HOW I FOUND MY FARM: BY MARY RANKIN CRANSTON

BEFORE I bought my farm I think I had been dimly conscious for some time of the fact that few women work toward independence, and that I was following along in the path of hundreds of others before me. My salary was sufficient for my needs and gave me a little to put in the bank every month, the surplus being spent for the most part in European travel; certainly not a foolish expenditure, since I was interested in far more than regulation sight-seeing. A study of social conditions, on such trips, having placed in my hands much that magazine editors found worth publishing, I had accumulated gradually a few hundred dollars. Although fond of travel, it seemed wiser to take this money and put it into a home of some sort, and, after my future was secured, to continue the globe-trotting, if I wanted to do so.

Having gained economic independence, I wanted personal freedom. I desired to earn a living by working for myself instead of spending the best years of my life in a salaried position; I wanted to find something that would give me pleasure as well as yield an income when I would reach the age for retirement in any other occupation. Above, and beyond, all was the overwhelming desire for home.

The majority of women work along until they get married or some relative leaves them a little money, enough to keep soul and body together, perhaps: or they are retired with or without a pension, usually without, when they go to live with some kind-hearted kinsman. Not many consciously aim at freedom, very few receive salaries large enough to warrant such dreams. The comparatively small number of truly successful women end by doing one of two things (leaving marriage out of the question), they either give up business altogether, as men do, or, if it has to a certain extent become indispensable, they have the power to arrange work to suit themselves. Such a woman is at her desk only at certain hours, or upon certain days, and therefore has the freedom to make a home for herself.

It is the exceptional woman who is physically able to stand more than twelve or fifteen years of continuous, efficient service. By that time she has exhausted her store of enthusiasm and nervous energy, the two things that vitalize any form of activity, the two things very soon worn out by the strain of business life. No matter how much enthusiasm there may have been at first, a few years of such a career are generally enough to awaken in most women a longing for home life, deeper, more intense, than if the business threshold had never been crossed.

This must not be construed as an argument against woman’s
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entrance into business or of impermanence in it; for she has arrived in the business world to stay. She can do and is doing good work, and it is undeniably a fine thing for the advancement of the race for women to acquire the breadth of view, the wider outlook upon life, which is gained by every self-supporting person through contact with the world. It may, however, be construed as a reassurance for those timid souls who view with alarm any interest for women aside from the needle and dish mop, for it simply means that nature may be trusted to keep the balance between the masculine and the feminine.

To my way of thinking the road to freedom led straight to a farm and the raising of fruits, vegetables, chickens or dairy products, as any of them ought to be a profitable occupation when the rising cost of living is considered. Even if I should discover that “the other fellow,” whoever he might be, and not I, reaped the larger margin of profit, it would still be a safe undertaking since I would be assured a good living, at the least, and could always find a market for my products that would bring in some ready cash, if not top-notch prices.

I did not want a suburban place, I wanted the real country. After an apartment-house experience of nine years I was tired of sleeping on a divan with a Bagdad cover, which is said to be the Bohemian ambition of every woman who aspires to earn a living in the metropolis; I was weary of keeping my best hat in a bandbox under the bed or upon a built-in closet shelf, so high that it meant a torn sleeve or strained joint to get it; I was tired of inadvertently overhearing the affairs of my neighbors and of having to converse in whispers if I would not disturb them; I wanted to see something else besides the glaring contrast between riches and poverty and the jostling crowds of people who rush up and down the street canons of brick and mortar. I made a vow to buy enough land to place neighbors at a comfortable distance and give me breathing room. I thought five acres would do.

Before the search even began, the farm was named. As it would be paid for, chiefly, with money made by writing, I wanted the name to be distinctive and to express the idea that it was made possible by my pen, therefore I called it Pendidit.

Indulging in the Utopian dream, induced by statements in newspapers and magazines that land within a radius of forty miles of New York could be had for fifty dollars an acre, I was confident that my little fortune of six hundred would purchase the five acres and a small, plain house. Alas for dreams! No fifty-dollar acreage property was on the market that I could discover. I soon found out that it was one thing to decide to buy a farm, quite another to find one within my means. I interviewed owners in vain. I sought out agents,
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I carried on a voluminous correspondence with them, in fact they fairly hobnobbed with me. They came to see me in swarms to offer all sorts of property, in the hills of New Hampshire and Vermont, along the bays and inlets of Maine, in Connecticut, in the wilds of Long Island, some of it bare of trees, some of it the virgin forest, some a pebbly beach. One of the most assiduous came in one day with a beaming face. "Madam," he said, "here is just what you want, a piece of property not large enough to be a burden, cheap as dirt now but worth ten times the purchase price when sidewalks are laid out, streets paved, the railroad extended, trolleys built, telephones put in and——" Cutting him short I asked the number of acres. "Ah, a-hem, Madam, you see you can’t buy acreage property near New York these days unless you pay a big price. Now this lot is twenty-five by seventy-five, just what——" "No, it isn’t just what I want, not by a long shot. I want acres, not feet; the country, not a desert or a forest." It seemed truly a difficult matter to find a scrap of ground not already bought up by millionaires for country seats or by real-estate companies for speculation.

