

THE GHOST HOUSE



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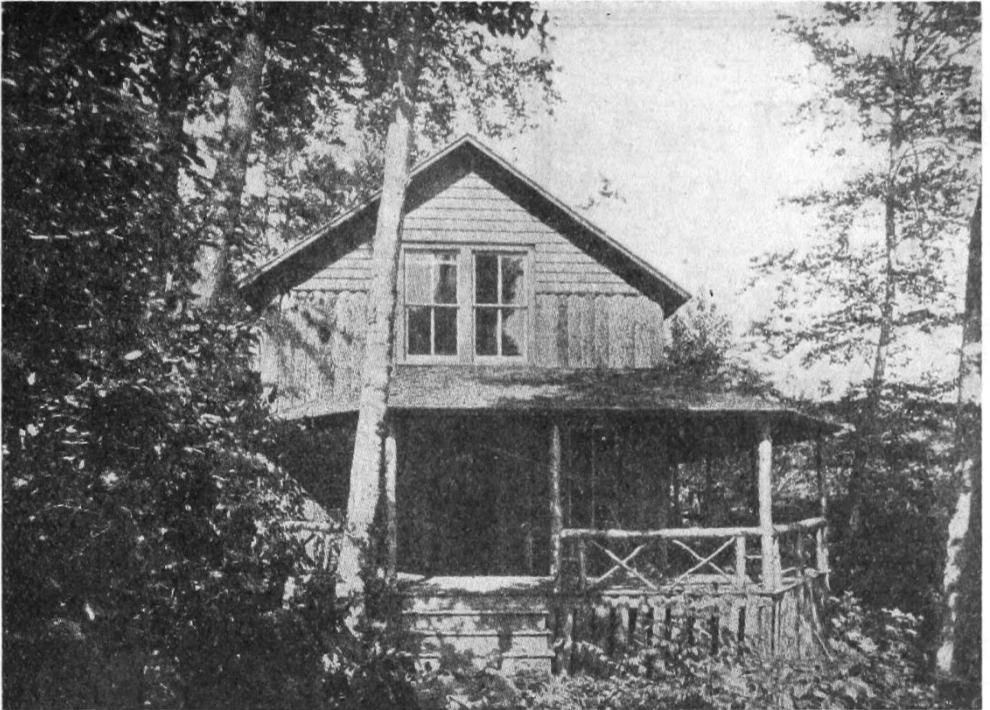
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THE GHOST HOUSE

A poet tells in colorful prose of how a mountain retreat, where he found a home for many years, may be reached by the wayfaring man.



“It is a small, slab-covered building, very unpretentious.”

Bliss Carman, the Canadian poet born in Fredericton, gives a description of the picturesque home where he lived in the Catskill Mountains, near Rip Van Winkle's country.

AT the quiet old town of Catskill, near the Hudson, if you took the June-time journey, you would find that there were still two ways of reaching the delectable mountains, ten or twelve miles to the westward, and the roofs of Twilight half way up the side of High Peak. You could take a train by the narrow, winding little road that would whisk you out in no time to the base of the hills. There, you would transfer to an elevating cable car, which would pull you up a couple of thousand feet on a grade like a toboggan slide, while you watched the earth enlarge and unfold and sink away below you, and finally land you on the roof of the range, deafened a little by the sudden altitude.

If you should prefer, however, you could take the highway, either afoot or in a hired vehicle, and enjoy the serenity of summer to the full, the strong tan of the sun, and the taste of the sweet air on the open road. In that case, after winding among rolling foothills and farm lands occupying the great valley of the Hudson, you would pass through Palenville, a delightful little village lying among its trees, close under the long shadows of the mountains and just at the mouth of the Kaaterskill Clove. From there to the upper levels the road climbs up the canon with a noisy, beautiful, headlong stream for its companion all the way, with walls of green on either side rising sheer and cool, where you may look up through the leaves and see summits of fir and bare, gray ledges towering above you against the blue. This is the front entrance to the Catskills, one of the enchanted portals by which you may

leave the clanking workshops of the world for a while and come out into God's green, blue-domed out-of-doors.

