

Stowe Harriet Beecher

Sam Lawson's Oldtown Fireside Stories



Гарриет Бичер-Стоу

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Harriet Beecher Stowe

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THE GHOST IN THE MILL

“COME, Sam, tell us a story,” said I, as Harriet and I crept to his knees, in the glow of the bright evening firelight; while Aunt Lois was busily rattling the tea-things, and grandmamma, at the other end of the fireplace, was quietly setting the heel of a blue-mixed yarn stocking.

In those days we had no magazines and daily papers, each reeling off a serial story. Once a week, “The Columbian Sentinel” came from Boston with its slender stock of news and editorial; but all the multiform devices – pictorial, narrative, and poetical – which keep the mind of the present generation ablaze with excitement, had not then even an existence. There was no theatre, no opera; there were in Oldtown no parties or balls, except, perhaps, the annual election, or Thanksgiving festival; and when winter came, and the sun went down at half-past four o’clock, and left the long, dark hours of evening to be provided for, the necessity of amusement became urgent. Hence, in those days, chimney-corner story-telling became an art and an accomplishment. Society then was full of traditions and narratives which had all the uncertain glow and shifting mystery of the firelit hearth upon them. They were told to sympathetic audiences, by the rising and falling light of the solemn embers, with the hearth-cricketts filling up every pause.

Then the aged told their stories to the young, – tales of early life; tales of war and adventure, of forest-days, of Indian captivities and escapes, of bears and wild-cats and panthers, of rattlesnakes, of witches and wizards, and strange and wonderful dreams and appearances and providences.

In those days of early Massachusetts, faith and credence were in the very air. Two-thirds of New England was then dark, unbroken forests, through whose tangled paths the mysterious winter wind groaned and shrieked and howled with weird noises and unaccountable clamors. Along the iron-bound shore, the stormful Atlantic raved and thundered, and dashed its moaning waters, as if to deaden and deafen any voice that might tell of the settled life of the old civilized world, and shut us forever into the wilderness. A good story-teller, in those days, was always sure of a warm seat at the hearthstone, and the delighted homage of children; and in all Oldtown there was no better story-teller than Sam Lawson.

“Do, do, tell us a story,” said Harry, pressing upon him, and opening very wide blue eyes, in which undoubting faith shone as in a mirror; “and let it be something strange, and different from common.”

“Wal, I know lots o’ strange things,” said Sam, looking mysteriously into the fire. “Why, I know things, that ef I should tell, – why, people might say they wa’n’t so; but then they *is so* for all that.”

“Oh, *do*, do, tell us!”

“Why, I should scare ye to death, mebbe,” said Sam doubtfully.

“Oh, pooh! no, you wouldn’t,” we both burst out at once.

But Sam was possessed by a reticent spirit, and loved dearly to be wooed and importuned; and so he only took up the great kitchen-tongs, and smote on the hickory forestick, when it flew apart in the middle, and scattered a shower of clear bright coals all over the hearth.

“Mercy on us, Sam Lawson!” said Aunt Lois in an indignant voice, spinning round from her dishwashing.

“Don’t you worry a grain, Miss Lois,” said Sam composedly. “I see that are stick was e’en a’most in two, and I thought I’d jest settle it. I’ll sweep up the coals now,” he added, vigorously applying a turkey-wing to the purpose, as he knelt on the hearth, his spare, lean figure glowing in the blaze of the firelight, and getting quite flashed with exertion.

“There, now!” he said, when he had brushed over and under and between the fire-irons, and pursued the retreating ashes so far into the red, fiery citadel, that his finger-ends were burning and tingling, “that ‘are’s done now as well as Hepsy herself could ‘a’ done it. I allers sweeps up the haarth: I think it’s part o’ the man’s bisness when he makes the fire. But Hepsy’s so used to seein’ me a-doin’ on’t, that she don’t see no kind o’ merit in’t. It’s just as Parson Lothrop said in his sermon, – folks allers overlook their common marcies” —

“But come, Sam, that story,” said Harry and I coaxingly, pressing upon him, and pulling him down into his seat in the corner.

“Lordy massy, these’ere young uns!” said Sam.

“There’s never no contentin’ on ‘em: ye tell ‘em one story, and they jest swallows it as a dog does a gob o’ meat; and they’re all ready for another. What do ye want to hear now?”

Now, the fact was, that Sam’s stories had been told us so often, that they were all arranged and ticketed in our minds. We knew every word in them, and could set him right if he varied a hair from the usual track; and still the interest in them was unabated.

Still we shivered, and clung to his knee, at the mysterious parts, and felt gentle, cold chills run down our spines at appropriate places. We were always in the most receptive and sympathetic condition. To-night, in particular, was one of those thundering stormy ones, when the winds appeared to be holding a perfect mad carnival over my grandfather’s house. They yelled and squealed round the corners; they collected in troops, and came tumbling and roaring down chimney; they shook and rattled the buttery-door and the sinkroom-door and the cellar-door and the chamber-door, with a constant undertone of squeak and clatter, as if at every door were a cold, discontented spirit, tired of the chill outside, and longing for the warmth and comfort within.

“Wal, boys,” said Sam confidentially, “what ‘ll ye have?”

“Tell us ‘Come down, come down!’” we both shouted with one voice. This was, in our mind, an “A No. 1” among Sam’s stories.

“Ye mus’n’t be frightened now,” said Sam paternally.

“Oh, no! we ar’n’t frightened *ever*,” said we both in one breath.

“Not when ye go down the cellar arter cider?” said Sam with severe scrutiny. “Ef ye should be down cellar, and the candle should go out, now?”

“I ain’t,” said I: “I ain’t afraid of any thing. I never knew what it was to be afraid in my life.”

“Wal, then,” said Sam, “I ‘ll tell ye. This’ere’s what Cap’n Eb Sawin told me when I was a boy about your bigness, I reckon.

“Cap’n Eb Sawin was a most respectable man. Your gran’ther knew him very well; and he was a deacon in the church in Dedham afore he died. He was at Lexington when the fust gun was fired agin the British. He was a dreffle smart man, Cap’n Eb was, and driv team a good many years atween here and Boston. He married Lois Peabody, that was cousin to your gran’ther then. Lois was a rael sensible woman; and I’ve heard her tell the story as he told her, and it was jest as he told it to me, – jest exactly; and I shall never forget it if I live to be nine hundred years old, like Mathuselah.

“Ye see, along back in them times, there used to be a fellow come round these’ere parts, spring and fall, a-peddlin’ goods, with his pack on his back; and his name was Jehiel Lommedieu. Nobody rightly knew where he come from. He wasn’t much of a talker; but the women rather liked him, and kind o’ liked to have him round. Women will like some fellows, when men can’t see no sort o’ reason why they should; and they liked this’ere Lommedieu, though he was kind o’ mournful and thin and shad-bellied, and hadn’t nothin’ to say for himself. But it got to be so, that the women would count and calculate so many weeks afore ‘twas time for Lommedieu to be along; and they’d make up ginger-snaps and preserves and pies, and make him stay to tea at the houses, and feed him up on the best there was: and the story went round, that he was a-courtin’ Phebe Ann Parker, or Phebe Ann was a-courtin’ him, – folks didn’t rightly know which. Wal, all of a sudden, Lommedieu stopped comin’ round; and nobody knew why, – only jest he didn’t come. It turned out that Phebe Ann Parker had

got a letter from him, sayin' he'd be along afore Thanksgiving; but he didn't come, neither afore nor at Thanksgiving time, nor arter, nor next spring: and finally the women they gin up lookin' for him. Some said he was dead; some said he was gone to Canada; and some said he hed gone over to the Old Country.

"Wal, as to Phebe Ann, she acted like a gal o' sense, and married 'Bijah Moss, and thought no more 'bout it. She took the right view on't, and said she was sartin that all things was ordered out for the best; and it was jest as well folks couldn't always have their own way. And so, in time, Lommedieu was gone out o' folks's minds, much as a last year's apple-blossom.

"It's relly affectin' to think how little these'ere folks is missed that's so much sot by. There ain't nobody, ef they's ever so important, but what the world gets to goin' on without 'em, pretty much as it did with 'em, though there's some little flurry at fust. Wal, the last thing that was in anybody's mind was, that they ever should hear from Lommedieu agin. But there ain't nothin' but what has its time o' turnin' up; and it seems his turn was to come.

