

The Free Press Short Story

THE BUGGIN'

GERTRUDE WEST

"Thank God for a garden," Alice Stacy sang from the kitchen porch, where she was hanging up dishcloths to dry.

Grandpa Cummings straightened from stooping above the rank young rows of beans and stood listening.

"Ain't that the truth?" he said as he caught the words of his granddaughter's song. "I'd defy anybody," he thought, "to walk through a good, clean, thrifty garden and not go out a happier man."

His eyes, following the straight weed-less rows, rested presently on coarse-stemmed, wide-leaved cucumber vines, close, ruffly green lines of lettuce, and straight young corn, with its flowing silk tassled to the sun.

He looked a roly-poly Santa Claus as he stood there among the trim rows. Hale at seventy, with shrewd eyes, he had been for years the head and adviser of his widowed daughter's home.

Sarah came with her hoe through the gate behind him.

"I was just thinking," he said to her, "of the dimes and quarters that hang on these bushes and make them so pretty."

"Dimes and quarters!" she repeated, jestingly. "Things don't have to have value to look pretty to my notion."

"Sure not. But then I was always one to like things useful as well as ornamental. There's all the color in a squash flower that there is in a nasturtium, and besides there's the squash coming on."

His daughter shook her head. "Flowers are flowers, and I like them separate from my squashes."

"If everybody saw things alike, the world would be full of one-eyes, but I like to look ahead. Take the potato patch over yonder; it wouldn't be half so pretty if it wasn't making music with singing lessons for Alice and Alicia."

"Singing lessons?" She had less of her twin daughters' confidence than had their grandfather. "Is that what they've set their hearts on?"

Grandpa nodded, holding up a finger for silence as from the house there came drifting again a fragment of Alice's song, joined now by Alicia's higher trill.

"There are no two prettier voices," he declared, "and if singing school starts next week, I've made up my mind they are going to it."

"That's right," agreed Sarah Stacy, straightening from her hoeing. "If we can take off a load of early potatoes Monday, that'll start the girls in on their lessons. And if maddling wet weather lasts us up into the summer and the pests don't get the potato patch, we'll have plenty to see them through."

Together father and daughter stepped across the abundant dew-wet rows to the potato patch. There Sarah, stooping to examine the thrifty vines, gave a cluck of dismay. For, clinging to the under side of the leaves as she turned them over, was a plump coral-colored parasite which Grandpa recognized as Colorado beetle, the bane of the potato grower.

Grandpa stooped beside his daughter for a glimpse at the menace and straightened at once, the glint of action in his eyes.

"We've got to bug 'em, Sarah, that's all there is to it," he announced. "Right after dinner we'll hustle out with the twins and make a short job of it."

Sarah nodded absently to her father's cheerful conclusion, but her thin face wore an unusual pucker.

"I've engaged to help Mrs. Colville with her cleaning this afternoon," she explained, "and I hate to fall her. I always feel that my words as good as my hand, but if you and the girls can get out, Father, I'll pick up somebody on the road to Colville's and send him to help in my place."

"Go ahead, Sarah. Wouldn't you have fall a neighbor. Hands ought to be easy to get. Some one was telling me the new family that's moved in below has strapping big boys. I don't give a hoot whether they're friend or stranger, just so's they can bug."

Dinner was a bustling meal. The twins accepted the situation as a matter of course.

"Mr. Colville sprayed his potatoes with bug poison," Alice commented. "All he had to do was drive up and down the rows and hold a rubber hose."

"Yes, and a sprayer costs money, and poison comes high," responded Grandpa cheerfully; "and two good hands were put on every one of this family to help them better themselves."

By the time Sarah set out for the neighbor's the other members of the family were already allied, each provided with an old tin can and a sharp little stick. Bending industriously to the long green rows, they scraped the fat pink insects from the leaves to deposit them on the smudge of smoldering straw they had lighted at one end of the patch.

Sarah had been gone perhaps an hour and the "buggin'" was progressing steadily if a little slowly when Grandpa looked up to see a stranger advancing toward the potato patch.

"Here comes the hand, girls," he called guardedly. "Well, he can cover considerable space at one step, but he will have a long way to stoop."

The young man who with some difficulty has untangled his long legs from the barb-wire fence which protected the

tenor, he sang slowly, indicating each insect in turn:

"Do, Re, Mi, Fa, Sol, La, Si, Do."

"Well, now," gasped Grandpa. He suggested appreciatively. "And you say that's all there is to singing lessons? You're joking."

"Fact, Mr. Cummings," returned the hired man. "Perhaps the majority of teachers don't illustrate in quite this way, but the principle is the same. All together now!"

And taking a careful pitch, the "hand" led off, followed by the lusty voices of the fifteen-year-old twins, warbling the major scale.

After that, the afternoon's bugging was suspended while the workers crowded round, studying and discussing the hired man's diagram.

"He's just dallying to make time," the old man thought and hustled both pupils and instructor back to work.

But already the young people had progressed rapidly in the acquaintance of the staircase family, and they kept vigilant watch upon it all the remainder of the afternoon.

"Sol is rolling off his step," Alicia would shriek, and then would ensue a

hilarious poking to restore the delinquent to his proper place.

Or it would be Do who was unruly. With such digressions it was well on toward dusk before the "buggin'" was completed.

At last, however, the workers straightened their tired backs and looked with satisfaction back over the sturdy green rows. The enemy had been circumvented. Even Do, Re, Mi, and the rest had at last been deposited upon the smoldering straw.

The hired man put on his coat. Grandpa thrust a hand into his pocket. "The job's done and done well," he conceded genially. "To be sure, you have all dalled along considerable, but it's helped to pass over a tiresome job; so I've nothing more to say."

