

# The Thicket

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As I scuff through the fallen leaves these days, I find my thoughts turning constantly to The Thicket, my former home in southern Indiana. Autumn will be arriving there, too, and I wonder what it must be like there now. Indian summer must bring dreams to the old place of all the years that have gone, and of the seasons past now. I wonder if it will ever be spring there again?

Spring in my childhood meant visits to The Thicket when my grandfather lived in the tall white house among the pines. I like to remember it in the spring with its early Ohio River architecture set off by the narrow verandas. Early spring comes with a rush in southern Indiana. Every March on the south lawn a patch of crocuses popped up, sounding the trumpet call for everything to come to life. Tiny green shoots appeared on the weeping willow and the dead grass of winter was blotted out with bright new blades. During April rains, the jonquils and daffodils made golden patches on the south lawn. In May a violet carpet covered the lawn. The dogwood and red bud arched over the long driveway near the wild garden, and golden spirea and spicy flowering quince bordered the path to the orchard. Shocking pink almond blossoms added an exotic appearance to the staid backyard with its white picket fence. Huge, waxy magnolia blossoms with their heavy fragrance near the street lawn were a constant temptation to school children who coveted them as gifts for their teachers. The yellow Russian olive was sweeter than Schaperelli's most daring perfume. I can remember yet that in May the fragrance of The Thicket permeated the atmosphere a block away. A

million perfume bottles could not equal its heavy scent.

Spring holidays were important to my grandfather and the most important day of them all was Easter. The Thicket had perfect hiding places for Easter nests in the limbs of trees, among the lilies of the valley, and under ferns in the wild garden. Grandfather often hid Easter eggs so well that they were not found for weeks afterward. May-day baskets at the thicket were masterpieces if the lady slipper appeared. In the shady wild garden by the picket fence a tiny, golden shoe grew each spring. All the grandchildren watched anxiously for it because the child who first found the elf's shoe was eyed with envy.

Spring somehow slipped away into summer on the Ohio without one's ever knowing how and where it had gone. One spring took my grandfather away from his beloved orchard trees, leaving me at The Thicket as a resident instead of a visitor, with only memories of my grandfather about the place.

Winter always seemed to close in softly at The Thicket. The pines seemed to sigh a bit mournfully then, but the candle spruces beyond the front gate, and the holly tree by the library window kept the place from seeming gloomy even when it snowed. A million holly leaves attracted all the birds which wintered along the Ohio, and at Christmas my father and I cut holly everyday for a week for our friends' Christmas greens. Sometimes I slipped a sheath of ice from a holly leaf to hold in my hand a fairy holly leaf of glass — even to the tiny thorny spines. When we had finished boxing holly for all the relatives away from home we usually raced

back from the post-office to sit by a crackling grate fire and drink egg nog.

I remember the mantel pieces banked with English ivy from Mt. Vernon (transplanted by my grandfather) flanked by holly boughs in tiny red pots at each end of the mantel pieces. Grate fires roared in all seven of the fireplaces at Christmas time and there was much ado about the Christmas tree and Christmas stockings at The Thicket. Presents popped out of hiding places behind the rows of books in the library and the closet under the stairs, while festive odors rose from the big old iron range in the kitchen. There were always mince pies and roast chickens in the Christmas kitchen at The Thicket and funny German hot cakes called Piffermusen sat on the same shelf with English plum pudding. Christmas carols around the old mahogany piano gave way to radio programs later in the evening while Christmas books were read. Everybody read at The Thicket in the evening by the fire. Out of doors the pines whispered in the snow, but indoors were warmth and light and at the front window a Christmas candle.

Christmases long gone troop past me in memory, but I look out again at the falling leaves of this October. What is it like back at The Thicket now? I shiver as I remember my last glimpse of it in its forsaken state. Dried weeds riot over the once well-kept garden. The apple orchard is filled with tangled underbrush and rotting apples. Only the wild morning glories are left on the pergolas of the covered walkways once filled with flowers and rare grapes. On the front lawn dried pine needles sift down ceaselessly into ankle-deep walkways. The Ginkgo tree is shedding its golden leaves unmolested across the broad expanse of the side lawn. No smoke comes from the chimney and no lamps gleam at the windows now. Now and then a lonely bird flaps its way into the depths of the pine branches.

Even Indian summer with its blue haze across the pasture lot cannot revive the day which passed when our family left its home. Only the pines remain unchanged. They whisper and whisper, "When are you coming back to The Thicket?" I shiver in the October wind and scuff the leaves on an Indianapolis sidewalk.