

An excerpt from
Five Bushel Farm
by Elizabeth Coatsworth

Chapter 1

ANDREW SEEKS FOR WORD OF THE FAIR AMERICAN

Step by step, listening for Mrs. Titcomb's heavy breathing from her chair by the parlor window, Andrew tiptoed down the narrow dark stairs and carefully unbolted and opened the front door. It creaked a little as it opened and Mrs. Titcomb snorted in her sleep. Andrew prepared to run, but the woman did not wake up, and he softly closed the door behind him.

Now that he was on the steps, facing the neat red brick Philadelphia street, he scarcely knew what to do nor where to go. He could hear Mr. Bumblebee Titcomb, as people called him, hammering down the lid of a box in the narrow back yard, ready to be packed in the wagon when it should come at dawn tomorrow to take them all away.

Away! Andrew did not even know where they were going, and for that matter neither did Mr. Bumblebee Titcomb nor Mrs. Titcomb having her nap by the window. Perhaps even now she was dreaming the dream that would decide where they were to go, for all the Titcombs' lives were ruled by Mrs. Titcomb's dreams. She had dreamed that they were to leave Philadelphia on a certain day for some better place where they would prosper; she had dreamed that Captain Patterson was dead and at the bottom of the sea, and that Andrew was an orphan; she had dreamed that he was to go with them into the new land.

Andrew's heart beat fast. He would not believe that the Fair American could be lost and that his strong young father could be dead and under the sea, even though the ship was four months overdue already. No, no! Someday his father would come back, with his pockets bulging with presents for Andrew; he would come hurrying up this quiet street like a southwest wind and knock eagerly at the polished knocker, and then some stranger would open the door, and tell him that the pretty frail lady had died in the summer, and that the Titcombs had gone away and taken their little boarder with them.

But no one would know where they had gone. His father would hunt and hunt, but he would not know where to hunt for Andrew. America is a pretty large place in which to lose one little boy!

"If only Mother had known someone!" thought Andrew, his hands on the steep rail, but they had known no one but the Titcombs. And now the Titcombs were going away and were going to take him with them!

"Please wait, dear Mrs. Titcomb, please wait just another week until my father comes back," Andrew had begged that very day at the dinner table, but Mrs. Titcomb had shut her mouth tight and settled her cap firmly on her curls.

"Nonsense, Andrew," she said impatiently. "Your father is dead, poor man. I saw him dead and under the sea myself in a dream a week ago. There is no one with whom to leave you, so you must come along and try to be a good boy."

"But mightn't your dream be wrong, Mrs. Titcomb?" Andrew had faltered.

"My dreams are never wrong," said Mrs. Titcomb, heaving out of her chair to kill a fly on the windowpane. "Go up to your room now and pack your trunk. The wagon will be here early." Andrew had given one despairing look at Mr. Titcomb. But Mr. Titcomb was staring at his finger, whose tip he had once cut off with a hatchet, intending to kill a bee that was on it. Mr. Titcomb might be a good carpenter, but he depended on Mrs. Titcomb for doing the thinking for them both.

"Be a good boy," he mumbled good-naturedly, giving Andrew a pat on his brown head. There was no help there.

Andrew went up the steep stairs to his little room under the slate roof, and pulled out the small trunk covered with spotted calfskin, with his initials in brass-headed tacks on the cover. He had been so proud of it when his father had given it to him for the voyage to the West Indies. But now it meant his mother's illness and being put ashore at this strange port; it meant her death, and loneliness; and as he folded his neat clothes into it, he hated it with all his heart, because it was going to carry away his things into an unknown world where his father would never find him.

"I won't go, I won't go!" he cried, striking against the calfskin suddenly with both fists. His hurt knuckles brought him back to his usual quietness.

"What shall I do, then?" he thought. "There is nowhere I can go."

And kneeling as he was in front of the little trunk, he tried to pray, but God seemed very far away.

