

**ALDRICH
THOMAS
BAILEY**

MISS MEHETABEL'S SON

Thomas Aldrich

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Thomas Bailey Aldrich

Miss Mehetabel's Son

I. THE OLD TAVERN AT BAYLEY'S FOUR CORNERS

You will not find Greenton, or Bayley's Four-Corners, as it is more usually designated, on any map of New England that I know of. It is not a town; it is not even a village; it is merely an absurd hotel. The almost indescribable place called Greenton is at the intersection of four roads, in the heart of New Hampshire, twenty miles from the nearest settlement of note, and ten miles from any railway station. A good location for a hotel, you will say. Precisely; but there has always been a hotel there, and for the last dozen years it has been pretty well patronized—by one boarder. Not to trifle with an intelligent public, I will state at once that, in the early part of this century, Greenton was a point at which the mail-coach on the Great Northern Route stopped to change horses and allow the passengers to dine. People in the county, wishing to take the early mail Portsmouth-ward, put up overnight at the old tavern, famous for its irreproachable larder and soft feather-beds. The tavern at that time was kept by Jonathan Bayley, who rivalled his wallet in growing corpulent, and in due time passed away. At his death the establishment, which included a farm, fell into the hands of a son-in-law. Now, though Bayley left his son-in-law a hotel—which sounds handsome—he left him no guests; for at about the period of the old man's death the old stage-coach died also. Apoplexy carried off one, and steam the other. Thus, by a sudden swerve in the tide of progress, the tavern at the Corners found itself high and dry, like a wreck on a sand-bank. Shortly after this event, or maybe contemporaneously, there was some attempt to build a town at Green-ton; but it apparently failed, if eleven cellars choked up with *débris* and overgrown with burdocks are any indication of failure. The farm, however, was a good farm, as things go in New Hampshire, and Tobias Sewell, the son-in-law, could afford to snap his fingers at the travelling public if they came near enough—which they never did.

The hotel remains to-day pretty much the same as when Jonathan Bayley handed in his accounts in 1840, except that Sewell has from time to time sold the furniture of some of the upper chambers to bridal couples in the neighborhood. The bar is still open, and the parlor door says Parlour in tall black letters. Now and then a passing drover looks in at that lonely bar-room, where a high-shouldered bottle of Santa Cruz rum ogles with a peculiarly knowing air a shrivelled lemon on a shelf; now and then a farmer rides across country to talk crops and stock and take a friendly glass with Tobias; and now and then a circus caravan with speckled ponies, or a menagerie with a soggy elephant, halts under the swinging sign, on which there is a dim mail-coach with four phantomish horses driven by a portly gentleman whose head has been washed off by the rain. Other customers there are none, except that one regular boarder whom I have mentioned.

If misery makes a man acquainted with strange bed-fellows, it is equally certain that the profession of surveyor and civil engineer often takes one into undreamed-of localities. I had never heard of Greenton until my duties sent me there, and kept me there two weeks in the dreariest season of the year. I do not think I would, of my own volition, have selected Greenton for a fortnight's sojourn at any time; but now the business is over, I shall never regret the circumstances that made me the guest of Tobias Sewell, and brought me into intimate relations with Miss Mehetabel's Son.

It was a black October night in the year of grace 1872, that discovered me standing in front of the old tavern at the Corners.

Though the ten miles' ride from K— had been depressing, especially the last five miles, on account of the cold autumnal rain that had set in, I felt a pang of regret on hearing the rickety open wagon turn round in the road and roll off in the darkness. There were no lights visible anywhere, and only for the big, shapeless mass of something in front of me, which the driver had said was the

hotel, I should have fancied that I had been set down by the roadside. I was wet to the skin and in no amiable humor; and not being able to find bell-pull or knocker, or even a door, I belabored the side of the house with my heavy walking-stick. In a minute or two I saw a light flickering somewhere aloft, then I heard the sound of a window opening, followed by an exclamation of disgust as a blast of wind extinguished the candle which had given me an instantaneous picture *en silhouette* of a man leaning out of a casement.

"I say, what do you want, down there?" inquired an unprepossessing voice.

"I want to come in; I want a supper, and a bed, and numberless things."

"This is n't no time of night to go rousing honest folks out of their sleep. Who are you, anyway?"

