

WIGGIN KATE SMITH

THE VILLAGE
WATCH-TOWER

Kate Wiggin

The Village Watch-Tower

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Kate Douglas Wiggin

The Village Watch-Tower

THE VILLAGE WATCH-TOWER

Dear old apple-tree, under whose gnarled branches these stories were written, to you I dedicate the book. My head was so close to you, who can tell from whence the thoughts came? I only know that when all the other trees in the orchard were barren, there were always stories to be found under your branches, and so it is our joint book, dear apple-tree. Your pink blossoms have fallen on the page as I wrote; your ruddy fruit has dropped into my lap; the sunshine streamed through your leaves and tipped my pencil with gold. The birds singing in your boughs may have lent a sweet note here and there; and do you remember the day when the gentle shower came? We just curled the closer, and you and I and the sky all cried together while we wrote "The Fore-Room Rug."

It should be a lovely book, dear apple-tree, but alas! it is not altogether that, because I am not so simple as you, and because I have strayed farther away from the heart of Mother Nature.

KATE DOUGLAS WIGGIN

"Quillcote," Hollis, Maine, August 12, 1895.

THE VILLAGE WATCH-TOWER

It stood on the gentle slope of a hill, the old gray house, with its weather-beaten clapboards and its roof of ragged shingles. It was in the very lap of the road, so that the stage-driver could almost knock on the window pane without getting down from his seat, on those rare occasions when he brought “old Mis’ Bascom” a parcel from Saco.

Humble and dilapidated as it was, it was almost beautiful in the springtime, when the dandelion-dotted turf grew close to the great stone steps; or in the summer, when the famous Bascom elm cast its graceful shadow over the front door. The elm, indeed, was the only object that ever did cast its shadow there. Lucinda Bascom said her “front door ‘n’ entry never hed ben used except for fun’rals, ‘n’ she was goin’ to keep it nice for that purpose, ‘n’ not get it all tracked up.”

She was sitting now where she had sat for thirty years. Her high-backed rocker, with its cushion of copperplate patch and its crocheted tidy, stood always by a southern window that looked out on the river. The river was a sheet of crystal, as it poured over the dam; a rushing, roaring torrent of foaming white, as it swept under the bridge and fought its way between the rocky cliffs beyond, sweeping swirling, eddying, in its narrow channel, pulsing restlessly into the ragged fissures of its shores, and leaping with a tempestuous roar into the Witches’ Eel-pot, a deep wooded gorge cleft in the very heart of the granite bank.

But Lucinda Bascom could see more than the river from her favorite window. It was a much-traveled road, the road that ran past the house on its way from Liberty Village to Milliken’s Mills. A tottering old sign-board, on a verdant triangle of turf, directed you over Deacon Chute’s hill to the “Flag Medder Road,” and from thence to Liberty Centre; the little post-office and store, where the stage stopped twice a day, was quite within eyeshot; so were the public watering-trough, Brigadier Hill, and, behind the ruins of an old mill, the wooded path that led to the Witches’ Eel-pot, a favorite walk for village lovers. This was all on her side of the river. As for the bridge which knit together the two tiny villages, nobody could pass over that without being seen from the Bascoms’. The rumble of wheels generally brought a family party to the window,—Jot Bascom’s wife (she that was Diadema Dennett), Jot himself, if he were in the house, little Jot, and grandpa Bascom, who looked at the passers-by with a vacant smile parting his thin lips. Old Mrs. Bascom herself did not need the rumble of wheels to tell her that a vehicle was coming, for she could see it fully ten minutes before it reached the bridge,—at the very moment it appeared at the crest of Saco Hill, where strangers pulled up their horses, on a clear day, and paused to look at Mount Washington, miles away in the distance. Tory Hill and Saco Hill met at the bridge, and just there, too, the river road began its shady course along the east side of the stream: in view of all which “old Mis’ Bascom’s settin’-room winder” might well be called the “Village Watch-Tower,” when you consider further that she had moved only from her high-backed rocker to her bed, and from her bed to her rocker, for more than thirty years,—ever since that july day when her husband had had a sun-stroke while painting the meeting-house steeple, and her baby Jonathan had been thereby hastened into a world not in the least ready to receive him.

She could not have lived without that window, she would have told you, nor without the river, which had lulled her to sleep ever since she could remember. It was in the south chamber upstairs that she had been born. Her mother had lain there and listened to the swirl of the water, in that year when the river was higher than the oldest inhabitant had ever seen it,—the year when the covered bridge at the Mills had been carried away, and when the one at the Falls was in hourly danger of succumbing to the force of the freshet.

All the men in both villages were working on the river, strengthening the dam, bracing the bridge, and breaking the jams of logs; and with the parting of the boom, the snapping of the bridge timbers, the crashing of the logs against the rocks, and the shouts of the river-drivers, the little Lucinda had come into the world. Some one had gone for the father, and had found him on the river, where

he had been since day-break, drenched with the storm, blown fro his dangerous footing time after time, but still battling with the great heaped-up masses of logs, wrenching them from one another's grasp, and sending them down the swollen stream.

Finally the jam broke; and a cheer of triumph burst from the excited men, as the logs, freed from their bondage, swept down the raging flood, on and ever on in joyous liberty, faster and faster, till they encountered some new obstacle, when they heaped themselves together again, like puppets of Fate, and were beaten by the waves into another helpless surrender.

With the breaking of the jam, one dead monarch of the forest leaped into the air as if it had been shot from a cannon's mouth, and lodged between two jutting peaks of rock high on the river bank. Presently another log was dashed against it, but rolled off and hurried down the stream; then another, and still another; but no force seemed enough to drive the giant from its intrenched position.

"Hurry on down to the next jam, Raish, and let it alone," cried the men. "Mebbe it'll git washed off in the night, and anyhow you can't budge it with no kind of a tool we've got here."

Then from the shore came a boy's voice calling, "There's a baby up to your house!" And the men repeated in stentorian tones, "Baby up to your house, Raish! Leggo the log; you're wanted!"

"Boy or girl?" shouted the young father.

