Doctor and Artist Wife Targets for Village Boycott: Firebrand Thrown on Cottage, Motor Boat Stove In, and Trouble Generally for Dr. and Mrs. Evans at Freeport, L. I.


Over 200 years have cycled by since the days of Salem persecution when, through prejudice, ignorance, and suspicion, members of society were outlawed and left to shift for themselves, by themselves as best they might. That so complete and merciless a boycott of people of refinement and professional standing can exist in the present age and in the heart of modern civilization seems incredible. It is not, however, impossible.

In the lower end of Freeport, L.I. a village within twenty miles of New York, a little old-fashioned house stands cuddled within the rectangular confines of a picket fence. The block of swellings, of which this house is one, overlooks the meadows where knifelike bladed grass rises sharply out of the ground like bayonets along the banks of an inlet, winding serpentine though the marshes and growing ever bigger until it finds its fulfillment in the Great South Bay, which lets out into the ocean. On a bright, sunshiny day strips of shimmering, dazzling white can be seen against the dark spaces of the water, pointing out the various beaches, while further out, where the sky and ocean merge into the horizon line black funnels trailing miles of ink-black smoke mark a homebound outgoing ocean liner.

Residents of Freeport are divided into three classes. There are the smart resort people who come down for a few weeks in the Summer [sic] and the smart all-year-around people who commute and own automobiles. Last, but not least, is the contingent which sees New York once in a twelve-month, and would be as likely to get mixed on the use of a demitasse as the late O. Henry’s Western friend in attempting to discuss dining in a Broadway café.

It is the latter class which chiefly lives and had its being in the neighborhood of the little old-fashioned house with the picket fence. The neighborhood also has a certain scattering of well-to-do residents, though the wealthy residential section is more in the vicinity of Ocean Avenue, on the other side of the village.

It was here that Gertrude Selene, a New York artist working here way to recognition was guided some three years ago. The house with the picket fence was for sale. The benefit of the ocean air to one fighting her way back to strength after years of frail health and the possibilities for picturesqueness in remodeling the house, were all pointed out with faithful precision.

With the quick grasp of the artist mind she took in at a glance the opportunities the place afforded for an attractive bungalow. The equal irresponsibility of the artist it never occurred to her to ask, as does the usual prospective purchaser, about the surroundings. She would do over the house, she thought living and working there in
the Winters [sic], and the other half of the year would be spent in much-loved Italy and other parts of Europe. She would never see the neighbors, nor they her. It even occurred to her to comment upon what an ideal neighbor she would be.

She did not know then that in rural districts, if you are a stranger and do not give your neighbors some idea of your source of income or tell them the names and errands of all your visitors, and where you have dinner at noon or at night, and cream with your cereal in the morning, they will be inclined to speculate about you. If the mystery continues any you do not relieve the tension, the speculation is apt to be passed over the back fence together with a pudding recipe, some morning, and it proceeds on its way until promoted into harmless and thoroughly interesting piece of gossip.

Miss Selene was too busy not only to get on intimate terms with her neighbors but she had the entire inside of her house turned topsy-turvy without talking it over with them. Needless to say interest increased in regard to the comparative stranger whose ways were so different from the other members of the community. As in all country towns the monotony in living is responsible for a craving for excitement and new sensations. Therefore, the coming of a stranger into a suburb is signal for fresh interest, and the opportunities thus afforded are not allowed to go a-begging. The vans are watched as the furniture is unloaded and carried up the front path to the house. They are often even counted.

If the newcomer turns out to be commonplace and like thousands of other people in the world, of whom they are only types, they soon slip into their niche, interest flags, and they are taken for granted. If the newcomers are not commonplace, however, and are seen to be drawing their plan of life according to an individual scale the interest of the neighbors gets new breath for sustenance and suspicion and distrust are apt to creep in. It depends largely then on how willing is the stranger to talk with the neighbors and disarm criticism, whether their attitude is to be friendly or otherwise. If it is otherwise it is apt to be fateful.

Miss Selene had little time for general sociability; besides, she had been brought up in New York, where frequently people live side by side for years without speaking.

