

# THE HOUSE WITH THE WOODBINE

BY DOROTHY CANFIELD

AUTHOR OF "THE PIANO," "THE SCRUBWOMAN," "THE STORY  
OF RALPH MILLER"

EZRA HUBBEL was a pale, hollow-chested, timid boy, with a mat of sandy hair, and gentle, hazel eyes like a rabbit's. He was but seventeen, and immature for his age, but he knew the fervor of a great passion. No hot-blooded young man ever loved his sweetheart with a more absolute ardor than did Ezra the house in which he lived.

In the beginning he had been partly moved by reaction from intense distaste for his former city surroundings. He had been ten years old when the Hubbel family moved away from the small Vermont village in the mountains and descended to the city, where Mr. Hubbel's skill as a woodworker was to float them high on a tide of opulent city wages. Ezra, being the eldest of the three children, felt more than the others the extreme contrast between life in the Chilton cottage and existence in a tenement on Second Avenue, although their apartment was, relatively speaking, a comfortable one.

His mother said that the change "had nearly be'n the death of Ezra," and the phrase was literally true. During the four years of their stay in the city the shrinking, sensitive little boy lived in such a veritable passion of horror and loathing for everything about him that it consumed him like a fire.

His sister, Elvira, a year younger than he, shared to some extent his morbid hatred for the dark little rooms, the long, ill-smelling stairways, and, above all, for the constant, never-ceasing contact with over-familiar and numerous neighbors; for these conditions pressed with an intolerable weight on the two wild, shy country children. Little Sammie, aged five, adjusted himself to the changed conditions with the ease of extreme youth, and was soon as ram-

pantly at ease in the crowds of hooting street-children as any descendant of generations of Ghetto-dwellers; but the two elder ones suffered a long agony of nostalgia — nostalgia for they knew not what, since the wide village street of Chilton and the joys of a large back yard soon faded into a child's hazy vision of a half-remembered past.

Ezra had never known what it was he so longed for, but when he saw the house in Mount Morris he recognized his ideal with the unerring instinct of love at first sight. When he was fourteen it was decided that he should go to work. Through a schoolmate he heard of a position as grocer's boy in Mount Morris. His father was to be at work on a long job near there, and the family talked of moving out to the suburb if Ezra, too, could find something to do.

He was returning from a successful interview with the grocer when his heart leaped high to see his unformulated ideal rise before him. It was in a poor part of the town which had evidently been once a village by itself, but which a colony of Sicilians had reduced to a state of forlorn desolation. In the midst of their unkempt and slovenly squalor the house with the woodbine smiled with the rustic radiance of a rosy country girl in a crowded car of haggard city dwellers.

Probably its resemblance to the faded picture of village houses which still lingered in his mind accounted for some of the love for the place which sprang full-fledged into the heart of the boy leaning over the picket-fence and gazing with enraptured eyes at the house before him; but, as a matter of fact, it was quite seductive enough to have bewitched him without the faint aroma of half-familiarity which hung about it.

It would have been a charming little home anywhere, and in its desolate setting it was positively enchanting. The white of the walls was almost covered with the rich, dark green of the woodbine which swept down over the quaint, small windows and drooped graceful sprays from the roof of the deep piazza. The very chimneys were swathed in the robust growth of the vine, now in the full luxuriance of its June vigor.

The mass of green was relieved by a healthy old climbing-rose, which displayed a quantity of red blossoms over the front door. Beside the grass-grown gravel walk leading out to the street was a hedge of ragged, untrimmed syringa bushes, white with a thousand fragrant stars. Neglected beds of peonies flamed red and pink between the mounting waves of the uncut grass and the noble old elms which cast a heavy shade over the house. Boy that he was, Ezra longed to open the gate and set the deserted paradise in the state of trim beauty for which he felt it so evidently intended.

If he had been either older or more worldly wise, he never would have thought it worth while even to inquire about the empty house, so apparent was its air of being far beyond the Hubbel purse; but his simple ignorance served him well. After much inquiry among the Sicilians he was directed to the owner of the house, an old Italian woman, who welcomed eagerly a prospective tenant, even one so doubtfully represented.

She explained that the house was a disappointment to her. It had been for sale at a very low price, and she had invested all her little savings in it, hoping to live on the rent; but Ezra gathered dimly through her imperfect, halting English a picture of a long line of bad tenants, who fell sick, paid no rent, or moved suddenly away, until now the place had a bad name and had been empty for more than a year. With a wild hope, Ezra overcame his shy timidity, and asked the rent, his pulse drumming in his ears so that he could hardly hear her name a sum less than they had paid for any of their Second Avenue tenement lodgings.

