The Rabbit−pen

Sherwood Anderson

Table of Contents

The Rabbit−pen.....**1**
Sherwood Anderson.....2

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IN a wire pen beside the gravel path, Fordyce, walking in the garden of his friend Harkness and imagining marriage, came upon a tragedy. A litter of new−born rabbits lay upon the straw scattered about the pen. They were blind; they were hairless; they were blue−black of body; they oscillated their heads in mute appeal. In the center of the pen lay one of the tiny things, dead. Above the little dead body a struggle went on. The mother rabbit fought the father furiously. A wild fire was in her eyes. She rushed at the huge fellow again and again.

The man who had written two successful novels stood trembling in the path. He saw the father rabbit and the furious little mother struggling in the midst of the new life scattered about the pen, and his hands shook and his lips grew white. He was afraid that the mother of the litter would be killed in the struggle. A cry of sympathy broke from his lips. "Help here! Help! There is murder being done!" he shouted.

Out at the back door of the house came Gretchen, the housekeeper. She ran rapidly down the gravel path. Seeing the struggle going on in the wire pen, she knelt, and, tearing open a little door, dragged the father rabbit out of the pen. In her strong grasp the father rabbit hung by his ears, huge and grotesque. He kicked out with his heels. Turning, she flung him through an open window into a child's play−house standing amid the shrubbery beside the path.

Fordyce stood in the path, looking at the little dead rabbit in the center of the pen. He thought that it should be taken away, and wondered how it might be done. He tried to think of himself reaching through the little door into the cage and taking the little blue−black dead thing into his hand; but the housekeeper, coming from the child's playhouse with a child's shovel in her hand, reached into the pen and threw the body over the shrubbery into the vegetable−garden beyond.

Fordyce followed her — the free−walking, straight−backed Gretchen — into the stable at the end of the gravel path. He heard her talking, in her bold, quick way, to Hans, the stableman. He wondered what she was saying that made Hans smile. He sat on a chair by the stable door, watching her as she walked back to the house.

Hans, the stableman, finished the righting of things in the home of the rabbits. The tragedy was effaced; the dead rabbit buried among the cabbages in the garden. Into the wire pen Hans put fresh, new straw. Fordyce wondered what Gretchen had said to Hans in that language. He was overcome by her efficiency. "She knew what to do, and yet, no doubt, like me, she knew nothing of rabbits," he thought, lost in wonder.

Hans came back into the stable and began again polishing the trimmings of a harness hanging on the wall. "He was trying to kill the young males," he explained in broken English.

Fordyce told Harkness of the affair of the rabbit−pen. "She was magnificent," he said. "She saved all of that new life while I stood by, trembling and impotent. I went up to my room and sat thinking of her. She should be spending her days caring for new life, making it fine and purposeful, and not be counting sheets and wrangling with the iceman for an old, worn−out newspaper hack like you."

Joe Harkness had laughed. "Same old sentimental, susceptible Frank," he had shouted, joyously. "Romancing about every woman you see, but keeping well clear of them, just the same."

Sitting on the wide veranda in the late afternoon, Fordyce read a book. He was alone, so it was his own book. As he read, he wondered that so many thousands of people had failed to buy and appreciate it. Between paragraphs he became entangled in one of his own fancies — the charming fancies that never became realities. He imagined himself the proud husband of Gretchen, the housekeeper.

Fordyce was always being a proud husband. Scarcely a week passed without the experience. It was satisfying and complete. He felt now that he had never been prouder husband to a more beautiful or more capable woman than Gretchen. Gretchen was complete. She was a Brunnhilde. Her fine face, crowned by thick, smooth hair, and her quiet, efficient manner, brought a thrill of pride. He saw himself getting off the train in the evening at some Chicago suburb and walking through the shady streets to the frame house where Gretchen waited at the door.

Glancing up, his eyes rested on the wide emerald lawn. In the shrubbery, Hans, the stableman, worked with a pair of pruning− shears. Fordyce began thinking of the master of the house and its mistress, Ruth — the brown−eyed, soft−voiced Ruth with the boyish freckles. Joe, comrade of the struggling newspaper days, was married to pretty Ruth and her fortune, and went off to meetings of directors in the city, as he had done this afternoon. "Good old Joe," thought Fordyce, with a wave of tenderness. "For him no more uncertainties, no more heartaches."

From the nursery at the top of the house came the petulant voices of the children. They were refusing to be off to bed at the command of their mother, refusing to be quiet, as they had been refusing her commands all afternoon. They romped and shouted in the nursery, throwing things about. Fordyce could hear the clear, argumentative voice of the older boy.