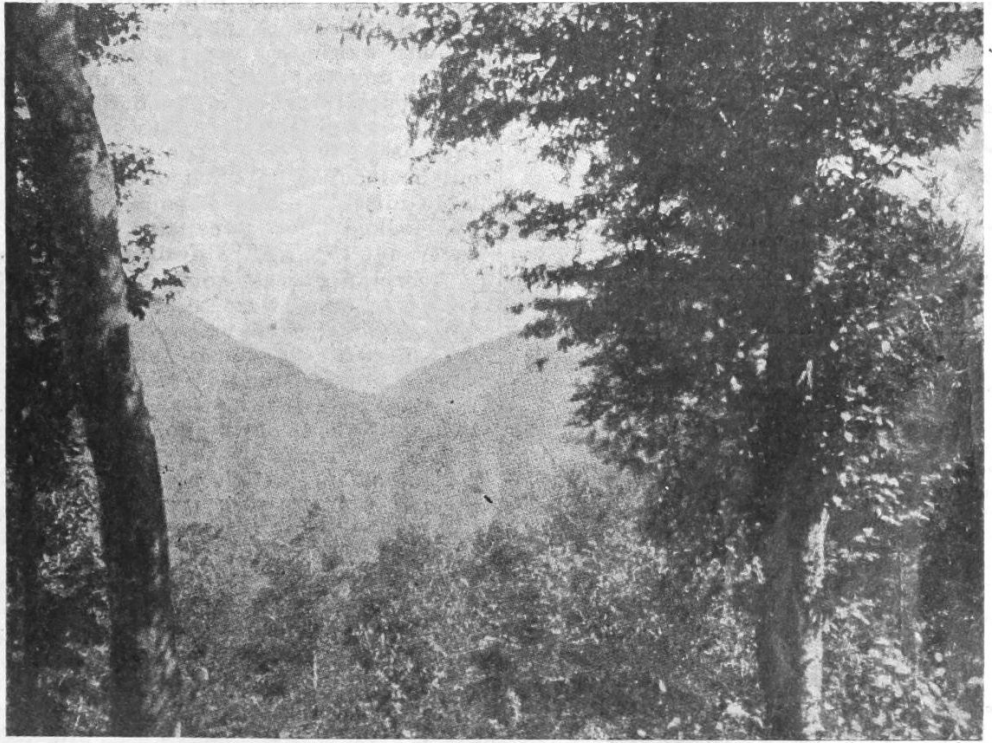
After you have followed this road up the Clove for a mile or two you might look up and see ahead of you on a rounded shoulder of High Peak several houses peeping out of the woods. They are the outposts of Twilight, and you have still a long, steep pull to reach them. At one point not far from here I could put you on a trail that would lead up through the hemlocks and bring you out almost under the eaves of the Ghost House itself. But unless you are woodwise you would very likely go astray, and anyhow it is a foolish man who puts sign boards on his own trail. So you would have to stick to the road, cheered now and then by glimpses of Ledge End Inn and your destination looking down on you from above, until you turned in at a gate and found yourself at last in Twilight.

If you followed the lower Ledge Road as it creeps around the side of the Clove you would find yourself in a forest settlement of summer cottages and log cabins hidden away under the trees; and if you held to this road for half a mile or more, you would come to a place where it skirts a precipitous ledge and where you could look down into the beautiful canon through which you had just toiled upward so laboriously. A little further on there is a path leading off the road on the ravine side and down through a tangle of bushes. If you were to push in there you would discover the top of a crazy flight of steps pretty well overgrown with underbrush, and as you descended cautiously, thinking perhaps you had come on the traces of a buried civilization, you would suddenly spy a roof and gable end through the leafage, and finally at the last step set foot on the piazza of the Ghost

House. There is no other way to reach it except by the trail I told you of, and no other point in the world from which it is visible, except my neighbor's porch which you passed on your way in. You may think I ought to cut out my overgrown path and make my steps look a little less like a death-trap. Not for the world.



A CANADIAN SINGER Bliss Carman, now seeking in California recovery from a severe illness, is one of our most musical poets.



“All the serene beauty of the forest morning.”