"Wal, ye see, 'twas the 19th o' March, when Cap'n Eb Sawin started with a team for Boston. That day, there come on about the biggest snow-storm that there'd been in them parts sence the oldest man could remember. 'Twas this'ere fine, siftin' snow, that drives in your face like needles, with a wind to cut your nose off: it made teamin' pretty tedious work. Cap'n Eb was about the toughest man in them parts. He'd spent days in the woods a-loggin', and he'd been up to the deestric't o' Maine a-lumberin', and was about up to any sort o' thing a man gen'ally could be up to; but these'ere March winds sometimes does set on a fellow so, that neither natur' nor grace can stan' 'em. The cap'n used to say, he could stan' any wind that blew one way 't time for five minutes; but come to winds that blew all four p'int's at the same minit, – why, they flustered him.

"Wal, that was the sort o' weather it was all day: and by sundown Cap'n Eb he got clean bewildered, so that he lost his road; and, when night came on, he didn't know nothin' where he was. Ye see the country was all under drift, and the air so thick with snow, that he couldn't see a foot afore him; and the fact was, he got off the Boston road without knowin' it, and came out at a pair o' bars nigh upon Sherburn, where old Cack Sparrock's mill is.

"Your gran'ther used to know old Cack, boys. He was a drefful drinkin' old crittur, that lived there all alone in the woods by himself a-tendin' saw and grist mill. He wa'n't allers jest what he was then. Time was that Cack was a pretty consid'ably likely young man, and his wife was a very respectable woman, – Deacon Amos Petengall's dater from Sherburn.

"But ye see, the year arter his wife died, Cack he gin up goin' to meetin' Sundays, and, all the tithing-men and selectmen could do, they couldn't get him out to meetin'; and, when a man neglects means o' grace and sanctuary privileges, there ain't no sayin' *what* he 'll do next. Why, boys, jist think on't! – an immortal crittur lyin' round loose all day Sunday, and not puttin' on so much as a clean shirt, when all 'spectable folks has on their best close, and is to meetin' worshippin' the Lord! What can you spect to come of it, when he lies idlin' round in his old week-day close, fishing, or some sich, but what the Devil should be arter him at last, as he was arter old Cack?"

Here Sam winked impressively to my grandfather in the opposite corner, to call his attention to the moral which he was interweaving with his narrative.

"Wal, ye see, Cap'n Eb he told me, that when he come to them bars and looked up, and saw the dark a-comin' down, and the storm a-thickenin' up, he felt that things was gettin' pretty consid'able serious. There was a dark piece o' woods on ahead of him inside the bars; and he knew, come to get in there, the light would give out clean. So he jest thought he'd take the hoss out o' the team, and go ahead a little, and see where he was. So he driv his oxen up ag'in the fence, and took out the hoss, and got on him, and pushed along through the woods, not rightly knowin' where he was goin'.

"Wal, afore long he see a light through the trees; and, sure enough, he come out to Cack Sparrock's old mill.

“It was a pretty consid’able gloomy sort of a place, that are old mill was. There was a great fall of water that come rushin’ down the rocks, and fell in a deep pool; and it sounded sort o’ wild and lonesome: but Cap’n Eb he knocked on the door with his whip-handle, and got in.

“There, to be sure, sot old Cack beside a great blazin’ fire, with his rum-jug at his elbow. He was a dreffful fellow to drink, Cack was! For all that, there was some good in him, for he was pleasant-spoken and ‘bliging; and he made the cap’n welcome.

“‘Ye see, Cack,’ said Cap’n Eb, ‘I’m off my road, and got snowed up down by your bars,’ says he.

“‘Want ter know!’ says Cack. ‘Calculate you ‘ll jest have to camp down here till mornin’,’ says he.

“Wal, so old Cack he got out his tin lantern, and went with Cap’n Eb back to the bars to help him fetch along his critturs. He told him he could put ‘em under the mill-shed. So they got the critturs up to the shed, and got the cart under; and by that time the storm was awful.

“But Cack he made a great roarin’ fire, ‘cause, ye see, Cack allers had slab-wood a plenty from his mill; and a roarin’ fire is jest so much company. It sort o’ keeps a fellow’s spirits up, a good fire does. So Cack he sot on his old teakettle, and made a swingeing lot o’ toddy; and he and Cap’n Eb were havin’ a tol’able comfortable time there. Cack was a pretty good hand to tell stories; and Cap’n Eb warn’t no way backward in that line, and kep’ up his end pretty well: and pretty soon they was a-roarin’ and haw-hawin’ inside about as loud as the storm outside; when all of a sudden, ‘bout midnight, there come a loud rap on the door.

“‘Lordy massy! what’s that?’ says Cack. Folks is rather startled allers to be checked up sudden when they are a-carryin’ on and laughin’; and it was such an awful blowy night, it was a little scary to have a rap on the door.

“Wal, they waited a minit, and didn’t hear nothin’ but the wind a-screechin’ round the chimbley; and old Cack was jest goin’ on with his story, when the rap come ag’in, harder’n ever, as if it’d shook the door open.

“Wal,’ says old Cack, ‘if ‘tis the Devil, we’d jest as good’s open, and have it out with him to onst,’ says he; and so he got up and opened the door, and, sure enough, there was old Ketury there. Expect you’ve heard your grandma tell about old Ketury. She used to come to meetin’s sometimes, and her husband was one o’ the prayin’ Indians; but Ketury was one of the rael wild sort, and you couldn’t no more convert *her* than you could convert a wild-cat or a painter [panther]. Lordy massy! Ketury used to come to meetin’, and sit there on them Indian benches; and when the second bell was a-tollin’, and when Parson Lothrop and his wife was comin’ up the broad aisle, and everybody in the house ris’ up and stood, Ketury would sit there, and look at ‘em out o’ the corner o’ her eyes; and folks used to say she rattled them necklaces o’ rattlesnakes’ tails and wild-cat teeth, and sich like heathen trumpery, and looked for all the world as if the spirit of the old Serpent himself was in her. I’ve seen her sit and look at Lady Lothrop out o’ the corner o’ her eyes; and her old brown baggy neck would kind o’ twist and work; and her eyes they looked so, that ‘twas enough to scare a body. For all the world, she looked jest as if she was a-workin’ up to spring at her. Lady Lothrop was jest as kind to Ketury as she always was to every poor crittur. She’d bow and smile as gracious to her when meetin’ was over, and she come down the aisle, passin’ out o, meetin’; but Ketury never took no notice. Ye see, Ketury’s father was one o’ them great powwows down to Martha’s Vineyard; and people used to say she was set apart, when she was a child, to the sarvice o’ the Devil: any way, she never could be made nothin’ of in a Christian way. She come down to Parson Lothrop’s study once or twice to be catechised; but he couldn’t get a word out o’ her, and she kind o’ seemed to sit scornful while he was a-talkin’. Folks said, if it was in old times, Ketury wouldn’t have been allowed to go on so; but Parson Lothrop’s so sort o’ mild, he let her take pretty much her own way. Everybody thought that Ketury was a witch: at least, she knew consid’able more’n she ought to know, and so they was kind o’ ‘fraid on her. Cap’n Eb says he never see a fellow seem scareder than Cack did when he see Ketury a-standin’ there.

“Why, ye see, boys, she was as withered and wrinkled and brown as an old frosted punkin-vine; and her little snaky eyes sparkled and snapped, and it made yer head kind o’ dizzy to look at ‘em; and folks used to say that anybody that Ketury got mad at was sure to get the worst of it fust or last. And so, no matter what day or hour Ketury had a mind to rap at anybody’s door, folks gen’ly thought it was best to let her in; but then, they never thought her coming was for any good, for she was just like the wind, – she came when the fit was on her, she staid jest so long as it pleased her, and went when she got ready, and not before. Ketury understood English, and could talk it well enough, but always seemed to scorn it, and was allers mowin’ and mutterin’ to herself in Indian, and winkin’ and blinkin’ as if she saw more folks round than you did, so that she wa’n’t no way pleasant company; and yet everybody took good care to be polite to her.

“So old Cack asked her to come in, and didn’t make no question where she come from, or what she come on; but he knew it was twelve good miles from where she lived to his hut, and the snow was drifted above her middle: and Cap’n Eb declared that there wa’n’t no track, nor sign o’ a track, of anybody’s coming through that snow next morning.”

“How did she get there, then?” said I.