The question, superficially considered, was a very simple one, and I, of all people in the world, ought to have been able to answer it off-hand; but it staggered me. Strangely enough, there came drifting across my memory the lettering on the back of a metaphysical work which I had seen years before on a shelf in the Astor Library. Owing to an unpremeditatedly funny collocation of title and author, the lettering read as follows: "Who am I? Jones." Evidently it had puzzled Jones to know who he was, or he would n't have written a book about it, and come to so lame and impotent a conclusion. It certainly puzzled me at that instant to define my identity. "Thirty years ago," I reflected, "I was nothing; fifty years hence I shall be nothing again, humanly speaking. In the mean time, who am I, sure-enough?" It had never before occurred to me what an indefinite article I was. I wish it had not occurred to me then. Standing there in the rain and darkness, I wrestled vainly with the problem, and was constrained to fall back upon a Yankee expedient.

"Isn't this a hotel?" I asked finally,

"Well, it is a sort of hotel," said the voice, doubtfully. My hesitation and prevarication had apparently not inspired my interlocutor with confidence in me.

"Then let me in. I have just driven over from K— in this infernal rain. I am wet through and through."

"But what do you want here, at the Corners? What's your business? People don't come here, leastways in the middle of the night."

"It is n't in the middle of the night," I returned, incensed. "I come on business connected with the new road. I 'm the superintendent of the works."

"Oh!"

"And if you don't open the door at once, I'll raise the whole neighborhood—and then go to the other hotel."

When I said that, I supposed Greenton was a village with a population of at least three or four thousand and was wondering vaguely at the absence of lights and other signs of human habitation. Surely, I thought, all the people cannot be abed and asleep at half past ten o'clock: perhaps I am in the business section of the town, among the shops.

"You jest wait," said the voice above.

This request was not devoid of a certain accent of menace, and I braced myself for a sortie on the part of the besieged, if he had any such hostile intent. Presently a door opened at the very place where I least expected a door, at the farther end of the building, in fact, and a man in his shirtsleeves, shielding a candle with his left hand, appeared on the threshold. I passed quickly into the house, with Mr. Tobias Sewell (for this was Mr. Sewell) at my heels, and found myself in a long, low-studded bar-room.

There were two chairs drawn up before the hearth, on which a huge hemlock backlog was still smouldering, and on the un-painted deal counter contiguous stood two cloudy glasses with bits of lemon-peel in the bottom, hinting at recent libations. Against the discolored wall over the bar hung a yellowed handbill, in a warped frame, announcing that "the Next Annual N. H. Agricultural Fair" would take place on the 10th of September, 1841. There was no other furniture or decoration in

this dismal apartment, except the cobwebs which festooned the ceiling, hanging down here and there like stalactites.

Mr. Sewell set the candlestick on the mantel-shelf, and threw some pine-knots on the fire, which immediately broke into a blaze, and showed him to be a lank, narrow-chested man, past sixty, with sparse, steel-gray hair, and small, deep-set eyes, perfectly round, like a fish's, and of no particular color. His chief personal characteristics seemed to be too much feet and not enough teeth. His sharply cut, but rather simple face, as he turned it towards me, wore a look of interrogation. I replied to his mute inquiry by taking out my pocket-book and handing him my business-card, which he held up to the candle and perused with great deliberation.

"You 're a civil engineer, are you?" he said, displaying his gums, which gave his countenance an expression of almost infantile innocence. He made no further audible remark, but mumbled between his thin lips something which an imaginative person might have construed into "If you 're at civil engineer, I 'll be blessed if I would n't like to see an uncivil one!"

Mr. Sewell's growl, however, was worse than his bite—owing to his lack of teeth probably—for he very good-naturedly set himself to work preparing supper for me. After a slice of cold ham, and a warm punch, to which my chilled condition gave a grateful flavor, I went to bed in a distant chamber in a most amiable mood, feeling satisfied that Jones was a donkey to bother himself about his identity.

When I awoke, the sun was several hours high. My bed faced a window, and by raising myself on one elbow I could look out on what I expected would be the main street. To my astonishment I beheld a lonely country road winding up a sterile hill and disappearing over the ridge. In a cornfield at the right of the road was a small private graveyard, enclosed by a crumbling stonewall with a red gate. The only thing suggestive of life was this little corner lot occupied by death. I got out of bed and went to the other window. There I had an uninterrupted view of twelve miles of open landscape, with Mount Agamenticus in the purple distance. Not a house or a spire in sight. "Well," I exclaimed, "Greenton does n't appear to be a very closely packed metropolis!" That rival hotel with which I had threatened Mr. Sewell overnight was not a deadly weapon, looking at it by daylight. "By Jove!" I reflected, "maybe I 'm in the wrong place." But there, tacked against a panel of the bedroom door, was a faded time-table dated Greenton, August 1, 1839.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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