WHAT YOU CAN'T HANG ONTO

by William Maxwell

Once upon a time there was an old woman who lived in a house by a river. The lane from the village ended at an old stone bridge half hidden by willows, a few feet from her garden gate. The river flowed around both sides of the garden and the house and came together just beyond the coal shed. Houses beside a river are always damp and subject to floods. And since it was often just as cold inside as out, she seldom bothered to close the front door until she went to bed at night. The cats never had to be let in or out, and the fish peddler never had to knock. He just stood on the back steps and hollered, and the old woman came to the door, and he showed her what was in his basket. The cats' meat man did the same. The house always smelled of the outdoors, and the old woman dressed warmly and didn't mind if there was a wreath of fog above the mantelpiece in the parlor.

The river was a little too wide for a boy to leap across and after the spring rains the current was swift, but for the rest of the year it was hardly noticeable. When the old woman leaned out of her bedroom window to see what kind of a day it was, she saw young boys and old men fishing, for it was only a short walk from the village. Usually they were staring so intently at the surface of the water that they didn't know anybody was

looking at them, but now and then one of them saw her and tipped his cap or waved.

The old woman was the last living member of both sides of her family, and inevitably the possessions of one branch after another ended up under her roof. Some of them, if you were at all knowledgeable, were enough to take your breath away. She was so accustomed to getting letters from solicitors informing her of modest bequests of money and furniture that it came as a surprise to her that there was no one left to leave her anything. There was hardly room in the house for another object if they had. Old furniture wherever you looked. Old prints, old drawings, old paintings on the walls. Old books that people had to advertise for, often in vain. Old china and silver.

As always when someone has valuable possessions, there were people who cast a covetous eye on the contents of that house by the river, and if they didn't know the old woman well, they said, "If you are ever of a mind to part with that settee in the upstairs hall..." Or that Boulle cabinet. Or writing desk. Or pencil sketch by Turner. Or battered first edition of *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*. And if they thought they knew her well enough to come right out and say it—"If you haven't promised it to somebody, will you leave me that Crown Derby teapot in your will?" And if they knew her better still, they said, "That soup tureen—Minton, isn't it? Lovely!" and changed the subject.

The old woman was fond of her possessions but not as fond of them as she was of her cats, and people who live alone get strange ideas, of course, and she had come to feel that her death would not be any great loss to the world and if she lived past a certain age might be a merciful release to her. But in her mind's eye she saw the furniture standing around on the lawn and being knocked down by the auctioneer's mallet and the garden grown up in weeds. Maybe there is still some grandniece or nephew or cousin by marriage, she would think. There weren't any that she knew about and so she resigned herself to the inevitable and only now and then, when she was pruning the huge Belle de Crecy rose bush or on her hands and knees in the vegetable garden thinning carrots, she would straighten up for a moment and look around her and sigh at the thought that this place, which she was so attached to, would not survive her in any recognizable form.

In her thirties the old woman had published a book of poems which had been praised by Thomas Hardy, and the praise brought forth a letter of

thanks from her, and this led to her being invited to Max Gate to tea, and to a further exchange of letters, and his letters to her she had naturally kept. A young American who was doing a critical study of *The Famous Tragedy of the Queen of Cornwall* came upon her letters in the Hardy papers and from them deduced that Hardy had discussed his feelings about the production of the play in a letter to her. So he wrote to the old woman and the upshot was an invitation to stay in the house by the river. In writing back, the American mentioned the fact that his wife would be travelling with him, and the invitation was amended to include her. When they stepped down from the train, in the railway station of a town that was three and a half miles from the village, a taxi was waiting and drove them through some of the most enchanting scenery in the whole of the south of England. "Look!" they kept exclaiming. "Oh just look!" As the old woman was greeting them the young man broke into a fit of coughing, which made the fishermen look up in irritation, for it was loud enough to frighten the fish. The old woman said, "I'm afraid there is not much that can be said in favor of the English climate."

The young man smiled wanly and said, "I have a slight temperature but I didn't want to miss seeing the letters and..."

While he was finishing his sentence the old woman was on her way upstairs, and before he quite realized what was happening to him he was in a big bed warmed by stone hot-water bottles, with a down comforter over him, in a bedroom full of things that had come down a long way through both sides of the old woman's family. He slept, and woke himself up coughing, and heard voices outside, and slept again.

His wife, thinking to keep out of the old woman's way while she was getting supper, went for a walk and came back in a state of rapture at what she had seen.

"The sign at the crossroads said TOLER FRATREM—"

"There used to be a Roman settlement there," the old woman said, nodding.

"—and when the farmer called off his dogs it didn't sound as if he was speaking English."

"The Dorset dialect," the old woman said. "Reading it in Hardy is one thing and hearing it spoken is another."

They carried trays upstairs to the invalid and then sat talking over a fire, and at dusk they wandered out into the garden to look at the daffodils. It

was quite apparent to the old woman that the young woman had lost her heart to the place, which was not surprising. What was surprising was that she didn't seem to covet anything. Perhaps in America they didn't care for old furniture, being a new country.

The old woman lay awake that night thinking, which she didn't commonly do.

On the third morning, the young man's fever broke and he insisted he was well enough to get dressed and come downstairs. He sat transcribing the letters of Thomas Hardy in a room heated by a small stove, while the two women talked in whispers so as not to disturb him. At lunchtime the old woman said, "If there is anything in this house that you would like me to leave you in my will, just tell me." And when, after consulting together, they mentioned a book of no great monetary value but hard to come by, she was disappointed. "Are you sure there isn't anything else?" she said, and the young woman said, smiling, "There isn't anything in the whole house that we don't love." At that moment a car horn sounded. The taxi was at the gate, and the Americans said goodby, and off they drove, promising to come back next year.

The old woman went up to London to consult the solicitor who, over the years, had informed her of so many bequests, and he made notes of what she said. "On the condition that they live in the house," the old woman said. "No. Strike that out. There are to be no conditions."

When the American couple stepped out of the same taxi, a year later, the fishermen hardly bothered to raise their heads. The Americans went all through the house without touching anything, and then sat down in the cold little parlor. "I feel her presence," the young woman said, and a cat jumped into her lap and settled down there. "Pity we can't afford to keep it," the young man said. "I feel we'd be very happy here. But we have no choice."

He meant that, given their financial circumstances, they had no choice but to sell the house and everything in it—the Crown Derby teapot and the letters of Horace Walpole in fifty-four volumes, the Regency mahogany writing desk and the Sheraton tallboy chest of drawers, the pencil sketch by Turner and the pair of gilt elbow chairs designed by Henry Holland. Everything disappeared into the storerooms of a London auction house and a FOR SALE sign was planted by the driveway.

When the Americans returned to England two years later they drove

south and west from London, in a rented car, to the Hardy country and made a detour to see what had happened to their house.

There was a NO FISHING OR TRESPASSING sign at the bridge, and the front door of the house was shut, there were curtains in all the windows, and the garden was grown up in weeds.

As they sat in their car, the young woman said sadly, "I keep thinking that there was surely something we could have done," and the river said, *No, there was nothing. The collecting of beautiful objects has to end ultimately in their dispersal. The old woman would have found the curtains odious, as indeed they are, but fortunately she doesn't know. What you can't hang onto you must let go of—that is the principle on which I operate, on my way to the sea.*