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Letter to Paul and May Beck Bennet, ca.

1939-1945

Samuel Stevens Bennet

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Mr. and Mrs. Paul Bennet,
Quitman, Georgia.

Dear Paul and May Beck:

This is not exactly a "bread and butter letter," albeit I realize that I ought to write you one, in view of the delightful entertainment that you gave me in your lovely home last night—I do not know when I have ever had a more pleasant visit. I know you both must be proud of your fine little girls and must get a great deal of pleasure out of them, as I did even in the brief contact I had with them.

But the main purpose of this letter is to try to "expel" from the store-room of my "subconscious mind" some of the many and poignant memories stirred up by the experiences I had in your lovely home last night—the home in which I was born and reared, and in which I had not slept for over fifty years. I lately dipped slightly into the study of the so-called "new psychology," which deals with the "objective" study of the mind (rather than the subjective study of the mind, which was a part of my course when I was a school boy)—the new psychology deals with a great deal of foolishness (it seems to me) concerning "stresses" and "strains" in the mind, and the unconscious desires on the part of the individual, to "restore the equilibrium" of the mind by "giving expression" to the things which cause those "stresses" and "strains," and so I am trying to "restore the equilibrium" of my own mind, by trying to express, or give utterance to some of the thoughts which were stirred up in the hidden chambers of my memory, by the associations which crowded around me last night in your home.

I have often thought that the word "home" is one of the most beautiful in the English language—it is a so much finer expression than the so-called synonyms of it—such as "domicile" or "apartment" and the like. Even the words "chateau" or "castle" or "palace" are weak indeed compared with that word "home." That word seems likely to fall into disuse in these latter days—indeed, the idea for which it stands seems to be about to disappear from our modern life. Yet the idea of home has a splendid part in the history of the English speaking people. The home

is not only the school which shapes the character and trains the citizen for life's endeavors, but it is also the highest reward which results from the efforts of a man's life. The home is not only a place of refuge in time of defeat, but it is also the scene of the greatest joy in time of triumph—what could a normal man care for the plaudits of the world except to carry them home, to those whom he loves? The "applause of listening Senates" and the cheers of victory shouted by swarming crowds whether in peace or war are nothing to him unless as a result thereof he can catch a gleam in the eyes of those whom he loves at home!

I think that is why we all respond so readily to the triumphant swell of the old song which we call "Home Sweet Home." When properly analyzed the melody of it is anything but plaintive—on the contrary, it rises to a magnificent paen of triumph, when considered as a whole. I have never much admired the weak words of John Howard Payne in this song—but the music (taken from an old Sicilian air of the middle ages, I think it is) fits in with the idea that a home, after all, is the scene of the greatest triumphs. For after all the ultimate aim of every really human effort, is to make happy the loved ones at home, and in the home is the highest reward of successful efforts in the outside world. Of course this does not apply to the efforts of such maniacs as Alexander and Napoleon, or even a little Hitler, or the like. I am speaking of really human endeavor alone.

While you have greatly improved the old home where your father and I were boys about sixty years ago, I am glad that you have preserved the general outlines, so that the old place is familiar to me still. The two rooms at the rear which formerly constituted the dining room and kitchen (and possibly an open corridor which connected them to the main house) have long since disappeared—whether they were burned or torn down I do not know, but their removal has not brought any considerable change in the general appearance of the scene. The old out-of-doors kitchen (which was used in slavery time, and which stood some fifty feet away from the main house) was torn down even in my childhood (I have often wondered why the kitchens were built so far from the main house in slavery days, whether it was to guard against the danger of fire, or whether the slave owners preferred not to smell the good things being cooked until they were served upon the table, or why). The old smokehouse (which stood some hundred feet north of the east side of the main dwelling) has

also been torn down—but that does not change the general appearance very much. The main changes consist in the removal of the five great China trees which stood in the back yard and on the west side of the main house, but their places have been taken by much more beautiful pecan trees, which are now fifty or sixty feet high, just as the old China trees were. I noted three or four large water oaks (each three or four feet in diameter in my childhood) which stood in a row about three hundred feet west of the house, have disappeared—they furnished the shade for the small slave quarters (not more than a half dozen houses) where the slaves of your grandfather lived "before the war." The old house which was occupied by Uncle Byron Jennings (who was the foreman of the slaves in slavery time, was off a quarter of a mile to the northwest of the main house—out in the direction where the big holly tree stands—that house was going to ruin even in my childhood sixty years ago, but there were two or three fine large Chinese cling-stone peach trees there, and the old well. But all of those things disappeared long ago. The large plum orchard (beginning about a hundred feet westward from the main house), and the mulberry trees just west of that, and the acre or two of scuppernong vines west of those, have disappeared long ago, along with the rose bushes, gardenias, crepe myrtle and oleanders and spirea and opopanax bushes, about the yard, and the trellises on which the yellow jessamine and the honeysuckle vines grew, as have also the "wild olive" trees which stood outside of the rows of cedars to the eastward and to the westward of the main house, though the cedars are still there. They do not seem to me to be as large as they were sixty years ago.