"Girl!" came back the answer above the roar of the river.

Whereupon Raish Dunnell steadied himself with his pick and taking a hatchet from his belt, cut a rude letter "L" on the side of the stranded log.

"L's for Lucindy," he laughed. "Now you log if you git's fur as Saco, drop in to my wife's folks and tell 'em the baby's name."

There had not been such a freshet for years before, and there had never been one since; so, as the quiet seasons went by, "Lucindy's log" was left in peace, the columbines blooming all about it, the harebells hanging their heads of delicate blue among the rocks that held it in place, the birds building their nests in the knot-holes of its withered side.

Seventy years had passed, and on each birthday, from the time when she was only "Raish Dunnell's little Lou," to the years when she was Lucinda Bascom, wife and mother, she had wandered down by the river side, and gazed, a little superstitiously perhaps, on the log that had been marked with an "L" on the morning she was born. It had stood the wear and tear of the elements bravely, but now it was beginning, like Lucinda, to show its age. Its back was bent, like hers; its face was seamed and wrinkled, like her own; and the village lovers who looked at it from the opposite bank wondered if, after all, it would hold out as long as "old Mis' Bascom."

She held out bravely, old Mrs. Bascom, though she was "all skin, bones, and tongue," as the neighbors said; for nobody needed to go into the Bascoms' to brighten up aunt Lucinda a bit, or take her the news; one went in to get a bit of brightness, and to hear the news.

"I should get lonesome, I s'pose," she was wont to say, "if it wa'n't for the way this house is set, and this chair, and this winder, 'n' all. Men folks used to build some o' the houses up in a lane, or turn 'em back or side to the road, so the women folks couldn't see anythin' to keep their minds off their churnin' or dish-washin'; but Aaron Dunnell hed somethin' else to think about, 'n' that was himself, first, last, and all the time. His store was down to bottom of the hill, 'n' when he come up to his meals, he used to set where he could see the door; 'n' if any cust'mer come, he could call to 'em to wait a spell till he got through eatin'. Land! I can hear him now, yellin' to 'em, with his mouth full of victuals! They hed to wait till he got good 'n' ready, too. There wa'n't so much comp'tition in business then as there is now, or he'd 'a' hed to give up eatin' or hire a clerk. ... I've always felt to be thankful that the house was on this rise o' ground. The teams hev to slow up on 'count o' the hill, 'n' it gives me consid'ble chance to see folks 'n' what they've got in the back of the wagon, 'n' one thing 'n' other. ... The neighbors is continually comin' in here to talk about things that's goin' on in the village. I like to hear 'em, but land! they can't tell me nothing'! They often say, 'For massy sakes, Lucindy Bascom, how d' you know that?' 'Why,' says I to them, 'I don't ask no questions, 'n'

folks don't tell me no lies; I just set in my winder, 'n' put two 'n' two together,—that's all I do.' I ain't never ben in a playhouse, but I don't suppose the play-actors git down off the platform on t' the main floor to explain to the folks what they've ben doin', do they? I expect, if folks can't understand their draymas when the're actin' of 'em out, they have to go ignorant, don't they? Well, what do I want with explainin', when everythin' is acted out right in the road?"

There was quite a gathering of neighbors at the Bascoms' on this particular July afternoon. No invitations had been sent out, and none were needed. A common excitement had made it vital that people should drop in somewhere, and speculate about certain interesting matters well known to be going on in the community, but going on in such an underhand and secretive fashion that it well-nigh destroyed one's faith in human nature.

The sitting-room door was open into the entry, so that whatever breeze there was might come in, and an unusual glimpse of the new forerom rug was afforded the spectators. Everything was as neat as wax, for Diadema was a housekeeper of the type fast passing away. The great coal stove was enveloped in its usual summer wrapper of purple calico, which, tied neatly about its ebony neck and portly waist, gave it the appearance of a buxom colored lady presiding over the assembly. The kerosene lamps stood in a row on the high, narrow mantelpiece, each chimney protected from the flies by a brown paper bag inverted over its head. Two plaster Samuels praying under the pink mosquito netting adorned the ends of the shelf. There were screens at all the windows, and Diadema fidgeted nervously when a visitor came in the mosquito netting door, for fear a fly should sneak in with her.

On the wall were certificates of membership in the Missionary Society; a picture of Maidens welcoming Washington in the Streets of Alexandria, in a frame of cucumber seeds; and an interesting document setting forth the claims of the Dunnell family as old settlers long before the separation of Maine from Massachusetts,—the fact bein' established by an obituary notice reading, "In Saco, December 1791, Dorcas, daughter of Abiathar Dunnell, two months old of Fits unbaptized."

"He may be goin' to marry Eunice, and he may not," observed Almira Berry; "though what she wants of Reuben Hobson is more 'n I can make out. I never see a widower straighten up as he has this last year. I guess he's been lookin' round pretty lively, but couldn't find anybody that was fool enough to give him any encouragement."

"Mebbe she wants to get married," said Hannah Sophia, in a tone that spoke volumes. "When Parson Perkins come to this parish, one of his first calls was on Eunice Emery. He always talked like the book o' Revelation; so says he, 'have you got your weddin' garment on, Miss Emery?' says he. 'No,' says she, 'but I ben tryin' to these twenty years.' She was always full of her jokes, Eunice was!"

"The Emerys was always a humorous family," remarked Diadema, as she annihilated a fly with a newspaper. "Old Silas Emery was an awful humorous man. He used to live up on the island; and there come a freshet one year, and he said he got his sofy 'n' chairs off, anyhow!" That was just his jokin'. He hadn't a sign of a sofy in the house; 't was his wife Sophy he meant, she that was Sophy Swett. Then another time, when I was a little mite of a thin runnin' in 'n' out o' his yard, he caught holt o' me, and says he, 'You'd better take care, sissy; when I kill you and two more, thet'll be three children I've killed!' Land! you couldn't drag me inside that yard for years afterwards. ... There! she's got a fire in the cook-stove; there's a stream o' smoke comin' out o' the kitchen chimbley. I'm willin' to bet my new rug she's goin' to be married tonight!"