"Don't be obstinate, mother," said the boy; "we will be quiet after a while."

The man sitting on the veranda could picture the gentle mother. She would be standing in the doorway of the nursery — the beautiful children's room with the pictures of ships on the walls — and there would be the vague, baffled uncertain look in her eyes. She would be trying to make herself severe and commanding, and the children would be defying her. The listening man closed his book with a bang. A shiver of impatience ran through him. "Damn!" he said, swiftly. "Damn!"

From below−stairs came the sharp clicking sound of footsteps. A voice, firm and purposeful, called up to the nursery. "Schweig!" commanded the voice of Gretchen, the housekeeper.

Above−stairs all became quiet. The mother, coming slowly down, joined Fordyce on the veranda. They sat together discussing books. They talked of the work of educators among children.

"I can do nothing with my own children," said Ruth Harkness. "They look to that Gretchen for everything."

In the house Fordyce could hear the housekeeper moving about, up and down the stairs, and in and out of the living room; he could see her through the windows and the open doors. She went about silently, putting the house in order. Above in the nursery all was peace and quiet.

Fordyce stayed on as a guest at Cottesbrooke, finishing his third book. With him stayed Gretchen, putting the house in order for the winter; Harkness, with Ruth, the two boys and the servants, had gone to the city home. It was autumn, and the brown leaves went dancing through the bare shrubbery on the lawn. In his overcoat Frank now sat on the veranda and looked at the hurrying leaves. He was being one of the leaves.

"I am dead and brown and without care, and that is I now being blown by the wind across the dead grass," he told himself.

At the end of the veranda, near the carriage entrance, stood his trunk. His brown bag was by his feet.

Out through the door of the house came Gretchen. She stood by the railing at the edge of the veranda, talking. "I am not satisfied with this family," she said. "I shall be leaving them. There is too much money."

She turned, waving her hand and talking vehemently. "It is of no account to save," she declared. "I am best at the saving. In this house all summer I have made the butter for the table from cream that has spoiled. Things were wasted in the kitchen and I have stopped that. It has passed unnoticed. I know every sheet, every towel. Is it appreciated? Master Harkness and mistress — they do not know that I know, and do not care. The sour cream they would see thrown to the pig. Uh! — It is of no use to be saving here."

Fordyce thought that he was near to being a real husband. It came into his mind to spring from his chair and beseech this frugal woman to come and save the soured cream in a frame house in a Chicago suburb. While he hesitated, she turned and disappeared into the house. "Auf Wiedersehen!" she called to him over her shoulder.

He went along the veranda and climbed into the carriage. He went slowly, looking back at the door through which she had disappeared. He was thinking of the day in the green summer when he had stood in the gravel path by the wire rabbit−pen, watching her straighten out the affair in the family of the rabbits. As on that day, he now felt strangely impotent and incapable. "I should be taking things into my own hands," he reflected, while Hans drove the carriage along the road under the bare trees.

Now it was February, with the snow lying piled along the edges of the city streets. Sitting in the office of his friend Harkness, Fordyce, looking through the window, could see the lake, blue and cold and lonely.

Fordyce turned from the window to his friend, at work among the letters on the desk. "It is of no avail to look sternly and forbiddingly at me," he said. "I will not go away. I have sold the book I wrote at your house, and have money in my pocket. Now I will take you to dine with me, and after the dinner I will get on a train and start on a

trip to Germany. There is a reason why I should learn to speak the German language. I hear housekeepers talking to stablemen about the doings of rabbits in pens, and it gets into my mind that I don't know what they say. They may whisper secrets of life in that language. I have a wish to know everything, and I shall begin by knowing the German language. Perhaps I shall get me a wife over there and come home a proud and serious husband. It would be policy for you to drop letter−signing and come to dine with me while yet I am a free man."

In the restaurant they had come to the cigars, and Harkness was talking of life in his house. He was talking intimately, as a man talks only to one who is near and dear to him.

"I have been unhappy," said Harkness. "A struggle has gone on in which I have lost."

His friend said nothing. Putting down his cigar, he fingered the thin stem of the glass that sat before him.

"In Germany I engaged Gretchen," said Harkness, talking rapidly. "I got her for the management of our house and for the boys. They were unruly, and Ruth could do nothing with them. Also we thought it would be well for them to know the German language.