"All about this place I wandered, nourishing
a youth sublime,
With the fairy tales of science and the
long results of time."

Your grandfather had a small but fairly well selected library—probably not over four or five hundred books, and a great deal too many of them dealt with theology, but there was some fairly good fiction and poetry and history mingled in it. I remember especially a life of Napoleon Bonaparte, consisting of two large octavo volumes of about a thousand pages each, profusely illustrated with wood cuts which we

children especially enjoyed, and a fairly good edition of Plutarch's Lives," etc. I had read most of these several times before I was ten or eleven years old, at which time I left the old home place when we moved in-to town.

But mainly I want to tell you about the memories which were stirred up during the hours of the night that I spent in the old home. I might speak of these really as a contact with the "Ghosts of the Yester-years."

After I had gone to my room upstairs, where your father and I used to sleep as boys (though generally we were in the easternmost room rather than the westernmost room) I lay down, but did not drop into sleep at once as I usually do. I could not help but think of the former guests who had occupied this room, and pictures of them came tramping out of the Past—first, your great-grandfather, old Dr. Jesse H. Campbell (who was my grandfather, and who occupied that room every Christmas that he spent at our home, our mother being his only daughter), and then Judge Aug H. Hansell (who presided in the Superior Courts of that Circuit for nearly fifty years, and usually spent one night as our guest, both at the Spring and the Fall terms of Court), and then Capt. W. M. Hammon (the most polished and widely read perhaps of all the visitors in our home, a very handsome man and always well groomed, and a brilliant story-teller, though not a profound lawyer). He gave me the first book I ever owned, long before I could even read, and I have often thought about it since, because it was a combination of the works of two of the biggest story-tellers of which history gives any account, to-wit: the tale of "Cul-liver's Travels" by Swift, and the stories of "Earon Munchausen" both bound in one volume! Then there came to my mind the pictures of the MacIntyres, "Old Tom" and "Young Tom," who came at different times to visit my father—both much abler lawyers than Capt. Hammon, though neither had the polish or brilliancy that Hammon had. There were others whose pictures came tramping by me in the night. Among these was the picture of a man named Oliver, who had the long black hair of a poet, and to whom was attributed the authorship of "All Quiet along the Potomac Tonight." Whether that was correct or not I do not know, for there were at least a half dozen to whom the authorship of that poem was attributed—but I know that

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Oliver, who was considered a worthless sort of near-do-well, did have the same appearance which my childish mind believed a poet should have. There were a good many others, but these are the last that I remembered as I lapsed into a lovely sleep amid the snow-white linen of the fine bed which you had assigned to me.

I waked up again about two or three o'clock in the morning, and the moon had risen high in the heavens, and the whip-poor-wills were singing outside my windows, just as they used to sing on moonlight nights sixty years ago. I wonder if they were descendants of the same whip-poor-wills. Anyhow, as the first Ghosts of the Yester-years dealt largely with memories of the Civil War (which was often discussed by your grandfather and his guests) and the struggles in the courts and the like—I might have referred to that chapter of my reveries under the title of "Swords and Conflicts;" but this second chapter which began when I was awakened at two o'clock by the moonlight and the whip-poor-wills, might be named by the title of "Moonlight and Roses," for somehow the songs of the whip-poor-wills and the scent of the lovely flowers that floated into my windows from out of the moonlight, brought back memories of the time when I first fell in love with your Aunt India. She and I were about eleven or twelve years old at that time, but I was still living out there at the old home place. Your Uncle Joe Bennet was a young lawyer just beginning the practice, and he and your Aunt Hattie, and your great-grandma Baker (with the nurse of your great-grandmother and also the colored cook, old Aunt Rachel) lived in the old home there for some time, after your grandfather and grandmother Bennet and Aunt Lee and Uncle Matt had moved into town, where the Doctor could constantly attend upon your grandmother, who was an invalid during several years before she died. Of course it was hard for the family to be split in that way, but I remember the evenings were always pleasant, for your Uncle Joe was a fine reader, and read aloud to your Aunt Hattie and me every evening—generally it was a play of Shakespeare's though sometimes it was one of Mark Twain's books.