"Mebbe she's makin' jell'," suggested Hannah Sophia.

"Jell'!" ejaculated Mrs. Jot scornfully. "Do you s'pose Eunice Emery would build up a fire in the middle o' the afternoon 'n' go to makin' a jell', this hot day? Besides, there ain't a currant gone into her house this week, as I happen to know."

"It's a dretful thick year for fol'age," mumbled grandpa Bascom, appearing in the door with his vacant smile. "I declare some o' the maples looks like balls in the air."

“That’s the twentieth time he’s hed that over since mornin’,” said Diadema. “Here, father, take your hat off ‘n’ set in the kitchen door ‘n’ shell me this mess o’ peas. Now think smart, ‘n’ put the pods in the basket ‘n’ the peas in the pan; don’t you mix ‘em.”

The old man hung his hat on the back of the chair, took the pan in his trembling hands, and began aimlessly to open the pods, while he chuckled at the hens that gathered round the doorstep when they heard the peas rattling in the pan.

“Reuben needs a wife bad enough, if that’s all,” remarked the Widow Buzzell, as one who had given the matter some consideration.

“I should think he did,” rejoined old Mrs. Bascom. “Those children ‘bout git their livin’ off the road in summer, from the time the dand’lion greens is ready for diggin’ till the blackb’ries ‘n’ choke-cherries is gone. Diademy calls ‘em in ‘n’ gives ‘em a cooky every time they go past, ‘n’ they eat as if they was famished. Rube Hobson never was any kind of a pervider, ‘n’ he’s consid’able snug besides.”

“He ain’t goin’ to better himself much,” said Almira. “Eunice Emery ain’t fit to housekeep for a cat. The pie she took to the pie supper at the church was so tough that even Deacon Dyer couldn’t eat it; and the boys got holt of her doughnuts, and declared they was goin’ fishin’ next day ‘n’ use ‘em for sinkers. She lives from hand to mouth Eunice Emery does. She’s about as much of a doshy as Rube is. She’ll make tea that’s strong enough to bear up an egg, most, and eat her doughnuts with it three times a day rather than take the trouble to walk out to the meat or the fish cart. I know for a fact she don’t make riz bread once a year.”

“Mebbe her folks likes buttermilk bread best; some do,” said the Widow Buzzell. “My husband always said, give him buttermilk bread to work on. He used to say my riz bread was so light he’d hev to tread on it to keep it anywheres; but when you’d eat buttermilk bread he said you’d got somethin’ that stayed by you; you knew where it was every time. ... For massy sake! there’s the stage stoppin’ at the Hobson’s door. I wonder if Rube’s first wife’s mother has come from Moderation? If ‘t is, they must ‘a’ made up their quarrel, for there was a time she wouldn’t step foot over that doorsill. She must be goin’ to stay some time, for there’s a trunk on the back o’ the stage. ... No, there ain’t nobody gettin’ out. Land, Hannah Sophia, don’t push me clean through the glass! It beats me why they make winders so small that three people can’t look out of ‘em without crowdin’. Ain’t that a wash-boiler he’s handin’ down? Well, it’s a mercy; he’s ben borrowin’ long enough!”

“What goes on after dark I ain’t responsible for,” commented old Mrs. Bascom, “but no new wash-boiler has gone into Rube Hobson’s door in the daytime for many a year, and I’ll be bound it means somethin’. There goes a broom, too. Much sweepin’ he’ll get out o’ Eunice; it’s a slick ‘n’ a promise with her!”

“When did you begin to suspicion this, Diademy?” asked Almira Berry. “I’ve got as much faculty as the next one, but anybody that lives on the river road has just got to give up knowin’ anything. You can’t keep runnin’ to the store every day, and if you could you don’t find out much nowadays. Bill Peters don’t take no more interest in his neighbors than a cow does in election.”

“I can’t get mother Bascom to see it as I do,” said Diadema, “but for one thing she’s ben carryin’ home bundles ‘bout every other night for a month, though she’s ben too smart to buy anythin’ here at this store. She had Packard’s horse to go to Saco last week. When she got home, jest at dusk, she drove int’ the barn, ‘n’ bimeby Pitt Packard come to git his horse,—‘t was her own buggy she went with. She looked over here when she went int’ the house, ‘n’ she ketched my eye, though ‘t was half a mile away, so she never took a thing in with her, but soon as ‘t was dark she made three trips out to the barn with a lantern, ‘n’ any fool could tell ‘t her arms was full o’ pa’cels by the way she carried the lantern. The Hobsons and the Emerys have married one another more ‘n’ once, as fur as that goes. I declare if I was goin’ to get married I should want to be relation to somebody besides my own folks.”

“The reason I can hardly credit it,” said Hannah Sophia, “is because Eunice never had a beau in her life, that I can remember of. Cyse Higgins set up with her for a spell, but it never amounted to nothin’. It seems queer, too, for she was always so fond o’ seein’ men folks round that when Pitt

Packard was shinglin' her barn she used to go out nights 'n' rip some o' the shingles off, so 't he'd hev more days' work on it."

"I always said 't was she that begun on Rube Hobson, not him on her," remarked the Widow Buzzell. "Their land joinin' made courtin' come dretful handy. His critters used to git in her field 'bout every other day (I always suspicioned she broke the fence down herself), and then she'd hev to go over and git him to drive 'em out. She's wed his onion bed for him two summers, as I happen to know, for I've been ou' doors more 'n common this summer, tryin' to fetch my constitution up. Diademy, don't you want to look out the back way 'n' see if Rube's come home yet?"

"He ain't," said old Mrs. Bascom, "so you needn't look; can't you see the curtains is all down? He's gone up to the Mills, 'n' it's my opinion he's gone to speak to the minister."

"He hed somethin' in the back o' the wagon covered up with an old linen lap robe; 't ain't at all likely he 'd 'a' hed that if he'd ben goin' to the minister's," objected Mrs. Jot.

