

## ALICE BROWN

(1857–1948)

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### *Farmer Eli's Vacation*

“IT DON’T SEEM as if we ’d really got round to it, does it, father?” asked Mrs. Pike.

The west was paling, and the August insects stirred the air with their crooning chirp. Eli and his wife sat together on the washing-bench outside the back door, waiting for the milk to cool before it should be strained. She was a large, comfortable woman, with an unlined face, and smooth, fine auburn hair; he was spare and somewhat bent, with curly iron-gray locks, growing thin, and crow’s-feet about his deep-set gray eyes. He had been smoking the pipe of twilight contentment, but now he took it out and laid it on the bench beside him, uncrossing his legs and straightening himself, with the air of a man to whom it falls, after long pondering, to take some decisive step.

“No; it don’t seem as if ’twas goin’ to happen,” he owned. “It looked pretty dark to me, all last week. It ’s a good deal of an undertakin’, come to think it all over. I dunno ’s I care about goin’.”

“Why, father! After you ’ve thought about it so many years, an’ Sereno ’s got the tents strapped up, an’ all! You must be crazy!”

“Well,” said the farmer, gently, as he rose and went to carry the milk-pails into the pantry, calling coaxingly, as he did so, “Kitty! kitty! You had your milk? Don’t you joggle, now!” For one eager tabby rose on her hind legs, in purring haste, and hit her nose against the foaming saucer.

Mrs. Pike came ponderously to her feet, and followed, with the heavy, swaying motion of one grown fleshy and rheumatic. She was not in the least concerned about Eli’s change of mood. He was a gentle soul, and she had always been able to guide him in paths of her own choosing. Moreover, the present undertaking was one involving his own good fortune, and she meant to tolerate no foolish scruples which might interfere with its result. For Eli, though he had lived all his life within easy

driving distance of the ocean, had never seen it, and ever since his boyhood he had cherished one darling plan,—some day he would go to the shore, and camp out there for a week. This, in his starved imagination, was like a dream of the Acropolis to an artist stricken blind, or as mountain outlines to the dweller in a lonely plain. But the years had flitted past, and the dream never seemed nearer completion. There were always planting, haying, and harvesting to be considered; and though he was fairly prosperous, excursions were foreign to his simple habit of life. But at last, his wife had stepped into the van, and organized an expedition, with all the valor of a Francis Drake.

“Now, don’t you say one word, father,” she had said. “We ’re goin’ down to the beach, Sereno, an’ Hattie, an’ you an’ me, an’ we ’re goin’ to camp out. It ’ll do us all good.”

For days before the date of the excursion, Eli had been solemn and tremulous, as with joy; but now, on the eve of the great event, he shrank back from it, with an undefined notion that it was like death, and that he was not prepared. Next morning, however, when they all rose and took their early breakfast, preparatory to starting at five, he showed no sign of indecision, and even went about his outdoor tasks with an alacrity calculated, as his wife approvingly remarked, to “for’ard the v’y’ge.” He had at last begun to see his way clear, and he looked well satisfied when his daughter Hattie and Sereno, her husband, drove into the yard, in a wagon cheerfully suggestive of a wandering life. The tents and a small hair-trunk were stored in the back, and the horse’s pail swung below.

“Well, father,” called Hattie, her rosy face like a flower under the large shade-hat she had trimmed for the occasion, “guess we ’re goin’ to have a good day!”

He nodded from the window, where he was patiently holding his head high and undergoing strangulation, while his wife, breathing huskily with haste and importance, put on his stock.

“You come in, Hattie, an’ help pack the doughnuts into that lard-pail on the table,” she called. “I guess you ’ll have to take two pails. They ain’t very big.”

At length, the two teams were ready, and Eli mounted to his place, where he looked very slender beside his towering mate. The hired man stood leaning on the pump, chewing a bit of

straw, and the cats rubbed against his legs, with tails like banners; they were all impressed by a sense of the unusual.

"Well, good-by, Luke," Mrs. Pike called, over her shoulder; and Eli gave the man a solemn nod, gathered up the reins, and drove out of the yard. Just outside the gate, he pulled up.

"Whoa!" he called, and Luke lounged forward. "Don't you forgit them cats! Git up, Doll!" And this time, they were gone.

