

*Pine Mile House*

*(Original working copy)  
Never published - J.H.R.*

It must have in 1908 that Jack and Sheila Hannison came to Milltown " looking for a place to settle ". They created quite a stir in our quiet little lumber town, where ~~there had been~~ <sup>HAD COME</sup> no settlers since the days of the pioneers. The tide of ~~immigration~~ <sup>immigration</sup> -- in full flow in those spacious ~~days~~ <sup>one war</sup> -- ignored the Atlantic provinces as if they did not exist, seeking the prairies and the fabulous " wide open spaces " ~~the Golden West of novels and magazines.~~ Jack Hannison was then about twenty three, a slim good-looking fellow with ~~grey eyes and a neat blond moustache.~~ There was a touch of ice about him, reflected in his eyes, which ~~were~~ grey like the colour of ~~the~~ river ice that has been darkened by ~~the~~ spring sun . He was ~~dressed~~ in what some London outfitter considered the proper thing for Canada, a quaint garb more suitable to Greenland than the kindly climate of ~~southern~~ Nova Scotia, and his trunks were packed with other properties equally incongruous. With his strange clothes, his accent, his impersonal smile and aloof manner he was an object of Pine County interest in his own right. In combination with Sheila he was a sensation. How shall I describe Sheila Hannison ? It is more than twenty ~~five~~ <sup>six</sup> years since she went away from Eight Mile House for ever, but her loveliness, the rich lilt of her laughter, the instinctive grace of her every movement and gesture, her gay courage that was like a flame within, these are still an ache in the heart. I was in love with her, -- What callow youth in Milltown was not ? -- and once in the poetic mood that comes with puppy love I told ~~her~~ <sup>Tom</sup> she was like a summer tanager, that lovely bird of the south which sometimes strays to our forest and ~~enlivens~~ <sup>FOR A SEASON</sup> the sombre shadows with a flash of bright wings and a little chirrup of song.

" Squire " ~~Barington~~ <sup>Barrington</sup> took them into his rambling Dutch-colonial house on the slope overlooking the river, for there was no hotel in Milltown in those days, and tried to talk them out of their magnificent ideas. They wanted " a section of forest land " where they could " chop out " a farm, with " a bit of a stream " for preference, and it had to be " well removed " from the settlement. There were good farms for sale in the northern part of Pine County, ~~Mr.~~ Barrington told them. Here in the southern district the land was rocky with intervals of clay bottom where water settled and swamps flourished, and ~~was~~ <sup>were</sup> covered with a dense growth of pine, hemlock, oak, beech and birch ~~on~~ <sup>you down</sup> the uplands, and black spruce, red maple and hackmatack ~~in~~ the bogs. It was, he told them bluntly, " the devil's own job to clear, and hell to cultivate." He wasted his breath, of course. ~~Jack~~ <sup>Jack</sup> Hannison's firm mouth grew tighter the longer Baring argued, and at last, inspired perhaps by the remembered talk of ~~soured~~ misfits returning to England, he accused the " Squire " of " not wanting strangers here." Old Baring bristled, for hospitality is not more sacred in the Arabian desert than in Pine County; and the quiet accusation, uttered in an accent which Baring dimly associated with " dudes ", laid a foundation for the Milltown belief that Hannison was " one of those " who-are-you-damn-you " Englishmen."

Sheila melted the old man's ~~uprush~~ <sup>uprush</sup> of anger with one of her quick smiles, and Baring leaned back in his great leather morris-chair, staring out over the houses clustered about the saw-mills on the river bank, and said, " Strangers are always welcome here, mister. I'm just tryin' to save you some of the misery that my own ancestors chose for themselves. They came ~~from~~ <sup>from</sup> New England to Nova Scotia in 1760, not long after the Acadians had been driven out. They might have gone up Fundy Bay an' taken up some of the rich dyke lands left empty by the Acadians -- they might have gone 'most anywhere, same as you -- but here they came. They were towns-folk lookin' for a better way of life somewhere handy to the seaboard, for they didn't fancy the inland wilderness. They didn't know any more about farmin' than I reckon you know, and for two generations they broke their hearts and backs tryin' to till this sour rocky land of ours. Look at the stone walls they built around these little fields with the rubble they dragged aside! -- Four foot thick an' shoulder high, ton upon ton of it, an' a drop of sweat in every ounce. An' the women -- go down an' ~~take a look~~ <sup>take a look</sup> at the old buryin' ground, mister, an' take a look at the dates on the tombstones. Hardly a woman got past the age of forty -- most of 'em died off in the twenties an' thirties, workin' 'emselevs to death. That's what I'm comin' at, mister. You're a man that uses plain talk an' I'll give you a plain answer. If you want to go in these woods an' break your back tryin' to make a farm out o' land that God meant for growin'

a



timber -- that's your own funeral an' you can do your own mournin'. But your wife ---"