"Anybody'd think you was born yesterday, to hear you talk, Diademy," retorted her mother-in-law. "When you 've set in one spot's long's I hev, p'raps you'll hev the use o' your faculties! Men folks has more 'n one way o' gettin' married, 'specially when they 're ashamed of it. ... Well, I vow, there's the little Hobson girls comin' out o' the door this minute, 'n' they 're all dressed up, and Mote don't seem to be with 'em."

Every woman in the room rose to her feet, and Diadema removed her murderous eye from a fly which she had been endeavoring to locate for some moments.

"I guess they 're goin' up to the church to meet their father 'n' Eunice, poor little things," ventured the Widow Buzzell.

"P'raps they be," said old Mrs. Bascom sarcastically; "p'raps they be goin' to church, takin' a three-quart tin pail 'n' a brown paper bundle along with 'em. ... They 're comin' over the bridge, just as I s'posed. ... Now, if they come past this house, you head 'em off, Almiry, 'n' see if you can git some satisfaction out of 'em. ... They ain't hardly old enough to hold their tongues."

An exciting interview soon took place in the middle of the road, and Almira reentered the room with the expression of one who had penetrated the inscrutable and solved the riddle of the Sphinx. She had been vouch-safed one of those gleams of light in darkness which almost dazzle the beholder.

"That's about the confirmin'gest thing I've heern yet!" she ejaculated, as she took off her shaker bonnet. "They say they're goin' up to their aunt Hitty's to stay two days. They're dressed in their best, clean to the skin, for I looked; 'n' it's their night gownds they've got in the bundle. They say little Mote has gone to Union to stop all night with his uncle Abijah, 'n' that leaves Rube all alone, for the smith girl that does his chores is home sick with the hives. And what do you s'pose is in the pail? *Fruit cake*,—that's what 't is, no more 'n' no less! I knowed that Smith girl didn't bake it, 'n' so I asked 'em, 'n' they said Miss Emery give it to 'em. There was two little round try-cakes, baked in muffin-rings. Eunice hed took some o' the batter out of a big loaf 'n' baked it to se how it was goin' to turn out. That means wedding-cake, or I'm mistaken!"

"There ain't no gittin' round that," agreed the assembled company, "now is there, Mis' Bascom?"

Old Mrs. Bascom wet her finger, smoothed the parting of her false front, and looked inscrutable.

"I don't see why you're so secret," objected Diadema.

"I've got my opinions, and I've had 'em some time," observed the good lady. "I don't know 's I'm bound to tell 'em and have 'em held up to ridicule. Let the veal hang, I say. If any one of us is right, we'll all know to-morrow."

"Well, all any of us has got to judge from is appearances," said Diadema, "and how you can twist 'em one way, and us another, stumps me!"

"Perhaps I see more appearances than you do," retorted her mother-in-law. "Some folks mistakes all they see for all there is. I was reading a detective story last week. It seems there was an awful murder in Schenectady, and a mother and her two children was found dead in one bed, with

bullet holes in their heads. The husband was away on business, and there wasn't any near neighbors to hear her screech. Well, the detectives come from far and from near, and begun to work up the case. One of 'em thought 't was the husband,—though he set such store by his wife he went ravin' crazy when he heard she was dead,—one of 'em laid it on the children,—though they was both under six years old; and one decided it was suicide,—though the woman was a church member and didn't know how to fire a gun off, besides. And then there come along a detective younger and smarter than all the rest, and says he, 'If all you bats have seen everything you can see, I guess I'll take a look around,' says he. Sure enough, there was a rug with 'Welcome' on it layin' in front of the washstand, and when he turned it up he found an elegant diamond stud with a man's full name and address on the gold part. He took a train and went right to the man's house. He was so taken by surprise (he hadn't missed the stud, for he had a full set of 'em) that he owned right up and confessed the murder."

"I don't see as that's got anything to do with this case," said Diadema.

"It's got this much to do with it," replied old Mrs. Bascom, "that perhaps you've looked all round the room and seen everything you had eyes to see, and perhaps I've had wit enough to turn up the rug in front o' the washstand."

"Whoever he marries now, Mis' Bascom'll have to say 't was the one she meant," laughed the Widow Buzzell.

"I never was caught cheatin' yet, and if I live till Saturday I shall be seventy-one years old," said the old lady with some heat. "Hand me Jot's lead pencil, Diademy, and that old envelope on the winder sill. I'll write the name I think of, and shut it up in the old Bible. My hand's so stiff to-day I can't hardly move it, but I guess I can make it plain enough to satisfy you."

"That's fair 'n' square," said Hannah Sophia, "and for my pat I hope it ain't Eunice, for I like her too well. What they're goin' to live on is more 'n I can see. Add nothin' to nothin' 'n' you git nothin',—that's arethmetic! He ain't hed a cent o' ready money sence he failed up four years ago, 'thout it was that hundred dollars that fell to him from his wife's aunt. Eunice'll hev her hands full this winter, I guess, with them three hearty children 'n' him all wheezed up with phthisic from October to April!... Who's that coming' down Tory Hill? It's Rube's horse 'n' Rube's wagon, but it don't look like Rube."

"Yes, it's Rube; but he's got a new Panama hat, 'n' he 's hed his linen duster washed," said old Mrs. Bascom. "... Now, do you mean to tell me that that woman with a stuck-up hat on is Eunice Emery? It ain't, 'n' that green parasol don't belong to this village. He's drivin' her into his yard!... Just as I s'posed, it's that little, smirkin' worthless school-teacher up to the Mills.—Don't break my neck, Diademy; can't you see out the other winder?—Yes, he's helpin' her out, 'n' showin' her in. He can't 'a' ben married more'n ten minutes, for he's goin' clear up the steps to open the door for her!"

"Wait 'n' see if he takes his horse out," said Hannah Sophia. "Mebbe he'll drive her back in a few minutes. ... No, he's onhitched! ... There, he's hangin' up the head-stall!"

"I've ben up in the attic chamber," called the Widow Buzzell, as she descended the stairs; "she's pulled up the curtains, and took off her hat right in front o' the winder, 's bold as a brass kettle! She's come to stay! Ain't that Rube Hobson all over,—to bring another woman int' this village 'stid o' weedin' one of 'em out as he'd oughter. He ain't got any more public sperit than a—hedgehog, 'n' never had!"

