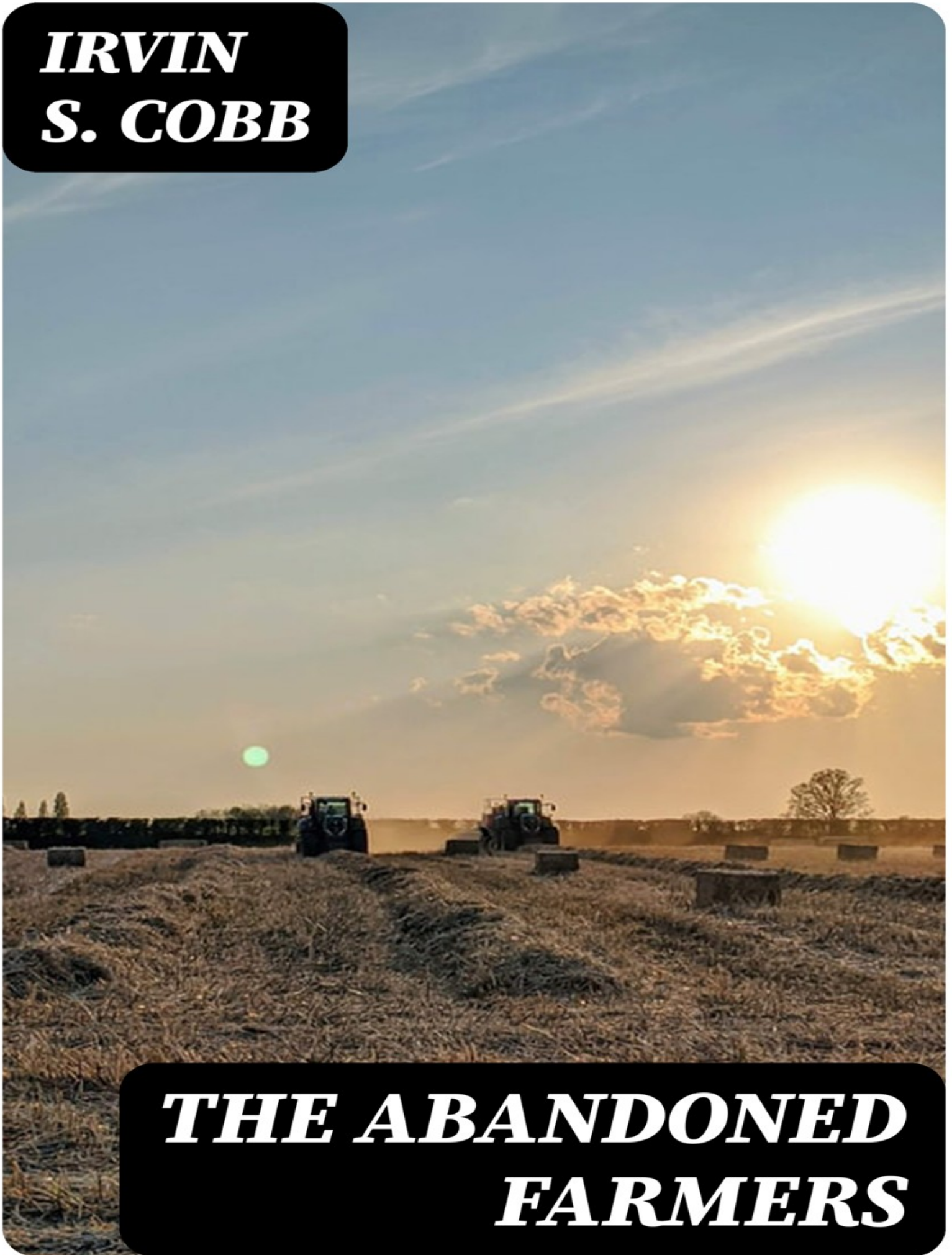


***IRVIN
S. COBB***



***THE ABANDONED
FARMERS***

Irvin S. Cobb

The Abandoned Farmers

**His Humorous Account of a Retreat from the City to
the Farm**

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CHAPTER I. WHICH REALLY IS A PREFACE IN DISGUISE

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It is the inclination of the average reader to skip prefaces. For this I do not in the least blame him. Skipping the preface is one of my favorite literary pursuits. To catch me napping a preface must creep up quietly and take me, as it were, unawares.