“Didn’t ye never see brown leaves a-ridin’ on the wind? Well,’ Cap’n Eb he says, ‘she came on the wind,’ and I’m sure it was strong enough to fetch her. But Cack he got her down into the warm corner, and he poured her out a mug o’ hot toddy, and give her: but ye see her bein’ there sort o’ stopped the conversation; for she sot there a-rockin’ back’ards and for’ards, a-sippin her toddy, and a-mutterin’, and lookin’ up chimbley.

“Cap’n Eb says in all his born days he never hearn such screeches and yells as the wind give over that chimbley; and old Cack got so frightened, you could fairly hear his teeth chatter.

“But Cap’n Eb he was a putty brave man, and he wa’n’t goin’ to have conversation stopped by no woman, witch or no witch; and so, when he see her mutterin’, and lookin’ up chimbley, he spoke up, and says he, ‘Well, Ketury, what do you see?’ says he. ‘Come, out with it; don’t keep it to yourself.’ Ye see Cap’n Eb was a hearty fellow, and then he was a leetle warmed up with the toddy.

“Then he said he see an evil kind o’ smile on Ketury’s face, and she rattled her necklace o’ bones and snakes’ tails; and her eyes seemed to snap; and she looked up the chimbley, and called out, ‘Come down, come down! let’s see who ye be.’

“Then there was a scratchin’ and a rumblin’ and a groan; and a pair of feet come down the chimbley, and stood right in the middle of the haarth, the toes pi’ntin’ out’rds, with shoes and silver buckles a-shinin’ in the firelight. Cap’n Eb says he never come so near bein’ scared in his life; and, as to old Cack, he jest wilted right down in his chair.

“Then old Ketury got up, and reached her stick up chimbley, and called out louder, ‘Come down, come down! let’s see who ye be.’ And, sure enough, down came a pair o’ legs, and j’ined right on to the feet: good fair legs they was, with ribbed stockings and leather breeches.

“‘Wal, we’re in for it now,’ says Cap’n Eb. ‘Go it, Ketury, and let’s have the rest on him.’

“Ketury didn’t seem to mind him: she stood there as stiff as a stake, and kep’ callin’ out, ‘Come down, come down! let’s see who ye be.’ And then come down the body of a man with a brown coat and yellow vest, and j’ined right on to the legs; but there wa’n’t no arms to it. Then Ketury shook her stick up chimbley, and called, ‘Come down, come down!’ And there came down a pair o’ arms, and went on each side o’ the body; and there stood a man all finished, only there wa’n’t no head on him.

“‘Wal, Ketury,’ says Cap’n Eb, ‘this ‘ere’s getting serious. I ‘spec’ you must finish him up, and let’s see what he wants of us.’

“Then Ketury called out once more, louder’n ever, ‘Come down, come down! let’s see who ye be.’ And, sure enough, down comes a man’s head, and settled on the shoulders straight enough; and Cap’n Eb, the minit he sot eyes on him, knew he was Jehiel Lommedieu.

“Old Cack knew him too; and he fell flat on his face, and prayed the Lord to have mercy on his soul: but Cap’n Eb he was for gettin’ to the bottom of matters, and not have his scare for nothin’; so he says to him, ‘What do you want, now you hev come?’

“The man he didn’t speak; he only sort o’ moaned, and p’inted to the chimbley. He seemed to try to speak, but couldn’t; for ye see it isn’t often that his sort o’ folks is permitted to speak: but just then there came a screechin’ blast o’ wind, and blowed the door open, and blowed the smoke and fire all out into the room, and there seemed to be a whirlwind and darkness and moans and screeches; and, when it all cleared up, Ketury and the man was both gone, and only old Cack lay on the ground, rolling and moaning as if he’d die.

“Wal, Cap’n Eb he picked him up, and built up the fire, and sort o’ comforted him up, ‘cause the crittur was in distress o’ mind that was drefful. The awful Providence, ye see, had awakened him, and his sin had been set home to his soul; and he was under such conviction, that it all had to come out, – how old Cack’s father had murdered poor Lommedieu for his money, and Cack had been privy to it, and helped his father build the body up in that very chimbley; and he said that he hadn’t had neither peace nor rest since then, and that was what had driv’ him away from ordinances; for ye know sinnin’ will always make a man leave prayin’. Wal, Cack didn’t live but a day or two. Cap’n Eb he got the minister o’ Sherburn and one o’ the selectmen down to see him; and they took his deposition. He seemed raily quite penitent; and Parson Carryl he prayed with him, and was faithful in settin’ home the providence to his soul: and so, at the eleventh hour, poor old Cack might have got in; at least it looks a leetle like it. He was distressed to think he couldn’t live to be hung. He sort o’ seemed to think, that if he was fairly tried, and hung, it would make it all square. He made Parson Carryl promise to have the old mill pulled down, and bury the body; and, after he was dead, they did it.

“Cap’n Eb he was one of a party o’ eight that pulled down the chimbley; and there, sure enough, was the skeleton of poor Lommedieu.

“So there you see, boys, there can’t be no iniquity so hid but what it ‘ll come out. The wild Indians of the forest, and the stormy winds and tempests, j’ined together to bring out this’ere.”

“For my part,” said Aunt Lois sharply, “I never believed that story.”

“Why, Lois,” said my grandmother, “Cap’n Eb Sawin was a regular church-member, and a most respectable man.”

“Law, mother! I don’t doubt he thought so. I suppose he and Cack got drinking toddy together, till he got asleep, and dreamed it. I wouldn’t believe such a thing if it did happen right before my face and eyes. I should only think I was crazy, that’s all.”

“Come, Lois, if I was you, I wouldn’t talk so like a Sadducee,” said my grandmother. “What would become of all the accounts in Dr. Cotton Mather’s ‘Magnilly’ if folks were like you?”

“Wal,” said Sam Lawson, drooping contemplatively over the coals, and gazing into the fire, “there’s a putty consid’able sight o’ things in this world that’s true; and then ag’in there’s a sight o’ things that ain’t true. Now, my old gran’ther used to say, ‘Boys, says he, ‘if ye want to lead a pleasant and prosperous life, ye must contrive allers to keep jest the *happy medium* between truth and falsehood.’ Now, that are’s my doctrine.”

Aunt Lois knit severely.

“Boys,” said Sam, “don’t you want ter go down with me and get a mug o’ cider?”

Of course we did, and took down a basket to bring up some apples to roast.

“Boys,” says Sam mysteriously, while he was drawing the cider, “you jest ask your Aunt Lois to tell you what she knows ‘bout Ruth Sullivan.”

“Why, what is it?”

“Oh! you must ask *her*. These ‘ere folks that’s so kind o’ toppin’ about sperits and sich, come sift ‘em down, you gen ‘lly find they knows one story that kind o’ puzzles ‘em. Now you mind, and jist ask your Aunt Lois about Ruth Sullivan.”

THE SULLIVAN LOOKING-GLASS

“AUNT LOIS,” said I, “what was that story about Ruth Sullivan?”

Aunt Lois’s quick black eyes gave a surprised flash; and she and my grandmother looked at each other a minute significantly.

“Who told you any thing about Ruth Sullivan,” she said sharply.

“Nobody. Somebody said *you* knew something about her,” said I.

I was holding a skein of yarn for Aunt Lois; and she went on winding in silence, putting the ball through loops and tangled places.

“Little boys shouldn’t ask questions,” she concluded at last sententiously. “Little boys that ask too many questions get sent to bed.”

I knew that of old, and rather wondered at my own hardihood.

Aunt Lois wound on in silence; but, looking in her face, I could see plainly that I had started an exciting topic.

“I should think,” pursued my grandmother in her corner, “that Ruth’s case might show you, Lois, that a good many things may happen, – more than you believe.”

“Oh, well, mother! Ruth’s was a strange case; but I suppose there are ways of accounting for it.”

“You believed Ruth, didn’t you?”

“Oh, certainly, I believed Ruth! Why shouldn’t I? Ruth was one of my best friends, and as true a girl as lives: there wasn’t any nonsense about Ruth. She was one of the sort,” said Aunt Lois reflectively, “that I’d as soon trust as myself: when she said a thing was so and so, I knew it was so.”

“Then, if you think Ruth’s story was true,” pursued my grandmother, “what’s the reason you are always cavilling at things just ‘cause you can’t understand how they came to be so?”

Aunt Lois set her lips firmly, and wound with grim resolve. She was the very impersonation of that obstinate rationalism that grew up at the New-England fireside, close alongside of the most undoubting faith in the supernatural.