## II

THE interval from that day until the time when they moved into the house with

the woodbine dragged like an eternity to the impatient boy, although it was but a fortnight. And yet, when they were once established in the low-ceiled, cozy rooms, the whole period of their life on the East Side seemed at once like a bad dream, so peacefully at home did they feel themselves from the first day.

The old house was even lovelier inside than out, full of odd nooks and corners, of rooms with small-paned windows and sloping ceilings. Mrs. Hubbel's New England housewifery, fallen into disuse in the city, reasserted itself in spotless neatness indoors, and Ezra gave literally every moment of his leisure to the care of the garden and yard. He dug and hoed and labored incessantly with a devotion which left him no time for other pursuits. Sometimes on his way past the house, going from the grocer to a customer, he set his basket down, darted inside the gate, straightened a drooping gladiolus stalk in the flower-garden, or pulled a weed from a trim row of vegetables, and then ran to make up for lost time, staggering under his load of groceries.

Three years of such ardent cherishing care wrought marvels in the old place. Well kept and prosperous, it nestled under the old elms in a happy transformation from its former neglect. As he walked about of summer evenings and surveyed his handiwork, Ezra's heart swelled with the same pride that a good husband feels to see a pale sweetheart blossoming into a radiant and vigorous wife.

Overwhelming sorrows had come to the Hubbels during the three years, and already, as though it were their old family home, the house was hallowed with tender and sad associations. Ezra felt bitterly the irony of fate which had taken Elvira away from the spot where she could have been so happy. With the blind belief in heredity of New Englanders, Mrs. Hubbel had said that Elvira must have inherited consumption from her grandmother, for she had died just as the older woman had, carried away in the fall of the year they moved to Mount Morris, when the woodbine was wrapping the house in cloth-of-gold. Ezra loved the new home with a deeper fervor as he remembered how Elvira had liked

her pretty room with the climbing-rose over the window, and he shuddered to think what her sickness and death would have been in the tiny inner room of a city tenement.

Sammie was the next to go, attacked with a strange disease of the bones. He had been taken to a hospital, had undergone operation after operation until the shock was too great for his worn little frame. The parents had not recovered from the loss of their youngest and favorite child. Mr. Hubbel fell into a mild melancholy that sent him drooping hopelessly about the house, unmindful of the others, and Mrs. Hubbel began to fade and wither before Ezra's anxious eyes. He fancied that she looked as Elvira had, and his heart stood still. They were drawn very close by the loss of the other children and by the community of their passion for the house which had seen their sorrows. Little Sammie had begged to be taken home to die, and in some way they had prevailed on the impersonal hospital authorities to allow this irregular proceeding; so that he, too, had closed his eyes for the last time on the roses of the vine over the window, and had left lingering in the small, old room the recollection of his appealing little face.

Ezra and his mother often wondered aloud how they ever could have borne the grief that had come to them, if they had not had about them the soothing comfort of the old house. As Mrs. Hubbel grew weaker and weaker she fretted chiefly because she could not give the place the care it needed. Winter came on, and Ezra transferred his energies indoors, taking his mother's place as well as he could, caring for her and for the quaint interior with the same unflinching fidelity. Half the sting of seeing the invalid so worn and thin was removed by the pleasure of observing her in one of the pretty, picturesque rooms, in a chintz-covered armchair by the hearth, the sun coming in faintly through the many-paned small windows and casting checkered squares of light on the curious old-fashioned wall-paper.

As his mother's cough grew more and more racking, Ezra tried to talk with his father about the necessity of having a doctor for her, but Mr. Hubbel's melancholy had settled into an absent sort

of gentle fatalism, and he seemed scarcely to hear the boy. Ezra felt himself the virtual head of the family, and finally went to the free dispensary, which had furnished them the doctors for Sammie and Elvira, and asked again for one.

The next day arrived a keen young Yankee, with a restless, inquiring eye, quite different from the overworked and careless young hospital doctors who had visited them before. He examined Mrs. Hubbel, he examined the house, he tried to interview Mr. Hubbel, and, getting no satisfaction out of the father's dreamy and despondent answers, he cross-examined Ezra as to every detail of the family history and health, including his own.

The last questions were accompanied by sharp looks at the boy's pale cheeks and hollow chest which Ezra resented as hotly as he did the impertinent curiosity about every corner of the house which the doctor made no effort to conceal. In these apparently impersonal and neutral inquiries Ezra felt a vague hostility to the place; and later, when he saw the doctor circulating busily from house to house among the neighbors, note-book in hand and fluent Italian questioning on his lips, the mild-natured lad felt an absolute hatred for him.