Hannison was about to say something hot at this point but Sheila cut in swiftly with some disarming remark and the upshot of the whole matter was that they bought a section of timber land " well removed " from Milltown on the old post road ~~which ran across the province~~ to Fort Royal. They built their home near the eight-mile mark on the post road, a crude Roman numeral chisled in a roadside boulder by pioneers

*blazing a trail*  
on their way to the northern district. Apparently Hannison had ~~some~~ money, for he hired carpenters ~~#####~~ masons and plasterers in Milltown and set about building the place which every traveller came to know as ~~Eight~~ Mile House. It was not a large house by any means, perhaps thirty feet by twenty five on the ground floor, rising to a half story upstairs, with ~~#####~~ little dormers peering from the steep shingled roof. Jack Hannison had set his heart on some sort of English cottage, but the ~~difficulty~~ *difficulty* of expressing a brick-and-stone idea in terms of wooden material, and the further difficulty of conveying his notions to the Milltown carpenters, who were used to the simple colonial architecture, finally persuaded him to fall in with Sheila and a house in the style of the country. The sills were hewn from logs of red pine, cut near the site, but the white pine beams, the hemlock joists and boards, the birch flooring and the spruce singles were hauled in ox-teams from the saw-mills at Milltown. With its great central chimney, its white painted clapboards, its windows flanked with ornamental green shutters, its little portico over the front door. Eight Mile House was to all outward appearance an ~~ordinary~~ *ordinary* dwelling such as you may see anywhere in the ~~older towns of the Atlantic seaboard from New York to Newfoundland.~~ *Pine County* Inside there ~~was~~ a difference. The dining room, for instance was panelled in natural pine, a thing unheard of at that time. There was room containing a built-in tin bath, at which the Milltown workmen marvelled. As far as I know it was the second permanent bathroom in the Milltown district. ~~It seems absurd to think that only thirty years ago the hip-bath on the bedroom floor or a wash-tub in the kitchen constituted the sole bathing facilities of urban as well as rural Pine County.~~ *It seems absurd to think that only thirty years ago* ~~#####~~ The world does move.

There were fireplaces in two bedrooms and a ~~huge~~ *big* oak-mantelled cave in the big living room. The carpenters told him that the fireplaces would not heat the place in zero weather, that he would have to install stoves, and then the yawning fireplaces must be covered to prevent the escape of precious heat. But he was obdurate, and those who were privileged afterwards to sit before that mighty living-room fire, blazing with four foot maple and beech logs, were ~~able~~ *able* to admit, that it was a " darned sight more cheerful than a Franklin, and ~~almost~~ *almost* as warm as a stove." The kitchen occupied the ~~seton side~~ *back side* of Eight Mile House, and Hannison ~~provided~~ *provided* great windows facing south and west, so that the room in which Sheila ~~#####~~ spend much of her day would get a maximum of sunshine. It was a pleasant place, even in winter when the sun describing its low arc in the southern sky filled the room with light and even a sense of warmth. I have stood in the kitchen of Eight Mile House upon a day in February when the thermometer ~~shrank~~ *shrank* ~~#####~~ under the zero mark, and felt the afternoon sun on my face as if it were Spring. But I was ~~young~~ *young* then and in love with Sheila Hannison and perhaps it was the light and glow that she herself diffused. I can see her now, holding ~~forth~~ *forth* some new triumph of cookery in a spoon or upon a fork for our taste, and watching us with enormous brown eyes as if her life's happiness depended on the verdict.

The house was about seventy five yards removed from the westerly side of the post-road, ~~and by~~ *and by* this you may gauge Jack Hannison's aloofness, for traffic on the road was limited to the teamsters hauling goods to the northern district merchants from Milltown, a dozen wagons a week perhaps, and in winter the sleds of a few lumbermen. Later he set out an apple orchard between the house and the road, but that ~~after the~~ *after the* breaking-up bee, which ~~prepared the land for planting and at the same time~~ *prepared the land for planting and at the same time* convinced Jack Hannison that the world of men was still at his door. Thirty years ago the bee was ~~still~~ *still* a thriving institution in Pine County. It exists still, but only in the remote ~~country~~ *country* ~~#####~~ an inheritance from the pioneers. There were various bees. When a young couple started "on their own" there was a rising bee, attended by men women and children from miles of countryside. The men brought tools -- every man his own carpenter in those days -- and the necessary lumber ~~#####~~ on ox-wagons, and there was a day of furious labour. A small house might be put up ~~#####~~ in a single bee, or " raised " to a



point where the young husband could finish off according to his fancy. In the evening there would be singing and dancing -- games only in the Hard-shell Baptist sections -- and a great feast of home-made wine and pastry. And when the young house-holder began to clear land for crops or pasture there would be a breaking-up bee, at which a small army of men boys and oxen fell upon the rough land with axe, saw, peavy, stone-boat and grub-hoe and mattock. Logs that might be sold to the sawmill were dragged aside and yarded to await winter and good sledding; the clear hardwood was hauled to the back of the house, ~~#####~~ for fuel, and all the small, twisted and rotten wood was piled in great heaps and burned. Heavy teams of oxen were yoked to the stumps. There was keen rivalry between groups to see who could cut burn and stump the most trees in a day. Boulder up to blasting size were dragged aside.

