

# DESERTED WIFE, 10 YEARS IN POORHOUSE, FINDS SON SHE SAW LAST OVER HALF CENTURY BEFORE

### Kindly Fate Brings Strange Reunion for Mary Roper, Whose Husband Took Her Children Away Fifty-eight Years Ago

### PAIN OF SEPARATION WAS PARTLY ERASED FROM HER MIND BY LONG SUFFERING

### Now, With Child She Lost as a Baby and With \$10,000 From Her Errant Spouse's Pension, Last Bits of Her Saga Are Happy Ones

THE town of Hebron is beside the banks of the placid canal over which ore-laden barges travel languorously but steadily toward the Lake Erie ports. It has not changed much in sixty years.

A few more hundreds, to the population, perhaps; a few manufactories added, a new set of dominant families, a Chamber of Commerce, maybe—but essentially it is one of those pretty survivals to be found with decreasing frequency in that section of the Middle West.

Or, except for the flatness of the surrounding landscape, it might be a New England town; the same wide, brick-guttered streets; the same neat many-gabled houses; the same sycamores whitewashed to their middles; the same churches with the same names; the same slow purposefulness in the look of the inhabitants. It is New England in blood, spirit and traditions.

It is here in Hebron that the saga of Mary Roper chooses to begin, in the two decades preceding the Civil War. The earlier numbers are not as complete as one might wish to have them. Those who might supply what is wanting in them are dead or cannot remember, and Mary herself is now so old as to confuse her memories.

#### Her Wooing Came Along Canal Pathway

Let us believe, at least, that when she was Mary Harris she was the prettiest girl in Hebron; not a belle, but better than a belle—slim-waisted, ruddy-cheeked and black-eyed, one of those types produced by the early American life; to whose culture the butter churn contributed as much as the harmonium; to whom Fate might with equal carelessness give for wife to a statesman, a barge owner, a missionary, a banker or a town prodigal.

Fate gave her, of course, to Jim Roper, as much in his way a type of the milieu as herself. That it was a fated thing there can be no doubting, for from the moment he tied the first bag of sugar for her and asked her to walk along the bypath of the canal, there was contentment on neither side until they were married less than a month later.

Jim did not belong to Hebron. He came from over Springfield way. As every one said of him, there was something wrong somewhere, for he had deserted the farm that his father had left him, and after knocking about various corners of Ohio at last reached Hebron, where he managed to get a job as clerk in the general store. He was then twenty-five, lank, clear-eyed, on the whole rather handsome and a good bit of a bravo. He was no great hand for work, but he got on well enough with old Seth Kiley, who owned the store. Perhaps because of politics, for Jim, the old Seth, was a rip splittin' Unionist, as indeed were most people thereabouts.

The early married months of Jim and Mary seem to have been one of those rural idylls which occur sometimes. There is no doubt that Mary worshipped every lank inch of this fellow who was the best jumper, the best quoter and the best rider in Licking County—as who might not? He seems, after his marriage, to have jumped rather less, to have ridden rarely alone, to have been at the quiet games infrequently and to have confined arguments to store hours.

#### Jim Heard Call of War and Shouldered a Musket

At the end of a year a boy was born. About the same time the Licking County Clarion went friendly to press with the news of secession and Fort Sumter. Not many days later a recruiting sergeant in a dark blue coat and cap and light blue trousers with a great swath of white stripe in them appeared on the porch of Kiley's store and tacked one of Lincoln's proclamations to the wall. Jim, who had come out to see what was up, read it over the sergeant's shoulder and was his before he finished reading.

#### "Lots of Life to Live." Is Mary's Optimism

AFTER fifty-eight years of wandering and privation, Mary Roper says there is still "lots of life to live." Optimism—that spirit which has buoyed her up for more than half a century, still dominates her life.

"I want to see Charles now that I have Joie with me again," she says. "Some day before I die he will come back, I am sure of it. And there is still lots of life to live."

Jim went out of Hebron with the rest of the Twenty-sixth Ohio Volunteer Infantry. Mary and his infant son and old Kiley were, of course, among the crowd that watched them march from the courthouse and disappear over the road that led across Licking County to the railroad.

How much Jim did in the war is not very clearly known. Possibly a great deal, for his regiment was at Gettysburg, helped to storm Lookout Mountain and followed Sherman across Georgia.

Twice during the war he returned to Hebron. The first time there was a bad wound in his left side, and Mary, half grateful to the rebel who had made it, nursed him, almost regretfully, back to strength again. He was the whole time impatient to be back with the army, and when at last he did set off again it was seemingly a much happier day for him than when he had first moved out with his company. Not much later he was back again, with the furrow of a Confederate bayonet across his forehead. This time a sergeant came to offer him an honorable discharge for wounds, and the palpitating wife heard him refuse it stormily.

