

Louis Bromfield

Early Autumn

CHAPTER III

WHEN Olivia first came to the old house as the wife of Anson Pentland, the village of Durham, which lay inland from Pentlands and the sea, had been invisible, lying concealed in a fold of the land which marked the faint beginnings of the New Hampshire mountains. There had been in the view a certain sleepy peacefulness: one knew that in the distant fold of land surmounted by a single white spire there lay a quiet village of white wooden houses built along a single street called High Street that was dappled in summer with the shadows of old elm-trees. In those days it been a country village, half asleep, with empty shuttered houses here and there falling into slow decay – a village with fewer people in it than there had been a hundred years before. It had stayed thus sleeping for nearly seventy-five years, since the day when a great migration of citizens had robbed it of its sturdiest young people. In the thick grass that surrounded the old meeting-house there lay a marble slab recording the event with an inscription which read:

FROM THIS SPOT ON THE FOURTEENTH DAY OF AUGUST, EIGHTEEN HUNDRED AND EIGHTEEN, THE REVEREND JOSIAH MILFORD, PASTOR OF THIS CHURCH, WITH ONE HUNDRED AND NINETY MEMBERS OF HIS CONGREGATION – MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN SET – OUT, SECURE IN THEIR FAITH IN ALMIGHTY GOD, TO ESTABLISH HIS WILL AND POWER IN THE WILDERNESS OF THE WESTERN RESERVE.

Beneath the inscription were cut the names of those families who had made the journey to found a new town which had since surpassed sleepy Durham a hundred times in wealth and prosperity. There was no Pentland name among them, for the Pentlands had been rich even in the year eighteen hundred and eighteen, and lived in winter in Boston and in summer at Durham, on the land claimed from the wilderness by the first of the family.

From that day until the mills came to Durham the village sank slowly into a kind of lethargy, and the church itself, robbed of its strength, died presently and was changed into a dusty museum filled with homely early American furniture and spinning-wheels – a place seldom visited by any one and painted grudgingly every five years by the town council because it was popularly considered an historical monument. The Pentland family long ago had filtered away into the cold faith of the Unitarians or the more compromising and easy creeds of the Episcopal church.

But now, nearly twenty years, after Olivia had come to Pentlands, the village was alive again, so alive that it had overflowed its little fold in the land and was streaming down the hill on the side next to the sea in straight, plain columns of ugly stucco bungalows, each filled with its little family of Polish mill-workers. And in the town, across High Street from the white-spined old

meeting-house, there stood a new church, built of stucco and green-painted wood and dedicated to the great Church of Rome. In the old wooden houses along High Street there still lingered remnants of the old families . . . old Mrs. Featherstone, who did washing to support four sickly grandchildren who ought never to have been born; Miss Haddon, a queer old woman who wore a black cape and lived on a dole from old John Pentland as a remote cousin of the family; Harry Peckhan, the village carpenter; old Mrs. Maison, living alone in a damp, gaunt and beautiful old house filled with bits of jade and ivory brought back from China by her grandfather's clippers; Miss Murgatroyd, who had long since turned her bullfinch house into a shabby tea-room. They remained here and there, a few worn and shabby-genteel descendants of those first settlers who had come into the country with the Pentlands.

But the mills had changed everything, the mills which poured wealth into the pockets of a dozen rich families who lived in summer within a few miles of Durham.

Even the countryside itself had changed. There were no longer any of the old New Englanders in possession of the land. Sometimes in riding along the lanes one encountered a thin, silly-faced remnant of the race sitting on a stone wall chewing a bit of grass; but that was all: the others had been swallowed up long ago in the mills of Salem and Lynn or died away, from too much inbreeding and too little nourishment. The few farms that remained fell into the hands of Poles and Czechs, solid, square people who were a little pagan in their closeness to the earth and the animals which surrounded them, sturdy people, not too moral, who wrought wonders with the barren, stony earth of New England and stood behind their walls staring wide-eyed while the grand people like the Pentlands rode by in pink coats surrounded by the waving nervous tails of foxhounds. And, one by one, other old farms were being turned back into a wilderness once more so that there would be plenty of room for the horses and hounds to run after foxes and bags of aniseed.

It had all changed enormously. From the upper windows of the big Georgian brick house where the Pentlands lived, one could see the record of all the changes. The windows commanded a wide view of a landscape composed of grubby meadows and stone walls, thickets of pine and white birches, marshes, and a winding sluggish brown river. Sometimes in the late autumn the deer wandered down from the mountains of New Hampshire to spoil the fox-hunting by leading the hounds astray after game that was far too fleet for them.

And nearer at hand, nestled within a turn of the river, lay the land where Sabine Callender had been born and had lived until she was a grown woman – the land which she had sold carelessly to O'Hara, an Irish politician and a Roman Catholic, come up from nowhere to take possession of it, to clip its hedges, repair its sagging walls, paint its old buildings and put up gates and fences that were too shiny and new. Indeed, he had done it so thoroughly and so well that the whole place had a little the air of a suburban real estate development. And now Sabine had returned to spend the

summer in one of his houses and to be very friendly with him in the face of Aunt Cassie and Anson Pentland, and a score of others like them.

Olivia knew this wide and somberly beautiful landscape, every stick and stone of it, from the perilous gravel-pit, half-hidden by its fringe of elder-bushes, to the black pine copse where Higgins had discovered only a day or two before a new litter of foxes. She knew it on gray days when it was cold and depressing, on those bright, terribly clear New England days when every twig and leaf seemed outlined by light, and on those damp, cold days when a gray fog swept in across the marshes from the sea to envelop all the countryside in gray darkness. It was a hard, uncompromising, stony country that was never too cheerful.

It was a country, too, which gave her an old feeling of loneliness ... a feeling which, strangely enough, seemed to increase rather than diminish as the years passed. She had never accustomed herself to its occasional dreariness. In the beginning, a long while ago, it had seemed to her green and peaceful and full of quiet, a place where she might find rest and peace . . . but she had come long since to see it as it was, as Sabine had seen it while she stood in the window of the writing-room, frightened by the sudden queer apparition of the little groom – a country beautiful, hard and cold, and a little barren.