For the first ten miles of the way, familiar in being the road to market, Eli was placidly cheerful. The sense that he was going to do some strange deed, to step into an unknown country, dropped away from him, and he chatted, in his intermittent, serious fashion, of the crops and the lay of the land.

"Pretty bad job up along here, ain't it father?" called Sereno, as they passed a sterile pasture where two plodding men and a yoke of oxen were redeeming the soil from its rocky fetters.

"There 's a good deal o' pastur', in some places, that ain't fit for nothin' but to hold the world together," returned Eli; and then he was silent, his eyes fixed on Doll's eloquent ears, his mouth working a little. For this progress through a less desirable stratum of life caused him to cast a backward glance over his own smooth, middle-aged road.

"We 've prospered, 'ain't we, Maria?" he said, at last; and his wife, unconsciously following his thoughts, in the manner of those who have lived long together, stroked her black silk *visite*, and answered, with a well-satisfied nod:

"I guess we 'ain't got no cause to complain."

The roadside was parched under an August sun; tansy was dust-covered, and ferns had grown ragged and gray. The jogging horses left behind their lazy feet a suffocating cloud.

"My land!" cried Mrs. Pike, "if that ain't goldenrod! I do b'lieve it comes earlier every year, or else the seasons are changin'. See them elderberries! Ain't they purple! You jest remember that bush, an' when we go back, we 'll fill some pails. I dunno when I 've made elderberry wine."

Like her husband, she was vaguely excited; she began to feel as if life would be all holidays. At noon, they stopped under the shadow of an elm-tree which, from its foothold in a field, completely arched the road; and there they ate a lunch of pie and doughnuts, while the horses, freed from their headstalls, placidly munched a generous feed of oats, near by. Hattie and her

mother accepted this picnicking with an air of apologetic amusement; and when one or two passers-by looked at them, they smiled a little at vacancy, with the air of wishing it understood that they were by no means accustomed to such irregularities.

"I guess they think we 're gypsies," said Hattie, as one carriage rolled past.

"Well, they needn't trouble themselves," returned her mother, rising with difficulty to brush the crumbs from her capacious lap. "I guess I 've got as good an extension-table to home as any on 'em."

But Eli ate sparingly, and with a preoccupied and solemn look.

"Land, father!" exclaimed his wife, "you 'ain't eat no more 'n a bird!"

"I guess I 'll go over to that well," said he, "an' git a drink o' water. I drink more 'n I eat, if I ain't workin'." But when he came back, carefully bearing a tin pail brimming with cool, clear water, his face expressed strong disapprobation, and he smacked his lips scornfully.

"Terrible flat water!" he announced. "Tastes as if it come out o' the cistern." But the others could find no fault with it, and Sereno drained the pail.

"Pretty good, I call it," he said; and Mrs. Pike rejoined,—

"You always was pretty particular about water, father."

But Eli still shook his head, and ejaculated, "Brackish, brackish!" as he began to put the bit in Doll's patient mouth. He was thinking, with a passion of loyalty, of the clear, ice-cold water at home, which had never been shut out, by a pump, from the purifying airs of heaven, but lay where the splashing bucket and chain broke, every day, the image of moss and fern. His throat grew parched and dry with longing.

When they were within three miles of the sea, it seemed to them that they could taste the saltness of the incoming breeze; the road was ankle-deep in dust; the garden flowers were glaring in their brightness. It was a new world. And when at last they emerged from the marsh-bordered road upon a ridge of sand, and turned a sudden corner, Mrs. Pike faced her husband in triumph.

"There, father!" she cried. "There 'tis!"

But Eli's eyes were fixed on the dashboard in front of him. He looked pale.

"Why, father," said she, impatiently, "ain't you goin' to look? It 's the sea!"

"Yes, yes," said Eli, quietly; "byme-by. I 'm goin' to put the horses up fust."

"Well, I never!" said Mrs. Pike; and as they drew up on the sandy tract where Sereno had previously arranged a place for their tents, she added, almost fretfully, turning to Hattie, "I dunno what 's come over your father. There 's the water, an' he won't even cast his eyes at it."

But Hattie understood her father, by some intuition of love, though not of likeness.

"Don't you bother him, ma," she said. "He 'll make up his mind to it pretty soon. Here, le's lift out these little things, while they 're unharnessin', and then they can get at the tents."