If a man fell sick in spring-time there was ~~#####~~ a ploughin bee or a planting bee; and in the Fall he would ~~##~~ awaken ~~##~~ one morning by a cordwood bee in full blast outside, and see a winter's supply of fuel cut, sawn and piled in his wood-shed before dark.

A few ~~days~~ after Eight Mile House received its gleaming coat of white paint, with a light and cheerful green on doors, window-frames and shutters, there was a hubbub on the post-road and the Hannisons beheld a ~~breaking-up~~ bee approaching their domain. The country folk were a bit shy of these exotic strangers but the ancient custom was ~~not to be set aside lightly~~. Jack Hannison came out on his doorstep as the ~~caravan~~ <sup>SWAG CARAVAN</sup> pulled up beside the house and asked curtly, "What's this, may I ask?"

The clamour subsided. "Breakin'-up bee" someone said in the hush. <sup>He</sup> ~~He~~ regarded them with an amazed anger, as if he ~~had~~ <sup>she</sup> found himself in the presence of ~~men~~ <sup>she</sup> burglars. He did not know what to say. They explained, awkwardly, even defensively. When <sup>at last</sup> he understood, Hannison was disposed to order them off, for he clearly regarded the whole thing as an impertinence; but as usual it was Sheila whose intuition and disarming smile melted the rising resentment of both husband and visitors.

"Oh Jack, how kind!" Her voice had that music in it. She seized his arm and swept him down the steps amongst them crying, "How nice to find so many friends, so soon." Sheila was a born politician. She shook hands, memorized names and faces, patted children, with just the right glow for the women and just the right impersonal little smile for the men, and insisted the women should come in and see every part of Eight Mile House while the <sup>men</sup> laboured outside.

Jack Hannison took his axe and fell to with the ~~men~~ <sup>rest</sup>, working with the energy of a man possessed, as if ~~determined~~ to show that he was quite capable of taking care of himself. He was capable enough physically. When you watched Jack Hannison in movement you watched an athlete and knew it. But after a time he was glad to take example from the Pine County men, whose unhurried axe-strokes fell so surely and cleanly, with rhythm of swing and economy of effort. "Squire" Baring was there with his three sturdy sons and two yoke of oxen. Hannison went over to ~~him~~ and reminded him pleasantly of his statement about the impossibility of farming in the Pine County woods. Baring's kindly smile stirred his broad face. "Sure. We break up land hereabouts for garden plots an' pastures. Always have. But not for real farmin', son. 'Course, mebbe we've got the wrong slant on this thing. Mebbe you can show us somethin'. Man's never too old to learn; an' if the lumber business don't pick up soon we'll all be growin' cabbages for a livin'. But right now, son, I still think you're workin' up grief for yourself." He nodded towards the gleaming paint of Eight Mile House. "You seem to have a bit o' capital, son, an' it's not too late to change your mind. You've got a nice lot o' timber here -- some good pine, and a fine stand o' hemlock. There's a lake not more than a mile back o' your house, about three miles long an' a mile wide. It flows to the river through a good deep brook. That's means you've got a ~~#####~~ first-rate lay-out for a small lumberman. There's good timber all around the lake. I know because I've looked it over. If I was you, son, I'd buy up the timber between Eight Mile an' Ten Mile, an' get options on the rest, all the way round the lake within good haulin' distance. Cut an' peel your hemlock in summer, pine in the Fall. Soon as snow comes, hire a few ox-teams an' start sleddin' down to the lake ice. A winter's work at that, what with swampin' an' loadin'. Then in spring ~~#####~~ float your stuff down the brook to the river -- sell it to some feller that's bringin' a drive







off the offensive raiment. Later we understood many things, but that incident remains <sup>UNSOLVED</sup> in my memory a thing apart; ~~and I shall never know~~ <sup>now</sup> what quirk of the past or the moment lit that particular fire in Jack Hannison.