Occupants of the old-time “parlor, settin’-room, kitchen, and upstairs” house learned that the first floor of the old fashioned house was being turned into a three-room apartment. To do this, the narrow hallway was torn out completely leaving the front door to open direct upon the living room, with a big luxurious divan under the slant of the roof, where the stairs formerly were. Back of this is a dining room and, on the other side a studio, the ceiling of which runs up to the roof.

Rare old piece of mahogany furnish the rooms and original paintings of well-known artists are on the walls not to mention some exceptionally good pieces of tapestry. On the second floor has been reserved space for an airy bedroom and a diminutive
by immaculate bath. On the whole, it is all most unexpected, the surprise one gets on stepping over the threshold from the outside, not to say effective and unique.

Shortly after Miss Selene bought the property she married Dr. T.H. Evans of Philadelphia. Through some odd condition of geography of their respective properties it is understood that in order to get into a part of his own backyard one of Mrs. Evans’s neighbors had been welcomed to convenience of going through her property by way of a back gate.

She discovered, she said, that if this was allowed to continue indefinitely without legal technicality of a twenty-four hour notice closing the entrance she would in time have a right of way through her place. In order to preclude this the notice was put up for twenty-four hours, she says. Undoubtedly this move did not enhance the opinion of the nearby residents, who looked upon it as an unnecessary and deliberate move to be disagreeable. Thus the misunderstanding gathered strength.

It ceased to be a mere misunderstanding when later Dr. Evans had occasions to apply for quarantine blanks and culture tubes for diphtheria. He says that to his dismay he was unable to procure them. Where this failure was from professional jealousy and due resentment of a new doctor in the town or lack of attention he says he is at a loss to know, save that he could not get his wants supplied.

On the other hand, it was said in Freeport that Dr. Evans was eccentric to a degree and that he used the culture tubes to experiment on cats. However that may be, he was very much upset, as the important point at issue to him was his medical needs and the possible danger which would ensue were he unable to have them supplied.

This then led to his being forced to the State Board of Health for his applications, he says and the question naturally arising from Albany as to why he had not procured the needed tubes from the local organization. The investigation of the State Board of Health was then precipitated, the decision of which is being awaited by the village in a unjustified trepidation.

The incident of the alleged failure to comply with the requests to the Health Board was not the first discovery of the villagers' open animosity by which the doctor found himself surrounded. Shortly after settling with his wife at Freeport the noise of entertainment in a house across the street, owned by a Freeport man, became so annoying that the couple succeeded in leasing the place, with a renewal in order to gain control of it, so it is said.

Dr. Evans’s furniture was stored there and also a complete library of medical works which he valued highly. A lease for a year with a renewal was signed. During this term the house changed hands and became the property of another individual who rented a wing in the building. Some time afterwards the house burned down together with the Evans family furniture, the medical library, and other treasures.
Work was then begun to convert the place into a coalyard. As the lease was still active, according to Dr. Evans, he went across the street one morning to protest. An altercation ensued in which he was being choked to death when his wife glancing out the window, saw this predicament, she says, and ran to his aid. She was then held on a charge of assault, which lasted the entire Winter and was not given up until Spring. Her husband suffered concussion of the brain as a result of the encounter. Two days later he was walking along his home street after dark when he was again assailed.

With the investigation of the State Board of Health became infuriated. When was this man, they asked about whom there was nothing particularly striking to distinguish him from anybody else, and why should he come into the village, a stranger, and create so much of a disturbance? Most decidedly they were resentful, and Freeport conditions were good enough for them.

What they learned later was that Dr. Evans is holding two positions in the Cornell Medical School, that he is an assistant to Dr. Charles L. Dana, the alienist, and that he has appeared as a witness in the New York courts. He is also author of numerous medical books and contributor to reputable medical journals. He is a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, where he was Professor of Anatomy at one time.

Aside from professional standing, he is master of six languages and was a musician of no small ability. There are those who-spectators of this little enactment from both sides of the screen-are vulgar enough to remark that Freeport has bitten off more than it can chew. At any rate, that Dr. Evans’s medical education and professional methods at Freeport were not molded in parallel channels appears to be evident.

That Dr. Evans’s enemies did not realize that lives may be endangered by lack of promptitude in the matters of quarantines, not to mention the damage to property values, should an epidemic break out was also evident. He was a stranger and had effected what they considered an unwarranted disturbance, and they began to believe the yarns about the culture tubes for experimentation on cats in the dark watches of the night, and that it must be a signal of a streak of insanity.

