

WIGGIN KATE SMITH

THE OLD PEABODY PEW:
A CHRISTMAS ROMANCE
OF A COUNTRY CHURCH

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Romance of a Country Church**

«Public Domain»

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Kate Douglas Wiggin

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Dedication

To a certain handful of dear New England women of names unknown to the world, dwelling in a certain quiet village, alike unknown:—

We have worked together to make our little corner of the great universe a pleasanter place in which to live, and so we know, not only one another's names, but something of one another's joys and sorrows, cares and burdens, economies, hopes, and anxieties.

We all remember the dusty uphill road that leads to the green church common. We remember the white spire pointing upward against a background of blue sky and feathery elms. We remember the sound of the bell that falls on the Sabbath morning stillness, calling us across the daisy-sprinkled meadows of June, the golden hayfields of July, or the dazzling whiteness and deep snowdrifts of December days. The little cabinet-organ that plays the doxology, the hymn-books from which we sing "Praise God from whom all blessings flow," the sweet freshness of the old meeting-house, within and without—how we have toiled to secure and preserve these humble mercies for ourselves and our children!

There really *is* a Dorcas Society, as you and I well know, and one not unlike that in these pages; and you and I have lived through many discouraging, laughable, and beautiful experiences while we emulated the Bible Dorcas, that woman "full of good works and alms deeds."

There never was a Peabody Pew in the Tory Hill Meeting-House, and Nancy's love story and Justin's never happened within its century-old walls; but I have imagined only one of the many romances that have had their birth under the shadow of that steeple, did we but realize it.

As you have sat there on open-windowed Sundays, looking across purple clover-fields to blue distant mountains, watching the palm-leaf fans swaying to and fro in the warm stillness before sermon time, did not the place seem full of memories, for has not the life of two villages ebbed and flowed beneath that ancient roof? You heard the hum of droning bees and followed the airy wings of butterflies fluttering over the gravestones in the old churchyard, and underneath almost every moss-grown tablet some humble romance lies buried and all but forgotten.

If it had not been for you, I should never have written this story, so I give it back to you tied with a sprig from Ophelia's nosegay; a spring of "rosemary, that's for remembrance."

K. D. W.

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CHAPTER I

Edgewood, like all the other villages along the banks of the Saco, is full of sunny slopes and leafy hollows. There are little, rounded, green-clad hillocks that might, like their scriptural sisters, “skip with joy,” and there are grand, rocky hills tufted with gaunt pine trees—these leading the eye to the splendid heights of a neighbour State, where snow-crowned peaks tower in the blue distance, sweeping the horizon in a long line of majesty.

Tory Hill holds its own among the others for peaceful beauty and fair prospect, and on its broad, level summit sits the white-painted Orthodox Meeting-House. This faces a grassy common where six roads meet, as if the early settlers had determined that no one should lack salvation because of a difficulty in reaching its visible source.

The old church has had a dignified and fruitful past, dating from that day in 1761 when young Paul Coffin received his call to preach at a stipend of fifty pounds sterling a year; answering “that never having heard of any Uneasiness among the people about his Doctrine or manner of life, he declared himself pleased to Settle as Soon as might be Judged Convenient.”

But that was a hundred and fifty years ago, and much has happened since those simple, strenuous old days. The chastening hand of time has been laid somewhat heavily on the town as well as on the church. Some of her sons have marched to the wars and died on the field of honour; some, seeking better fortunes, have gone westward; others, wearying of village life, the rocky soil, and rigours of farm-work, have become entangled in the noise and competition, the rush and strife, of cities. When the sexton rings the bell nowadays, on a Sunday morning, it seems to have lost some of its old-time militant strength, something of its hope and courage; but it still rings, and although the Davids and Solomons, the Matthews, Marks, and Pauls of former congregations have left few descendants to perpetuate their labours, it will go on ringing as long as there is a Tabitha, a Dorcas, a Lois, or a Eunice left in the community.

This sentiment had been maintained for a quarter of a century, but it was now especially strong, as the old Tory Hill Meeting-House had been undergoing for several years more or less extensive repairs. In point of fact, the still stronger word, “improvements,” might be used with impunity; though whenever the Dorcas Society, being female, and therefore possessed of notions regarding comfort and beauty, suggested any serious changes, the finance committees, which were inevitably male in their composition, generally disapproved of making any impious alterations in a tabernacle, chapel, temple, or any other building used for purposes of worship. The majority in these august bodies asserted that their ancestors had prayed and sung there for a century and a quarter, and what was good enough for their ancestors was entirely suitable for them. Besides, the community was becoming less and less prosperous, and church-going was growing more and more lamentably uncommon, so that even from a business standpoint, any sums expended upon decoration by a poor and struggling parish would be worse than wasted.

In the particular year under discussion in this story, the valiant and progressive Mrs. Jeremiah Burbank was the president of the Dorcas Society, and she remarked privately and publicly that if her ancestors liked a smoky church, they had a perfect right to the enjoyment of it, but that she didn’t intend to sit through meeting on winter Sundays, with her white ostrich feather turning grey and her eyes smarting and watering, for the rest of her natural life.