It could not have been a dislike to see <sup>his wife perform the hottest amusement</sup> Sheila ~~play acting~~ <sup>for her gifts of</sup> ~~song~~ <sup>she was a success from the first</sup> ~~and~~ Jack Hannison usually played her accompaniments. She was always greeted with a storm of applause and obliged to give encore after encore. Then she offered to dance for one affair and the offer was accepted with alacrity by all but her husband. Hannison's small neat face froze into ~~the~~ blank mask, he assumed more and more frequently, ~~in~~ the familiar enough, but for once Sheila seemed not to notice it. She did a spirited Spanish thing with the fire and grace that was hers alone. It was new to Milltown concerts, where dancing moved in the shadow of a puritan conscience inherited from the pioneers, and the younger folk were in raptures; but Aunt Sarah Grindling, the fearsome spinster who was the bony figurehead of public opinion, pronounced loudly and acidly, "A bit free with her laigs, if you ask me", and Sheila's performance was officially damned. Jack Hannison, returning unobtrusively from the piano to his seat, overheard Aunt Sarah. What passed between him and his wife on the long ride home I do not know, but the Hannisons ~~apparently~~ <sup>apparently</sup> accepted Sarah's verdict as excommunication, and from that time the village hall saw no more of the master and mistress of Eight Mile House. Aunt Sarah passed to her reward long since. She must ~~make the other saints very uncomfortable~~ be a nuisance to the other saints.

During the first winter we kept up our visits to Eight Mile House as often as snowstorms permitted, whipping along ~~behind~~ <sup>behind</sup> the horses in little two-seated cutters, with the harness bells filling the silence of the woods, and the runners creaking on the snow and the white road sliding past. And ~~once or twice~~ <sup>sometimes</sup> there was a sleigh drive of the old-fashioned kind, the long sled boxes piled with straw and fifteen or twenty youngsters wedged in with blankets and buffalo robes and two or three pairs of horses in the harness, whips cracking, bells tinkling, voices chanting sleigh songs, and ~~the sky~~ <sup>the sky</sup> frosty with stars flowing overhead ~~between the dark walls~~ <sup>in the dark canyon</sup> of pine and hemlock like an ~~river in a canyon upside down~~ <sup>river in a canyon upside down</sup>. Then the noisy arrival at Eight Mile House, with Jack and Sheila framed in the yellow light of the doorway, and the invasion of red cheeks and flashing teeth; caps, mittens, mackinaws, furs, hurled right and left, overshoes in a slowly dripping pyramid in the hall; shouts and songs, and ~~then~~ <sup>then</sup> the table with hot dishes of baked beans -- Sheila cooked them lumber camp style in great earthenware crocks with chunks of fat pork and a generous dash of molasses -- and the smell of coffee and --- but why go on? I was ~~nineteen then~~ <sup>nineteen then</sup>, and ~~at twenty six~~ <sup>at twenty six</sup> (Sheila was ~~at once~~ <sup>at once</sup> the oldest and youngest of us all. <sup>ALL THAT FIXING GOES</sup> Youth is dead, like Eight Mile House and the curious idyll that passed within its walls, and the living hearts are scattered from Halifax to the Rockies after the fashion of our roving Nova Scotia folk; ~~and~~ Bill Kerr and Harry Baring are quiet under the Norway maples in the shadow of Vimy monument, ~~and~~ Lance Porter vanished in a shell explosion under the old ramparts at Ypres, and angelic Harvey Delhanty who sang in the Milltown choir was killed in a paltry bow with Japanese soldiers on Kepeck Hill in Vladivostock. The cutters are mouldering and their iron runners rusting in lofts and corners of Milltown barns, for the post road is a motor highway now, kept open in winter with tractor-driven ploughs, and the old days are drowned in the stink of gasolene. ~~Death did not matter, for death was a sealed jar preserving the ideals of life.~~ Time, with its disillusion, its ~~bitter~~ <sup>bitter</sup> memories and empty ~~remorse~~ <sup>remorse</sup>, this was the ~~real~~ spectre that hung over us and Eight Mile House.

In the three years that followed, the Hannisons gradually acquired a dossier in Milltown's verbal Who's-Who. Some of it was pure guessing; some, I know now, was accurate enough, though how the knowledge came to ~~the county~~ <sup>the county</sup> Milltown is one of those mysteries of country towns. Jack Hannison, it said positively, was the younger son of a well-to-do English family. Sheila was an actress. They had eloped, and Jack's family had written him off the books. An old story, and simple enough. There were various details. Some were absurd, and the rest you can fill in for yourself. One thing was certain. Jack Hannison regarded his home and family with a fanatic hatred. He never spoke of

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imprisonment would flock to see their show. The results were frequently disappointing, and the village hall with its great rusty stove in the centre of the floor and no heat at all back-stage was a frigid place in which to face a scanty audience. The players went through their parts with a certain air of defiance, as much as to say, "The feeling's mutual, we ~~assure~~ <sup>damn</sup> you", and went away calling loudly for strong drinks.