“I don’t believe such things,” at last she snapped out, “and I don’t disbelieve them. I just let ‘em alone. What do I know about ‘em? Ruth tells me a story; and I believe her. I know what she saw beforehand, came true in a most remarkable way. Well, I’m sure I’ve no objection. One thing may be true, or another, for all me; but, just because I believe Ruth Sullivan, I’m not going to believe, right and left, all the stories in Cotton Mather, and all that anybody can hawk up to tell. Not I.” This whole conversation made me all the more curious to get at the story thus dimly indicated; and so we beset Sam for information.

“So your Aunt Lois wouldn’t tell ye nothin’,” said Sam. “Wanter know, neow! sho!”

“No: she said we must go to bed if we asked her.”

“That ‘are’s a way folks has; but, ye see, boys,” said Sam, while a droll confidential expression crossed the lack-lustre dolefulness of his visage, “ye see, I put ye up to it, ‘cause Miss Lois is so large and commandin’ in her ways, and so kind o’ up and down in all her doin’s, that I like once and a while to sort o’ gravel her; and I knowed enough to know that that ‘are question would git her in a tight place.

“Ye see, yer Aunt Lois was knowin’ to all this ‘ere about Ruth, so there wer’n’t no gettin’ away from it; and it’s about as remarkable a providence as any o’ them of Mister Cotton Marther’s ‘Magnilly.’ So if you ‘ll come up in the barn-chamber this artemoon, where I’ve got a lot o’ flax to hatchel out, I ‘ll tell ye all about it.”

So that afternoon beheld Sam arranged at full length on a pile of top-tow in the barn-chamber, hatchelling by proxy by putting Harry and myself to the service.

“Wal, now, boys, it’s kind o’ refreshing to see how wal ye take hold,” he observed. “Nothin’ like bein’ industrious while ye’r young: gret sight better now than loafin off, down in them medders.

“In books and work and useful play
Let my fust years be past:
So shall I give for every day
Some good account at last.”

“But, Sam, if we work for you, you must tell us that story about Ruth Sullivan.”

“Lordy massy! yis, – course I will. I’ve had the best kind o’ chances of knowin’ all about that ‘are. Wal, you see there was old General Sullivan, he lived in state and grande’r in the old Sullivan house out to Roxberry. I been to Roxberry, and seen that ‘are house o’ General Sullivan’s. There was one time that I was a consid’able spell lookin’ round in Roxberry, a kind o’ seein’ how things wuz there, and whether or no there mightn’t be some sort o’ providential openin’ or suthin’. I used to stay with Aunt Polly Ginger. She was sister to Mehitable Ginger, General Sullivan’s housekeeper, and hed the in and out o’ the Sullivan house, and kind o’ kept the run o’ how things went and came in it. Polly she was a kind o’ cousin o’ my mother’s, and allers glad to see me. Fact was, I was putty handy round house; and she used to save up her broken things and sich till I come round in the fall; and then I’d mend ‘em up, and put the clock right, and split her up a lot o’ kindlings, and board up the cellar-windows, and kind o’ make her sort o’ comfortable, – she bein’ a lone body, and no man round. As I said, it was sort o’ convenient to hev me; and so I jest got the run o’ things in the Sullivan house pretty much as ef I was one on ‘em. General Sullivan he kept a grand house, I tell you. You see, he cum from the old country, and felt sort o’ lordly and grand; and they used to hev the gretest kind o’ doin’s there to the Sullivan house. Ye ought ter a seen that ‘are house, – gret big front hall and gret wide stairs; none o’ your steep kind that breaks a feller’s neck to get up and down, but gret broad stairs with easy risers, so they used to say you could a cantered a pony up that ‘are stairway easy as not. Then there was gret wide rooms, and sofys, and curtains, and gret curtained bedsteads that looked sort o’ like fortifications, and pictur’s that was got in Italy and Rome and all them ‘are heathen places. Ye see, the General was a drefful worldly old critter, and was all for the pomps and the vanities. Lordy massy! I wonder what the poor old critter thinks about it all now, when his body’s all gone to dust and ashes in the graveyard, and his soul’s gone to ‘tarnity! Wal, that are ain’t none o’ my business; only it shows the vanity o’ riches in a kind o’ strikin’ light, and makes me content that I never hed none.”

“But, Sam, I hope General Sullivan wasn’t a wicked man, *was* he?”

“Wal, I wouldn’t say he was railly wickeder than the run; but he was one o’ these ‘ere high-stepping, big-feeling fellers, that seem to be a hevin’ their portion in this life. Drefful proud he was; and he was pretty much sot on this world, and kep’ a sort o’ court goin’ on round him. Wal, I don’t jedge him nor nobody: folks that hes the world is apt to get sot on it. Don’t none on us do more than middlin’ well.”

“But, Sam, what about Ruth Sullivan?”

“Ruth? – Oh, yis! – Ruth – .

“Wal, ye see, the only crook in the old General’s lot was he didn’t hev no children. Mis’ Sullivan, she was a beautiful woman, as handsome as a pictur’; but she never had but one child; and he was a son who died when he was a baby, and about broke her heart. And then this ‘ere Ruth was her sister’s child, that was born about the same time; and, when the boy died, they took Ruth home to sort o’ fill his place, and kind o’ comfort up Mis’ Sullivan. And then Ruth’s father and mother died; and they adopted her for their own, and brought her up.

“Wal, she grew up to be amazin’ handsome. Why, everybody said that she was jest the light and glory of that ‘are old Sullivan place, and worth more’n all the pictur’s and the silver and the jewels, and all there was in the house; and she was jest so innercent and sweet, that you never see nothing to beat it. Wal, your Aunt Lois she got acquainted with Ruth one summer when she was up to Old Town a visitin’ at Parson Lothrop’s. Your Aunt Lois was a gal then, and a pretty good-lookin’ one too; and, somehow or other, she took to Ruth, and Ruth took to her. And when Ruth went home, they used

to be a writin' backwards and forads; and I guess the fact was, Ruth thought about as much of your Aunt Lois as she did o' anybody. Ye see, your aunt was a kind o' strong up-and-down woman that always knew certain jest what she did know; and Ruth, she was one o' them gals that seems sort o' like a stray lamb or a dove that's sort o' lost their way in the world, and wants some one to show 'em where to go next. For, ye see, the fact was, the old General and Madam, they didn't agree very well. He wa'n't well pleased that she didn't have no children; and she was sort o' jealous o' him 'cause she got hold o' some sort of story about how he was to a married somebody else over there in England: so she got sort o' riled up, jest as wimmen will, the best on 'em; and they was pretty apt to have spats, and one could give t'other as good as they sent; and, by all accounts, they fit putty lively sometimes. And, between the two, Ruth she was sort o' scared, and fluttered like a dove that didn't know jest where to settle. Ye see, there she was in that 'are great wide house, where they was a feastin' and a prancin' and a dancin', and a goin' on like Ahashuerus and Herodias and all them old Scriptur' days. There was a comin' and goin,' and there was gret dinners and gret doin's, but no love; and, you know, the Scriptur' says, 'Better is a dinner o' yarbs, where love is, than a stalled ox, and hatred therewith.'

"Wal, I don't orter say *hatred*, arter all. I kind o reckon, the old General did the best he could: the fact is, when a woman gits a kink in her head agin a man, the best on us don't allers do jest the right thing.

"Any way, Ruth, she was sort o' forlorn, and didn't seem to take no comfort in the goin's on. The General he was mighty fond on her, and proud on her; and there wa'n't nothin' too good for Ruth. He was free-handed, the General wuz. He dressed her up in silks and satins, and she hed a maid to wait on her, and she hed sets o' pearl and dimond; and Madam Sullivan she thought all the world on her, and kind o' worshipped the ground she trod on. And yet Ruth was sort o' lonesome.

"Ye see, Ruth wa'n't calculated for grande'r. Some folks ain't.

"Why, that 'are summer she spent out to Old Town, she was jest as chirk and chipper as a wren, a wearin' her little sun-bunnet, and goin' a huckle-berryin' and a black-berryin' and diggin' sweet-flag, and gettin cowslops and dandelions; and she hed a word for everybody. And everybody liked Ruth, and wished her well. Wal, she was sent for her health; and she got that, and more too: she got a sweetheart.