Whereupon, this being in a business session, she then and there proposed to her already hypnotized constituents ways of earning enough money to build a new chimney on the other side of the church.

An awe-stricken community witnessed this beneficent act of vandalism, and, finding that no thunderbolts of retribution descended from the skies, greatly relished the change. If one or two aged persons complained that they could not sleep as sweetly during sermon-time in the now clear

atmosphere of the church, and that the parson's eye was keener than before, why, that was a mere detail, and could not be avoided; what was the loss of a little sleep compared with the discoloration of Mrs. Jere Burbank's white ostrich feather and the smarting of Mrs. Jere Burbank's eyes?

A new furnace followed the new chimney, in due course, and as a sense of comfort grew, there was opportunity to notice the lack of beauty. Twice in sixty years had some well-to-do summer parishioner painted the interior of the church at his own expense; but although the roof had been many times resingled, it had always persisted in leaking, so that the ceiling and walls were disfigured by unsightly spots and stains and streaks. The question of shingling was tacitly felt to be outside the feminine domain, but as there were five women to one man in the church membership, the feminine domain was frequently obliged to extend its limits into the hitherto unknown. Matters of tarring and water-proofing were discussed in and out of season, and the very school-children imbibed knowledge concerning lapping, overlapping, and cross-lapping, and first and second quality of cedar shingles.

Miss Lobelia Brewster, who had a rooted distrust of anything done by mere man, created strife by remarking that she could have stopped the leak in the belfry tower with her red flannel petticoat better than the Milltown man with his new-fangled rubber sheeting, and that the last shingling could have been more thoroughly done by a "female infant babe"; whereupon the person criticized retorted that he wished Miss Lobelia Brewster had a few infant babes to "put on the job—he'd like to see 'em try." Meantime several male members of the congregation, who at one time or another had sat on the roof during the hottest of the dog days to see that shingling operations were conscientiously and skilfully performed, were very pessimistic as to any satisfactory result ever being achieved.

"The angle of the roof—what they call the 'pitch'—they say that that's always been wrong," announced the secretary of the Dorcas in a business session.

"Is it that kind of pitch that the Bible says you can't touch without being defiled? If not, I vote that we unshingle the roof and alter the pitch!" This proposal came from a sister named Maria Sharp, who had valiantly offered the year before to move the smoky chimney with her own hands, if the "men-folks" wouldn't.

But though the incendiary suggestion of altering the pitch was received with applause at the moment, subsequent study of the situation proved that such a proceeding was entirely beyond the modest means of the society. Then there arose an ingenious and militant carpenter in a neighbouring village, who asserted that he would shingle the meeting-house roof for such and such a sum, and agree to drink every drop of water that would leak in afterward. This was felt by all parties to be a promise attended by extraordinary risks, but it was accepted nevertheless, Miss Lobelia Brewster remarking that the rash carpenter, being already married, could not marry a Dorcas anyway, and even if he died, he was not a resident of Edgewood, and therefore could be more easily spared, and that it would be rather exciting, just for a change, to see a man drink himself to death with rain-water.

The expected tragedy never occurred, however, and the inspired shingler fulfilled his promise to the letter, so that before many months the Dorcas Society proceeded, with incredible exertion, to earn more money, and the interior of the church was neatly painted and made as fresh as a rose. With no smoke, no rain, no snow nor melting ice to defile it, the good old landmark that had been pointing its finger Heavenward for over a century would now be clean and fragrant for years to come, and the weary sisters leaned back in their respective rocking-chairs and drew deep breaths of satisfaction.

These breaths continued to be drawn throughout an unusually arduous haying season; until, in fact, a visitor from a neighbouring city was heard to remark that the Tory Hill Meeting-House would be one of the best preserved and pleasantest churches in the whole State of Maine, if only it were suitably carpeted.

This thought had secretly occurred to many a Dorcas in her hours of pie-making, preserving, or cradle-rocking, but had been promptly extinguished as flagrantly extravagant and altogether impossible. Now that it had been openly mentioned, the contagion of the idea spread, and in a month every sort of honest machinery for the increase of funds had been set in motion: harvest suppers, pie

sociables, old folk's concerts, apron sales, and, as a last resort, a subscription paper, for the church floor measured hundreds of square yards, and the carpet committee announce that a good ingrain could not be purchased, even with the church discount, for less than ninety-seven cents a yard.

The Dorcases took out their pencils, and when they multiplied the surface of the floor by the price of the carpet per yard, each Dorcas attaining a result entirely different from all the others, there was a shriek of dismay, especially from the secretary, who had included in her mathematical operation certain figures in her possession representing the cubical contents of the church and the offending pitch of the roof, thereby obtaining a product that would have dismayed a Croesus. Time sped and efforts increased, but the Dorcases were at length obliged to clip the wings of their desire and content themselves with carpeting the pulpit and pulpit steps, the choir, and the two aisles, leaving the floor in the pews until some future year.

How the women cut and contrived and matched that hardly-bought red ingrain carpet, in the short December afternoons that ensued after its purchase; so that, having failed to be ready for Thanksgiving, it could be finished for the Christmas festivities!

