

WE BUY #123 HILLSIDE AVENUE, ENGLEWOOD

by
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We had bought a house in Tenaflly (28 De Peyster Avenue) in 1928 and put considerable time and money shaping it to our needs and wishes. In the 1930's the great depression had paralyzed the nation; on our little street two of the other three houses had "for sale" signs; there were no buyers. My friend, Gerry Clarke, realtor and then Mayor of Englewood, telephoned to me and asked if I knew the Johnson place on Hillside Avenue in Englewood. He said Mrs. Johnson had ordered that he get some sort of a bid; her problem was emotional, not financial, as she was wealthy; that to keep his reputation as a realtor he had to produce *some* bid for this landmark and show-place of Englewood; that I was one of the few men who had an income sufficient to swing the place; that he thought Mrs. Johnson would look kindly on my family having the place. I replied that I knew the place by sight but had never been inside the house, or even in the yard, and that I had never met Mrs. Johnson. That evening, I talked it over at home and the following day called back and offered \$30,000, all cash. Clarke remonstrated that this wasn't much of an offer and I agreed but reminded him that I really didn't need, or want, the place but was primarily trying to be a good fellow and help him preserve his reputation. Later, that day, an officer of United States Trust Company called me and urged me to make a very substantial increase in my offer, which I refused to do. "Did you know," he asked, "that with the house goes all the furniture left in the house by Mrs. Johnson?" I replied I hadn't known this but it didn't change my bid as I was merely trying to be a good fellow and didn't much want that big a house anyhow. The conversation ended with his telling me he considered my bid ridiculous.

What I didn't know was that on the death of her husband, Mrs. Johnson was so sentimental about the place that she couldn't continue in it and had moved to North Carolina, renting the place to a David Weil, who was then President of Macy's. Weil, at best, was a difficult character and he was besieging Mrs. Johnson with complaints about the

plumbing, or the heating, or the roof, etc., etc., and this was unbearable for her. She had ordered her bank: "Get a bid—preferably from some nice family who would take care of the place and love it as I have loved it."

The next morning the bank gave me the alarming news: "O.K. You have bought a house but we can't give possession until we can get the tenant out." This, and the title papers, etc., took about five weeks, and then one day they delivered the keys to me and that evening Miriam and I went, with some misgivings, to see what we had bought. It was spring, and with the flowering shrubs, the yard was beautiful—and then we unlocked the door and went cautiously into the house. Even though recently vacated by a cantankerous tenant, it seemed spacious and gracious; and there were many pieces of fine old furniture—including two beautiful antique grandfather clocks. We did no remodeling except that I converted the "Music Room," a fully panelled room with a little niche with a bust of Mozart, into a library by pulling out the panels at either end of the room and building in shelves for my law library. I can't remember what I did with Mozart.

We were settled in and enjoying our new home (I had sold the Tenafly house with very little trouble) when I received a letter from an embarrassed Mrs. Johnson. She thought that the two grandfather clocks had been stored but now discovered that they had been left in the house and had gone to me under the general deed; that these clocks were old family heirlooms; would I be willing to have them appraised by Tiffany's and then let her buy them back from me at the appraised price? I replied that I would not sell them to her; that it was just a mistake; that I loved the house and the many pieces of fine furniture which came with it, and if she would tell me where, I would simply send the two clocks. So I called Tiffany's and they crated and shipped the clocks to Mrs. Johnson. Then I got a letter asking that I let her have the Tiffany bill, to which I replied that I was trying to be gallant and please not deprive me of this by demanding the bill. I got another little "thank-you" note.

That first winter in the house we had a disastrous ice storm. It rained for hours and it froze, bogging down the trees and bushes under a punishing weight of ice—and then came a wind-storm and trees and

bushes were snapped off. When spring came the place was a mess. Miriam and I had talked about doing something but I was busy and had no time to even study nursery catalogues. Then one morning when I hurried out to start for New York I met at the gate, coming in, three big Nursery Company vans and a crew of men. I thought Miriam had ordered all that stuff without having told me and I went back in the house and angrily confronted her. She denied that she ordered anything and that she knew anything about those big vans. So I went back and told the foreman of the crew—"You have the wrong place; we didn't order anything." "Oh," said the foreman, "don't you know about this? Mrs. Johnson has been working with our Nursery and a distinguished landscape gardener for several months on a complete replanting of the place. It is a gift from her."

Then I had to write a "thank-you" note. For years, we exchanged Christmas cards but never met and then one year no card came. I felt good about living in a home that had been loved by the previous owner, and which came to us under such friendly circumstances.