Into this sort of situation there came one evening about sundown (either in late December or early January) a tall, raw-boned, handsome young man with an

immense moustache, riding in a one-horse wagon which he had driven from Rome, Georgia, down to Brooks County. He had been a college mate of your Uncle Joe's and was in some way kin to us—probably third or fourth cousin, and naturally came by to visit with us before he went on to his newly purchased farm out near the old Perdue Place. I had never seen him before, but he turned out to be what was later your Uncle Allie McDonald, the father of your partner and cousin, "Skeet." Allie had been rather wild at college and had spent two or three years as a cowboy out on the Western plains—that was the fashionable thing for young men to do in those days. Teddy Roosevelt was one of the young fellows that did the same thing about that time. Allie McDonald had not been in the house a half hour before it appeared to even my childish mind that there was a case of love at first sight between him and your Aunt Hattie. His tales of the wild west were very captivating, and I remember he went out after breakfast the next morning and let all of us (including your Aunt Hattie and me) have a few shots with a very beautiful pearl-handled revolver that he had brought back from the West. My recollection is that he was a good shot himself, but I don't think he ever made any of the balance of us very good marksmen.

As I lay and listened to the whip-poor-wills, looking out at the moonlight and drowsing off towards my second nap, somehow a good number of pictures of the old life in this old home came flashing across my mind.

Most of the pictures were bright and happy, only a few were gloomy and sad:

"As when some painter dips
His pencil in the gloom of earthquakes and eclipse."

Among these latter pictures was one of our entire household (before the separation and when all of us lived in the old home there) with strained and anxious faces, as night closed down upon us, while my little invalid mother suffering from one of her periodical attacks, which filled us all with terror, for fear that she would die almost immediately. On such an occasion your father (then twelve or fourteen years old) was sent off post haste for fine old Dr. Jekks,

and the moment that the Doctor's firm foot fall was heard upon the veranda steps, all of us felt better at once, as his contagious courage was caught up by us all. I do not know whether he was a great physician or not (though I still think he was), but I do know that he was a great man, who inspired confidence by his presence. It always happened that very soon after Dr. Jalks had come, my mother's sudden attack would pass off, and she fell into a restful sleep, and how much that would relieve the whole family you can never know!

Another gloomy picture which the Ghosts of Yesterday-years brought to me was that of the night when your great-grandmother (Grandma Baker) stumbled in the dark back hall, and fell over a large box of books which your Uncle Joe had brought home from college. The box had been carelessly left where someone might walk, and the good old lady, seventy odd years old then, did not know it. The fall crippled her for remainder of her life. She never walked a step after that, but before that she had gone every afternoon (with your Uncle Matt and me who were boys four or five years old, too young to go to school) down the short road that led in a diagonal way down to the main road from the old home, down to where we could see across to the next hill the older children coming home from school. Matt and I would pick wild flowers on each side of the road and bring them to the grandmother as she walked carefully along the beaten path. We would wait at the public road for the older children to come in from school—your Aunt Hattie, Aunt Lee and your father. I shall never forget the terror of that night when the little grandmother fell over that box of books and became a permanent cripple—the dull thud of the fall—the hurried scramble of all of us out of the mother's room (used as a sitting room where the older children studied) into the back hall where the grandmother lay helpless—the picking of her up and the carrying of her to her bed (she did not weigh over a hundred pounds), in the same room which you have now converted into a beautiful modern kitchen. The realization that she would never walk another step in this life, and all of the foregoing formed a vivid impression upon the tablet of my mind, and the picture was brought again to my mind when I lay there in the old room last night going into my second sleep. The good old grandmother lived four or five years afterwards, but had to be lifted from her bed to her chair, and from her chair to the bed, again and again throughout each day and night.

Among the pleasant memories that came back to my mind last night were those of your Uncle Joe when he would come home from college. I was too small to know much of him when he first went away, but every time he came back home he always brought us younger children some sort of little presents, and there was a great jubilation among the children as well as the old members of the family when he came home. Yet he was rather cross at times, but very affectionate, and I think we younger children needed some crossness, as our parents were not very strict disciplinarians.