"Ye see, there was a Cap'n Oliver a visitin' at the minister's that summer, – a nice, handsome young man as ever was. He and Ruth and your Aunt Lois, they was together a good deal; and they was a ramblin' and a ridin' and a sailin': and so Ruth and the Captin went the way o' all the airth, and fell dead in love with each other. Your Aunt Lois she was knowing to it and all about it, 'cause Ruth she was jest one of them that couldn't take a step without somebody to talk to.

"Captain Oliver was of a good family in England; and so, when he made bold to ask the old General for Ruth, he didn't say him nay: and it was agreed, as they was young, they should wait a year or two. If he and she was of the same mind, he should be free to marry her. Jest right on that, the Captain's regiment was ordered home, and he had to go; and, the next they heard, it was sent off to India. And poor little Ruth she kind o' drooped and pined; but she kept true, and wouldn't have nothin' to say to nobody that came arter her, for there was lots and cords o' fellows as did come arter her. Ye see, Ruth had a takin' way with her; and then she had the name of bein' a great heiress, and that allers draws fellers, as molasses does flies.

"Wal, then the news came, that Captain Oliver was comin' home to England, and the ship was took by the Algerenes, and he was gone into slavery there among them heathen Mahomedans and what not.

"Folks seemed to think it was all over with him, and Ruth might jest as well give up fust as last. And the old General he'd come to think she might do better; and he kep' a introducin' one and another, and tryin' to marry her off; but Ruth she wouldn't. She used to write sheets and sheets to your Aunt Lois about it; and I think Aunt Lois she kep' her grit up. Your Aunt Lois she'd a stuck by a man to the end o' time ef't ben her case; and so she told Ruth.

“Wal, then there was young Jeff Sullivan, the General’s nephew, he turned up; and the General he took a gret fancy to him. He was next heir to the General; but he’d ben a pretty rackety youngster in his young days, – off to sea, and what not, and sowed a consid’able crop o’ wild oats. People said he’d been a pirating off there in South Ameriky. Lordy massy! nobody rightly knew where he hed ben or where he hadn’t: all was, he turned up at last all alive, and chipper as a skunk blackbird. Wal, of course he made his court to Ruth; and the General, he rather backed him up in it; but Ruth she wouldn’t have nothin’ to say to him. Wal, he come and took up his lodgin’ at the General’s; and he was jest as slippery as an eel, and sort o’ slid into every thing, that was a goin’ on in the house and about it. He was here, and he was there, and he was everywhere, and a havin’ his say about this and that; and he got everybody putty much under his thumb. And they used to say, he wound the General round and round like a skein o’ yarn; but he couldn’t come it round Ruth.

“Wal, the General said she shouldn’t be forced; and Jeff, he was smooth as satin, and said he’d be willing to wait as long as Jacob did for Rachel. And so there he sot down, a watchin’ as patient as a cat at a mousehole; ’cause the General he was thick-set and shortnecked, and drank pretty free, and was one o’ the sort that might pop off any time.

“Wal, Mis’ Sullivan, she beset the General to make a provision for Ruth; ’cause she told him very sensible, that he’d brought her up in luxury, and that it wa’n’t fair not to settle somethin’ on her; and so the General he said he’d make a will, and part the property equally between them. And he says to Jeff, that, if he played his part as a young fellow oughter know how, it would all come to him in the end; ’cause they hadn’t heard nothing from Captain Oliver for three or four years, and folks about settled it that he must, be dead.

“Wal, the General he got a letter about an estate that had come to him in England; and he had to go over. Wal, livin’ on the next estate, was the very cousin of the General’s that he was to a married when they was both young; the lands joined so that the grounds run together. What came between them two nobody knows; but she never married, and there she was. There was high words between the General and Madam Sullivan about his goin’ over. She said there wa’n’t no sort o’ need on’t, and he said there was; and she said she hoped *she* should be in her grave afore he come back; and he said she might suit herself about that for all him. That ‘are was the story that the housekeeper told to Aunt Polly; and Aunt Polly she told me. These ‘ere squabbles somehow allers does kind o’ leak out one way or t’other. Anyhow, it was a house divided agin itself at the General’s, when he was a fixin’ out for the voyage. There was Ruth a goin’ fust to one, and then to t’other, and tryin’ all she could to keep peace beteen ‘em; and there was this ‘ere Master Slick Tongue talkin’ this way to one side, and that way to t’other, and the old General kind o’ like a shuttle-cock atween ‘em.

“Wal, then, the night afore he sailed, the General he hed his lawyer up in his library there, a lookin’ over all his papers and bonds and things, and a witnessing his will; and Master Jeff was there, as lively as a cricket, a goin’ into all affairs, and offerin’ to take precious good care while he was gone; and the General he had his papers and letters out, a sortin’ on ‘em over, which was to be took to the old country, and which was to be put in a trunk to go back to Lawyer Dennis’s office.

“Wal, Abner Ginger, Polly’s boy, he that was footman and waiter then at the General’s, he told me, that, about eight o’clock that evening he went up with hot water and lemons and sperits and sich, and he see the gret green table in the library all strewed and covered with piles o’ papers; and there was tin boxes a standin’ round; and the General a packin’ a trunk, and young Master Jeff, as lively and helpful as a rat that smells cheese. And then the General he says, ‘Abner,’ says he, ‘can you write your name?’ – ‘I should hope so, General.’ says Abner. – ‘Wal, then, Abner,’ says he, ‘this is my last will; and I want you to witness it,’ and so Abner he put down his name opposite to a place with a wafer and a seal; and then the General, he says, ‘Abner, you tell Ginger to come here.’ That, you see, was his housekeeper, my Aunt Polly’s sister, and a likely woman as ever was. And so they had her up, and she put down her name to the will; and then Aunt Polly she was had up (she was drinking tea there that night), and she put down her name. And all of ‘em did it with good heart, ’cause it had got about

among 'em that the will was to provide for Miss Ruth; for everybody loved Ruth, ye see, and there was consid'ble many stories kind o' goin' the rounds about Master Jeff and his doin's. And they did say he sort o' kep' up the strife atween the General and my lady, and so they didn't think none too well o' him; and, as he was next o' kin, and Miss Ruth wa'n't none o' the General's blood (ye see, she was Mis' Sullivan's sister's child), of course there wouldn't nothin' go to Miss Ruth in way o' law, and so that was why the signin' o' that 'are will was so much talked about among 'em."

"Wal, you see, the General he sailed the next day; and Jeff he staid by to keep watch o' things.

"Wal, the old General he got over safe; for Miss Sullivan, she had a letter from him all right. When he got away, his conscience sort o' nagged him, and he was minded to be a good husband. At any rate, he wrote a good loving letter to her, and sent his love to Ruth, and sent over lots o' little keepsakes and things for her, and told her that he left her under good protection, and wanted her to try and make up her mind to marry Jeff, as that would keep the property together.

"Wal, now there couldn't be no sort o' sugar sweeter than Jeff was to them lone wimmen. Jeff was one o' the sort that could be all things to all wimmen. He waited and he tended, and he was as humble as any snake in the grass that ever ye see and the old lady, she clean fell in with him, but Ruth, she seemed to have a regular spite agin him. And she that war as gentle as a lamb, that never had so much as a hard thought of a mortal critter, and wouldn't tread on a worm, she was so set agin Jeff, that she wouldn't so much as touch his hand when she got out o' her kerridge.

"Wal, now comes the strange part o' my story: Ruth was one o' the kind that *hes the gift o' seein'.* *She was born with a veil over her face!*"

This mysterious piece of physiological information about Ruth was given with a look and air that announced something very profound and awful; and we both took up the inquiry, "Born with a veil over her face? How should *that* make her see?"

"Wal, boys, how should I know? But the fact *is so*. There's those as is wal known as lies the gift o' seein' what others can't see: they can see through walls and houses; they can see people's hearts; they can see what's to come. They don't know nothin' how 'tis, but this 'ere knowledge comes to 'em: it's a gret gift; and that sort's born with the veil over their faces. Ruth was o' these 'ere. Old Granny Badger she was the knowingest old nuss in all these parts; and she was with Ruth's mother when she was born, and she told Lady Lothrop all about it. Says she, 'You may depend upon it that child 'll have the "*second-sight*,"' says she. Oh, that 'are fact was wal known! Wal, that was the reason why Jeff Sullivan couldn't come it round Ruth tho' he was silkier than a milkweed-pod, and jest about as patient as a spider in his hole a watchin' to got his grip on a fly. Ruth wouldn't argue with him, and she wouldn't flout him; but she jest shut herself up in herself, and kept a lookout on him; but she told your Aunt Lois jest what she thought about him.

