

[Gone to Seed]

March 13, 1939.

Billy Gilbert (white).

Leicester, N. C.

Farmer

Anne Winn Stevens, writer.

Douglas Carter, reviser.

GONE TO SEED Original names Changed names

Billy Gilbert Bobby Gardner C9 - 1/22/41 - N.C. Box 1.

GONE TO SEED

The older Mrs. Gardner tramped through the mud on her way from her son's small, boxlike store at the corner of the school grounds - - a brawny, elderly woman. Her bobbed white hair was unkempt; her elbows stuck out of holes in her red sweater; her green skirt was as short as a 16-year-old's; her stocky legs were bare, and she wore striped socks and heavy shoes run down at the heel.

She fitted appropriately enough into the run-down farmhouse toward which she plodded. And yet in spite of its neglected, run-down air, the farm must once have been very prosperous. The great oaks between the paved highway and the big, green-shuttered white dwelling were badly in need of trimming. Many of their branches were dead, and so were some of the trees. Beneath the oaks, cedars which must have outlined a walk were

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untrimmed and running wild. The front of the house showed yellowish splotches where the front piazza had been before it was allowed to rot down and fall apart. The long L trailing at the rear of the house supported an unpainted piazza, piled with old planks, old boxes, broken farm implements, stovewood, and Names changed.

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Douglas Carter (Reviser). [no?] write [about?] this [story?] GONE TO SEED

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broken farm implements, stovewood, and 2 miscellaneous junk, all of which was partially hidden from the highway and the intersecting side road by a tangled clump of cherry trees.

The road leading to the kitchen at the end of the L was muddy and deeply rutted. Several ramshackle outbuildings - garage, barns, chicken house - showed also a clutter of indescribable junk. Fenced in a muddy yard at the back, a number of half-grown hunting dogs tried miserably to escape the red mire, pawing desperately at the fence. Beyond the house, huge grapevines did show some evidence of care and pruning, but the sprawling apple orchard seemed uncared for.

As I accompanied Mrs. Gardner up the muddy road, I tried vainly to make conversation.

"I see you have hunting dogs for sale," I said, referring to a sign. "What kind are they?"

"There are several kinds," she replied.

"What do you charge for them?" I continued.

"My son charges different prices," she said.

"I'll have to ask you into the kitchen; it's the only room that has a fire," she explained. The morning was cold.

The kitchen presented the same disorderly, cluttered appearance as the outbuildings and the side piazza. Behind the kitchen range the shelves were filled with empty tins, 3 boxes, pans, and pots, in complete disorder. The walls seemed never to have been painted. A sullen young woman was washing a child's socks in water as inky as if it had been used to mop the floor. Her dark hair was in disorder; her ill-fitting gingham dress was by no means clean. Her gray eyes smouldered and her answers were curt. She wrung out the socks without rinsing them, and hung them to dry on rods above the range, on whose top beans and potatoes were simmering for the midday meal.

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The farm owner, Bobby Gardner, seated in a low chair beside the stove; was reading a magazine. He seemed superior to the clutter. His thick, neatly brushed, white hair contrasted pleasantly with his clear, ruddy skin. His features were good. Through the open doors Bobby's crippled son, a young man in khaki and high boots, could be seen limping through the mire.

Bobby closed the magazine and pointed to an illustration on the back cover: a glamorous cigarette advertisement.

"That advertisement," he observed, "is a snare. The manufacturer is the only person who finds tobacco profitable."

His wife and daughter-in-law remained standing, but did not comment.

"You raise tobacco?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied, "but there's nothing in it for the farmer. It's, all a lottery, and the farmer is the loser.

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This past year I raised 1,940 pounds of leaf. I had to sell it at 12¢ a pound. There ought to be some way of regulating the price by law."

He continued in the same vein: "The farmer has no chance. Look at the taxes he has to pay! Like as not, he lives on nothing a year, so that officials up in Washington can draw big salaries."

A child ran out of an inner room and climbed into Bobby's lap - - evidently the child of the sullen young woman and the crippled young man. He seemed intelligent, but curiously small for his three years. Perhaps it was because he was clad in clothes much too large and old for him that he seemed so tiny.

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Conversation lagged. Mrs. Gardner murmured something about having to dress for a funeral to be hold that morning at the Methodist church. I took the hint.

But several days later I said to Mrs. Cooper, whose husband owns the twin-looking farm next to the Gardners, "Tell me about your neighbors."

Mrs. Cooper fenced. "There never were kinder, more considerate neighbors." she said. "They would do anything for me."

"Yes, but what are they doing for themselves?"

"Well, there's nowhere a better man than Bobby Gardner," she answered. "He's honest, sober, hardworking; but he just 5 doesn't know how to manage."

"The place used to be prosperous?" I said tentatively.

"When Bobby's father was living," she replied, "it was the finest farm in this section. He owned from skyline to skyline." She pointed out the boundaries. "He had upland farms, and rich bottom land. He kept the house and surroundings in beautiful order. Bobby just farms sections here and there. He raises tobacco chiefly. He's no manager," she repeated.

"Besides, his son is no help - the crippled boy you must have seen."

"What happened to him?"

"He had infantile paralysis as a very young child. But he could be of more use if he wasn't so dissipated. He is kind and generous when he's sober; but he's always in trouble. He's been in several automobile accidents - driving when drunk. Recently he lost his driver's license. About a year ago he was nearly killed in a fight with his father-in-law, Mike O'Brien, a rough and tough fellow who lives over on Mushy Clay. It's a wild section."

"What happened there?"

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"Wells Dick - that's the crippled boy - carried a woman over there. He claimed he met her by accident, and she begged a ride. His father-in-law had been drinking. He cut Dick in several places, across the stomach and on 6 the arms. Dick had to drive a mile before he could get anyone to bring him to a doctor. When he reached the hospital, my son, who is a surgeon, sewed him up. A little more and Dick would have bled to death. His mother was ill in Florida, where she was visiting her married daughter, so they didn't let her know at the time. I was mighty sorry for Dick's wife. She nearly died of shame. You see, he's in trouble so much, he's very little help on the farm."

An acquaintance in town threw further light on the situation.

"Did you hear Bobby Gardner's wife talk?" she asked.

"No, she said very little to me. Her husband did the talking." "Bobby's wife," she observed, "is a woman of no education. Bobby is much better educated than she is. But he's always been eccentric. His son is no help to him, as you have been told. Now, when Bobby's father was living that farm was a show place, the most beautiful in the neighborhood. But you saw how they let the piazza just rot down and fall to pieces. And did you ever seen anywhere such piles of junk? And Bobby," she continued, "isn't as young as he used to be. He raises and sells fruit, though, as well as tobacco, and in the summer he has a pretty good truck farm. But as Mrs. Cooper said, he just isn't any manager."