Mrs. Pike's mind was diverted by the exigencies of labor, and she said no more; but after the horses had been put up at a neighboring house, and Sereno, red-faced with exertion, had superintended the tent-raising, Hattie slipped her arm through her father's, and led him away.

"Come, pa," she said, in a whisper; "le's you and me climb over on them rocks."

Eli went; and when they had picked their way over sand and pools to a headland where the water thundered below, and salt spray dashed up in mist to their feet, he turned and looked at the sea. He faced it as a soul might face Almighty Greatness, only to be stricken blind thereafter; for his eyes filled painfully with slow, hot tears. Hattie did not look at him, but after a while she shouted in his ear, above the outcry of the surf,—

"Here, pa, take my handkerchief. I don't know how 'tis about you, but this spray gets in my eyes."

Eli took it obediently, but he did not speak; he only looked at the sea. The two sat there, chilled and quite content, until six o'clock, when Mrs. Pike came calling to them from the beach, with dramatic shouts, emphasized by the waving of her ample apron,—

"Supper's ready! Sereno's built a burn-fire, an' I 've made some tea!"

Then they slowly made their way back to the tents, and sat down to the evening meal. Sereno seemed content, and

Mrs. Pike was bustling and triumphant; the familiar act of preparing food had given her the feeling of home.

"Well, father, what think?" she asked, smiling exuberantly, as she passed him his mug of tea. "Does it come up to what you expected?"

Eli turned upon her his mild, dazed eyes.

"I guess it does," he said, gently.

That night, they sat upon the shore while the moon rose and laid in the water her majestic pathway of light. Eli was the last to leave the rocks, and he lay down on his hard couch in the tent, without speaking.

"I would n't say much to father," whispered Hattie to her mother, as they parted for the night. "He feels it more 'n we do."

"Well, I s'pose he is some tired," said Mrs. Pike, acquiescing, after a brief look of surprise. "It 's a good deal of a jaunt, but I dunno but I feel paid a'ready. Should you take out your hair-pins, Hattie?"

She slept soundly and vocally, but her husband did not close his eyes. He looked, though he could see nothing, through the opening in the tent, in the direction where lay the sea, solemnly clamorous, eternally responsive to some infinite whisper from without his world. The tension of the hour was almost more than he could bear; he longed for morning, in sharp suspense, with a faint hope that the light might bring relief. Just as the stars faded, and one luminous line pencilled the east, he rose, smoothed his hair, and stepped out upon the beach. There he saw two shadowy figures, Sereno and Hattie. She hurried forward to meet him.

"You goin' to see the sunrise, too, father?" she asked. "I made Sereno come. He 's awful mad at bein' waked up."

Eli grasped her arm.

"Hattie," he said, in a whisper, "don't you tell. I jest come out to see how 'twas here, before I go. I 'm goin' home,—I 'm goin' *now!*"

"Why, father!" said Hattie; but she peered more closely into his face, and her tone changed. "All right," she added, cheerfully. "Sereno 'll go and harness up."

"No; I 'm goin' to walk."

“But, father—”

“I don’t mean to break up your stayin’ here, nor your mother’s. You tell her how ’twas. I ’m goin’ to walk.”

Hattie turned and whispered to her husband for a moment. Then she took her father’s hand.

“I ’ll slip into the tent and put you up somethin’ for your breakfast and luncheon,” she said. “Serenno ’s gone to harness; for, pa, you must take one horse, and you can send Luke back with it Friday, so ’s we can get the things home. What do we want of two horses down here, at two and ninepence a day? I guess I know!”

So Eli yielded; but before his wife appeared, he had turned his back on the sea, where the rose of dawn was fast unfolding. As he jogged homeward, the dusty roadsides bloomed with flowers of paradise, and the insects’ dry chirp thrilled like the song of angels. He drove into the yard just at the turning of the day, when the fragrant smoke of many a crackling fire curls cheerily upward, in promise of the evening meal.

“What ’s busted?” asked Luke, swinging himself down from his load of fodder-corn, and beginning to unharness Doll.

“Oh, nothin’,” said Eli, leaping from the wagon as if twenty years had been taken from his bones. “I guess I ’m too old for such jaunts. I hope you did n’t forgit them cats.”