On the night of "Charlie's Aunt" however the hall was full, and just before the tattered curtain went up Jack and Sheila Hannison came in. They were spattered with mud in spite of the buggy's leather dash-board, and they had to take a pair of rickety chairs well up towards the front. "Charlie's Aunt" found favour. Laughter filled the hall, and the players taking courage went through the merry farce with unusual verve. The posters announced them "straight from Drury Lane", which was open to ~~serious~~ <sup>serious</sup> doubt, but their accents were English enough and I was not surprised, when the curtain came down on the last act, to see Sheila Hannison mounting the stage by the little side steps and disappearing behind the ragged daub of Mount Blomidon. Hannison followed her slowly and with obvious distaste. I waited in the empty hall, filled with a sudden hunger for ~~Sheila's smile~~ <sup>Sheila's smile</sup>. I had not seen her in six months. I told you I was in love with her. Puppy love, of course; but nothing that came afterward was like my feeling for Sheila Hannison. It was ~~entirely innocent~~ <sup>almost entirely innocent</sup>, asking ~~nothing but the magic~~ <sup>nothing but the magic</sup> of a smile and the aprkle of her wit, but it was so much a part of me that to this day, looking at the ruins of Eight Mile House from the distance of ~~thirty years~~ <sup>fall a lifetime</sup>, I experience a tightness of the throat that throbs like a pain. I stood in the empty, ~~hall~~ <sup>village</sup> hall for a long time, hearing the muddled echo of ~~lively conversation~~ <sup>lively conversation</sup> back stage, and then I was aware of Jack Hannison staring at me gloomily from the shadow of the wing door. He had followed her no farther than that. The great round-bellied stove, cooling for lack of fuel, made little cracking noises, a chilly sound. I turned up my collar and went out, ~~I did not see~~ <sup>I did not see</sup> Sheila Hannison again for ~~thirty years~~ <sup>out of the hall and out of Sheila Hannison's life</sup>.

Two or three days after that happy-go-lucky troupe vanished into the outer world it was whispered in Milltown that "the dancing woman" from Eight Mile House had run away with Charlie's Aunt. Elmer Ternholm, that gossipy man-who-should-have-been-a-woman, told me, and I kicked him ~~generously~~ <sup>fairly</sup> and told him to wash out his mouth with a good strong brand of soap. But it was true. Old Dixie came in for supplies the next Saturday. Aunt Sarah Grindling tried to get something out of him but had to give up in disgust, and on his way out of the village Dixie saw me and pulled up the horse quickly. He lenaed over and spoke from the side of his old slack mouth. "She's gone," he said, and whipped up the horse again. ~~Jack Hannison made no attempt to follow her.~~ <sup>Jack Hannison made no attempt to follow her.</sup> It would have been hopeless in any case, for it was known that the troupe were heading for the United States, and a third-rate theatrical company was a very small needle indeed in that haystack of one-night stands. I thought once or twice of driving out to Eight Mile House to offer my sympathy, or rather to share Jack Hannison's misery, but I shrank from the prospect of his ~~stare~~ <sup>Colo's GREY stare</sup>. In all probability he would have said it was none of my business, and he would have been quite right.

Two years later (came the war) and ~~our~~ <sup>our</sup> petty current of local affairs was lost in the tide of great events. Before it was over the boys who had known Eight Mile House were scattered from Ypres to Siberia. A few who belonged to the militia went overseas in the Fall of '14 with the first contingent, but there was a general belief that the whole thing would be over in a few months and there was no rush to enlist until the next spring when the news from Ypres shocked us like cold water. One alone, the owner of Eight Mile House, stayed at home. We were not surprised, for we remembered his hatred of England and the English. Those who saw him wrote that he was a wreck of a man, working himself to death in his timber clearing and refusing any contact with the world, and those who had a word or two with him in the way of business said that he spoke through his teeth, very short and to the point, as if he grudged the time and breath involved. Then, abruptly, in the Fall of '16 he packed up a few belongings and left, telling old Dixie to sell the furniture and keep the money for his wages.

"What about Eight Mile House?" old Dixie said, wondering about the taxes.  
"The house," said Hannison, "can go to hell, Dixie, for all of me." And that was the last Pine County ~~knew of Jack Hannison~~ <sup>saw of him</sup>.



It was queer how much we talked of "home" when we were overseas and how little it satisfied us when we got back. There was a restlessness that took several years to work off, and the country was full of men wandering up and down, full of vague talk about getting out of the old rut and striking out at something with a future. It was summed up in the song that came from Tin Pan Alley about this time and swept the country -- "How ya gonna keep 'em down on the farm

Now that they've seen Faree ? "

For my part I had no wish to see Milltown, and when in the streets of Halifax I met Bob Nash \$\$\$\$\$\$, just out of the Air Force and bursting with enthusiasm about forestry in British Columbia, I decided on the spot. British Columbia it was. I had to learn forestry all over again, of course, for trees, rivers, mountains -- everything, were on a scale beyond Atlantic measurement, but it was strange and interesting, sometimes exciting, and just what I needed. There were transfers and promotions and changes from employer to employer. And there were girls, tall willow girls for choice, with humorous brown eyes and a knack of jolly little songs. There was a chance to launch out for myself, and then problems \$\$\$\$\$\$ that pushed me farther and farther, from the trees and deeper into an office chair. The years went by. I kept in touch with Pine County all this time by letter and by a subscription to the Pine County Courier, and I watched the decline and fall of Eight Mile House across the width of a continent.