Then the idea came to him that perhaps if he went down to the docks he might hear some news of his father. There was no good asking Mrs. Titcomb's permission to go. She would only tell him again that she had seen Captain Patterson in a dream, dead and under the sea. But this was the hour for Mrs. Titcomb's nap, when she sat red-faced and heavy in her chair by the window after her monstrous dinner, and even on this last day, she would probably be sleeping. So Andrew tiptoed down the stairs and at last found himself on the steps with the door closed safely behind him.

Andrew had never been to the docks since he left the deck of the Fair American nearly ten months ago, but he knew in which direction they lay, and guided partly by the smell of salt water and tar, he found his way from the streets of red brick houses and yellowing maples to the warehouses, sail lofts, water-front taverns and ship chandlers' stores that lined the river. Above the roofs he could see the masts and spars of vessels at the docks, and here and there catch the stained white of a drying sail. Big drays rattled and bumped over the cobblestones, and once he was almost run down by a team of heavy chestnuts coming from an alley. There were

sailors, some of them foreign, blowsy women, hurrying merchants, but none of them paid any attention to Andrew.

So, amid the confusion and the reek of many smells, pleasant and unpleasant, he found his way from dock to dock, wherever he could make out the tall spars of a brig, but each time he was disappointed, and it was the Amiable Nancy of Machias, the Fortune and Sally of Boston, the Three Sisters or the Alert of Newburyport which lay being loaded or unloaded, and never the vessel he sought.

At last he began stopping people, to ask:

"Have you heard any news of the brig Fair American of Providence, Captain John Patterson, bound from Havana?"

But though one or two waited to question the boy, all ended by shaking their heads. It was no new thing at the water front to have anxious wives or children inquiring for men and ships. "Never heard tell of the Fair American, sonny," most of the men said, often adding kindly, "But like as not she'll come sailing up the river any day now."

"If you should meet Captain Patterson sometime, sir, will you tell him his son Andrew was inquiring for him?" Andrew would ask wistfully. "Tell Captain Patterson they're taking me away-I don't know where."

"Now that's too bad, sonny," the men would say, giving him a pat on the shoulder. "If I meet him, I'll tell him. You can count on me."

The afternoon was drawing on to dusk, and still Andrew had heard no word of his father. He knew now, for sure, that the Fair American was not in port: that foolish hope was dead. Perhaps Mrs. Titcomb was right. Four months was a long time to be overdue from the West Indies.

A man leaned over the rail of an untidy-looking vessel with a foreign name.

"Nice leetle boy, you coma on board," he said, smiling. "I gotta nice monkey to show you. I gotta nice parrot. You coma on board."

"No thank you, sir," said Andrew, and turned and ran down the almost deserted dock, his footsteps echoing loud in his own ears. He didn't want to be carried off to be a cabin boy against his will. The water front was full of shadows now, and loud voices from the taverns. Andrew saw a man lying on the cobbles and did not know whether he was drunk or dead. With the coming of October dusk the brisk sailors, the officers, the merchants and drays seemed gone; in their place were shadows that slouched or staggered, faces with dangerous eyes.

Andrew could not stay here. Hungry, weary and hopeless, he found his way back to the Titcombs, and knocked at their door.

Mrs. Titcomb flung it open in a flurry.

"Well, what a turn you've given us, young man!" she cried. "You need to have your trousers well warmed for playing us such a trick on the last afternoon!"

But when she saw Andrew's tired, desperate face, her hand on his shoulder turned kinder. "There, there," she said, "go and get washed for your supper and we'll say no more about it. I suppose you've been down to the docks hunting for your father, though I've told you a hundred times he's dead and under the sea. Hurry, Andrew! Thanks to your obstinacy you'll have to pack by candlelight, for the wagon will be here tomorrow at cockcrow."

*"Sailor, have you seen my sweetheart
Sailing o'er the main?
Fast and staunch the ship he sailed in
Yet I watch for him in vain!
He is mate of the Amanda,
Soon a captain he will be-
Sailor, have you seen my sweetheart
As you sailed the sea?"*

*"Lady, I have met no sweetheart
Sailing o'er the main.
Many a brave man leaves the harbor
Never to return again,-
But that name I do remember
Washing past our rails
On the wreckage of some vessel
Long lost in the gales."*

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