They were sewing in the church, and as the last stitches were being taken, Maria Sharp suddenly ejaculated in her impulsive fashion:—

“Wouldn't it have been just perfect if we could have had the pews repainted before we laid the new carpet!”

“It would, indeed,” the president answered; “but it will take us all winter to pay for the present improvements, without any thought of fresh paint. If only we had a few more men-folks to help along!”

“Or else none at all!” was Lobelia Brewster's suggestion. “It's havin' so few that keeps us all stirred up. If there wa'n't any anywheres, we'd have women deacons and carpenters and painters, and get along first rate; for somehow the supply o' women always holds out, same as it does with caterpillars an' flies an' grasshoppers!”

Everybody laughed, although Maria Sharp asserted that she for one was not willing to be called a caterpillar simply because there were too many women in the universe.

“I never noticed before how shabby and scarred and dirty the pews are,” said the minister's wife as she looked at them reflectively.

“I've been thinking all the afternoon of the story about the poor old woman and the lily,” and Nancy Wentworth's clear voice broke into the discussion. “Do you remember some one gave her a stalk of Easter lilies and she set them in a glass pitcher on the kitchen table? After looking at them for a few minutes, she got up from her chair and washed the pitcher until the glass shone. Sitting down again, she glanced at the little window. It would never do; she had forgotten how dusty and blurred it was, and she took her cloth and burnished the panes. Then she scoured the table, then the floor, then blackened the stove before she sat down to her knitting. And of course the lily had done it all, just by showing, in its whiteness, how grimy everything else was.”

The minister's wife who had been in Edgewood only a few months, looked admiringly at Nancy's bright face, wondering that five-and-thirty years of life, including ten of school-teaching, had done so little to mar its serenity. “The lily story is as true as the gospel!” she exclaimed, “and I can see how one thing has led you to another in making the church comfortable. But my husband says that two coats of paint on the pews would cost a considerable sum.”

“How about cleaning them? I don't believe they've had a good hard washing since the flood.” The suggestion came from Deacon Miller's wife to the president.

“They can't even be scrubbed for less than fifteen or twenty dollars, for I thought of that and asked Mrs. Simpson yesterday, and she said twenty cents a pew was the cheapest she could do it for.”

“We've done everything else,” said Nancy Wentworth, with a twitch of her thread; “why don't we scrub the pews? There's nothing in the orthodox creed to forbid, is there?”

“Speakin’ o’ creeds,” and here old Mrs. Sargent paused in her work, “Elder Ransom from Acreville stopped with us last night, an’ he tells me they recite the Euthanasian Creed every few Sundays in the Episcopal Church. I didn’t want him to know how ignorant I was, but I looked up the word in the dictionary. It means easy death, and I can’t see any sense in that, though it’s a terrible long creed, the Elder says, an’ if it’s any longer ’n ourn, I should think anybody *might* easy die learnin’ it!”

“I think the word is Athanasian,” ventured the minister’s wife.

“Elder Ransom’s always plumb full o’ doctrine,” asserted Miss Brewster, pursuing the subject.

“For my part, I’m glad he preferred Acreville to our place. He was so busy bein’ a minister, he never got round to bein’ a human creeter. When he used to come to sociables and picnics, always lookin’ kind o’ like the potato blight, I used to think how complete he’d be if he had a foldin’ pulpit under his coat tails; they make foldin’ beds nowadays, an’ I s’pose they could make foldin’ pulpits, if there was a call.”

“Land sakes, I hope there won’t be!” exclaimed Mrs. Sargent. “An’ the Elder never said much of anything either, though he was always preachin’! Now your husband, Mis’ Baxter, always has plenty to say after you think he’s all through. There’s water in his well when the others is all dry!”

“But how about the pews?” interrupted Mrs. Burbank. “I think Nancy’s idea is splendid, and I want to see it carried out. We might make it a picnic, bring our luncheons, and work all together; let every woman in the congregation come and scrub her own pew.”

“Some are too old, others live at too great a distance,” and the minister’s wife sighed a little; “indeed, most of those who once owned the pews or sat in them seemed to be dead, or gone away to live in busier places.”

“I’ve no patience with ’em, gallivantin’ over the earth,” and here Lobelia rose and shook the carpet threads from her lap. “I shouldn’t want to live in a livelier place than Edgewood, seem’s though! We wash and hang out Mondays, iron Tuesdays, cook Wednesdays, clean house and mend Thursdays and Fridays, bake Saturdays, and go to meetin’ Sundays. I don’t hardly see how they can do any more ’n that in Chicago!”

“Never mind if we have lost members!” said the indomitable Mrs. Burbank. “The members we still have left must work all the harder. We’ll each clean our own pew, then take a few of our neighbours’, and then hire Mrs. Simpson to do the wainscoting and floor. Can we scrub Friday and lay the carpet Saturday? My husband and Deacon Miller can help us at the end of the week. All in favour manifest it by the usual sign. Contrary minded? It is a vote.”

There never were any contrary minded when Mrs. Jere Burbank was in the chair. Public sentiment in Edgewood was swayed by the Dorcas Society, but Mrs. Burbank swayed the Dorcas themselves as the wind sways the wheat.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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