THE OLD HEARTHSTONE: BY CHARLES GRANT MILLER

Tradition and romance would be dead indeed but for the genial sentiments that cluster about the old hearthstone. And lots of other good things in this world would never have come to life but for its blood-warming glow. Family, clan, tribe and nation were born in its beneficent warmth. Morality and civilization were lighted through ages of progress by the old-time back-log.

On wild winter nights, when the ice-edged wind pierced the cracks of the cabins and roared exultingly, the fire upon the hearthstone leaped like a lion in a cage lashing its tail in defiance. And the family meals that were cooked on the open hearth! A huge back-log, with smaller wood before it, blazed on rude andirons and stones. A johnny-cake, on a white-scoured ash board, baked before the fire, and a frying-pan, with its long handle resting on a splint-bottom chair, sputtered with boiling grease, while the swinging tea kettle merrily sang.

To countless generations, the hearthstone was at once newspaper and school. There the current events were related and discussed, and there the first simple lessons were instilled in the minds of youth.

Art and poetry of all time have created no picture so beautiful and so alive with human interest as that of the old-time family gathered at the hearthstone when day was done.

There was no "race suicide" in those good days. Father and mother were surrounded by a generous brood of children. If there was not room in the half-circle for chairs for them all, some sprawled happily upon the floor; the firelight, like gay troupes of gold-liveried fairies, playing hide-and-seek in their tousled hair. The father, with a youngster on either knee, awkwardly expounded the mysteries of a, b, c, or the rule of three, and the silent, smiling mother was busy at her sewing. Sometimes there was room too for the dear old grandmother with her endless knitting and her tales of the goblins that lurked in the shadows. And upon them all, the fire crackled and laughed, and the kettle cheerily sang. It was a little world but a sweet one.

But times and customs and needs have changed. The old fireplaces are walled up. The stove, the hot air register and the steam radiator supply the heat of today, leaving family cheer and close companionship out of the reckoning.

The crackling wood has receded before advancing civilization, and coal is dirty and makes a muss. The gas grate lingers only as a
mockery. Even the sacred mantelpiece must soon succumb to the inevitable.

There is no longer any domestic shrine where all the family can meet and feel in place. In the arrangement of the up-to-date home, the father has his “den,” the mother her own room, the children have the nursery and the boy has the backyard and the streets.

The father has not the wisdom any more to know his own son. The mother gives her daughter some stilted advice in melting moments now and then, and imagines that she is bringing her up in the way that she should go. Vain imagining!

The children of today are being brought up in the schools, not in the homes.

The home of today is the place to sleep and take most of our meals. We live elsewhere.

To find congenial companionship, we all go out—father, mother, son and daughter. Our greatest sympathies are nourished outside the cheerless barrack we call home.

But nature is infinitely wise. In our complex life today, families cannot live to themselves. There must be system and harmony in the bringing up of children such as only the schools can afford.

In the simple, narrow life of the old days the mental needs were few; and the son, destined to follow in the footsteps of the father, had no cause to go elsewhere for his learning. But the son today is performing miracles of which his father never dreamed.

Families no longer hold together to wrest a homestead from the wilderness, but scatter throughout the wide earth, each individual following his bent, and thus perhaps doing best service.

Yes; the old fireplace is walled up. In another generation or two, it may have passed even from memory of living man. Like chivalry, it will exist mainly in history, poetry and picture.

But for him who still can see it through the haze of years, its glow remains in his heart. Its warmth ever stays in his life.