But in this case sundry prefatory remarks became necessary. It was essential that they should be inserted into this volume in order that certain things might be made plain. The questions were: How and where? After giving the matter considerable thought I decided to slip them in right here, included, as they are, with the body of the text and further disguised by masquerading themselves under a chapter heading, with a view in mind of hoodwinking you into pursuing the course of what briefly I have to say touching on the circumstances attending the production of the main contents. Let me explain:

Chapter II, coming immediately after this one, was written first of all; written as an independent contribution to American letters. At the time of writing it I had no thought that out of it, subsequently, would grow material for additional and supplementary offerings upon the same general theme and inter-related themes. It had a basis of verity, as all things in this life properly should have, but I shall not attempt to deny that largely it deals with what more or less is figurative and fanciful. The incident of the finding of the missing will in the ruins of the old mill is a

pure figment of the imagination; so, too, the passage relating to the search for the lost heir (Page 55) and the startling outcome of that search.

Three years later, actual events in the meantime having sufficiently justified the taking of such steps, I prepared the matter which here is presented in Chapters III, IV and V, inclusive. Intervened then a break of approximately two years more, when the tale was completed substantially in its present form. In all of these latter installments I adhered closely to facts, merely adding here and there sprinklings of fancy, like dashes of paprika on a stew, in order to give, as I fondly hoped, spice to my recital.

One of the prime desires now, in consolidating the entire narrative within these covers, is to round out, from inception to finish, the record of our strange adventures in connection with our quest for an abandoned farm and on our becoming abandoned farmers, trusting that others, following our examples, may perhaps profit in some small degree by our mistakes as here set forth and perhaps ultimately when their dreams have come true, too, share in that proud joy of possession which is ours. Another object, largely altruistic in its nature, is to afford opportunity for the reader, by comparison of the chronological sub-divisions into which the story falls, to decide whether with the passage of time, my style of writing shows a tendency toward improvement or an increasing and enhanced faultiness. Those who feel inclined to write me upon the subject are notified that the author is most sensible in this regard, being ever ready to welcome criticism, provided only the criticism be favorable in tone. Finally there is herewith confessed a third motive, namely,

an ambition that a considerable number of persons may see their way clear to buy this book.

Quite aside from my chief aim as a writer, which is from time to time to enrich our native literature, I admit to sharing with nearly all writers and with practically all publishers a possibly selfish but not altogether unnatural craving. When I have prepared the material for a volume I desire that the volume may sell, which means royalties, which means cash in hand. The man who labors for art's sake alone nearly always labors for art's sake alone; at least usually he appears to get very little else out of his toil while he is alive. After his death posterity may enshrine him, but posterity, as some one has aptly said, butters no parsnips. I may state that I am almost passionately fond of my parsnips, well-buttered. My publisher is also one of our leading parsnip-lovers. These facts should be borne in mind by prospective purchasers of the book.

I believe that is about all I would care to say in the introductory phase. With these few remarks, therefore, the attention of the reader respectfully is directed to Chapter II and points beyond.



CHAPTER II. THE START OF A DREAM

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For years it was the dream of our life—I should say our lives, since my wife shared this vision with me—to own an abandoned farm. The idea first came to us through reading articles that appeared in the various magazines and newspapers telling of the sudden growth of what I may call the abandoned-farm industry.

It seemed that New England in general—and the state of Connecticut in particular—was thickly speckled with delightful old places which, through overcultivation or ill-treatment, had become for the time being sterile and non-productive; so that the original owners had moved away to the nearby manufacturing towns, leaving their ancestral homesteads empty and their ancestral acres idle. As a result there were great numbers of desirable places, any one of which might be had for a song. That was the term most commonly used by the writers of these articles—abandoned farms going for a song. Now, singing is not my forte; still, I made up my mind that if such indeed was the case I would sing a little, accompanying myself on my bank balance, and win me an abandoned farm.