### III

A WEEK later Dr. Burton returned, loaded down with evidence and burning with zeal. He took Ezra on one side, and, without preparation of any sort, plunged brutally into the heart of his accusation. Ezra's first movement was one of generous anger and hot, unreasoning resistance. No attack upon and defense of the good name of a woman could have been more acrimonious than this struggle over the reputation of a house, and no despairing lover, confronted with indisputable proofs of the perfidy of his sweetheart could have been more helpless than poor Ezra before the crushing mass of evidence which the busy young doctor had collected.

"I tell you the place is a pest-house, and has been for sixty years! I've looked up the coroner's papers and the records of the hospital. The number of people who have been killed by the infernal old hole is beyond belief. I suspected at once that this was the trouble. I'm going

to devote my life to stamping out tuberculosis, and this is the sort of smooth, deceitful thing that's the most devilishly hard to get at. It seems there have been many complaints—vague, good-for-nothing reports that led nowhere—and the board of health has gone through the motions of fumigating the old sink of iniquity; but, Lord! you can't fumigate a graveyard!

"I made a germ-culture test with a piece of the old wall-paper in that room where your mother sits, and there are enough T.B.'s in a square inch to kill an ox. The house killed your little sister and brother as much as if the roof had fallen on them, and it has killed your mother, for it is too late to save her. You and your father have escaped because you were so much away. But look at you! It has one hand at your throat now!"

Ezra protested in a burst of shocked horror. He told the inflexible young scientist how he had loved the place, what a haven of peace it had been to them after the nightmare of life in the tenements; he refused to believe the patently true. It was one of the first days of early spring, and the two stood by the front gate.

"Why, look at it!" cried Ezra, turning to the comfortable, inviting old house, lying in a peaceful calm under the elms, held close in the embrace of the woodbine, beginning to show a tender green.

Confidence returned to him as he noted the dear and familiar beauty of it. He pointed to its innocent appearance with as complete a trust as a confiding man feels in the candid eyes of the woman he loves. And with the ruthlessness of a man with proofs did the doctor crush such sentimental considerations. He showed Ezra the list of the people who had lived in the house, and the deaths among them. He explained with pitiless clearness how little Sammie's long agony had been caused by another form of the same poison that had killed Elvira. He had all the fervor of a man with a mission in the world; he had all the unflinching bitterness of attack which characterizes the reformer; and he did not spare Ezra.

The sensitive, ignorant, impressionable boy was helpless against the onslaught

from a trained mind, and the shock of disillusion almost unhinged his reason. As he nursed his mother through her last illness (the doctor had said there was no use to move her since death was so close upon her), the long fervor of his love for the house changed into a half-frantic loathing for the very things he had cherished.

The doctor had left no point untouched. He had pointed out that the high old windows Ezra had thought so quaint kept out the sunshine which might have purified the rooms, and he had shown the dampness which came from the strangling embrace of the woodbine. In the long watches of the night when Ezra expected his mother to breathe her last at any moment, the figures on the old wall-paper seemed to crawl in a sinister and mocking measure. He thought of little Elvira, and he choked with fury. He kept his frenzy to himself with a forlorn heroism, not wishing to trouble his mother's last days, and feeling the uselessness of speaking to his father, who sat beside his wife in a hopeless expectation of the end.

After his mother's death, the eighteen-year-old boy assumed charge of affairs and moved his father and himself to a pair of small rooms in an ugly new tenement-building. After only a week's stay in their new quarters, one night his father did not come home from work. He never came home again. It was supposed that he had wandered in his daft way upon the railroad tracks, or had walked off the pier into the river. Thus Ezra found himself quite alone in the world, his half-crazed hatred for the house with the woodbine the only thing in his sentient life. He still passed it on his errands for the grocer, and never without a wave of revulsion.

As long as Dr. Burton was in the hospital the two raised heaven and earth to bring the board of health to order the destruction of the place. But friends of the owner opposed them, saying that it was the only means of support of a widow; and, moreover, Dr. Burton's impetuous career of attack on infected houses frightened owners who feared for the effect of a precedent of that kind. Innumerable technical delays ensued, politics became a factor, and when Dr. Bur-

ton was called to a Western city the matter was dropped with a sigh of relief from all concerned.