Old Dixie held the fort until some time in 1922, selling the furniture bit by bit for taxes, and living on the garden stuff and an occasional moose or deer. Then one day the strength went out of him and some teamsters found him waving feebly from the doorway. The house, they said, was bare and spotless, as if the Hannisons had left it yesterday and taken the furniture with them, but the roof was leaking in several places. It is strange how quickly a wooden house disintegrates. That incredible old man had lived in the barn for six years, keeping the house spotless for the Hannisons' return. For Dixie believed to his dying day that they would come back. He had an honest respect for Hannison, and Sheila he had worshipped, and to his dying day he believed that they would come back. Mac Baring was there the day they took him away to the County Poor Farm, and saw the old man drive away with his personal trinkets in a handkerchief and a little rocking chair that had belonged to Sheila Hannison tied on the back of the buggy. He had saved that from the tax sales and would not be parted from it. "The saddest thing," Mac wrote, "I ever saw in my life."

After six empty years the house needed repairs. The roof leaked in several places. Mac Baring and some others boarded up the doors and windows and fastened a plank across the barn door, but they knew it was labour wasted. No barriers could keep out the damp and frost and the rot that comes in their wake. There had been six unheated winters, and already the hardwood floors had begun to heave, the paper was leaving the walls, and the pine panelling of the dining room was warped beyond hope. The house was doomed. By 1926, when the County went through the usual form of seizing it for outstanding taxes, the roof leaked in a dozen places and the floors were like a relief map of the county complete with hills, valleys, streams and lakes. Hunters and wandering hoboes began to use it for shelter, tearing down the interior woodwork for kindling, tearing boards off the barn for kindling, until the barn collapsed in an autumn storm. The county authorities send a man out to board up the doors again, and he found several windows broken, plaster lying in heaps on the porcupine den in the kitchen. About that time the timber at Eight Mile Lake was logged by men from the River and other gentiles, who took doors and window sashes one by one for their camps. So it went. There was nothing unusual about it after all. An abandoned house in the woods.

In 1928 the human depredations were noted in an unexpected way. Poor-house visitors told poor Dixie Willis something of the destruction, and one day the old man got permission to go to Milltown in the supply wagon. He was eighty three, a thin dried stick of a man, but he compelled the driver to take the long way round, past Eight Mile House. He walked through the shattered rooms, and wept, and on the bare white plaster over the great fireplace he wrote with a stub of lumber-crayon, "The People who destroyed this House will some day Come to Want".

*These woods had work always*  
*You know how they got.*  
*It was offered for sale, what who would buy a desolate house at Nine Mile?*

*THESE WERE PINE COUNTY*  
*in Milltown*

*Corrected*

*VANISHED*

*AND TURNED UP IN VARIOUS AND*

*strange*

*TEXTURE*



When I <sup>next</sup> came there last <sup>year</sup> fall the sprawling blue letters were still distinct, and potent, like a curse in that melancholy place. The economy and power of the words impressed me, like something out of one of the more vindictive psalms, as if some brooding spirit of the house had guided the old man's hand. It had been potent, too. There were <sup>recent</sup> no signs of <sup>recent</sup> human destruction in that damp and silent wreck. The hardwood flooring was gone, torn up and burned, I suppose, and the hemlock boards of the under-floor ~~were~~ rotten to the danger point. The plaster was nearly all down, the laths wrenched off for firewood. There were no doors, no windows. The gaping frames stared out of the drunken walls like sightless eyes. The stairs had collapsed. I could only guess at the ruin upstairs. The living room fireplace was deep in the ashes left by hunters and wanderers. A blackened little <sup>parakeet</sup> billy-can stood on the ~~mantel~~ mantel. The corners were <sup>SOAKEN HEAPS</sup> full of drifted leaves from other years. Soon, when the frosts came, there would be another layer. A depressing smell of wood rot hung in the rooms. A Squirrel skittered over the sagging floor above my head, and ~~the~~ fitful wind came out of the woods and rattled the loose clapboards like castanets.