The formula as laid down by the authorities was simple in the extreme: Taking almost any Connecticut town for a starting point, you merely meandered along an elm-lined road until you came to a desirable location, which you purchased for the price of the aforesaid song. This formality being completed, you spent a trivial sum in restoring the

fences, and so on, and modernizing the interior of the house; after which it was a comparatively easy task to restore the land to productiveness by processes of intensive agriculture—details procurable from any standard book on the subject or through easy lessons by mail. And so presently, with scarcely any trouble or expense at all, you were the possessor of a delightful country estate upon which to spend your declining years. It made no difference whether you were one of those persons who had never to date declined anything of value; there was no telling when you might start in.

I could shut my eyes and see the whole delectable prospect: Upon a gentle eminence crowned with ancient trees stood the rambling old manse, filled with marvelous antique furniture, grandfather's clocks dating back to the whaling days, spinning wheels, pottery that came over on the *Mayflower*, and all those sorts of things. Round about were the meadows, some under cultivation and some lying fallow, the latter being dotted at appropriate intervals with fallow deer.

At one side of the house was the orchard, the old gnarly trees crooking their bent limbs as though inviting one to come and pluck the sun-kissed fruit from the burdened bough; at the other side a purling brook wandering its way into a greenwood copse, where through all the golden day sang the feathered warblers indigenous to the climate, including the soft-billed Greenwich thrush, the Peabody bird, the Pettingill bird, the red worsted pulse-warmer, and others of the commoner varieties too numerous to mention.

At the back were the abandoned cotes and byres, with an abandoned rooster crowing lustily upon a henhouse, and an abandoned bull calf disporting himself in the clover of the pasture. At the front was a rolling vista undulating gently away to where above the tree-tops there rose the spires of a typical New England village full of old line Republicans and characters suitable for putting into short stories. On beyond, past where a silver lake glinted in the sunshine, was a view either of the distant Sound or the distant mountains. Personally I intended that my establishment should be so placed as to command a view of the Sound from the east windows and of the mountains from the west windows. And all to be had for a song! Why, the mere thought of it was enough to make a man start taking vocal culture right away.

Besides, I had been waiting impatiently for a long time for an opportunity to work out several agricultural projects of my own. For example, there was my notion in regard to the mulberry. The mulberry, as all know, is one of our most abundant small fruits; but many have objected to it on account of its woolly appearance and slightly caterpillary taste. My idea was to cross the mulberry on the slippery elm—pronounced, where I came from, *ellum*—producing a fruit which I shall call the *mulellum*. This fruit would combine the health-giving qualities of the mulberry with the agreeable smoothness of the slippery elm; in fact, if my plans worked out I should have a berry that would go down so slick the consumer could not taste it at all unless he should eat too many of them and suffer from indigestion afterward.

Then there was my scheme for inducing the common chinch bug to make chintz curtains. If the silk worms can

make silk why should not the chinch bug do something useful instead of wasting his energies in idle pursuits? This is what I wished to know. And why should this man Luther Burbank enjoy a practical monopoly of all these propositions? That was the way I looked at it; and I figured that an abandoned farm would make an ideal place for working out such experiments as might come to me from time to time.

The trouble was that, though everybody wrote of the abandoned farms in a broad, general, alluring way, nobody gave the exact location of any of them. I subscribed for one of the monthly publications devoted to country life along the Eastern seaboard and searched assiduously through its columns for mention of abandoned farms. The owners of most of the country places that were advertised for sale made mention of such things as fourteen master's bedrooms and nine master's baths—showing undoubtedly that the master would be expected to sleep oftener than he bathed—sunken gardens and private hunting preserves, private golf links and private yacht landings.