The State Board hearing was held on July 21, before Alexander H. Seymour in the absence of Commissioner Porter. It brought out an avalanche of charges, and to date, no counter-charges have been filed. In substance the allegations are to the effect that the local Board of Health representative refused to place under quarantine houses in which contagious diseases existed; that Dr. Evans was unable to procure form him diphtheria culture outfits, as required by law, and that he was also unable to procure diphtheria antitoxin.

Dr. Evans further charged that patients suffering from malignant diseases were not isolated and that they were permitted to mingle with other members of their families at the risk of those with whom they associated. Dr. Evans asserted that
houses in which contagious diseases existed were placard in all instances; that cases of tuberculoses had not been reported to the State board, and that generally the local board was remiss in its duties.

He did not hesitate to say that his trouble lay in the fact that he had aroused the eminity of certain of a certain clique because he had insisted that it live up to the law promptly and to the last detail. The charges also included Dr. Evans’s effort to alter conditions around the creek, or inlet, where it is alleged that thousands of oysters and clams are being illegally “fattened” almost daily, ready for shipment to New York markets. On the banks are numerous cottages where it is said this steam can be the only outlet for sewage from these places. When, during the hearing, a representative of the State Health Board visited the creek he found the shacks had been moved back.

The local representative of the Health Board at Freeport made a general denial of these allegations.

Since this eventful date Dr. Evans and his artist wife live in constant dread of what may happen from hour to hour. Threats have been made that they will be driven out of town, but they pluckily assert that they will not allow the prejudice and suspicion which have combined against them to gain their end.

“We will stay, “ said Mrs. Evans, “until this little account is settled.” The laws fro the protection of an individual are not very active in Freeport, but it may be possible to put some life into them in time. I came here with the intention of going about my own affairs, working here in the studio in the Winter and going abroad in the Summer. I expect to see little or nothing of the people and carry out my life unmolested.

“Surely I thought, I one desires to live one's life quietly and to no one's self, there is no unwritten law against it. Then I married shortly afterward and the neighbors made my business theirs. I am now on a continual nervous strain, never knowing at what instant something disagreeable or worse may occur.”

“A short time ago the doctor went down to the creek, where our small powerboat is anchored, to find a hole stove in the bottom. On that day he went to Albany and petitioned the Governor for protection, things had gone so far. Not more than twenty-four hours later a workman whom I was instructing in regard to repairs pointed to a firebrand on the roof. It was a piece of spruce lying aslant on the studio light with a bunch of rags tied to the end. The roof was burned in several places. The rags are partly charred and the tar of the roof is melted in places. The netting at the window also shows signs of fire. How the brand got there and how the burned places in the roof came to be are questions still to be settled. One of our neighbors volunteered the information to my maid that they saw it burning there on a date in the early part of July.
“It seems to me that everything is being done to annoy us. We did not know, for instance, of the law regarding the use of village water for sprinkling purposes, and were informed only when one day a telephone message came to the effect that we had our sprinkler going out of hours. We shut it off. Later, when it was in use perhaps three minutes overtime and I was just about to close it off, a telephone order came to do so at once. I am heartbroken at the whole affair. The publicity of the whole thing is especially distasteful, but what are we to do? At any rate, we do not intend to run away from it, just because this trouble has come to us.”

Not the least annoying thing to the family is that its members are almost constantly under observation. On one occasion, it is asserted, an order to the grocery store for five gallons of kerosene brought back five gallons of gasoline. The case is now in the hands of Franklin A. Coles, the Nassau County District Attorney, whose term of office has been an active, effective, and creditable one.

The State Board of Health has not as yet delivered its report owing to the absence of Commissioner Porter on his vacation. The result of the visitation to Gov. Hughes is among the other reports towards which resident of Freeport are looking with interest.

Among the friends of the Evanses are listed F. Marcy Pendleton, whose paintings of Mrs. Evan's brother hung next to a Sargent in an exhibition in Philadelphia, and was also seen in the academy in New York; the late Alfred I. Collins, E. A. Bell, Frank Eugene, and Vandering Perrine. Mrs., Evans herself has also done some good work, among theme a tapestry decorated which received much attention where on exhibition in New York.