It was late September. On the edge of the clearing the maples were a flame in the sunshine. ~~Apple~~ The apples in Jack Hannison's pitiful orchard were dropping from the trees. The ground was littered with bruised fruit, and I knew the deer would come out of the woods at dusk to hold feast. Behind the house, stretching back towards the lake hidden in the pines, the fields were shaggy with uncut grass, and wire birch were springing up, and thick bunches of alder bushes. The rail fence mouldering on the ground no longer separated the sown from the wilderness. In ten more years the forest would ~~have~~ reclaimed its own. I walked down past the ruined heap of the barn to look at the well and found Sheila Hannison sitting on the stone curb. I had a mad thought that I was looking at her mother. I <sup>SEEMED IMPOSSIBLE THAT</sup> had never thought of Sheila <sup>WOULD BE</sup> getting old. She had the same straight-backed figure, a little riper perhaps, but the black cloud of hair was now a <sup>shined</sup> gleaming silver <sup>CONFECTION</sup> that rippled in hair-dresser's waves below a smart little three-cornered hat. She was wearing a grey costume of some sort with a rich mink cape about her shoulders and the long shapely ankles were crossed in grey silk. Her hands were quiet in her lap.

She said "Hello, Jeff. This must be visitor's day." Quietly, just like that. I had a feeling that she had been watching me, ~~for some time~~. I said, "Yes," inanely. I could think of nothing to say. It was like talking to a stranger. Her long lips were thinner than I remembered, perhaps because they were compressed, and expressionless. In the old days her mouth had been a barometer for her emotions; you could read her mood from the lower lip alone. Her face <sup>NOW</sup> seemed to have drawn inwards, leaving a long faint shadow under the high cheek-bones. The passionate flaring ~~hostils~~ were the same, though, and the arched black eyebrows, and her eyes were enormous and very bright, but there was a ~~brooding~~ brooding in them where the gaiety had been, and a suggestion of hardness. There was a hint of rouge, delicately shaded, high on each cheek. She was a handsome woman. "If we'd been sweethearts," she said evenly, "this is the point where I should say, 'At last, my darling, you have come.'" I felt between my shoulder blades the queer chill that my mother used to call 'somebody walking <sup>ON</sup> your grave.' I said, "It must be, what -- twenty six years?"

She pulled at the fur cape and examined her gloves. "Yes. I went away to New York. You knew that, of course." I smiled faintly. "With Charlei's Aunt, wasn't it?"

"I played in their company for a time, yes. They went broke in a small town in New Jersey, and I went back to New York. It was like that for several years; getting a job in a road show, going broke somewhere, retruning to New York, hunting about the agencies again. Then I got a chance in a musical show, and people liked my singing and dancing. After that, more singing and dancing. Then drama, which was what I really wanted. It was easy, really."

"I never saw your name," I said. She <sup>stirred</sup> rustled the cape with her shoulders.

"I couldn't use my <sup>OWN</sup> name. Jack had that." So that was it. He had cast off the family name along with the rest. An absurd thought came into my mouth.

"It'd be quær, Sheila, if Jack were to come along now." She gave me a long deep look. There was no reproach in her eyes, only that touch of hardness.



There was something horribly unreal about ~~the~~ it  
this ~~like~~ elderly ghost of Sheila Harrison  
talking of lights and music and fun



" It would be very embarrassing. He's married, quite happily I think, and there's a family of three boys and two girls, the oldest almost at college age. And there's the management of the family affairs. But you wouldn't know about that."

" I thought, we all thought, that Jack was some sort of runaway nobleman, " I said. She laughed, <sup>pleasantly</sup>. " I wondered what Milltown thought. Jack's people were merchant aristocracy, which is very much more respectable. The Nonconformist Constence, <sup>burned</sup> within them like an indigestible dinner. An actress in the family! No no! So we ran away to live like the babes in the woods. Jack hated them for the way they treated me, and I hated them for the way they treated him. It was a jolly fine hate. But Jack and I couldn't get along on that alone." She was silent for a moment, and then said very rapidly, " ~~Oh~~, you thought we were madly in love, So did we. But you saw how utterly ~~different~~ we were. It was impossible. ~~Did~~ you thought I left him in a noble spirit of self-sacrifice, didn't you? -- so he could go back to his people and the life he was fitted for! Well, you were wrong, all of you. I left him because I couldn't stand it any longer. I wanted lights and music and all the fun of the fair. He wanted to lose himself in ~~this~~ nightmare of work and loneliness. I felt like the girl in the fairy tale, dragged off into the forest by an ogre in the shape of a young man. Cooped up in ~~that~~ lonely house! The long dull days and the awful nights! I never wonder now at those prairie tragedies where a man or woman goes mad and slaughters the whole family, preferably with an axe. It's so utterly logical; like two and two making four."

*There was more in her laughter still, but no warmth like the tinkle of ice in a glass.*

I put the question that was burning my tongue. " And Jack? Did you ever hear what became of him? ~~After he left the~~ <sup>Eight Mile House</sup> ~~mean~~."