Ezra continued to haunt the offices of the city authorities in all his leisure moments, his passion overcoming his shrinking timidity and utter ignorance of the world. He tried to buttonhole politicians on their way in or out, and to present his case, at first diffidently, and then with an excitable defiance, which was at once pitiable and ludicrous in the insignificant grocer's clerk. He came to be one of the familiar figures in the number of eccentric petitioners about the city hall, and was a favorite butt for office-boy jokes. Finally, one of the authorities, detained from an important engagement by the boy's despairing tenacity, gave orders, in a fit of impatience, that he be excluded from the building.

After this, Ezra was shut in entirely with his work for the grocer—work which took him constantly past the house with the woodbine. Winter was beginning, and the dingy white of the walls showed through the sinuous lines of the dry vine like the gleam of bleached bones. The deep veranda, which kept the light out of the rooms back of it, made a shadowy spot of gloom which, to Ezra's overwrought fancy, looked a very cave of disease and death.

Ezra's hatred for the place grew deeper and deeper. He passed his solitary evenings brooding over the past, living again the days when he had devoted himself with single-hearted ardor to the brazen fraud.

#### IV

THE winter passed and spring began to come, touching the old house with light, transforming fingers. Ezra knew beforehand with an embittered familiarity every step of the changes which came upon his former home. His morbid preoccupation kept him constantly alert for the smallest event in garden or yard. One morning he woke up, felt the unmistakable spring pulsation in the air, and said to himself: "The crocuses will be above the grass to-day."

As he turned the corner and came in sight of the house, he saw, indeed, the tiny many-colored heads of the heralds of spring, but he also saw several children

running about the yard, and a man and a woman who stood on the deep piazza and looked around with satisfied eyes. Ezra's heart began thumping furiously. He walked more slowly and stared over the picket fence at the children with a distraught intensity which frightened them. They ran trembling to their mother and stood holding to the skirts of the large, matronly woman as Ezra stopped before the gate, shivering in the horror which lay on him.

The family inside drew together in a compact group and faced him expectantly. There was about the haggard, wild-eyed boy so evident and so impetuous an inarticulate protest that the man spoke as though in answer to a warning shout.

"*Du Gott in Himmel!* Vot's the matter?" he cried.

Ezra opened the gate and went in. It was the first time he had set foot upon the accursed ground since he had led his father away. The grating of the gravel under his heavy shoes sounded loud in his ears.

"Are you going to move in here?" he asked breathlessly.

"Yes," said the man. "To-morrow. Why?"

Ezra advanced upon him with an excited rush which made the woman and children retreat hastily to a corner of the veranda. "Oh, don't!" he screamed hysterically. "Don't! Don't! *Don't!*"

"Why not?" said the man. "Vat's the matter mit you, anyway. Get off! You're scaring my woman!"

Ezra broke out in a disjointed flood of warnings and entreaties. He wrung his hands, and his voice rose into a shrill and broken quaver. He was hardly intelligible, but they gathered that he was attacking the house which was to be their home. One of the children spoke impulsively and with the fluency of a descendant of foreigners.

"Why, you mean thing! It's a perfectly beautiful house, and I just love it already."

Ezra stopped, choking, and looked at her. He fancied that she looked a little like Elvira.

"You *mustn't* let her live here!" he cried agonizingly to the parents. "She'll die! They'll all die! Everybody does! You might as well kill them to-day as

to move in—and your wife'll die—and you'll go crazy—”

The choleric German lost his patience.

“Crazy, is it?” he said, advancing angrily upon the slight boy before him. “You're crazy by the head yourself. Get off with you! You're the foolish man the neighbors told me to look out for. I'm going to start right mit you. Get away! And don't let me never catch you here again, yet!”

He raised his arm threateningly, and as Ezra did not stop his wild gesticulations and frantic entreaties and exhortations, he took the boy by the collar and half carried, half kicked him into the street, closing the gate with a bang and glowering over it with triumphant satisfaction.

Ezra picked himself up, shaken and bruised, and went on to the grocer's, too dazed to think. The next time he passed the house with the woodbine the people had disappeared. He remembered that they had said they were not going to move in until the next day.

On his way home that afternoon he stopped in front of the house, and, leaning weakly on the fence, he stared at it long and savagely. The place wore a complacent look of smug and baleful self-satisfaction. Through his bitter hatred he felt some of its old fatal charm. The woodbine was a fresh, light green, the elms showed a faint tracery of verdure, and the home-like, inviting grace of the house was never more apparent. The small windows gleamed with a kindly look, like falsely benevolent eyes, and the deep veranda was lighted up by the level rays of the setting sun.

Ezra had a sudden capricious hallucination that his mother sat on the steps waiting for his return, and his lonely heart ached with an unendurable realization of desolate solitude. And then he remembered that, even as she had done that so many evenings, the evil old house had been distilling its poison upon her.