"Wal, in about six months, come the news that the General was dead. He dropped right down in his tracks, dead with apoplexy, as if he had been shot; and Lady Maxwell she writ a long letter to my lady and Ruth. Ye see, he'd got to be Sir Thomas Sullivan over there; and he was a comin' home to take 'em all over to England to live in grande'r. Wal, my Lady Sullivan (she was then, ye see) she took it drefful hard. Ef they'd a been the lovingest couple in the world, she couldn't a took it harder. Aunt Polly, she said it was all 'cause she thought so much of him, that she fit him so. There's women that thinks so much o' their husbands, that they won't let 'em hev no peace o' their life; and I expect it war so with her poor soul! Any way, she went right down smack when she heard he was dead. She was abed, sick, when the news come; and she never spoke nor smiled, jest turned her back to everybody, and kinder wilted and wilted, and was dead in a week. And there was poor little Ruth left all alone in the world, with neither kith nor kin but Jeff.

"Wal, when the funeral was over, and the time app'nted to read the will and settle up matters, there wa'n't no will to be found nowhere, high nor low.

"Lawyer Dean he flew round like a parched pea on a shovel. He said he thought he could a gone in the darkest night, and put his hand on that 'ere will; but when he went where he thought it was, he

found it warn't there, and he knowed he'd kep' it under lock and key. What he thought was the will turned out to be an old mortgage. Wal, there was an awful row and a to-do about it, you may be sure. Ruth, she jist said nothin' good or bad. And her not speakin' made Jeff a sight more uncomfortable than ef she'd a hed it out with him. He told her it shouldn't make no sort o' difference; that he should allers stand ready to give her all he hed, if she'd only take him with it. And when it came to that she only gin him a look, and went out o' the room.

“Jeff he flared and flounced and talked, and went round and round a rumpussin' among the papers, but no will was forthcoming high or low. Wal, now here comes what's remarkable. Ruth she told this 'ere, all the particulars, to yer Aunt Lois and Lady Lothrop. She said that the night after the funeral she went up to her chamber. Ruth had the gret front chamber, opposite to Mis' Sullivan's. I've been in it; it was a monstrous big room, with outlandish furniture in it, that the General brought over from an old palace out to Italy. And there was a great big lookin'-glass over the dressin'-table, that they said come from Venice, that swung so that you could see the whole room in it. Wal, she was a standin' front o' this, jist goin' to undress herself, a hearin' the rain drip on the leaves and the wind a whishin' and whisperin' in the old elm-trees, and jist a thinkin' over her lot, and what should she do now, all alone in the world, when of a sudden she felt a kind o' lightness in her head, and she thought she seemed to see somebody in the glass a movin'. And she looked behind, and there wa'n't nobody there. Then she looked forward in the glass, and saw a strange big room, that she'd never seen before, with a long painted winder in it; and along side o' this stood a tall cabinet with a good many drawers in it. And she saw herself, and knew that it was herself, in this room, along with another woman whose back was turned towards her. She saw herself speak to this woman, and p'int to the cabinet. She saw the woman nod her head. She saw herself go to the cabinet, and open the middle drawer, and take out a bundle o' papers from the very back end on't. She saw her take out a paper from the middle, and open it, and hold it up; and she knew that there was the missin' will. Wal, it all overcome her so that she fainted clean away. And her maid found her a lyin' front o' the dressin'-table on the floor.

“She was sick of a fever for a week or fortnight a'ter; and your Aunt Lois she was down takin' care of her; and, as soon as she got able to be moved, she was took out to Lady Lothrop's. Jeff he was jist as attentive and good as he could be; but she wouldn't bear him near her room. If he so much as set a foot on the stairs that led to it she'd know it, and got so wild that he hed to be kept from comin' into the front o' the house. But he was doin' his best to buy up good words from everybody. He paid all the servants double; he kept every one in their places, and did so well by 'em all that the gen'l word among 'em was that Miss Ruth couldn't do better than to marry such a nice, open-handed gentleman.

“Wal, Lady Lothrop she wrote to Lady Maxwell all that hed happened; and Lady Maxwell, she sent over for Ruth to come over and be a companion for her, and said she'd adopt her, and be as a mother to her.

“Wal, then Ruth she went over with some gentlefolks that was goin' back to England, and offered to see her safe and sound; and so she was set down at Lady Maxwell's manor. It was a grand place, she said, and such as she never see before, – like them old gentry places in England. And Lady Maxwell she made much of her, and cosseted her up for the sake of what the old General had said about her. And Ruth she told her all her story, and how she believed that the will was to be found somewhere, and that she should be led to see it yet.

“She told her, too, that she felt it in her that Cap'n Oliver wasn't dead, and that he'd come back yet. And Lady Maxwell she took up for her with might and main, and said she'd stand by her. But then, ye see, so long as there warn't no will to be found, there warn't nothin' to be done. Jeff was the next heir; and he'd got every thing, stock, and lot, and the estate in England into the bargain. And folks was beginnin' to think putty well of him, as folks allers does when a body is up in the world, and hes houses and lands. Lordy massy! riches allers covers a multitude o' sins.

“Finally, when Ruth hed ben six months with her, one day Lady Maxwell got to tellin' her all about her history, and what hed ben atween her and her cousin, when they was young, and how

they hed a quarrel and he flung off to Ameriky, and all them things that it don't do folks no good to remember when it's all over and can't be helped. But she was a lone body, and it seemed to do her good to talk about it.

"Finally, she says to Ruth, says she, 'I 'll show you a room in this house you han't seen before. It was the room where we hed that quarrel,' says she; 'and the last I saw of him was there, till he come back to die,' says she.

"So she took a gret key out of her bunch; and she led Ruth along a long passage-way to the other end of the house, and opened on a great library. And the minute Ruth came in, she threw up her hands and gin a great cry. 'Oh!' says she, 'this is the room! and there is the window! and there is the cabinet I and *there in that middle drawer at the back end in a bundle of papers is the will!*

"And Lady Maxwell she said, quite dazed, 'Go look,' says she. And Ruth went, jest as she seed herself do, and opened the drawer, and drew forth from the back part a yellow pile of old letters. And in the middle of those was the will, sure enough. Ruth drew it out, and opened it, and showed it to her.

"Wal, you see that will give Ruth the whole of the General's property in America, tho' it did leave the English estate to Jeff.

"Wal, the end on't was like a story-book.

"Jeff he made believe be mighty glad. And he said it must a ben that the General hed got flustered with the sperit and water, and put that 'ere will in among his letters that he was a doin' up to take back to England. For it was in among Lady Maxwell's letters that she writ him when they was young, and that he'd a kep' all these years and was a takin' back to her.

"Wal, Lawyer Dean said he was sure that Jeff made himself quite busy and useful that night, a tyin' up the papers with red tape, and a packin' the Gin-eral's trunk; and that, when Jeff gin him his bundle to lock up in his box, he never mistrusted but what he'd got it all right.

"Wal, you see it was jest one of them things that can't be known to the jedgment-day. It might a ben an accident, and then agin it might not; and folks settled it one way or t'other, 'cordin' to their 'pinion o' Jeff; but ye see how 'mazin' handy for him it happened! Why, ef it hadn't ben for the providence I've ben a tellin' about, there it might a lain in them old letters, that Lady Maxwell said she never hed the heart to look over! it never would a turned up in the world."

"Well," said I, "what became of Ruth?"

"Oh! Cap'n Oliver he came back all alive, and escaped from the Algerines; and they was married in King's Chapel, and lived in the old Sullivan House, in peace and prosperity. That's jest how the story was; and now Aunt Lois can make what she's a mind ter out on't."

"And what became of Jeff?"

"Oh! he started to go over to England, and the ship was wrecked off the Irish coast, and that was the last of him. He never got to his property."

"Good enough for him," said both of us.

"Wal, I don't know: 'twas pretty hard on Jeff. Mebbe he did, and mebbe he didn't. I'm glad I warn't in his shoes, tho' I'd rather never hed nothin'. This 'ere hastin' to be rich is sich a drefful temptation.

"Wal, now, boys, ye've done a nice lot o' flax, and I guess we 'll go up to yer grand'ther's cellar and git a mug o' cyder. Talkin' always gits me dry."

THE MINISTER'S HOUSEKEEPER

Scene. – The shady side of a blueberry-pasture. – Sam Lawson with the boys, picking blueberries. – Sam, loq.