Among the other pleasant pictures that came to me last night was that which gave me the first glimpse of the pine trees growing down where the old pond was, and which you have recently had cut down. I was a very small boy when we first moved back to Quitman and have no memory of those trees before one evening (a short while after we had moved back, and a kitchen garden had been begun along where the old slave quarters had been to the westward of the house, the garden was enclosed with closely fitted together riven boards about six feet high (to keep out rabbits) and of course I could not see over them or through them. My father and mother were walking in the garden giving directions to the gardener, old Uncle Allen Zellner, about the planting of the vegetables, and I had become fretful, for some reason, and my father (who was a very tall man, six feet three or four inches in height) picked me up and put me on his shoulder, and I could look over that paling fence down toward that beautiful stretch of young pine trees (then not over thirty or forty feet high) which grew so thickly down there along by the pond. The picture has remained with me until now.

Another vivid picture flashed through my mind before I went into that second sleep. It was that of an April day when I must have been six or seven years old. The whole atmosphere was redolent with the blooms of the China trees, when my father came home from town at noon (a thing he hardly ever did) and I was told that he was going to take your Uncle Matt and me down to Savannah with him on a business trip. It was the first time I remember riding on a railroad train (though of course I had come in from Thomasville a year or two before that, I have no

memory of that), the freshness of the spring sunshine and the thoughts of the great adventure which lay before me on this trip to the great city, down to the seaside where I could see ships (I was always crazy about ships) produced a vivid impression on my mind that came back to me last night just as clear as it was over sixty years ago.

Then another picture comes up. It is a bitter cold morning, the sun not yet arisen, but the eastern sky is all red with its rising. It is cane-grinding time, and Uncle Sherod Williams (the old darky who lived on the hill up next north from ours) is the boss of the cane-grinding and sugar and syrup making, but he has not shown up and it is getting late for him to show up. Your grandfather stands in the back door facing Uncle Sherod's house and raises his powerful voice in a shout across the valley where old Sherod lives and tells him that it is time to begin the work, and I can hear the answer of old Sherod come faintly back, that he is coming right now. I didn't know then that your grandfather had so strong a voice, but in later years I read of Darius the Persian King when he came back from across the Danube and suspected treachery of Histiaeus whom he had left to guard his bridge of boats across the Danube, miles wide at that point—the bridge of boats had been broken in two. The garrulous old Herodotus paints a vivid picture of how Darius and his shivering soldiers stood on the north bank of the Danube in the drizzling rain and called across the miles of water to Histiaeus and his cohorts on the other side. Herodotus tells that there was on one side of the broken bridge (I have forgotten which side) an Egyptian in the Army who had perhaps the loudest voice that any human being ever had, and how this Egyptian was able to talk across the miles of the turbulent waters of the Danube. If I had read Herodotus before that bitter cold morning, when your grandfather called Uncle Sherod, I would have compared the voice of the Egyptian with the voice of your grandfather.

I think the pleasantest memories that came back to me last night were those of the social occasions in the old home. Your grandfather was very poor when your father and I were growing up, as he, like most of the Southern people, was bankrupted when his slaves were freed, and worse than that was in debt,

though he managed to pay all of his debts in the end. But he had this little farm left, and he managed not only to raise a large family by means of the products of that farm, but also greatly enjoyed entertaining his friends. He never had to buy anything to eat except sugar and flour (indeed, these were bought by the barrel so as to economize as much as possible), but we had plenty of hams and bacon, plenty of milk and eggs, and chickens and butter, plenty of good corn, meal and syrup and potatoes—in fact a plenty of everything necessary for a good living, and we always had a fine vegetable garden. Hence, however poor he was, your grandfather was delighted to have friends come out and visit him, and the children were all taught to keep their mouths shut and their ears open while conversations were going on, both at the table and in the parlor. There were many delightful stories told, and many discussions of various subjects (except theology, my father would not discuss it to lay visitors) and I believe a very great part of our education was the result of those fine visits of congenial spirits whom my father brought home with him from town.

My stenographer is getting almight tired of taking this letter and I can't blame her, but I want to get rid of the thoughts whether they entertain anyone else or not. I can sleep better tonight on account of having dictated the letter, but I don't ask you to read it all—just read enough to know that I thank you again for the delightful entertainment which you have given me.

Your affectionate Uncle,

(Signed) Sam.