

## FORTY-FOUR ELM

or

*Da more da bun da biga da bun*

—

In Zanadu did Kublai Khan  
A stately pleasure dome decree,  
Where Alp the sacred river ran  
In caverns measureless to man  
Down to the A & P.

On the heights above the Boston and Albany railroad, close to the site of the recently-vanished Briggs henhouse, there stands a large shingled ruin, relic of a fabled past. If once it vied in oriental splendor, with other Wellesley palaces, it no longer does; wild and doleful people have made it their habitation, its stairs are falling, and the screech owl calls from a nest in the lavatory cupboard. Only the strains of the *Chicken Song*, heard sometimes at twilight, recall its golden days.

*Caw dawk, dick McDabby,  
Dabby cheeps to be McDabby.  
Dabby wants cheeps,  
Cheeps to be McDabby.*

Music by Bizet; words by GLC Jr.

The Wellesley Proustian League's most recent publication, *Nostalgia and the Wellesley Hills Dump*, has declared this falling structure an historic ruin (it is Wellesley's only ruin); and while some do not find its history interesting, others declare it a tisane of recall. They describe artifacts found on the site—a frayed lavender bathtowel, a standing green-and-chrome ashtray with weighted bottom and clips to hold lighted cigarettes, a period photo of a dog in a man's hat—and say these evoke

overwhelming memories of the Great Depression, the years when the green paint never dried.

The family that built 44 Elm (probably about 1918) had high hopes for the house. There was a large heated barn with stables below and servants' quarters above; a butler's pantry with a German-silver sink; a servants' dining room; and an electric bell system, never used in later years because filled with paint. There were several henhouses, none as substantial as the Briggs', but undoubtedly with hens. (One of the later occupants of the house, while in the Pacific during the war, dreamt that he saw his mother sitting on a henhouse roof and later found that his sister had an identical dream. This seemed odd as their mother had surely never been in a henhouse and, even more certainly, never on its roof. The dream may have some mythic significance. "There are," Freud has said, "no innocent dreams.")

Perhaps it will take too long to recount all the wonderful comforts of this house; two sleeping porches with painted iron beds and worn red-plaid World-War-I army blankets, each porch with an old apple tree outside, magnificent in spring; a special shelf for the telephone, Wellesley 1541 (Briggs, 1518; Donald, 0580) where Warren Cross, second son of the new family, called Teddy Weggett's girl friends to ask for a date, and Teddy called Warren's in the same manner—a strategy that made refusal less wounding; two downstairs closets of especial interest—one long and dark, where kicking battles of unparalleled ferocity were fought amongst the rubbers and overshoes, and another smaller closet where Bill Bean, a grandson aged three, was once found. When asked what he was doing in the closet, he said, "I'm looking for my axe." Bill was called by his uncles "Belly Bean" or, for short, just "Belly." In this same closet Gorham Cross, the father, kept his black worumba coat.

The reader may now have begun to sense that this new culture did not live up to the house's early promise. The original owner had been displaced, and a certain lack of refinement was soon noticed. Gorham, a trained engineer, fond of improvised comfort, nailed a Band-Aid tin to the wall of the sleeping porch just beside his bed, so that in the night he could emerge from under the Hudson Bays for a smoke. He had a large supply of Band-Aid tins, which he kept in a cupboard of the basement, together

with his stock of tinned “Jap” (mandarin) oranges, both of these hoarded against a future war. His daughter painted a sailboat on her bathroom wall with a toothbrush. This was not very well executed, but she thought it appropriate and pleasing that she’d done it with a toothbrush. Her friend, Monk Donald, then painted an entire yachting mural on her bathroom wall, also with a toothbrush. The backstairs became a laundry chute, so that Mae and Alice Marcel and everyone else had to search for a firm footing under the sheets while hoping not be buried by a new load thrown from the top. Coming down these stairs was easier because one could fall into the pile of laundry, open the door, and step out. I think that Mardie, the mother, never went up or down these stairs; there were many places in the house where she was said never to have been—the cellar in particular.

The German-silver sink was used by the younger sons for washing plates. One washed, and the other had a dishtowel tucked into his shirt over which he rapidly passed both sides of the plate.

The family did have writing paper, Gorham’s the most unusual. He took used pressman’s worksheets from his printing plant, turned them over, and had them bound into pads for his correspondence. These pads were of beautiful pale colors—pink, green, and blue—hardly equalled by other stationery.