Almira drew on her mitts excitedly, tied on her shaker, and started for the door.

"I'm goin' over to Eunice's," she said, "and I'm goin' to take my bottle of camphire. I shouldn't wonder a mite if I found her in a dead faint on the kitchen floor. Nobody need tell me she wa'n't buildin' hopes."

"I'll go with you," said the Widow Buzzell. "I'd like to see with my own eyes how she takes it, 'n' it'll be too late to tell if I wait till after supper. If she'd ben more open with me 'n' ever asked for my advice, I could 'a' told her it wa'n't the first time Rube Hobson has played that trick."

"I'd come too if 't wa'n't milkin' but Jot ain't home from the Centre, and I've got to do his chores; come in as you go along back, will you?" asked Diadema.

Hannah Sophia remained behind, promising to meet them at the post-office and hear the news. As the two women walked down the hill she drew the old envelope from the Bible and read the wavering words scrawled upon it in old Mrs. Bascom's rheumatic and uncertain hand,—

the milikins Mills Teecher.

"Well Lucindy, you do make good use o' your winder," she exclaimed, "but how you pitched on anything so unlikely as her is more'n I can see."

"Just because 't was unlikely. A man's a great sight likelier to do an unlikely thing than he is a likely one, when it comes to marryin'. In the first place, Rube sent his children to school up to the Mills 'stid of to the brick schoolhouse, though he had to pay a little something to get 'em taken in to another deestrick. They used to come down at night with their hands full o' 'ward o' merit cards. Do you s'pose I thought they got 'em for good behavior, or for knowin' their lessons? Then aunt Hitty told me some question or other Rube had asked examination day. Since when has Rube Hobson 'tended examinations, thinks I. And when I see the girl, a red-and-white paper doll that wouldn't know whether to move the churn-dasher up 'n' down or round 'n' round, I made up my mind that bein' a man he'd take her for certain, and not his next-door neighbor of a sensible age and a house 'n' farm 'n' cow 'n' buggy!"

"Sure enough," agreed Hannah Sophia, "though that don't account for Eunice's queer actions, 'n' the pa'cels 'n' the fruit cake."

"When I make out a case," observed Mrs. Bascom modestly, "I ain't one to leave weak spots in it. If I guess at all, I go all over the ground 'n' stop when I git through. Now, sisters or no sisters, Maryabby Emery ain't spoke to Eunice sence she moved to Salem. But if Eunice has ben bringin' pa'cels home, Maryabby must 'a' paid for what was in 'em; and if she's ben bakin' fruit cake this hot day, why Maryabby used to be so font o' fruit cake her folks were afraid she'd have fits 'n' die. I shall be watchin' here as usual to-morrow morning, 'n' if Maryabby don't drive int' Eunice's yard before noon I won't brag any more for a year to come."

Hannah Sophia gazed at old Mrs. Bascom with unstinted admiration. "You do beat all," she said; "and I wish I could stay all night 'n' see how it turns out, but Almiry is just comin' over the bridge, 'n' I must start 'n' meet her. Good-by. I'm glad to see you so smart; you always look slim, but I guess you'll tough it out's long 's the rest of us. I see your log was all right, last time I was down side o' the river."

"They say it 's jest goin' to break in two in the middle, and fall into the river," cheerfully responded Lucinda. "They say it's just hanging' on by a thread. Well, that's what they 've ben sayin' about me these ten years, 'n' here I be still hanging! It don't make no odds, I guess, whether it's a thread or a rope you 're hangin' by, so long as you hang."

* * *

The next morning, little Mote Hobson, who had stayed all night with his uncle in Union, was walking home by the side of the river. He strolled along, the happy, tousle-headed, barefooted youngster, eyes one moment on the trees in the hope of squirrels and birds'-nests, the next on the ground in search of the first blueberries. As he stooped to pick up a bit of shining quartz to add to the collection in his ragged trousers' pockets he glanced across the river, and at that very instant Lucinda's log broke gently in twain, rolled down the bank, crumbling as it went, and, dropping in like a tired child, was carried peacefully along on the river's breast.

Mote walked more quickly after that. It was quite a feather in his cap to see, with his own eyes, the old landmark slip from its accustomed place and float down the stream. The other boys would miss it and say, "It's gone!" He would say, "I saw it go!"

Grandpa Bascom was standing at the top of the hill. His white locks were uncovered, and he was in his shirt-sleeves. Baby Jot, as usual, held fast by his shaking hand, for they loved each other,

these two. The cruel stroke of the sun that had blurred the old man's brain had spared a blessed something in him that won the healing love of children.

"How d' ye, Mote?" he piped in his feeble voice. "They say Lucindy's dead. ... Jot says she is, 'n' Diademy says she is, 'n' I guess she is. ... It 's a dretful thick year for fol'age; ... some o' the maples looks like balls in the air."

Mote looked in at the window. The neighbors were hurrying to and fro. Diadema sat with her calico apron up to her face, sobbing; and for the first morning in thirty years, old Mrs. Bascom's high-backed rocker was empty, and there was no one sitting in the village watch-tower.

TOM O' THE BLUEB'RY PLAINS

The sky is a shadowless blue; the noon-day sun glows fiercely; a cloud of dust rises from the burning road whenever the hot breeze stirs the air, or whenever a farm wagon creaks along, its wheels sinking into the deep sand.

In the distance, where the green of the earth joins the blue of the sky, gleams the silver line of a river.

As far as the eye can reach, the ground is covered with blueberry bushes; red leaves peeping among green ones; bloom of blue fruit hanging in full warm clusters,—spheres of velvet mellowed by summer sun, moistened with crystal dew, spiced with fragrance of woods.

In among the blueberry bushes grow huckleberries, “choky pears,” and black-snaps.

Gnarled oaks and stunted pines lift themselves out of the wilderness of shrubs. They look dwarfed and gloomy, as if Nature had been an untender mother, and denied them proper nourishment.