In nearly every instance, also, the advertisement was accompanied by a halftone picture of a structure greatly resembling the new county court house they are going to have down at Paducah if the bond issue ever passes. This seemed a suitable place for holding circuit court in, or even fiscal court, but it was not exactly the kind of country home that we had pictured for ourselves. As my wife said, just the detail of washing all those windows would keep the girl busy fully half the time. Nor did I care to invest in any sunken gardens. I had sufficient experience in that direction when

we lived in the suburbs and permanently invested about half of what I made in our eight-by-ten flower bed in an effort to make it produce the kind of flowers that the florists' catalogues described. You could not tell us anything about that subject—we knew where a sunken garden derives its name. We paid good money to know.

None of the places advertised in the monthly seemed sufficiently abandoned for our purposes, so for a little while we were in a quandary. Then I had a bright thought. I said to myself that undoubtedly abandoned farms were so cheap the owners did not expect to get any real money for them; they would probably be willing to take something in exchange. So I began buying the evening papers and looking through them in the hope of running across some such item as this:

To Exchange—Abandoned farm, centrally located, with large farmhouse, containing all antique furniture, barns, outbuildings, family graveyard—planted—orchard, woodland, fields—unplanted—for a collection of postage stamps in album, an amateur magician's outfit, a guitar with book of instructions, a safety bicycle, or what have you? Address Abandoned, South Squantum Center, Connecticut.

I found no such offers, however; and in view of what we had read this seemed stranger still. Finally I decided that the only safe method would be by first-hand investigation upon the spot. I would go by rail to some small but accessible hamlet in the lower part of New England. On arriving there I personally would examine a number of the more attractive abandoned farms in the immediate vicinity and make a discriminating selection. Having reached this conclusion I

went to bed and slept peacefully—or at least I went to bed and did so as soon as my wife and I had settled one point that came up unexpectedly at this juncture. It related to the smokehouse. I was in favor of turning the smokehouse into a study or workroom for myself. She thought, though, that by knocking the walls out and altering the roof and building a pergola on to it, it would make an ideal summer house in which to serve tea and from which to view the peaceful landscape of afternoons.

We argued this back and forth at some length, each conceding something to the other's views; and finally we decided to knock out the walls and alter the roof and have a summer house with a pergola in connection. It was after we reached this compromise that I slept so peacefully, for now the whole thing was as good as settled. I marveled at not having thought of it sooner.

It was on a bright and peaceful morning that I alighted from the train at North Newburybunkport.

Considering that it was supposed to be a typical New England village, North Newbury-bunkport did not appear at first glance to answer to the customary specifications, such as I had gleaned from my reading of novels of New England life. I had expected that the platform would be populated by picturesque natives in quaint clothes, with straws in their mouths and all whittling; and that the depot agent would wear long chin whiskers and say “I vum!” with much heartiness at frequent intervals. Right here I wish to state that so far as my observations go the native who speaks these words about every other line is no longer on the job. Either I Vum the Terrible has died or else he has gone to

England to play the part of the typical American millionaire in American plays written by Englishmen.

Instead of the loafers, several chauffeurs were idling about the station and a string of automobiles was drawn up across the road. Just as I disembarked there drove up a large red bus labeled: Sylvan Dale Summer Hotel, European and American Plans. The station agent also proved in the nature of a disappointment. He did not even say “I swan” or “I cal'late!” or anything of that nature. He wore a pink in his buttonhole and his hair was scalloped up off his forehead in what is known as the lion tamer's roach. Approaching, I said to him:

“In what direction should I go to find some of the abandoned farms of this vicinity? I would prefer to go where there is a good assortment to pick from.”

He did not appear to understand, so I repeated the question, at the same time offering him a cigar.

“Bo,” he said, “you've sure got me winging now. You'd better ask Tony Magnito—he runs the garage three doors up the street from here on the other side. Tony does a lot of driving round the country for suckers that come up here, and he might help you.”

To reach the garage I had to cross the road, dodging several automobiles in transit, and then pass two old-fashioned New England houses fronting close up to the sidewalk. One had the sign of a teahouse over the door, and in the window of the other, picture postcards, birch-bark souvenirs and standard varieties of candy were displayed for sale.

