gently enough with the silky admonition "Fortified Area—Stay Off," the tone changes abruptly to a sinister "Communicable Diseases—Proceed at Your Own Risk." Should this prove inadequate, and it always does, the next two hundred feet are devoted to some choice billingsgate culled from Restoration plays, calculated to make a mule skinner flush to the roots of his hair. Unfortunately, since very few mule skinnners pass that way, and those mostly bald, the effect is negligible, and by the time you top the rise beyond the persimmon trees, the signs culminate on a note of sheer hopelessness in a pair of 24-sheet billboards reading "Country Life: A Mockery" and "Solitude, My Foot."

Naturally enough I have been called everything from an old crosspatch to a modern Timothy Dexter of Newburyport. Indeed, whenever I drive my gig into the county seat for a pound of wire brads, of which I am inordinately fond, a troop of small boys invariably forms at my heels with taunts of "Oh, you modern Timothy Dexter of Newburyport!" So if I take the stand now in my own defence, it is only because Thoreau has had it long enough. Privacy in the country? Don't make me laugh, I've got a split personality.

Back in 1932, just before That Man came in and destroyed business confidence by reopening the banks, I belonged to a little group of profound thinkers who spent their evenings doing embroidery. The embroidery was on the theme "If you have a small piece of dirt somewhere, you can always raise enough to keep you going." There was also a corollary which specified, "No-

body bothers you in the country. You can sleep as late as you like." Well, Sal's in a brothel, Pat's in jail, and I'm the one to tell the tale. I raised enough to keep myself going, all right, but my stomach never really became adjusted to ferns and hot water. Now I eat and drink whatever I like and sleep like a top—till shortly before dawn. Then the parade begins.

It is usually headed by a snaggletoothed old bit player overpicturesquely made up as a hired man, who follows a well-worn routine. After sneaking around the house a few times to set the dogs in an uproar, he stations himself beneath my bedroom window and bawls out some obscene farrago, which presumably is a request for instructions about the chores. Properly keyed up on several brandies and armed with a pony, I can feel my way through Pennsylvania German dialect, but pluck me out of a sound slumber and I present a pitiable sight. Experience has taught me that to keep the respect of this man, whom I have never seen after five o'clock in the morning, I must pretend to give the matter deep thought. So for the next five minutes we both remain *en tableau*: he with an oily grin on his face, as though butter wouldn't melt in his mouth (he has even held up lumps of unmelted butter to me on occasion), and the young master swaying against the window, eyes closed and forefinger to temple in an attitude of profound concentration. In the end I give the fellow carte blanche and reel back to my crib, only to discover later, on arising again, that he has chopped down all the Chinese elms I planted last fall. Who pays the man to do this type of work I have no idea, unless it can be the War Office in Tokio.

HARDLY am I back in the Taj Mahal, surrounded by Madeleine Carroll and five hundred million billion trillion dollars, when the masons, carpenters, and assorted technicians arrive, minus tools but with plenty of

noisemakers and confetti. After a brief warmup, which includes morris dancing on the green and feats of strength, one of their number, who is either eighteen feet high or uses a ladder, leans in at my window for a series of those highly complex questions you love to wake up to: "Hey, Mister, does the bushing fit over or under the flange on the cam?" or "Shall we put the differential on the housing or white-lead the gaskets? You haven't got a pound of sixpenny nails in there, have you?" Ignoring with considerable hauteur the implication that I am the sort of man who sleeps with sixpenny nails, I now rise and stand up in a clothes closet until time for breakfast.

Belowstairs, preparations have gone forward briskly to welcome the laird to his morning meal. Compared to my dining room, the floor of the Stock Exchange is a cloistered dell. The family motto seems to be "Let's tell him now, he'll only find out anyway." Bubbling with infectious laughter, the staff greets me with the news that the hot-water system has gone to hell and rabbits have been at the lettuce. Gramps, a lovable old white-haired character who fought with Meade at Shiloh—he and Meade just never got along—has been up since six, making his usual inspection of the premises, and things look pretty black. A large bird, cousin to the giant condor of the Andes, has mysteriously wedged itself into the chimney during the night; it might be cheaper to tear down the whole kitchen wing while we're about it. None of the lespedeza he planted yesterday is up yet, and the old gentleman shouldn't wonder if they sold him last year's seed. With the orange juice and coffee scarcely more than a hot ball in my throat, instant decisions are now in order regarding the dinner menu. What about roast-beef hash with gravy and browned potatoes? Or a few salmon croquettes followed by boiled beef with horseradish and capers? Yes, but don't put so much flour in the sauce. Well, you try and cook with that oven. Nothing wrong with the oven; we just bought it. Nothing wrong with the oven? *Didn't we tell you?* This morning, just as Freda went to light the burner. . . .

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—S. J. PERELMAN