The road is a little-traveled one, and furrows of feathery grasses grow between the long, hot, sandy stretches of the wheel-ruts.

The first goldenrod gleams among the loose stones at the foot of the alder bushes. Whole families of pale butterflies, just out of their long sleep, perch on the brilliant stalks and tilt up and down in the sunshine.

Straggling processions of wooly brown caterpillars wend their way in the short grass by the wayside, where the wild carrot and the purple bull-thistle are coming into bloom.

The song of birds is seldom heard, and the blueberry plains are given over to silence save for the buzzing of gorged flies, the humming of bees, and the chirping of crickets that stir the drowsy air when the summer begins to wane.

It is so still that the shuffle-shuffle of a footstep can be heard in the distance, the tinkle of a tin pail swinging musically to and fro, the swish of an alder switch cropping the heads of the roadside weeds. All at once a voice breaks the stillness. Is it a child's, a woman's, or a man's? Neither yet all three.

“I'd much d'ruth-er walk in the bloom-in' gy-ar-ding,
An' hear the whis-sle of the jol-ly
—swain.”

Everybody knows the song, and everybody knows the cracked voice. The master of this bit of silent wilderness is coming home: it is Tom o' the blueb'ry plains.

He is more than common tall, with a sandy beard, and a mop of tangled hair straggling beneath his torn straw hat. A square of wet calico drips from under the back of the hat. His gingham shirt is open at the throat, showing his tanned neck and chest. Warm as it is, he wears portions of at least three coats on his back. His high boots, split in foot and leg, are mended and spliced and laced and tied on with bits of shingle rope. He carries a small tin pail of molasses. It has a bail of rope, and a battered cover with a knob of sticky newspaper. Over one shoulder, suspended on a crooked branch, hangs a bundle of basket stuff,—split willow withes and the like; over the other swings a decrepit, bottomless, three-legged chair.

I call him the master of the plains, but in faith he had no legal claim to the title. If he owned a habitation or had established a home on any spot in the universe, it was because no man envied him what he took; for Tom was one of God's fools, a foot-loose pilgrim in this world of ours, a poor addle-pated, simple-minded, harmless creature,—in village parlance, a “softy.”

Mother or father, sister or brother, he had none, nor ever had, so far as any one knew; but how should people who had to work from sun-up to candlelight to get the better of the climate have leisure to discover whether or no Blueb'ry Tom had any kin?

At some period in an almost forgotten past there had been a house on Tom's particular patch of the plains. It had long since tumbled into ruins and served for fire-wood and even the chimney bricks had disappeared one by one, as the monotonous seasons came and went.

Tom had settled himself in an old tool-shop, corn-house, or rude out-building of some sort that had belonged to the ruined cottage. Here he had set up his house-hold gods; and since no one else had ever wanted a home in this dreary tangle of berry bushes, where the only shade came from stunted pines that flung shriveled arms to the sky and dropped dead cones to the sterile earth, here he remained unmolested.

In the lower part of the hut he kept his basket stuff and his collection of two-legged and three-legged chairs. In the course of evolution they never sprouted another leg, those chairs; as they were given to him, so they remained. The upper floor served for his living-room, and was reached by a ladder from the ground, for there was no stairway inside.

No one had ever been in the little upper chamber. When a passer-by chanced to be-think him that Tom's hermitage was close at hand, he sometimes turned in his team by a certain clump of white birches and drove nearer to the house, intending to remind Tom that there was a chair to willow-bottom the next time he came to the village. But at the noise of the wheels Tom drew in his ladder; and when the visitor alighted and came within sight, it was to find the inhospitable host standing in the opening of the second-story window, a quaint figure framed in green branches, the ladder behind him, and on his face a kind of impenetrable dignity, as he shook his head and said, "Tom ain't ter hum; Tom's gone to Bonny Eagle."

There was something impressive about his way of repelling callers; it was as effectual as a door slammed in the face, and yet there was a sort of mendacious courtesy about it. No one ever cared to go further; and indeed there was no mystery to tempt the curious, and no spoil to attract the mischievous or the malicious. Any one could see, without entering, the straw bed in the far corner, the beams piled deep with red and white oak acorns, the strings of dried apples and bunches of everlastings hanging from the rafters, and the half-finished baskets filled with blown bird's-eggs, pine cones, and pebbles.

No home in the village was better loved than Tom's retreat in the blueberry plains. Whenever he approached it, after a long day's tramp, when he caught the first sight of the white birches that marked the gateway to his estate and showed him where to turn off the public road into his own private grounds, he smiled a broader smile than usual, and broke into his well-known song:

"T'd much d'ruth-er walk in the bloom-in' gy-ar-ding,
An' hear the whis-sle of the jol-ly
—swain."

Poor Tom could never catch the last note. He had sung the song for more than forty years, but the memory of this tone was so blurred, and his cherished ideal of it so high (or so low, rather), that he never managed to reach it.

Oh, if only summer were eternal! Who could wish a better supper than ripe berries and molasses? Nor was there need of sleeping under roof nor of lighting candles to grope his way to pallet of straw, when he might have the blue vault of heaven arching over him, and all God's stars for lamps, and for a bed a horse blanket stretched over an elastic couch of pine needles. There were two gaunt pines that had been dropping their polished spills for centuries, perhaps silently adding, year by year, another layer of aromatic springiness to poor Tom's bed. Flinging his tired body on this grateful couch, burying his head in the crushed sweet fern of his pillow with one deep-drawn sigh of pleasure,—there, haunted by no past and harassed by no future, slept God's fool as sweetly as a child.

Yes, if only summer were eternal, and youth as well!

But when the blueberries had ripened summer after summer, and the gaunt pine-trees had gone on for many years weaving poor Tom's mattress, there came a change in the aspect of things. He still made his way to the village, seeking chairs to mend; but he was even more unkempt than of old, his tall figure was bent, and his fingers trembled as he wove the willow strands in and out, and over and under.

