

## These Things She Loved

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Nancy McIntire lay quite still in the great four-poster bed. Her tiny shrivelled frame was huddled beneath the covers and her eyes had lost their old sparkle. She knew that what everybody said was true, that she would never again leave her bed. For Nancy McIntire was nearly ninety.

There was a narrow band of sunlight streaming through a crack in the shade. Dumbly she watched the particles of dust caught in its rays. Bits of matter suddenly snatched up in their idle drifting by a slim golden shaft, turned into a thousand shimmering little worlds, and then dropped back into the darkness.

"Maybe that's what people are," she thought, "tiny things suddenly bathed in a lovely light and then ceasing to be. Or maybe that's death, a step from out of darkness into a dazzling light."

As she lay there waiting for the shadows and mist to overtake her, she could see in her mind's eye all the things she treasured. During her long life she had learned to see beauty in the things about her and, because of this, she had also learned to love them. She could see her fields in their neat checker-board patterns and the pasture lying like the heart of a great emerald scarred only by the tiny foot path and a sluggish little brook which loitered near one corner.

She saw her corn storing golden sunshine inside cool green sheaths and the pumpkins at its feet which would soon begin to show a brilliant orange. She saw green fields dotted with white starlets of clover and the orchard where sturdy trees stood knee-deep in the luxuriant growth of grass, and she realized anew how good the lives of the trees were. Each year they

awoke to the clarion call of spring drawing their vitality from the storehouse which nature provided. They developed and matured through sultry summer days when the sun was a glowing white-hot ball and finally brought forth their fruit in the ripe golden days of autumn. Their life each year was ended in a glorious triumph of color and richness. Not for them was this slow wasting away at the end of the road.

Thinking of these things she was engulfed by a tide of memories. She could see the cows in the fields surveying the world with a calm unquestioning gaze. She had not always felt so about them. There had been a time when to her unaccustomed eyes they had appeared as savage beasts waiting for her to stumble. Her mind wandered back to the time when, more than half a century ago, she had cast her lot with that of Steve McIntire and come to live with him on his farm.

She remembered her terror at the silence, the silence through which each of nature's tiny voices could be heard. She remembered how she had closed her eyes to the shattering white sun-light, so different from that of the city, and how grateful she had been when the lengthening shadows across the fields had foretold the coming of the cool purple dusk. Now she loved the day-light best. Those piercing white rays cheered her, and her body seemed to plead for their hotness. She dreaded the dusk now. It was pale and cold; it seemed to prophesy the time when she too would be pale and cold.

As she counted over all her cherished landmarks, she remembered the barn. Its walls long since having lost their coat of

paint, looked silvery gray and brown in the light. Even from the first she had loved the barn. It was a cool, dark retreat, its floor criss-crossed with pale bars of sunlight filtered through cracks in the walls. She remembered its draughty loft which the pigeons claimed, its pungent door of freshly cut hay, its corners filled with mysterious odds and ends. It had been a long time since she had ventured all the way down to the barn, but even yet she could recall all those things and love them.

Then in her mind's eye she saw her house as it had been when she came to it. She had loved her house too, and now as her life was nearly finished she knew she would leave in it, indelibly stamped, her own personality. It was here in her house that her domain lay, and here more than any place else were the tangible reminders of her life. She could visualize her kitchen where she had spent so many hours, its walls lined with pots and pans which caught the early morning sun in bright dancing points of light.

Filling one corner and crowding into the room stood a great cupboard painted apple green. In its vast bosom it held countless good things to eat as well as the best dishes with their bold blue and white pattern. The center of the room was dominated by an oversized table. It had always been covered with gay red and white tablecloths except on Sundays and when company was expected. On these occasions it proudly bore the thick damask cloth which age had made an ivory color.

The table was supported by enormously large pillar-like legs which bore jagged scars from the many battles waged about them. (Here in her own kitchen the threads of her life had made their headquarters.)

Then she saw her pantry. Even more than her kitchen she loved this tiny room which the rows of preserves and jellies transformed into a color-filled fairy land. In stocking its shelves she had created beauty as surely as an artist. And because it was all her own she had loved it best of all. She could see yet the jars which seemed to catch the few stray beams of light and to hold them in glorious ranks of glowing ruby and rich amber.

As she cherished the memory of all these things she could see as from a great distance the pattern and meaning of her life. She knew now it had been a good life. It had been a busy one too; all her days had been filled with the countless duties required of one who looks after a large family on a farm. It was not an illustrious, shining life. Instead hers had been a life of faithful steady service. She had uncomplainingly served those people and things she loved best, and as a reward she could hold in her mind a treasury of beautiful things.

Now she was no longer needed and it was time she rested from her work. She was very tired, all she wanted was to lie quite still and watch through the ever-approaching mist the tiny flecks of dust caught in the sun's light.