“WAL, you see, boys, ’twas just here, – Parson Carryl’s wife, she died along in the forepart o’ March: my cousin Huldy, she undertook to keep house for him. The way on’t was, that Huldy, she went to take care o’ Mis’ Carryl in the fust on’t, when she fust took sick. Huldy was a tailoress by trade; but then she was one o’ these ‘ere facultised persons that has a gift for most any thing, and that was how Mis’ Carryl come to set sech store by her, that, when she was sick, nothin’ would do for her but she must have Huldy round all the time: and the minister, he said he’d make it good to her all the same, and she shouldn’t lose nothin’ by it. And so Huldy, she staid with Mis’ Carryl full three months afore she died, and got to seein’ to every thing pretty much round the place.

“Wal, arter Mis’ Carryl died, Parson Carryl, he’d got so kind o’ used to hevin’ on her ‘round, takin’ care o’ things, that he wanted her to stay along a spell; and so Huldy, she staid along a spell, and poured out his tea, and mended his close, and made pies and cakes, and cooked and washed and ironed, and kep’ every thing as neat as a pin. Huldy was a drefful chipper sort o’ gal; and work sort o’ rolled off from her like water off a duck’s back. There warn’t no gal in Sherburne that could put sich a sight o’ work through as Huldy; and yet, Sunday mornin’, she always come out in the singers’ seat like one o’ these ‘ere June roses, lookin’ so fresh and smilin’, and her voice was jest as clear and sweet as a meadow lark’s – Lordy massy! I ‘member how she used to sing some o’ them ‘are places where the treble and counter used to go together: her voice kind o’ trembled a little, and it sort o’ went thro’ and thro’ a feller! tuck him right where he lived!”

Here Sam leaned contemplatively back with his head in a clump of sweet fern, and refreshed himself with a chew of young wintergreen. “This’ere young wintergreen, boys, is jest like a feller’s thoughts o’ things that happened when he was young: it comes up jest so fresh and tender every year, the longest time you hev to live; and you can’t help chawin’ on’t tho’ ‘tis sort o’ stingin’. I don’t never get over likin’ young wintergreen.”

“But about Huldah, Sam?”

“Oh, yes! about Huldy. Lordy massy! when a feller is Indianin’ round, these ‘ere pleasant summer days, a feller’s thoughts gits like a flock o’ young partridges: they’s up and down and everywhere; ‘cause one place is jest about as good as another, when they’s all so kind o’ comfortable and nice. Wal, about Huldy, – as I was a sayin’. She was jest as handsome a gal to look at as a feller could have; and I think a nice, well-behaved young gal in the singers’ seat of a Sunday is a means o’ grace: it’s sort o’ drawin’ to the unregenerate, you know.

“Why, boys, in them days, I’ve walked ten miles over to Sherburne of a Sunday mornin’, jest to play the bass-viol in the same singers’ seat with Huldy. She was very much respected, Huldy was; and, when she went out to tailorin’, she was allers bespoke six months ahead, and sent for in waggins up and down for ten miles round; for the young fellers was allers ‘mazin’ anxious to be sent after Huldy, and was quite free to offer to go for her. Wal, after Mis’ Carryl died, Huldy got to be sort o’ housekeeper at the minister’s, and saw to every thing, and did every thing: so that there warn’t a pin out o’ the way.

“But you know how ‘tis in parishes: there allers is women that thinks the minister’s affairs belongs to them, and they ought to have the rulin’ and guidin’ of ‘em; and, if a minister’s wife dies, there’s folks that allers has their eyes open on providences, – lookin’ out who’s to be the next one.

“Now, there was Mis’ Amaziah Pipperidge, a widder with snappin’ black eyes, and a hook nose, – kind o’ like a hawk; and she was one o’ them up-and-down commandin’ sort o’ women, that feel that they have a call to be seein’ to every thing that goes on in the parish, and ‘specially to the minister.

“Folks did say that Mis’ Pipperidge sort o’ sot her eye on the parson for herself: wal, now that ‘are might a been, or it might not. Some folks thought it was a very suitable connection. You see she

hed a good property of her own, right nigh to the minister's lot, and was allers kind o' active and busy; so, takin' one thing with another, I shouldn't wonder if Mis' Pipperidge should a thought that Providence p'inted that way. At any rate, she went up to Deakin Blodgett's wife, and they two sort o' put their heads together a mournin' and condolin' about the way. things was likely to go on at the minister's now Mis' Carryl was dead. Ye see, the parson's wife, she was one of them women who hed their eyes everywhere and on every thing. She was a little thin woman, but tough as Inger rubber, and smart as a steel trap; and there warn't a hen laid an egg, or cackled, but Mis' Carryl was right there to see about it; and she hed the garden made in the spring, and the medders mowed in summer, and the cider made, and the corn husked, and the apples got in the fall; and the doctor, he hedn't nothin' to do but jest sit stock still a mediatin' on Jerusalem and Jericho and them things that ministers think about. But Lordy massy! he didn't know nothin' about where any thing he eat or drunk or wore come from or went to: his wife jest led him 'round in temporal things and took care on him like a baby.

"Wal, to be sure, Mis' Carryl looked up to him in spirituals, and thought all the world on him; for there warn't a smarter minister no where 'round. Why, when he preached on decrees and election, they used to come clear over from South Parish, and West Sherburne, and Old Town to hear him; and there was sich a row o' waggins tied along by the meetin'-house that the stables was all full, and all the hitchin'-posts was full clean up to the tavern, so that folks said the doctor made the town look like a ginerall trainin'-day a Sunday.

"He was gret on texts, the doctor was. When he hed a p'int to prove, he'd jest go thro' the Bible, and drive all the texts ahead o' him like a flock o' sheep; and then, if there was a text that seemed gin him, why, he'd come out with his Greek and Hebrew, and kind o' chase it 'round a spell, jest as ye see a fellar chase a contrary bell-wether, and make him jump the fence arter the rest. I tell you, there wa'n't no text in the Bible that could stand agin the doctor when his blood was up. The year arter the doctor was app'inted to preach the 'lection sermon in Boston, he made such a figger that the Brattlestreet Church sent a committee right down to see if they couldn't get him to Boston; and then the Sherburne folks, they up and raised his salary; ye see, there ain't nothin' wakes folks up like somebody else's wantin' what you've got. Wal, that fall they made him a Doctor o' Divinity at Cambridge College, and so they sot more by him than ever. Wal, you see, the doctor, of course he felt kind o' lonesome and afflicted when Mis' Carryl was gone; but raily and truly, Huldy was so up to every thing about house, that the doctor didn't miss nothin' in a temporal way. His shirt-bosoms was pleated finer than they ever was, and them ruffles 'round his wrists was kep' like the driven snow; and there warn't a brack in his silk stockin's, and his shoe buckles was kep' polished up, and his coats brushed; and then there warn't no bread and biscuit like Huldy's; and her butter was like solid lumps o' gold; and there wern't no pies to equal hers; and so the doctor never felt the loss o' Miss Carryl at table. Then there was Huldy allers oppisite to him, with her blue eyes and her cheeks like two fresh peaches. She was kind o' pleasant to look at; and the more the doctor looked at her the better he liked her; and so things seemed to be goin' on quite quiet and comfortable ef it hadn't been that Mis' Pipperidge and Mis' Deakin Blodgett and Mis' Sawin got their heads together a talkin' about things.

"'Poor man,' says Mis' Pipperidge, 'what can that child that he's got there do towards takin' the care of all that place? It takes a mature woman,' she says, 'to tread in Mis' Carryl's shoes.'

"'That it does,' said Mis' Blodgett; 'and, when things once get to runnin' down hill, there ain't no stoppin' on 'em,' says she.

"Then Mis' Sawin she took it up. (Ye see, Mis' Sawin used to go out to dress-makin', and was sort o' jealous, 'cause folks sot more by Huldy than they did by her). 'Well,' says she, 'Huldy Peters is well enough at her trade. I never denied that, though I do say I never did believe in her way o' makin' button-holes; and I must say, if 'twas the dearest friend I hed, that I thought Huldy tryin' to fit Mis' Kittridge's plumb-colored silk was a clear piece o' presumption; the silk was jist spiled, so 'twarn't fit to come into the meetin'-house. I must say, Huldy's a gal that's always too ventersome about takin' 'spon-sibilities she don't know nothin' about.'