" Yes. I knew all along. Humphrey, the older brother, was killed in France quite early in the war. Humphrey was decent. He and Jack were very fond of each other. It was Humphrey who risked the parental wrath and scraped up the thousand pounds we brought to Canada. The news got to Jack in some casual way ~~a long time~~ <sup>months</sup> after Humphrey died, and he went to England and enlisted as a private. In the name of Hannison -- my name. He must have been good fighting material. He was a captain when the war finished. He had that stubborn ruthless streak and a grudge to work off, a touch of the devil within. <sup>I suppose</sup> There was no hate left in him, ~~I suppose~~, when peace came. He went home to the family bosom, the prodigal son and heir. A few years later he got a divorce. ~~Found~~, desertion, of course. I saw a legal advertisement in one of the New York papers, the Times, I think. " She was smoothing her gloves again.

" You seem, " I said bluntly, " to have followed his career very closely. " " I was interested, of course. And information came to me in roundabout ways. " " Married? "

She gave me a quick glance. " ~~No. I've been busy with a career~~ " <sup>you forget I've had a</sup>

" Actresses marry, " I said. " Are you sure you're not still in love with Jack? "

" After all these years? How absurd. <sup>of course</sup> I still consider myself his wife. I always shall. I don't mean anything sentimental or religious; and certainly no legal foolishness. There was ~~no love~~ <sup>NO LOVE</sup> after the first two years, <sup>but</sup> in ~~that~~ <sup>few years</sup> time I'd given him everything, and when it was over I had no more capacity for marriage. I'm not making it very clear, I'm afraid. It's like giving away, no, using up, a part of yourself. <sup>never</sup> After that, <sup>all</sup> men are just so many talking dummies. They never seem quite human, at least not in an intimate and personal sense."

" Then, " I said brutally, <sup>sentimental said</sup>, " what are you doing here? "

She drew in those expressionless lips and gazed towards the ruin of the house. " The murderer and the scene of the crime. I wanted to see it again. After all, we had some happy times here, all of us, in those first two years. I've thought of them often. And old Dixie. What ever became of Dixie? "

" He went to the poor-house after a time. I think he was quite happy there. When he was dying somebody -- the keeper's wife, I think; she was a Willis from Milltown -- mentioned something about burying him in the <sup>Milltown</sup> Baptist cemetery in Milltown, and Dixie called out in a loud voice that he 'd be damned if he'd be buried amongst strangers. So his <sup>grave</sup> <sup>is</sup> in the poor-house yard, <sup>by request</sup>."

" Poor Dixie. " For the first time there was a tremor in her voice. But when I looked at her she met my eyes firmly, even coldly. That touch of hardness.

A long <sup>gray</sup> car pulled up beside mine on the post-road, and a horn blew a little harmony



on three notes. It ~~was~~<sup>AND</sup> an expensive sound. Sheila stood up settling the cape about her shoulders, and ~~stayed~~ <sup>stooped</sup> to brush her skirt. Her eyes met mine, and she ~~was~~ <sup>was</sup> ~~lingering~~ <sup>lingered</sup> ~~there~~ in front of me smiling faintly ~~and impersonally~~, as if I were something quite impersonal and rather amusing, a not-very-talkative dummy perhaps; and then I looked down and saw her out-stretched hand. "This is goodbye, Jeff. To you and to Mac and Harry and Bill and Harvey and the rest." I ~~was~~ <sup>wondered if Sheila</sup> ~~tempted~~ <sup>tempted</sup> to say that half ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> boys were dead and the girls married and gone, but it did not seem important. I shook her hand and dropped it woodenly.

"And Eight Mile House?" I said.

~~She turned and gave it a long look.~~ <sup>AGAIN THAT</sup> "I said good-bye to Eight Mile House twenty six years ago, Jeff. This is only a ghost. I shall always think of it as I knew it, ~~first!~~"

Without another word she left me and walked past the ruins ~~down~~ <sup>down</sup> to her car. She did not turn her ~~head~~ <sup>eyes</sup> once. She walked ~~steadily, serenely, confidently,~~ <sup>with</sup> with none of the old animal grace, but ~~with~~ <sup>with</sup> a perfect poise and timing that was beautiful in its ~~human~~ <sup>human</sup> perfection, steady, serene, confident, as if she were making an exit from a stage, as if she had just played a difficult scene and played it ~~rather~~ <sup>rather</sup> well.



a She was taller - taller than Jack - and she wore <sup>nowadays</sup> her dark hair curling about <sup>her</sup> shoulders in what is called <sup>nowadays</sup> the "page-boy bob". It was very unusual in those days of knobs and stiff piled pompadours. The nostrils flared away from the tilt of her nose in a way that suggested a keen and sensitive animal ~~sight~~ to sniff the savour of life, and her lips, long and full and wide, pouted a little, as if she were eager to taste as well.

Her eyes were dark and enormous, with a ~~felt~~ <sup>perceptible</sup> suggestion of a cast in the left, which far from detracting from her looks was oddly appealing. The <sup>the skin on the</sup> flower beds had a ~~bluish gleam~~ <sup>bluish</sup> ~~formed~~ long, sad with a vague bluish gleam.