THE POWDER HORN

By Elizabeth Coatsworth

ONE OF the places Alice liked best to go was to Simeon Hall's junk shop, which was in a small red brick building a little back from the main street. Simeon Hall was an old man with a wooden leg. He liked working in his garden better than sitting in his shop, so often Alice and her best friend Marcia would find a small sign pinned to the door, "Out back in the garden — S. H." and then they could either go out back and help Mr. Hall weed his vegetables, or walk into the vacant shop and look at what there was there.

It was not the kind of shop to attract summer people unless they were very wise and unhurried, but it was a place where a housewife could buy a secondhand kitchen stove good for another twenty years of baking pies and roasting meat, or a farmer might find a secondhand harness hanging from the cobwebby rafters. There was nothing so dusty, so cracked, or so worn that it didn't have a story and when Simeon Hall was in his shop he would tell some of the stories to the girls.

Because Alice and Marcia were best friends, they did their hair alike, but Marcia's bang and her crossed braids were as light as Alice's were dark, and her eyes were as blue as two morning-glories. She was more independent than Alice but sometimes Alice did things that Marcia wouldn't even have thought of, because it never occurred to her that they were brave or unusual.

Often coming home from school they would drop in to see Mr. Hall. He kept a basket of Mackintosh red apples on a shelf far from the stove and, when they came, he always gave them each an apple and took one himself. The front room of the shop was warm and smelled of bitten apples and white pine smoke, and a little dust and harness. You could hear the big flies on the windowpanes much more clearly than the automobiles passing along the main street.

"See that ice chest over there?" Mr. Hall asked. "Electric. When the bank took over the Thompson 151 place, you never saw such a pile of machinery as they had. Even

milked the cows by electricity. I give you my word, I jumped when I saw a common everyday ordinary cat on the doorstep—thought they'd have had an electric rat trap, sure." Mr. Hall chuckled, threw his core into the stove, and lighted his pipe.

"That mantel," he went on, "came from the big Spooner house up the river. The people who have it now are redecorating. In the old days, Captain Spooner ordered two carved mantels from Italy for the big parlor, but they came on different vessels and the second one was wrecked on Thread of Life Ledges at the mouth of the river, and he never could get another mantel to match. So now out goes the odd one after fifty years."

"If I were the new people," Alice said, "I'd love to have a mantel whose mate was under the sea being made into coral."

"Well, folks don't all think alike," said old Mr. Hall, "or I'd have nothing to buy or sell."

It was Marcia who one coldish afternoon in late October found the powder horn in a corner, but it was Alice who loved it on sight. Ten minutes after finding it, Marcia had forgotten all about it, but Alice dreamed about it at night. It was made from a cow's horn, closed with wood at the wide end and with a kind of wooden stopper at the point through which the powder had once been poured. The horn had been deeply scratched with all sorts of designs: sunflowers and thistles, fish, deer, swans, and hearts, and under the date 1741 was the head of a man in a wig with a lace frill and a crown — the king, of course.

Mr. Hall didn't know much about it.

"I bought it with a lot of junk," he said. "but some of the summer people may like it next year."

Alice felt certain that the horn must have come from the old Oliver house where the clapboards had been nailed over square hewn logs and there were still marks of arrow and bullet holes near the back door. She was sure the horn had been used in the French and Indian War. Perhaps it had even gone up the Kennebec with Arnold and his men. Or perhaps it had belonged to her own ancestor who had been a noted hunter and whose fine buckskin breeches and silver buckles were in the top drawer of the secretary in the parlor. Alice thought about the powder horn a great deal. Then she went to Marcia.

"Marcia," she said, "I want to ask you something."

"What is it?" asked Marcia.

Alice swallowed. "Marcia," she said, "Do you want that powder horn at Mr. Hall's?"

"What could I do with it?" asked Marcia, who was practical. "I don't want the old thing."

Then Alice went to Mr. Hall. She found him shingling a chicken coop, for in the fall everyone in Maine shingles something.

"Mr. Hall," she began, trying to speak like her mother, "what are you asking for your powder horn?"

Mr. Hall looked at her and then took the nails out of his mouth. "That's a pretty good horn," he said. "I imagine it's worth a basketful of apples, all shined up to look nice and not a wormhole in them."

What a time Alice and Marcia had finding so many perfect apples, even in the big orchard back of Alice's house! Often when they were polishing one that looked perfectly good they would find the smallest speck of a hole, and then they would throw that apple out and race back to the orchard to get some more. At last after a long afternoon's work, they lugged the basket to the junk shop and apparently Mr. Hall was very much pleased. He had the horn wrapped up in newspaper and tied with a red string, waiting for them, and he had a parcel for Marcia, too, which turned out to be four glass balls on top of each other for her desk.

Alice's father liked the horn almost as much as Alice did.

"Look," he said, "how much yellower it is on one side than the other, where it fitted into the hand while the powder was being poured out."

"I think the Rainy-day Attic would be a good place to keep it," said Alice, which was generous of her, but she wanted her father to share her new possession.

As I said, every year something new is made or shingled or contrived in a good Maine household. This year Alice's father had been busy taking a part of the big attic to make a room where they might all go on rainy days. He had Mr. Morse, the carpenter, put in a big dormer window, and Mr. Tibbets, the plumber, made a hole in the chimney for a Franklin stove, but that smoked too much. Then Alice's father came across a little iron stove, with a bird on top as a handle and isinglass windows through which you could see the red of the fire, and that did very well.

There was a partition of new boards behind the chimney dividing the new Rainy-day Attic from the rest of the attic. That was the only thing that looked a little out of place with the old brown beams as dark and soft as a moth's wing, and the turkey-red curtains at the windows, with the shelves filled with old books (mostly picture books) and the hooked rugs and the three rocking chairs, and the cot with the chariot-wheel quilt on it.

But when they brought the horn there, Alice's father had an idea. "Why don't we make a Norwegian sort of room?" he suggested. "We could draw designs from the horn on the new wall and paint them in bright colors. It would be very northern, and we would do it all ourselves."

It was Alice's mother who drew the designs with a piece of charred wood left in the stove, and it was Alice who painted them with a little help from her father when the designs ran too high for her to reach.

At the end of four or five afternoons the wall looked beautiful. There was a sunflower plant on each side of the chimney with heart-shaped leaves and big, staring flowers, and two swans facing each other across each sunflower stalk, painted white and outlined with a turquoise.

In the border Alice's mother had drawn three hearts, "Because it's our especial room," she said, and Alice's father added two red apples, "Because they were the price of the horn," he said.

Then Alice and Marcia waited for a rainy day. It seemed as though it would never never come, but at last a morning dawned when the sky was leaden gray and the cold drops began to fall on the bright foliage and the yellowing grass. The girls raced home from school that afternoon and up the stairs and into the Rainy-day Attic. Alice's father and mother were already there, and they were popping corn over the stove and pouring it into a yellow kitchen bowl with a big pat of butter on a dish and a saltcellar beside it.

There was a great basket of apples, too, and a sweet smelling bouquet of herbs, and the candles were lighted. You could hear the rain falling so lightly and steadily on the roof, and the whisper and furling of the flames, and the gay dancing and popping of the corn. There was a little chair waiting for Marcia, beside the row of old, bound *St. Nicholases*, and the swans and sun flowers and hearts looked down from the wall as

though they were happy to have flowered from the old beautiful horn, and found a new place in people's lives.