There was little work to do, moreover, for the village had altogether retired from business, and was no longer in competition with its neighbors: the dam was torn away, the sawmills were pulled down; husbands and fathers were laid in the churchyard, sons and brothers and lovers had gone West, and mothers and widows and spinsters stayed on, each in her quiet house alone. "T ain't no hardship when you get used to it," said the Widow Buzzell. "Land sakes! a lantern 's 's good 's a man any time, if you only think so, 'n' 't ain't half so much trouble to keep it filled up!"

But Tom still sold a basket occasionally, and the children always gathered about him for the sake of hearing him repeat his well-worn formula,—“Tom allers puts two handles on baskets: one to take 'em up by, one to set 'em down by.” This was said with a beaming smile and a wise shake of the head, as if he were announcing a great discovery to an expectant world. And then he would lay down his burden of basket stuff, and, sitting under an apple-tree in somebody's side yard, begin his task of willow-bottoming an old chair. It was a pretty sight enough, if one could keep back the tears,—the kindly, simple fellow with the circle of children about his knees. Never a village fool without a troop of babies at his heels. They love him, too, till we teach them to mock.

When he was younger, he would sing,

“Rock-a-by, baby, on the treetop,”

and dance the while, swinging his unfinished basket to and fro for a cradle. He was too stiff in the joints for dancing nowadays, but he still sang the “bloomin' gy-ar-ding” when ever they asked him, particularly if some apple-cheeked little maid would say, “Please, Tom!” He always laughed then, and, patting the child's hand, said, “Pooty gal,—got eyes!” The youngsters dance with glee at this meaningless phrase, just as their mothers had danced years before when it was said to them.

Summer waned. In the moist places the gentian uncurled its blue fringes; purple asters and gay Joe Pye waved their colors by the roadside; tall primroses put their yellow bonnets on, and peeped over the brooks to see themselves; and the dusty pods of the milkweed were bursting with their silky fluffs, the spinning of the long summer. Autumn began to paint the maples red and the elms yellow, for the early days of September brought a frost. Some one remarked at the village store that old Blueb'ry Tom must not be suffered to stay on the plains another winter, now that he was getting so feeble,—not if the “seleckmen” had to root him out and take him to the poor-farm. He would surely starve or freeze, and his death would be laid at their door.

Tom was interviewed. Persuasion, logic, sharp words, all failed to move him one jot or tittle. He stood in his castle door, with the ladder behind him, smiling, always smiling (none but the fool smiles always, nor always weeps), and saying to all visitors, “Tom ain't ter hum; Tom's gone to Bonny Eagle; Tom don' want to go to the poor-farm.”

November came in surly.

The cheerful stir and bustle of the harvest were over, the corn was shocked, the apples and pumpkins were gathered into barns. The problem of Tom's future was finally laid before the selectmen; and since the poor fellow's mild obstinacy had defeated all attempts to conquer it, the sheriff took the matter in hand.

The blueberry plains looked bleak and bare enough now. It had rained incessantly for days, growing ever colder and colder as it rained. The sun came out at last, but it shone in a wintry sort of way,—like a duty smile,—as if light, not heat, were its object. A keen wind blew the dead leaves

hither and thither in a wild dance that had no merriment in it. A blackbird flew under an old barrel by the wayside, and, ruffling himself into a ball, remarked despondently that feathers were no sort of protection in this kind of climate. A snowbird, flying by, glanced in at the barrel, and observed that anybody who minded a little breeze like that had better join the woodcocks, who were leaving for the South by the night express.

The blueberry bushes were stripped bare of green. The stunted pines and sombre hemlocks looked in tone with the landscape now; where all was dreary they did not seem amiss.

“Je-whilikins!” exclaimed the sheriff as he drew up his coat collar. “A madhouse is the place for the man who wants to live ou’dors in the winter time; the poor-farm is too good for him.”

But Tom was used to privation, and even to suffering. “Ou’dors” was the only home he knew, and with all its rigors he loved it. He looked over the barren plains, knowing, in a dull sort of way, that they would shortly be covered with snow; but he had three coats, two of them with sleeves, and the crunch-crunch of the snow under his tread was music to his ears. Then, too, there were a few hospitable firesides where he could always warm himself; and the winter would soon be over, the birds would come again,—new birds, singing the old songs,—the sap would mount in the trees, the buds swell on the blueberry bushes, and the young ivory leaves push their ruddy tips through the softening ground. The plains were fatherland and mother-country, home and kindred, to Tom. He loved the earth that nourished him, and he saw through all the seeming death in nature the eternal miracle of the resurrection. To him winter was never cruel. He looked underneath her white mantle, saw the infant spring hidden in her warm bosom, and was content to wait. Content to wait? Content to starve, content to freeze, if only he need not be carried into captivity.

The poor-farm was not a bad place, either, if only Tom had been a reasonable being. To be sure, when Hannah Sophia Palmer asked old Mrs. Pinkham how she liked it, she answered, with a patient sigh, that “her ‘n’ Mr. Pinkham hed lived there goin’ on nine year, workin’ their fingers to the bone ‘most, ‘n’ yet they hadn’t been able to lay up a cent!” If this peculiarity of administration was its worst feature, it was certainly one that would have had no terrors for Tom o’ the blueb’ry plains. Terrors of some sort, nevertheless, the poor-farm had for him; and when the sheriff’s party turned in by the clump of white birches and approached the cabin, they found that fear had made the simple wise. Tom had provished the little upper chamber, and, in place of the piece of sacking that usually served him for a door in winter, he had woven a defense of willow. In fine, he had taken all his basket stuff, and, treating the opening through which he entered and left his home precisely as if it were a bottomless chair, he had filled it in solidly, weaving to and fro, by night as well as by day, till he felt, poor fool, as safely intrenched as if he were in the heart of a fortress.

The sheriff tied his horse to a tree, and Rube Hobson and Pitt Packard got out of the double wagon. Two men laughed when they saw the pathetic defense, but the other shut his lips together and caught his breath. (He had been born on a poor-farm, but no one knew it at Pleasant River.) They called Tom’s name repeatedly, but no other sound broke the silence of the plains save the rustling of the wind among the dead leaves.