"In our house, after we got Gretchen, peace came. The boys stayed diligently at their lessons. When in the school−room at the top of the house they were unruly, Gretchen came to the foot of the stairs, 'Schweig!' she shouted, and they were intent upon their lessons.

"In the house Gretchen went about quietly. She did the work of the house thoroughly. When I came home in the evening the toys of the children no longer were scattered about underfoot. They were gathered into the boxes put into the nursery for the purpose.

"Our two boys sat quietly with us at the evening meal. When they had been well−mannered they looked for approval to Gretchen, who talked to them in German. Ruth did not speak German. She sat at the table, looking at the boys and at Gretchen. She was unhappy in her own home, but I did not know why.

"One evening when the boys had gone up−stairs with Gretchen she turned to me, saying intensely, 'I hate German!' I thought her over−tired. 'You should see a physician for the nerves,' I said.

"And then came Christmas. It was a German Christmas with German cakes and a tree for each of the boys. Gretchen and I had planned it one evening when Ruth was in bed with a headache.

"The gifts on our Christmas trees were magnificent. They were a surprise to me. Ruth and I had not believed in costly gifts, and now Ruth had loaded the trees with them. The trees were filled with toys, costly mechanical toys for each of our two boys. With them she had planned to win the boys.

"The boys were beside themselves with joy. They ran about the room shouting. They played with the elaborate toys upon the floor.

"Ruth took the gifts from the trees. In the shadow by the door stood Gretchen. She was silent. When the boys got the packages from the trees they ran to her, shouting, 'Mach' es auf! Mach' es auf! Tante Gretchen!'

"I was happy. I thought we were having a beautiful Christmas. The annoyance I had felt at the magnificence of Ruth's gifts passed away.

"And then, in one moment, the struggle that had smoldered under the surface of the lives of the two women in my house burst forth. Ruth, my gentle Ruth, ran out into the middle of the floor, shouting in a shrill, high voice, 'Who is mother here? Whose children are these?'

"The two boys clung to the dress of Gretchen. They were frightened and cried. Gretchen went out of the room, taking them with her. I could hear her quick, firm footsteps on the stairs.

"Gretchen put the two boys into their white beds in the nursery. At her word they ceased weeping.

"In the center of the room they had left, lighted only by the little electric bulbs in the branches of the Christmas trees, stood Ruth. She stood in silence, looking at the floor, and trembling.

"I looked at the door through which our boys had gone at the command of Gretchen. I did not look at Ruth. A flame of indignation burned in me. I felt that I should like to take her by the shoulders and shake her."

Fordyce had never seen his friend so moved. Since his visit to Cottesbrooke he had been thinking of his old comrade as a man in a safe harbor — one peacefully becalmed behind the breakwater of Ruth and her fortune, passing his days untroubled, secure in his happiness.

"My Ruth is wonderful," declared Harkness, breaking in on these reflections. "She is all love and truth. To me she had been more dear than life. We have been married all these years and still like a lover I dream of her at night. Sometimes I get out of bed and creep into her room, and, kneeling there in the darkness, I kiss the strands of her hair that lie loose upon the pillow.

"I do not understand why it is not with our boys as it is with me," he said simply. "To myself I say, 'Her love should conquer all.'"

Before the mind of Fordyce was a different picture — the picture of a strong, straight−backed woman running down a gravel path to a wire rabbit−pen. He saw her reach through the door, and, taking the father rabbit by the ears, throw him through the window of the child's play−house. "She could settle the trouble in the rabbit's pen," he thought, "but this was another problem."

Harkness talked again. "I went to where Ruth stood trembling and took her in my arms," he said. "I made up my mind that I would send Gretchen back to Germany. It was my love for Ruth that had made my life. In a flash I saw how she had been crowded out of her place in her own home by that able, quiet, efficient woman."

Harkness turned his face away from the eyes of his friend. "She lay in my arms and I ran my hand over her hot little head," he said. 'I couldn't keep it back any longer, Joe; I couldn't help saying it,' she cried. 'I have been a child, and I have lost a fight. If you will let me, I will try now to be a woman and a mother.'"

Fordyce took his eyes from the face of his friend. For relief he had been feeding an old fancy. He saw himself walking up a gravel path to the door of a German house. The house would be in a village, and there would be formal flower−pots by the side of the gravel path.

"To what place in Germany did she go, this Gretchen?" he demanded.

Harkness shook his head. "She married Hans, the stableman, and they went away together," he said. "In my house the mechanical toys from the Christmas tree lie about underfoot. We are planning to send our boys to a private school. They are pretty hard to control."