During World War II Gorham had the fireplaces covered with large sheets of beaverboard, behind which he generally threw his lighted cigarette-ends, thus causing the first of the famous fires which almost destroyed the house in its early days. Several of these fires were in the barn, the largest caused by the eldest son, Theodore (it was he who had the henhouse dream while serving on the destroyer-escort *Ulithi*), and after this his mother called him “ar-son.” If the general tone of life fell a little at times, this was probably counterbalanced by the zealous emptying of wastebaskets (into the incinerator, which caused more fires).

Mardie was never responsible for any lowering of standards. Descended from forebears who believed it wrong to read before lunch, she kept up a high standard of before-lunch activity, especially carpet-sweeping. This, she thought, was good for one’s *tension capacity*, a

concept described by her as the capacity to do something disagreeable for a long time. It was, she said, morally rewarding.

Mardie first made herself known in Wellesley by driving her new Ford through a wood fence behind the A&P. Later she removed the door of a new Chrysler roadster when driving into the garage, and later still she backed a car out through a closed garage door—not an easy thing to do.

She dreamed regularly that a neighbor, Dora Mowbray, had stolen the family silver, and for months had to avoid Dora for fear of saying the wrong thing. (Dora's husband was the family's insurance agent.) Several members of her family including her mother and brother, both of whom at times lived in 44 Elm, were noted for their dreams of royalty. Her brother Keith's particular dream was that he was at Buckingham Palace, crouched under the throne.

Mardie is best remembered by some for an irrational faith in her children. Even when her daughter failed the Rapid Promotion Test, when her eldest son was rated by his teacher as "not college material," and when some of them seemed not to learn to spell, she continued to insist that they must be intelligent—and perhaps they were after their fashion. She was also noted for her ability to touch her nose with her tongue and to make cat faces. These last accomplishments greatly frightened one of the children. She did not herself dream of royalty, so far as we know, but she was once in a crowd received by the Pope. Having with her some trinkets which she wanted to have blessed, she turned to her daughter and said, "Do you think I have to take them out of the paper bag?"

During all the years that the family lived in the house, there often was no one there at all. Mardie went to Margaret Traver's or Gwennie Drew's to play duplicate bridge, while the children generally were in the aqueduct watching tramps; behind the barn building catapults; at the Eastmans' house jumping on the sleeping-porch beds; taking ginger-ale bottles back to the Wellesley Hills Market; playing baseball in the field by the Briggs' house with Hendy, Billy Cliff & and his old dog Tigger, Jack Perry, Charlie Jones, and Curtis Eastman (Hendy with his slight figure and back brace hitting balls way over into the Mowbray's garden); taking bribes for jumping into White's pond fully clothed (the money collected

from Kathie Sumner on a Sunday—her mother was unconcerned about the jump into the pond, only thought it indecorous to collect money on a Sunday); winning marbles from Benny Hunter, who always let his marbles get too close to the hole, and at one time, for some reason punching him in the stomach; taking bribes (once his scout jack-knife) from Charlie Jones for a kiss; hiding one's friend, Kiffie Frizzee, in a third-floor closet so that he could jump out and frighten one's sister, and reading the sister's diary (in which Theodore discovered that she had backed into a parked car in Brookline Village before she had her license, whereupon he told her she would have to do everything he said for a year if she wanted him not to tell).

Often it was hard to know whether anyone was at home because he might be crouched in a cupboard, in the cellar listening to the baseball game in the remodeled cellar hole, on the henhouse roof playing poker with Monk Donald, or checking the dump for china and other articles with which to furnish the orange-crate house in Dinny Standish's garage. For some reason the daughter Margaret once encouraged the provocatively-named Dinny (Miles Standish III) to swallow a live goldfish. His mother called Mardie, and Margaret had to apologize.

During this period the house did not show signs of the ruin that was to come. Each year Everett took out the rugs and dismantled the back screened-porch (emptying the large, decorative green bottle and taking down all the screening); Gorham kept a list of the things he wanted to do on what he called "the place"; Jerry, the youngest son, started a large vegetable garden and chicken business; Mardie sat in the sun (after the carpet sweeping) on the upstairs front balcony, reading a book from the Hathaway House library; and all was ordered and peaceful. The house's progress into desolation did not occur until some years later when another family moved in. Then the shrubbery grew too high, the porch steps fell in, and the upstairs balcony disappeared completely. There may be still some hope for the magnificent old structure if the Proustian League can find support for its restoration. Meanwhile the ghosts of Chick, Mopey Hood, Charlie Jensen, Dot, and Michael will haunt its storied walls.

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