Somewhere between Atlanta and the coast a bit of shell tore away three of his right fingers. Such a man could do little more for emancipation or the Constitution, and he was discharged willy-nilly and sent back to Hebron.

Another son had been born in the interval and christened Charles Roper. The baby delighted him, and he swore to make the child the greatest fighter of men or wildcats alive. He talked often like this and an alarm, of which she had beginnings during his furloughs, began to grow steadily in Mary.

#### Silent, Moody Soldier Returned From the War

Jim was not at all the same old Jim. He never boasted. He made ambiguous threats. He never talked politics—sometimes he would not talk at all for days, not even to his wife and children, but sit cldn in hand in front of his home, watching the sky. Kiley offered the job at the store, but Jim made no move to take it. Sometimes he would not eat and pretended not to hear when food was offered. At other times he would suddenly accuse his wife of trying to starve him and would demand a dinner of specified things on the instant.

"Shell shock," of course, and rapidly becoming infectious—but there was in those days no such term and no such implicated understanding. A period followed in which Jim left the cottage and came back irregularly, sometimes not for weeks. In this time the whole burden of support for herself and her children fell upon the



Mrs. Mary Roper and her son Joseph

### Science Could Have Prevented Clouds From Mrs. Roper's Life

SCIENCE—that science which is healing the scars, physical and mental, of war victims—could have prevented most of the life tragedy of Mary Roper. But it was not until the last great war that humanitarianism turned toward alleviating the aftermath of the battlefields for those who came through their ordeal still bearing its marks.

"Jim" Roper was "shellshocked." True, the term was not known in those days after the Blue had grappled with the Gray and the survivors had come home.

Those who tried to take up their old places, but who relapsed into moodiness and fits of ill temper, were merely called "queer." For a while their mannerisms were put up with, then the cause was forgotten. So it was with Roper. As his moody spells grew he found himself receiving less and less sympathy. Then came his desertion.

And to the last of his days he bore the mark of his "queerness." But today it is different. Uncle Sam is spending millions to take his soldier boys who are just as Roper was—moody, taciturn and morose, and by the latest healings of science put them back as nearly as "par" as when they marched away to France.

Occupational therapy, vocational training—these are some of the things unthought of in "Jim" Roper's day.

Had they been even dreamed of, Mary Roper's days might have had much more sunshine instead of shadow.

rounding shoulders of the wife, who had watched herself growing dull-eyed and heavy-footed, and at last bitter. The baby delighted him, and he swore to make the child the greatest fighter of men or wildcats alive. He talked often like this and an alarm, of which she had beginnings during his furloughs, began to grow steadily in Mary.

One evening, Jim, uncouth and unshaven, appeared after a fortnight's absence. He at once demanded supper. He watched with a stiff stare while she prepared it. As she was carrying a dish of meat to the table her own eyes met his stare. She let fall the dish and the next instant Jim was on his feet shouting an oath.

#### Just Put on His Hat and Walked From Home

At this sound the bitterness in Mary strained and broke. She began a long cold indictment of his sins, to which he listened in strange silence. At the end of it he put on his hat, walked to the crib in the corner and lifted the youngest boy to his shoulder. As though stricken the wife watched him. She saw him go into the next room, heard a word or two between him and the other boy. She tried to comprehend what was happening. . . . Something dreadful—but what? It was not until he came back into the room dragging four-year-old Joseph by the arm that she found speech. "What are you doing?" she asked in a dull voice. He answered not a word, but bus-

toned the boy's coat over his nightgown and picked up theshawl that was used as the baby's wrap. The next thing she knew he was taking them out of the door.

Mary watched them go as though it were a dream. The door closed on them and she could hear them going off behind the window. What could it all mean? She puzzled quietly for a little while as one will over abstractions. Then as though some one had shaken her it came to her all at once.

She rushed out of the house and frantically down the road after them. If he heard her coming he gave no sign, though Joseph turned his head and shouted to her.

When, breathless, she came full upon him she pulled at his coat. "Jim! Jim! Where are you going? His answer was to push her away. But she took the edge of his coat again.

"Jim! Tell me where you are going! Tell me where you are taking the babies!"

He shifted the infant on his shoulder slightly and with his free arm gave her a push that sent her headfirst on to the road.

When she had picked herself up he was disappearing down the hill. She ran this way and that, tearing at her clothes, weeping and shouting. When a little later neighbors found her they

there was none who could tell her. Nobody had heard of them. He had been seen with the children in the next town on the day after, but had not stopped there. That was all.