Despite his foreign-sounding name, Mr. Magnito spoke fair English—that is, as fair English as any one speaks who employs the Manhattan accent in so doing.

Even after he found out that I did not care to rent a touring car for sightseeing purposes at five dollars an hour he was quite affable and accommodating; but my opening question appeared to puzzle him just as in the case of the depot agent.

“Mister,” he said frankly, “I'm sorry, but I don't seem to make you. What's this thing you is looking for? Tell me over again slow.”

Really the ignorance of these villagers regarding one of their principal products—a product lying, so to speak, at their very doors and written about constantly in the public prints—was ludicrous. It would have been laughable if it had not been deplorable. I saw that I could not indulge in general trade terms. I must be painfully explicit and simple.

“What I am seeking”—I said it very slowly and very distinctly—“is a farm that has been deserted, so to speak—one that has outlived its usefulness as a farm proper, and everything like that!”

“Oh,” he says, “now I get you! Why didn't you say that in the first place? The place you're looking for is the old Parham place, out here on the post road about a mile. August'll take good care of you—that's his specialty.”

“August?” I inquired. “August who?”

“August Weinstopper—the guy who runs it,” he explained. “You must have known August if you lived long in New York. He used to be the steward at that big hotel at Broadway and Forty-second; that was before he came up

here and opened up the old Parham place as an automobile roadhouse. He's cleaning up about a thousand a month. Some class to that mantrap! They've got an orchestra, and nothing but vintage goods on the wine card, and dancing at all hours. Any night you'll see forty or fifty big cars rolling up there, bringing swell dames and—"

I judge he saw by my expression that he was on a totally wrong tack, because he stopped short.

"Say, mister," he said, "I guess you'd better step into the post-office here—next door—and tell your troubles to Miss Plummer. She knows everything that's going on round here—and she ought to, too, seeing as she gets first chance at all the circulars and postal cards that come in. Besides, I gotter be changing that gasoline sign—gas has went up two cents a gallon more."

Miss Plummer was sorting mail when I appeared at her wicket. She was one of those elderly, spinsterish-looking, kittenish females who seem in an intense state of surprise all the time. Her eyebrows arched like croquet wickets and her mouth made O's before she uttered them.

"Name, please?" she said twitteringly.

I told her.

"Ah," she said in the thrilled tone of one who is watching a Fourth of July skyrocket explode in midair. The news seemed to please her.

"And the initials, please?"

"The initials are of no consequence. I do not expect any mail," I said. "I want merely to ask you a question."

"Indeed!" she said coyly. She said it as though I had just given her a handsome remembrance, and she cocked her

head on one side like a bird—like a hen-bird.

“I hate to trouble you,” I went on, “but I have experienced some difficulty in making your townspeople understand me. I am looking for a certain kind of farm—a farm of an abandoned character.” At once I saw I had made a mistake.

“You do not get my meaning,” I said hastily. “I refer to a farm that has been deserted, closed up, shut down—in short, abandoned. I trust I make myself plain.”

She was still suffering from shock, however. She gave me a wounded-fawn glance and averted her burning face.

“The Prewitt property might suit your purposes—whatever they may be,” she said coldly over her shoulder. “Mr. Jabez Pickerel, of Pickerel & Pike, real-estate dealers, on the first corner above, will doubtless give you the desired information. He has charge of the Prewitt property.”

At last, I said to myself as I turned away, I was on the right track. Mr. Pickerel rose as I entered his place of business. He was a short, square man, with a brisk manner and a roving eye.

“I have been directed to you,” I began. He seized my hand and began shaking it warmly. “I have been told,” I continued, “that you have charge of the old Prewitt farm somewhere near here; and as I am in the market for an aban-” I got no farther than that.

“In one minute,” he shouted explosively—“in just one minute!”

Still clutching me by the hand, he rushed me pell-mell out of the place. At the curbing stood a long, low, rakish racing-model roadster, looking something like a high-