

Next Summer

John O'Drain

To others it is just an old-fashioned garden, along the bus route, but to me it is a nostalgic symbol. Every time I pass, memories of another garden filter into consciousness. A garden bordered with iris plumes of varied hues and perfumed with an elusive fragrance appears. An old lady is bent over a bloom of exceptionally delicate shade. She straightens slowly saying, "Lovely, isn't it, John?" Her hands are gnarled and dirty, her dress black and shapeless, but her smile makes you overlook all else. Again she smiles as she walks slowly over to the trellis where a rose vine tangles in among the spider webs. It is laden with blooms. "I thought I might lose the vine last winter during the cold spell," she says. Clipping off a scarlet flower she hands it to me. A cardinal suddenly sings out its nervous notes from a wire some distance away. Telling me that she has something to show me, she leads the way to the honeysuckle vine. There is a flash of dull red from within the vine, as a female cardinal darts with alarm from a nest. Four speckled eggs are visible in the neatly woven structure. "I do hope they grow into fine young birds," she exclaims. "Last year the cat killed the mother and young one night. I felt so sorry for the male. He kept looking around for a week before he disappeared." Her sad commentary was interrupted by the harsh clacks made by a male cardinal who had left his lofty perch to come to the defense of his family. Pursued by the wrathful bird, we beat a hasty retreat to the opposite end of the garden. As darkness was descending, I decided to leave. However it was not easy. Before the gate finally

slammed behind me I had listened to tales of neighborhood violence, of dogs invading the sacred garden precincts, and been presented with innumerable shoots and slips dug from odds and ends of her prolific yard. "Come back soon," she calls. "The poppies will be out shortly." I leave her as I found her, bending over some loved plant, the darkness blending her form into the bushes surrounding her.

Any day from March to November might bring her forth to attend to the garden. Always there was something to occupy her attention. Her energy was amazing for a person in excess of three score and ten years. In winter this energy was applied in a different field. Genealogy was her sole concern as the winds howled and the garden lay dormant beneath the snow. Her background was indeed interesting. She had written two small books. They were the result of long and painstaking research into the activity of her Quaker forefathers in their dealings with the Indians of the region. She was writing a third book when I last saw her. It was never completed. The piles of manuscripts and dusty research books were found in her study one cold February when she died without disturbance.

This woman had lived long after her contemporaries had vanished. You might expect a lone survivor of another age to dwell mentally in that age. But this one old lady had the secret of eternal youth, hope for the future — for new books to publish, for new plants to set out, for new seasons to welcome. I was sorry that she hadn't lived until summer. She never knew her new species of pink phlox had survived the winter to bloom in splendor.