I WENT to land sales in Long Island where lots were staked off in the wilderness that could hardly become a human habitation for many years, visited the banks of the Hudson to find bare, unimproved land, some of it on steep hillsides, for from three hundred to fifteen hundred dollars an acre and more, and wandered over other parts of Westchester County where the price of real estate is out of sight. Finally the choice narrowed down to either Connecticut or New Jersey. Deciding upon the latter, I did not go to New England where it is said farms may be bought for a song, but, resigning myself to the Jersey mosquito, I bent every energy toward hunting out a place in that State. Here let me say a word for a much-maligned insect, the mosquito, it has appeared for only a night or so once during each summer, and then not in large numbers. There were three reasons which made New Jersey seem best for me. First, the good markets in every direction for produce; second, good railway facilities and third, the increasing value of property in that State which would make a wise selection of land a good investment. I began to look about in May, but it was the last of October before I found the place I finally bought, and an advertisement in a daily paper led me to it.

All during the summer I spent my spare time and so much money answering advertisements and traveling about in the home search, that I began to wonder if any cash would remain with which to make the first payment. To paraphrase "Little Nanny Petticoat," the longer
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I looked, the smaller my farm grew, for the high prices of realty dissipated all hope of being able to buy five acres, so the dream dwindled down to three, and whatever I could get on it, whether a house, a chicken house or a mere shed. But when the phantom farm seemed about to elude my grasp realization was very near.

One day I saw an advertisement in a New York paper of three acres and an eight-room house for eighteen hundred dollars, on easy terms. Making an appointment with the advertiser, a real-estate agent, I went to New Brunswick, New Jersey, to look at the place. I would not have it as a gift. Disappointed but still resolute, I asked if that was all he had to offer in the way of country property. No, there was another place four miles out, one mile from the railway station, and there was time to see it before my train came if I cared to do so. "I might as well, I suppose. How much land is there?" "Fourteen acres, and the price is thirteen hundred dollars." Now, after having my farm shrink from five to three acres, the fourteen went to my head, my spirits rose at a bound, I felt as if I were soaring away in an airship, as I said, "Let's go at once, and is there a house on the place?" He had not been there in some time but he was under the impression that there was a small house. The road was good and we soon reached the farm. There were no "great shade trees," "no rustic bridges over rippling streams," no "quaint summer houses," that had been in my dream farm, but there were good apple, pear and cherry trees that gave shade as well as fruit, a fine grape-vine, rose, lilac, syringa, spiræa and snowball bushes, and all around the edge of the place were the prettiest tall cedars, chestnuts and young oaks.

The fields were cleared and worked by the owner who lived on his other farm half a mile away. But the two shanties, by courtesy called house and barn, were a sight to behold. If I wanted a simple, plain house I certainly would get it here. Nevertheless, the house was good, although built almost one hundred years ago. If it was ugly, imagination pointed out the changes that would make it attractive and more comfortable, the absence of rustic arbors and summer houses could not be looked upon as a disadvantage since I would have the pleasure of making them myself.

THE buildings, with twenty-five by fifty feet of land, or very little more than they actually occupied, were rented to a farm hand and his wife, the woman unconsciously doing much to effect the sale by quarreling all during the visit because the owner gave them so little ground, would not rent them enough to plant three rows of potatoes. Now, I did not know the first thing about soils, so her com-
plaint seemed pretty good evidence of the fertility of the land, for, I argued, the owner would not wish to keep it for his own use unless it was good.

The place had possibilities, for the fruit trees were bearing, there were two good hay-fields and good pasture land, besides several acres given over to corn and potatoes, and it was cheap. I said to the agent, "I like the place. See how near a thousand dollars you can get the owner and upon what terms, and then we will talk business." In a few days I heard that I could have it for one thousand and seventy-five dollars upon the terms I wanted, and I took it. The money I had made the first payment, and I retained my position in New York until the farm was entirely paid for and enough more laid by to begin building a new, comfortable house.

Pendidit is about forty miles from New York, on the main line of one of the best railway systems and is a little more than a quarter of a mile from the station. It is in the real country, though not isolated, for good neighbors are near enough for protection, the roads are fine, and the "National Highway from New York to Atlanta," the popular automobile route, is within sight but too far away for noise and dust to be objectionable. The nearest store, a realistic little country store, is a mile away, and all around me are the green lanes, the beautiful orchards, the wayside wild flowers I longed for.

It is amusing, though, when city friends ask how I found the way to operate the Law of Opulence so that I get what I want, for I simply knew what I wanted and kept at it until I got it, and what I have set in motion is the Law of Hard Work. There's never an idle moment in the country, as I know it, and I might add, never a dull one. As a matter of fact, I work harder than I did in New York, but it is activity that is better balanced, for I have physical as well as mental work. Life is normal, therefore more complete, for I have my quiet home with its domestic duties and pleasures, yet am in touch with the outside world through papers and magazines, besides the additional interest of working out Pendidit's financial side by marketing what it produces.