Title: My year in a log cabin

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MY YEAR IN A LOG CABIN

BY

W. D. HOWELLS

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English Alumnas
MY YEAR IN A LOG-CABIN

A BIT OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY

I

In the fall of the year 1850 my father removed with his family from the city of D——, where we had been living, to a property on the Little Miami River, to take charge of a saw-mill and grist-mill, and superintend their never-accomplished transformation into paper-mills. The property belonged to his brothers—physicians and druggists—who were to follow later, when they had disposed of their business in town. My father left a disastrous newspaper enterprise behind him when he came out to apply his mechanical taste and his knowledge of farming to the care of their place. Early in the century his parents had brought him to Ohio from Wales, and his boyhood was
passed in the new country, where pioneer customs and traditions were still rife, and for him it was like renewing the wild romance of those days to take up once more the life in a log-cabin interrupted by forty years' sojourn in matter-of-fact dwellings of frame and brick.

He had a passion for nature as tender and genuine and as deeply moralized as that of the English poets, by whom it had been nourished; and he taught us children all that he felt for the woods and fields and open skies; all our walks had led into them and under them. It was the fond dream of his boys to realize the trials and privations which he had painted for them in such rosy hues, and even if the only clap-boarded dwelling on the property had not been occupied by the miller, we should have disdained it for the log-cabin in which we took up our home till we could build a new house.

Our cabin stood close upon the road, but behind it broadened a cornfield of eighty acres. They still built log-cabins for dwellings in that region forty years ago, but ours must have been nearly half
a century old when we went into it. It had been recently vacated by an old Virginian couple, who had long occupied it, and we decided that it needed some repairs to make it habitable even for a family inured to hardship by dauntless imaginations, and accustomed to retrospective discomforts of every kind.

So before we all came out of it a deputation of adventurers put it in what rude order they could. They glazed the narrow windows, they relaid the rotten floor, they touched (too sketchily, as it afterwards appeared) the broken roof, and they papered the walls of the ground-floor rooms. Perhaps it was my father's love of literature which inspired him to choose newspapers for this purpose; at any rate, he did so, and the effect, as I remember it, was not without its decorative qualities.

He had used a barrel of papers bought at the nearest post-office, where they had been refused by the persons to whom they had been experimentally sent by the publisher, and the whole first page was taken up by a story, which broke off in
the middle of a sentence at the foot of the last column, and tantalized us forever with fruitless conjecture as to the fate of the hero and heroine. I really suppose that a cheap wall-paper could have been got for the same money, though it might not have seemed so economical.

I am not sure that the use of the newspapers was not a tributary reminiscence of my father's pioneer life; I cannot remember that it excited any comment in the neighbors, who were frank with their opinions of everything else we did. But it does not greatly matter; the newspapers hid the walls and the stains with which our old Virginian predecessor, who had the habit of chewing tobacco in bed, had ineffaceably streaked the plastering near the head of his couch.

The cabin, rude as it was, was not without its sophistications, its concessions to the spirit of modern luxury. The logs it was built of had not been left rounded, as they grew, but had been squared in a saw-mill, and the crevices between them had not been chinked with moss and daubed with clay in the true pioneer
fashion, but had been neatly plastered with mortar, and the chimney, instead of being a structure of clay-covered sticks, was solidly laid in courses of stone.

Within, however, it was all that could be asked for by the most romantic of pioneer families. It was six feet wide and a yard deep, its cavernous maw would easily swallow a back-log eighteen inches through, and we piled in front the sticks of hickory cord-wood as high as we liked. We made a perfect trial of it when we came out to put the cabin in readiness for the family, and when the hickory had dropped into a mass of tinkling, snapping, bristling embers we laid our rashers of bacon and our slices of steak upon them, and tasted with the appetite of tired youth the flavors of the camp and the wildwood in the captured juices.

I suppose it took a day or two to put the improvements which I have mentioned upon the cabin, but I am not certain. At night we laid our mattresses on the sweet new oak plank of the floor, and slept hard—in every sense. Once I remember waking, and seeing the man who
was always the youngest of his boys sitting upright on his bed.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Oh, resting!" he answered; and that gave us one of the Heaven-blessed laughs with which we could blow away almost any cloud of care or pain.