“Numb-head!” muttered the sheriff, pounding on the side of the cabin with his whip-stock. “Come out and show yourself! We know you’re in there, and it’s no use hiding!”

At last in response to a deafening blow from Rube Hobson’s hard fist, there came the answering note of a weak despairing voice.

“Tom ain’t ter hum,” it said; “Tom’s gone to Bonny Eagle.”

“That’s all right!” guffawed the men; “but you’ve got to go some more, and go a diff’rent way. It ain’t no use fer you to hold back; we’ve got a ladder, and by Jiminy! you go with us this time!”

The ladder was put against the side of the hut, and Pitt Packard climbed up, took his jack-knife, slit the woven door from top to bottom, and turned back the flap.

The men could see the inside of the chamber now. They were humorous persons who could strain a joke to the snapping point, but they felt, at last, that there was nothing especially amusing in

the situation. Tom was huddled in a heap on the straw bed in the far corner. The vacant smile had fled from his face, and he looked, for the first time in his life, quite distraught.

“Come along, Tom,” said the sheriff kindly; “we ‘re going to take you where you can sleep in a bed, and have three meals a day.”

“I’d much d’ruth-er walk in the bloom-in’ gy-ar-ding,”

sang Tom quaveringly, as he hid his head in a paroxysm of fear.

“Well, there ain’t no bloomin’ gardings to walk in jest now, so come along and be peaceable.”

“Tom don’ want to go to the poor-farm,” he wailed piteously.

But there was no alternative. They dragged him off the bed and down the ladder as gently as possible; then Rube Hobson held him on the back seat of the wagon, while the sheriff unhitched the horse. As they were on the point of starting, the captive began to wail and struggle more than ever, the burden of his plaint being a wild and tremulous plea for his pail of molasses.

“Dry up, old softy, or I’ll put the buggy robe over your head!” muttered Rube Hobson, who had not had much patience when he started on the trip, and had lost it all by this time.

“By thunder! he shall hev his molasses, if he thinks he wants it!” said Pitt Packard, and he ran up the ladder and brought it down, comforting the shivering creature thus, for he lapsed into a submissive silence that lasted until the unwelcome journey was over.

Tom remained at the poorhouse precisely twelve hours. It did not enter the minds of the authorities that any one so fortunate as to be admitted into that happy haven would decline to stay there. The unwilling guest disappeared early on the morrow of his arrival, and, after some search, they followed him to the old spot. He had climbed into his beloved retreat, and, having learned nothing from experience, had mended the willow door as best he could, and laid him down in peace. They dragged him out again, and this time more impatiently; for it was exasperating to see a man (even if he were a fool) fight against a bed and three meals a day.

The second attempt was little more successful than the first. As a place of residence, the poor-farm did not seem any more desirable or attractive on near acquaintance than it did at long range. Tom remained a week, because he was kept in close confinement; but when they judged that he was weaned from his old home, they loosed his bonds, and—back to the plains he sped, like an arrow shot from the bow, or like a bit of iron leaping to the magnet.

What should be done with him?

Public opinion was divided. Some people declared that the village had done its duty, and if the “dog-goned lunk-head” wanted to starve and freeze, it was his funeral, not theirs. Others thought that the community had no resource but to bear the responsibility of its irresponsible children, however troublesome they might be. There was entire unanimity of view so far as the main issues were concerned. It was agreed that nobody at the poor-farm had leisure to stand guard over Tom night and day, and that the sheriff could not be expected to spend his time forcing him out of his hut on the blueberry plains.

There was but one more expedient to be tried, a very simple and ingenious but radical and comprehensive one, which, in Rube Hobson’s opinion, would strike at the root of the matter.

Tom had fled from captivity for the third time.

He had stolen out at daybreak, and, by an unexpected stroke of fortune, the molasses pail was hanging on a nail by the shed door. The remains of a battered old bushel basket lay on the wood-pile: bottom it had none, nor handles; rotundity of side had long since disappeared, and none but its maker would have known it for a basket. Tom caught it up in his flight, and, seizing the first crooked stick that offered, he slung the dear familiar burden over his shoulder and started off on a jog-trot.

Heaven, how happy he was! It was the rosy dawn of an Indian summer day,—a warm jewel of a day, dropped into the bleak world of yesterday without a hint of beneficent intention; one of those enchanting weather surprises with which Dame Nature reconciles us to her stern New England rule.

The joy that comes of freedom, and the freedom that comes of joy, unbent the old man's stiffened joints. He renewed his youth at every mile. He ran like a lapwing. When his feet first struck the sandy soil of the plains, he broke into old song of the "bloom-in' gy-ar-ding" and the "jolly swain," and in the marvelous mental and spiritual exhilaration born of the supreme moment he almost grasped that impossible last note. His heart could hardly hold its burden of rapture when he caught the well-known gleam of the white birches. He turned into the familiar path, boy's blood thumping in old man's veins. The past week had been a dreadful dream. A few steps more and he would be within sight, within touch of home,—home at last! No—what was wrong? He must have gone beyond it, in his reckless haste! Strange that he could have forgotten the beloved spot! Can lover mistake the way to sweetheart's window? Can child lose the path to mother's knee?

He turned,—ran hither and thither, like one distraught. A nameless dread flitted through his dull mind, chilling his warm blood, paralyzing the activity of the moment before. At last, with a sob like that of a frightened child who flies from some imagined evil lurking in darkness, he darted back to the white birches and started anew. This time he trusted to blind instinct; his feet knew the path, and, left to themselves, they took him through the tangle of dry bushes straight to his—

It had vanished!

Nothing but ashes remained to mark the spot,—nothing but ashes! And these, ere many days, the autumn winds would scatter, and the leafless branches on which they fell would shake them off lightly, never dreaming that they hid the soul of a home. Nothing but ashes!

Poor Tom o' the blueb'ry plains!

THE NOONING TREE

The giant elm stood in the centre of the squire's fair green meadows, and was known to all the country round about as the "Bean ellow." The other trees had seemingly retired to a respectful distance, as if they were not worthy of closer intimacy; and so it stood alone, king of the meadow, monarch of the village.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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