It was more than naturally cruel, because a sort of survey had taken place in her memory. She could not remember the absurd, morbid Jim of the months after the war. Only Jim, the handsome clerk, who could jump better, ride better, talk better, than anybody else. Brave Jim, wonderful Jim—who had been the first to join up for freedom. Whatever had happened surely was of her doing. In sane, she must have been. Yes, certainly, insane. He would understand once she put it to him that way. But how was she to find him and explain?

There was, of course, no answer to that and by and by she grew to understand it. And here the saga very nearly stops. She was, of course, without money. For a while she did odd bits of work around Hebron and finally "hired out" with a family at London. They treated her decently, and in time some of the old beauty came back to her. There were many men of a little substance in London who were not ashamed to court this hired girl, and her good-natured employer told her she should ask the courts for divorce. She would not heed the suggestion twice. Jim, she was sure, had forgiven her and she would wait until she found him or he found her. What money was paid her she spent on advertisements and detectives.

After some years the family for whom she worked moved to Lee's Summit, Mo. She went with them, but soon after her employer died and the family was disrupted. She became housekeeper for another family. But she was getting old and the work grew too hard. She became a child nurse.

#### Kindly Employer Got Her Into Home for Aged

Years followed others until the one that told her she was seventy-three.

### Husband Marched Away to War and Came Back "Shell-Shocked," and Then Left With Their Children and Disappeared

### LIVES ONLY A FEW MILES FROM PLACE WHERE WIFE MOURNED FOR LOVED ONES

### Strange Chance Brings Brightness to Drab Life, and Government Money Comes as Additional Boon to Brighten Her Remaining Days

too old. This employer was a kindly man and did the best he could. He managed to get her admitted into a fairly comfortable home for old women at Little Blue.

Perhaps it tells something of what Mary was like that she became known there as "Mother." A rare tribute, rather, to be known as "Mother" among old women in a home. She talked often of her tragedies as nearly all old people do, and strangely the worst thing that might have happened for her peace would have been that she should suddenly forget them. Here again Mary Roper's saga nearly ends.

Was it some philanthropic outsider, or one of the other old women who, after Mary had been at the home and talking of it for ten years, suggested an advertisement in the National G. A. R. monthly? It is not clear. But, anyway, a suggestion of the sort was never wasted upon Mary. The placing of advertisements had become a sort of ritual.

One morning, almost fifty-eight years

to her the whole home collected about her, as much excited as herself. Poor Mary's worn wits could not encompass quite what was happening to her. She handed the letter to some one to explain to her. It was a long letter and signed "Your son, Joseph Roper."

#### Wanderer Found Haven Near to His Old Home

Now Jim Roper had moved to Columbus, not sixty miles from Hebron, found a job there and raised his two children in the belief their mother was dead. It was not much of a life for any of them. He let the boys remain in school until they were ten. Then he sent Joe to black boots in front of the courthouse and Charlie to sell papers near the railroad station. As for himself, he sometimes had a job and sometimes none. His taciturnity grew. He talked to them little and never about the war or their mother. A question on either subject would throw him into fury.

When Joseph was twenty and Charles seventeen he suddenly deserted them and went to live with a comrade in Cleveland. Two years later he died and was buried in the soldiers' lot of the Erie cemetery.

Charles soon afterward began a roaming life, and in a few years had dropped from his brother's knowledge. Joseph remained in Columbus, found a good job and married.

#### Rejoins Son She Lost Nearly Lifetime Ago

One morning recently Mrs. Joseph Roper arrived at the old women's home in Little Blue to announce that she was



Mrs. Joseph Roper

In that year her employer suddenly went bankrupt. Another job, of course, could not be found for her. She was

to the day from the one on which her husband had left her lying on the road, there was an answer. As it was handed

going to take Mary home to Columbus. There were some to say that even yet Mary did not understand. However, she went willingly, and some hours later her son was embracing her on the station platform at Columbus.

They took her home and installed her in more comfort than she had known in many a year. . . . And yet there are times when they too are not certain that she comprehends. For several times she has told them, as she would a new acquaintance, of the husband who left her years ago, talking with him his two sons, and who will some day come back. . . .

Here ends the saga of Mary Roper. And yet not quite. It occurred to some one that if Mary were the widow of a soldier, pension money was due her. Somebody wrote to Washington about it, and the answer came that she has a rightful claim to more than \$10,000. . . . They have tried to tell her of it. But this, too, she fails to understand. Here ends the saga of Mary Roper.