It is a small slab-covered building, very unpretentious, and, like all the Twilight cottages, intended only for summer use, and unplastered. In one corner of the living-room there is an open fireplace of brick, for it is often cool in the mountains even in July, and on many evenings a fire of logs is comfortable as well as companionable. In another corner the stairs go up to three bedrooms above, where you can lie and hear the rain drum on the shingles above your head, or be waked up by the thrushes at the first break of dawn. Under these stairs are a door and other stairs down to the wood-pile and open-air bathroom. As it was built on so steep a site, only the back of the cabin rests against the hillside; the front is ten or twelve feet off the ground. This under space, partly floored, partly bare earth and rock, is only enclosed by slabs set two or

three inches apart, letting the air blow through at will and the morning sun come in to keep it fresh and dry. There was no bathroom in the house when I moved in, so here I constructed one. The water pipe runs overhead under the floor of the house, and where it is about seven feet from the ground I had a faucet put in. Under this I laid a piece of flooring four or five feet square, and my bathroom was ready for use. It has neither onyx nor marble nor decorated tiles nor silver fittings; it only cost two or three dollars, but Diana herself could have made no more refreshing toilet in her sylvan stream than you may make here. The vigorous douche comes cold and forceful from our reservoir farther up the wild mountain side; the sun and the wind will be your attendants, the shy woodbirds will make music for you as fine as any private orchestra, and all the serene beauty of the forest morning will be there to sweeten the beginning of your day with courage.

FROM the piazza you look out through the beech trees which stand immediately about the Ghost House, and see almost nothing but forested hills. You are looking eastward down the ravine; to the left and right are mountain walls, covered with hemlock, beech, maple, chestnut, ash and basswood; the Kaaterskill stream sounds murmurously far below you, in the bottom of the gorge, and your eye is led down along the canon to the top of Palenville at the edge of the great plain of the Hudson.

You would not have half a dozen visitors in the season, except the wood-mice and ground squirrels. You would have all the privacy of the wilderness, and yet all the essential luxuries of town. You could be as solitary as you pleased and yet have plenty of pleasant society for the asking, as soon as you had discovered that Thoreau didn't know everything after

all. You would have to make your own bed and build your own fire, but your laundress would come and give the place a thorough Christian cleaning as often as it needed it. If you are like me, your daily routine would be regular, but not inflexible. You would get up early enough to feel the earliness, to taste the freshness and solemnity of the first hours of the day and hear the thrushes at their best. (There are more birds in the woods around the Ghost House than anyone but John Burroughs could name, and nowhere do the thrushes sing more wondrously.) After you had dressed and pottered about a little, and sat on the porch a while, and perhaps done a few strokes of work, you would climb your steps and wander over to the Inn for breakfast. You would be thankful that you had such a clean, quiet, comfortable place to go to, and come back smoking your cigarette, and be ready to work again by nine o'clock. It would probably be about nine, if you ever took the trouble to look at your watch. There you would stay, sticking to your task until one, unless you wanted to climb High Peak or walk over to Palenville Overlook by way of Wildcat Ravine. After dinner you would have time to answer your letters, and then about three or four you would probably go for a long walk, getting home for supper at six. In the evening you would be likely to visit your neighbors for a bit of a chat or perhaps some good music or reading. You would carry your own lantern with you to light you over the stones and roots of the dark wood paths and to keep you out of the mud when it was wet.

It does not aim to be the simple life, you see; it is only simplified to a certain extent, in certain directions, to suit your particular needs and preferences. One may enjoy camping out for its own sake, and there is an unquestionable zest in getting back to nature, as we call it. But that does not prove that we

should live perpetually under canvas. Everybody who has tried it knows that in our climate a tent is almost as comfortless a dwelling as can be devised. It will not necessarily expedite the writing of your novel to spend three or four hours a day cooking your own food and washing your own dishes, nor will it inevitably increase your aesthetic appreciation of nature to sleep out in the rain, though a fair amount of rough life is undoubtedly wholesome and tonic. It is useless to ask men of the twentieth century to live the life of the twelfth, or of the Stone Age. We are more complex in our nature than the people of those times and our life must be more complicated. On the other hand it is undoubtedly true that we surround ourselves with a lot of complications and complexities that are only hindrances to our freedom and development and happiness. It is good to get rid of these unnecessary things, but every man must determine the limit of simplification for himself. It is perfection, not simplicity, that must be our aim; and perfection in life as in art, is attained only gradually by eliminating all that is unhelpful and unessential, and retaining only what is indispensable for the beautifying of our daily lives, the increasing of our intelligence, and the strengthening and ennobling of our hearts. It follows that we will cast aside many experimental ideals in the process,—ideals not necessarily wrong in themselves, but partial and imperfect.

[The end of *The Ghost House* by William Bliss Carman]