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The Story of Troutbeck

This is the story of Troutbeck, a Dutchess County homestead that nestles in the foothills of the Berkshires. Troutbeck is three miles from Amenia and a hundred miles from New York by car. But in time Troutbeck lies much further away, for as soon as one passes over the stone bridge that spans the river below it, one is in a timeless world, free from the urgencies of the city, where the hours do not halt for a red light or accelerate on a green one. Almost two centuries from now, one hopes, there will still be fields and woods where there are now fields and woods, and a big house nestling under the sheltering plateau to the north, where the vegetable garden, the hothouse, the gracious stone-walled garden now are.

One cannot write about Troutbeck impersonally. There are places so warmed by human companionship that they have taken on a human character of their own, and their story is a special kind of human biography. Troutbeck is such a place. Four generations, beginning with Celeb Benton, who moved there with his family in 1795, have nourished this land with their love; five if one counts William Young, who first settled there in 1765. They preserved the ancient oaks, which were already old when they came; in 1835 they planted sycamores, which still stand above the brook that flows, under a steep bank, beyond the lawn in front of the house; in our time, they turned what was once a high road into a velvety carpet of grass, and planted lilies and scilla and ajuga and primroses that feed one's color-starved eyes in spring. Beyond this sunny meadow lies Oblong Mountain, the Western boundary of Troutbeck; when one climbs its rocky flanks one is close to the same primeval wilderness in the Indians found

here, and may rouse a covey of partridge, or hear, in the distance, in the high bark of the red fox.

Gradually the land around Troutbeck, once parceled off into many smaller holdings, was brought together, first by the Benton family, and then more extensively by the the present owners, the Spingarns; so that by now some eight hundred acres, of garden and meadowland and pasture and lake and mountain woods form Troutbeck: an area roughly equivalent to Central Park. The main house itself stands before a trout pool that gives the place its name. Once that icy spring served as cold-closet and refrigerator for the Benton family; today it lues open to the sky, its edges fringed with primroses, though as of old the trout still dart in and out of the shadows. The water, seeing through the limestone strata of the region, is one of the special delights of the place. Besides the open springs, before and behind the house, there is big spring, a mile away, whose water was once bottled and sold in New York; and it is the water from that spring that now runs by pipe to every part of the homestead. In a region where the summer dry spells sometime work hardship on dairy farmers, dependent on local wells, the perennial springs of Troutbeck have more than once slaked the thirst of the whole countryside. And the taste of that water, when one has been away from it for even a short time, is one of the great delights of coming back to Troutbeck.

Not by accident did this Dutchess County farm get its literary name, in honor of the famous village in the English Lake Country that was so dear to Coleridge. The Bentons, at least in the third generation, where a literary family. In the eighteenth fifties they formed the Amenia Literary Society, whose minutes are still preserved in an old copybook at Troutbeck; one of them, Joel while still a youngster edited the Amenia Times, and another, Charles, who enlisted as a drummer-boy in the civil

war, wrote a stirring book about his war experiences, and compiled the first story of Troutbeck itself. Their brother Myron, the third Benton to work this farm, was a poet as well as a farmer.

When Emerson lectured at the Poughkeepsie Lyceum, it was Myron who drove over to listen to him and chat with him afterward; and when Myron read Thoreau's *A Week on the Concord and the Merrimac*, he spent a similar week on his own river, the Webutuck, and wrote an account of it too.

That literary tradition enhanced the charms of the landscape for Joel Elias Spingarn, the critic and poet and philosopher; he too fell in love not merely with the place but the spirit that pervaded it, from his first sight of it in 1910. He carried on that tradition, not alone in his own work, but in the efforts he and his wife made to domesticate other American men of letters to this scene. Here come Sinclair Lewis, observant and restless., the brilliant Italian philosopher and novelist, putting Fascist Italy behind him; here came poets like Melville Cane, critics like Van Wyck Brooks and Lewis Mumford, painter and critics like Walter Pach, who brought the great Mexican artist Orozco, to give by the presence, for a night or a decade, the quality that Emerson's *Concorde* had in an earlier day. The Troutbeck leaflets brought together the living past of this homestead, with an equally vital present.

If the Benton gave this land its first firm outlines, it was Joel and Amy Spingarn who, with more labour to command and no less love, brought it to the pitch of perfection. When the old farmhouse burned down in 1917 - a building that had been renovated by Myron in the old Gothic taste that Andrew Jackson Downing had made popular in the Hudson Valley - they put in its place an L-shaped house, with the warm-colored stone walls and the heavy slate roofs beloved by William Morris, built solidly enough to last through the centuries: a house with all its main room

facing south, to keep the sun out in summer and to drink it in the winter. Spacious but informal, ready to hold a big family and a flock of guests, but not oppressive when it is empty, alternating openness with seclusion, sociability with privacy; such is the nature of this house. After a period of architectural experiment that has turned the dwelling house into a goldfish bowl or terrarium, Troutbeck offers quality many people are beginning to appreciate again today; it has an interior. Nestling under a hill, secure against even visual intruders, this house cultivates its innerness; through numerous doors open into lawn and terrace, Troutbeck itself gives a sense of being snug, protected, inviolate.

If when one is indoors in Troutbeck one is really within, when one is outdoors, a few steps carry one away into the world of nature, as if the house were a thousand paces away. That precious transformation is in no small part due to Colonel Spingarn's skill and taste as a horticulturalist and master of landscape design. Since at one period of his life, he lived on a close tether and could not exert himself too strenuously, he gave to a quarter mile circuit of Troutbeck the variety of a long stroll through many different kinds of landscape. Beyond that circuit, the land becomes wilder; and a private road carries one to the lake that nestles under the mountain and the cedar-covered hill on the other side. That lake is formed by natural springs whose water was dammed up at the far end; bass and sunfish swim its waters; and its bottom slopes so slowly downward that generations of children have enjoyed its waters with a minimum of anxiety to their guardians.

Troutbeck, as one finds it now, with its circuit of land and its houses, with garden and tennis court, with its roads and clearings and woodland paths, is the visible result of a long collaboration between man

and nature. Many people have loved this place, and each generation has added something to testify to that love. This sense of time past, which hovers like the smell of wildgrape blossoms in the air, gives also a sense of potential lives to come - people who will claim the landscape with the same sort of love and make their own contribution to it, planting a clump of trees here, or embroidering some untouched meadow with spring flowers. But admittedly, there are moments when, in walking around Troutbeck, one remembers Checov's *The Cherry Orchard*, and wonders whether its fate is to be that of many country houses in Europe and America: to become the rural outpost of some metropolitan institution, or to be broken up like a suburban subdivision into building lots. That may be Troutbeck's destiny; yet there is something in the personality of the place that makes one hope for a different outcome when it changes hands.

Troutbeck still offers a link between a family and a landscape, between a patch of historic soil and the generations that are still to come, a link that has been unbroken since Caleb Benton first settled here. No feudal continuity of blood, but a democratic continuity of spirit binds together the families that have occupied Troutbeck. There are other farms where the soil is as rich and the pasture as plentiful. But Troutbeck has brought forth through the years a special crop of its own: a pattern of life and gentle breed of men and woman; people like Wordsworth's Lucy, who «dwell in beauty» and unconsciously carry some of that beauty into their daily actions. This quality is beyond any price; but whoever learns to love Troutbeck with the love that the Bentons and the Spingarns have given it, will find that it is the most precious part of the bargain.