“Of course she don’t,” said Mis’ Deakin Blodgett. ‘What does she know about all the lookin’ and see-in’ to that there ought to be in guidin’ the minister’s house. Huldy’s well meanin’, and she’s good at her work, and good in the singers’ seat; but Lordy massy I she hain’t got no experience. Parson Carryl ought to have an experienced woman to keep house for him. There’s the spring house-cleanin’ and the fall house-cleanin’ to be seen to, and the things to be put away from the moths; and then the gettin’ ready for the association and all the ministers’ meetin’s; and the makin’ the soap and the candles, and settin’ the hens and turkeys, watchin’ the calves, and seein’ after the ‘hired men and the garden; and there that ‘are blessed man jist sets there at home as serene, and has nobody ‘round but that ‘are gal, and don’t even know how things must be a runnin’ to waste!’

“Wal, the upshot on’t was, they fussed and fuzzled and wuzzled till they’d dranked up all the tea in the teapot; and then they went down and called on the parson, and wuzzled him all up talkin’ about this, that, and t’other that wanted lookin’ to, and that it was no way to leave every thing to a young chit like Huldy, and that he ought to be lookin’ about for an experienced woman. The parson he thanked ‘em kindly, and said he believed their motives was good, but he didn’t go no further. He didn’t ask Mis’ Pipperridge to come and stay there and help him, nor nothin’ o’ that kind; but he said he’d attend to matters himself. The fact was, the parson had got such a likin’ for havin’ Huldy ‘round, that he couldn’t think o’ such a thing as swappin’ her off for the Widder Pipperridge.

“But he thought to himself, ‘Huldy is a good girl; but I oughtn’t to be a leavin’ every thing to her, – it’s too hard on her. I ought to be instructin’ and guidin’ and helpin’ of her; ‘cause ‘tain’t everybody could be expected to know and do what Mis’ Carryl did;’ and so at it he went; and Lordy massy! didn’t Huldy hev a time on’t when the minister began to come out of his study, and want to tew ‘round and see to things? Huldy, you see, thought all the world of the minister, and she was ‘most afraid to laugh; but she told me she couldn’t, for the life of her, help it when his back was turned, for he wuzzled things up in the most singular way. But Huldy she’d jest say ‘Yes, sir,’ and get him off into his study, and go on her own way.

“Huldy,’ says the minister one day, ‘you ain’t experienced out doors; and, when you want to know any thing, you must come to me.’

“Yes, sir,’ says Huldy.

“Now, Huldy,’ says the parson,’ you must be sure to save the turkey-eggs, so that we can have a lot of turkeys for Thanksgiving.’

“Yes, sir,’ says Huldy; and she opened the pantry-door, and showed him a nice dishful she’d been a savin’ up. Wal, the very next day the parson’s hen-turkey was found killed up to old Jim Scroggs’s barn. Folks said Scroggs killed it; though Scroggs, he stood to it he didn’t: at any rate, the Scroggses, they made a meal on’t; and Huldy, she felt bad about it ‘cause she’d set her heart on raisin’ the turkeys; and says she, ‘Oh, dear! I don’t know what I shall do. I was just ready to set her.’

“Do, Huldy?’ says the parson: ‘why, there’s the other turkey, out there by the door; and a fine bird, too, he is.’

“Sure enough, there was the old tom-turkey a struttin’ and a sidlin’ and a quitterin,’ and a floutin’ his tail-feathers in the sun, like a lively young widower, all ready to begin life over agin.

“But,’ says Huldy, ‘you know *he* can’t set on eggs.’

“He can’t? I’d like to know why,’ says the parson. ‘He *shall* set on eggs, and hatch ‘em too.’

“O doctor!’ says Huldy, all in a tremble; ‘cause, you know, she didn’t want to contradict the minister, and she was afraid she should laugh, – ‘I never heard that a tom-turkey would set on eggs.’

“Why, they ought to,’ said the parson, getting quite ‘arnest: ‘what else be they good for? you just bring out the eggs, now, and put ‘em in the nest, and I ‘ll make him set on ‘em.’

“So Huldy she thought there wern’t no way to convince him but to let him try: so she took the eggs out, and fixed ‘em all nice in the nest; and then she come back and found old Tom a skirmishin’ with the parson pretty lively, I tell ye. Ye see, old Tom he didn’t take the idee at all; and he flopped and gobbled, and fit the parson; and the parson’s wig got ‘round so that his cue stuck straight out over

his ear, but he'd got his blood up. Ye see, the old doctor was used to carryin' his p'int's o' doctrine; and he hadn't fit the Arminians and Socinians to be beat by a tom-turkey; so finally he made a dive, and ketched him by the neck in spite o' his floppin', and stroked him down, and put Huldy's apron 'round him.

“There, Huldy,” he says, quite red in the face, ‘we’ve got him now;’ and he travelled off to the barn with him as lively as a cricket.

“Huldy came behind jist chokin’ with laugh, and afraid the minister would look ‘round and see her.

“Now, Huldy, we ‘ll crook his legs, and set him down,’ says the parson, when they got him to the nest: ‘you see he is getting quiet, and he ‘ll set there all right.’

“And the parson, he sot him down; and old Tom he sot there solemn enough, and held his head down all droopin’, lookin’ like a rail pious old cock, as long as the parson sot by him.

“There: you see how still he sets,’ says the parson to Huldy.

“Huldy was ‘most dyin’ for fear she should laugh, ‘I’m afraid he ‘ll get up,’ says she, ‘when you do.’

“Oh, no, he won’t!’ says the parson, quite confident. ‘There, there,’ says he, layin’ his hands on him, as if pronouncin’ a blessin’. But when the parson riz up, old Tom he riz up too, and began to march over the eggs.

“Stop, now!’ says the parson. ‘I ‘ll make him get down agin: hand me that corn-basket; we ‘ll put that over him.’

“So he crooked old Tom’s legs, and got him down agin; and they put the corn-basket over him, and then they both stood and waited.

“That ‘ll do the thing, Huldy,’ said the parson.

“I don’t know about it,’ says Huldy.

“Oh, yes, it will, child! I understand,’ says he.

“Just as he spoke, the basket riz right up and stood, and they could see old Tom’s long legs.

“I ‘ll make him stay down, confound him,’ says the parson; for, ye see, parsons is men, like the rest on us, and the doctor had got his spunk up.

“You jist hold him a minute, and I ‘ll get something that ‘ll make him stay, I guess;’ and out he went to the fence, and brought in a long, thin, flat stone, and laid it on old Tom’s back.

“Old Tom he wilted down considerable under this, and looked raily as if he was goin’ to give in. He staid still there a good long spell, and the minister and Huldy left him there and come up to the house; but they hadn’t more than got in the door before they see old Tom a hippin’ along, as high-steppin’ as ever, say in’ ‘Talk! talk! and quitter! quitter!’ and struttin’ and gobblin’ as if he’d come through the Red Sea, and got the victory.

“Oh, my eggs!’ says Huldy. ‘I’m afraid he’s smashed ‘em!’

“And sure enough, there they was, smashed flat enough under the stone.

“I ‘ll have him killed,’ said the parson: ‘we won’t have such a critter ‘round.’

“But the parson, he slep’ on’t, and then didn’t do it: he only come out next Sunday with a tip-top sermon on the “Riginal Cuss” that was pronounced on things in ginerall, when Adam fell, and showed how every thing was allowed to go contrary ever since. There was pig-weed, and pusley, and Canady thistles, cut-worms, and bag-worms, and canker-worms, to say nothin’ of rattlesnakes. The doctor made it very impressive and sort o’ improvin’; but Huldy, she told me, goin’ home, that she hardly could keep from laughin’ two or three times in the sermon when she thought of old Tom a standin’ up with the corn-basket on his back.

“Wal, next week Huldy she jist borrowed the minister’s horse and side-saddle, and rode over to South Parish to her Aunt Bascome’s, – Widder Bascome’s, you know, that lives there by the trout-brook, – and got a lot o’ turkey-eggs o’ her, and come back and set a hen on ‘em, and said nothin’; and in good time there was as nice a lot o’ turkey-chicks as ever ye see.

“Huldy never said a word to the minister about his experiment, and he never said a word to her; but he sort o’ kep’ more to his books, and didn’t take it on him to advise so much.

“But not long arter he took it into his head that Huldy ought to have a pig to be a fattin’ with the buttermilk. Mis’ Pipperidge set him up to it; and jist then old Tim Bigelow, out to Juniper Hill, told him if he’d call over he’d give him a little pig.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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