He held out some jingling change to the "hand."

"I'm payin' you for a full half-day," he stated magnanimously. "It's no more than right."

But the stranger shook his head and made no move to take the money.

"I feel myself well paid already," he answered. "I have no garden of my own."

And, standing there in the sweet-smelling dusk, before the startled little group, he lifted a wonderful mellow voice.

"Thank God for a garden," he sang. Then, before the marveling audience could speak or move, he turned and went striding away across the field.

"Well!" gasped Grandpa, staring wide-eyed after him. "If that ain't the looniest hired man ever I come up against!"

The little group on their preoccupied way to the house were still marveling and speculating when the creak of Sarah's wagon sounded at the gate and her crisp voice called out to them:

"How'd you make it by yourselves, Father you and the girls? After I couldn't find a hand to send in my place, I figured on getting back in time to help you some with the bugging, but I could not get around any sooner."

Grandpa stared blankly at his daughter.

"Couldn't find a hand? Why, Sarah, then who was that 'foony' you sent here?"

"That, I didn't send anybody—except that young Mr. Culpepper, the singing

teacher that was getting signers for a term of singing lessons. I told him to come up and see you, Grandpa; about signing up for the twins."

Grandpa gazed at his daughter and at the stricken twins.

"Oh, Grandpa," breathed Alice, "what have you done?"

Then Grandpa abruptly recovered his serenity. "Nothing out of the road that I can see. His work was a free-will offering, and he got a good bit of run out of it, as far as I noticed. And a body that has no garden might count it a privilege, nothing less, to work a spell in a trim, neat patch like ours. I guess the afternoon hasn't been wasted—for any of us."

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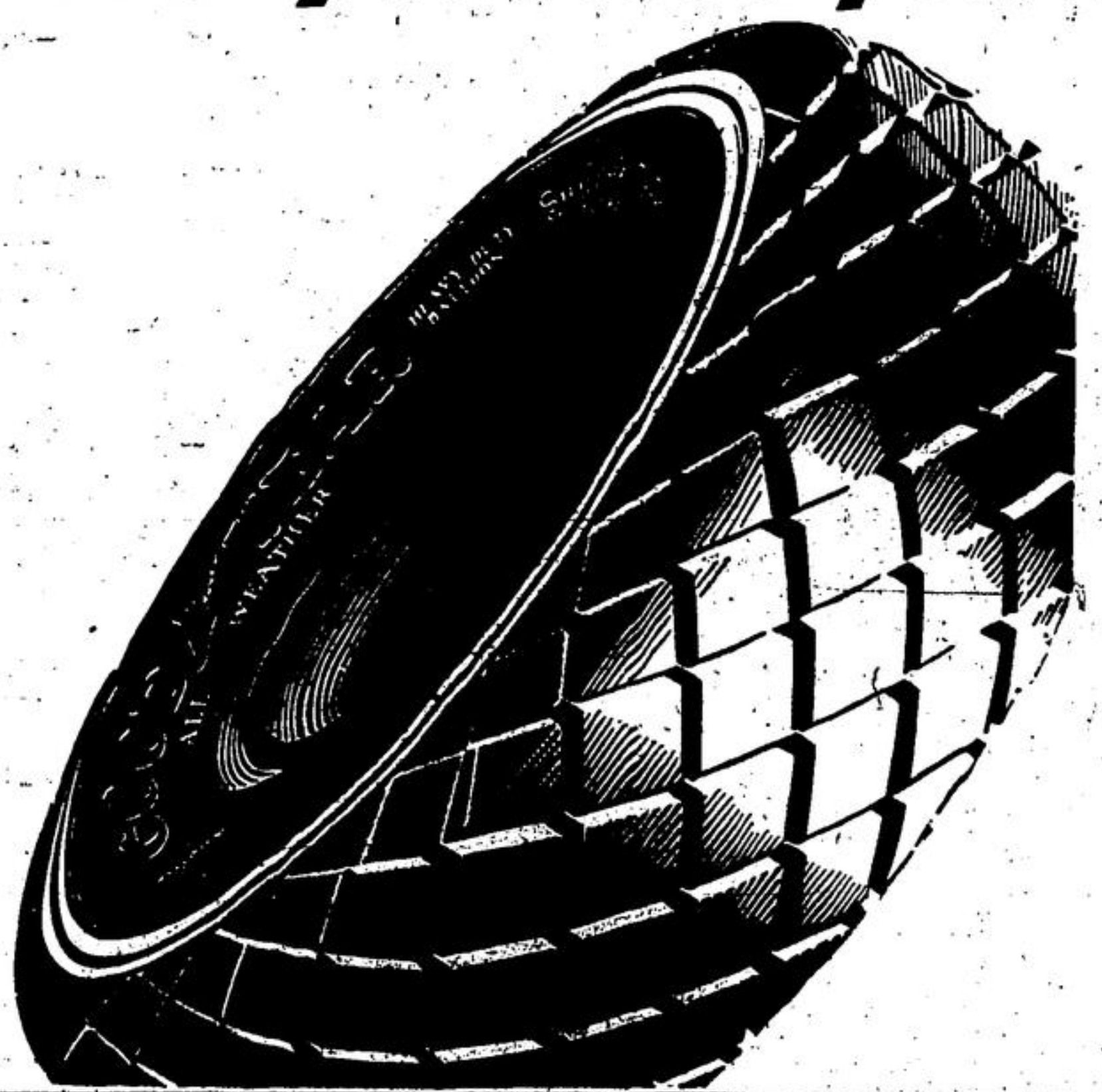
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