He thought of the doomed little girl he had seen that morning—the little girl who looked like Elvira—and his head whirled dizzily with an emotion that seemed like to choke him.

Suddenly the setting sun played an odd trick on the house. For a moment it threw its level rays of red light on the windows from an angle which made them look as though a mighty fire glowed within. Ezra noticed how instantly glorified the place appeared, and with the thought came another which straightened him in unexpected resolve. He turned away and walked down the street, no longer with the uncertain, wavering steps of one half daft, but with the firm tread of a purposeful man. For the first time since the rending disillusion of the interview with the doctor he looked serene.

That night as he stood in the yard before the house, the little tongues of flame, leaping up in a dozen places at once, showed his face exalted with a holy joy of fanatical self-congratulation. He glowed with pride in himself and with faith in the righteousness of his deed.

As the flames from the different small fires flashed together and embraced the old house in a fiery caress even closer than that of the woodbine, Ezra clasped his hands with a gesture unconsciously noble in its fervor. The dry old timbers burned with ferocious haste, and when, too late, the men in helmets arrived with their clanging, puffing engines, the house with the woodbine was a tall tower of flames, crackling and roaring to the skies.

Ezra moved to meet the firemen, still uplifted with the conscious dignity of a man who has accomplished a great action. For the first time in his life he was entirely unafraid.

“My father and my mother and my sister and my little brother are all gone,” he said. “But now the house is gone, too. It can never kill any one again.”

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#### THE LABORER

Show me your arms all muscular and bare.

Why, here is power a lion might beware!

Wealth, too, is here, and profit of your strength—  
But do you dream that you shall have a share?

*Elsa Barker*

# STORIETTES

## "The Shelter of the Fold"

THE Prodigal sat down-stairs in the dining-room. The house was curiously quiet, though faint sounds came from the kitchen, where the evening dishes were being washed—carefully, so as not to disturb the hush.

After a while his sister came to him. Her eyes were red and her face was blotched and swollen. The Prodigal got up awkwardly and shook hands.

"How are you, Selina?" he asked, returning her nerveless clasp.

"Pretty well," she said formally. "We didn't know you were back till yesterday. The last we heard you were in Montana."

"I was there for a couple of years. I—I just heard this morning about father. How is he?"

"Very low," she answered in a hushed tone. And then she began to cry, noiselessly, without attempting to wipe away the tears that rolled down her pale cheeks. The Prodigal put out his hand as if to comfort her; then he remembered, and drew it back.

He looked strangely out of place in the ugly respectability of the room. He knew it all so well: the built-in corner cupboard, with the glass doors, and his mother's wedding-cups on hooks just inside; the red and green cover on the square table; the black marble clock on the mantel—it was all the same, except that just beside him there was a buffet, new and showy, with a silver-plated tea-set on the top. He divined that George had bought it.

His sister was not crying now. She was inspecting him—his shabby clothes, his frayed linen, the gray in his thinning hair. And then something in his face caught her attention: his chin was working convulsively, and there were tears in his sunken eyes. The lines left by years of dissipation were obliterated for the time, and there remained only grief, and a great regret.

"Would you like to go up?" she asked more kindly. All the small things—resentment, anger, bitterness—were swallowed up in this trouble that had come. Then, seeing his hesitation; "I don't think he will know you," she said.

The Prodigal creaked up the stairs after her. Instinctively he avoided the second step from the top; there had always been a loose board there.

"George isn't here," his sister whispered, turning. "He has been camping for a week and he can't get back until morning. The elders from the church have been taking turns at sitting up. Wait until I see if he is sleeping."

The Prodigal stood on the little landing and waited. The house spread out on three sides of him, smaller than he had remembered it, but otherwise unchanged. The door was open into the bare study. There were books everywhere—how familiar was that confusion of books!—but the desk was strangely orderly.

His sister did not come back for him at once, so he went in and sat down. Even the wall-paper was the same. Over in the corner, behind the bookcases, would be the pencil-marks which had registered for years his annual gain in inches, only—he could not look. And there was his mother's picture, in its black-walnut frame, and under it George and himself, in queer plaid dresses and black shoes with white buttons. He had been taller than George in those early days; it was a long time ago—a long time.

His sister came to the doorway.

"He won't know you," she said. "You can come in."

The dim light of the lamp was kept from the sick man's eyes by a green shade on one side of the burner. The Prodigal stopped inside the doorway awkwardly, while his sister went over and smoothed the counterpane.

"He doesn't toss around any," she said. "He just lies there."