

Deland Margaret Wade Campbell

An Old Chester Secret



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CHAPTER I

THERE was not a person in Old Chester less tainted by the vulgarity of secretiveness than Miss Lydia Sampson. She had no more reticence than sunshine or wind, or any other elemental thing. How much of this was due to conditions it would be hard to say; certainly there was no "reticence" in her silence as to her neighbors' affairs; she simply didn't know them! Nobody ever dreamed of confiding in Lydia Sampson! And she could not be reticent about her own affairs because they were inherently public. When she was a girl she broke her engagement to Mr. William Rives two weeks before the day fixed for the wedding – and the invitations were all out! So of course everybody knew *that*. To be sure, she never said why she broke it, but all Old Chester knew she hated meanness, and felt sure that she had given her William the choice of being generous or being jilted – and he chose the latter. As she grew older the joyous, untidy makeshifts of a poverty which was always hospitable and never attempted to be genteel, stared you in the face the minute you entered the house; so everybody knew she was poor. Years later, her renewed engagement to Mr. Rives, and his flight some ten minutes before the marriage ceremony, were known to everybody because we had all been invited to the wedding, which cost (as we happened to know, because we had presented her with just exactly that amount) *a hundred dollars!* At the sight of such extravagance the thrifty William turned tail and ran, and we gave thanks and said he was a scoundrel to make us thankful, though, with the exception of Doctor Lavendar, we deplored the extravagance as much as he did! As for Doctor Lavendar, he said that it was a case of the grasshopper and the ant; "but Lydia is a gambling grasshopper," said Doctor Lavendar; "she took tremendous chances, for suppose the party *hadn't* scared William off?"

So, obviously, anything which was personal to Miss Lydia was public property. She simply couldn't be secretive.

Then, suddenly, and in the open (so to speak) of her innocent candor, a Secret pounced upon her! At first Old Chester didn't know that there was a secret. We merely knew that on a rainy December day (this was about eight months after William had turned tail) she was seen to get into the Mercer stage, carrying a carpetbag in one hand and a bandbox in the other. This was surprising enough – for why should Lydia Sampson spend her money on going to Mercer? Yet it was not so surprising as the fact that she did not come back from Mercer! And even that was a comparative surprise; the superlative astonishment was when it became known that she had left her door key at the post office and said she didn't know when she would return!

"Where on earth has she gone?" said Old Chester. But only Mrs. Drayton attempted to reply:

"It certainly looks *very* strange," said Mrs. Drayton.

It was with the turning of her front-door key that Miss Lydia made public confession of secrecy – although she had resigned herself to it, privately, three months before. The Secret had taken possession of her one hazy September evening, as she was sitting on her front doorstep, slapping her ankles when a mosquito discovered them, and watching the dusk falling like a warm veil across the hills. The air was full of the scent of evening primroses, and Miss Lydia, looking at a clump of them close to the step, could see the pointed buds begin to unfurl, then hesitate, then tremble, then opening with a silken burst of sound, spill their perfume into the twilight. Except for the crickets, it was very still. Once in a while some one plodded down the road, and once, when it was quite dark, Mr. Smith's victoria rumbled past, paused until the iron gates of his driveway swung open, then rumbled on to his big, handsome house. He was one of the new Smiths, having lived in Old Chester hardly twenty years; when he came he brought his bride with him – a Norton, she was, from New England. A nice enough

woman, I suppose, but not a Pennsylvanian. He and his wife built this house, which was so imposing that for some time they were thought of, contemptuously, as the *rich* Smiths. But by and by Old Chester felt more kindly and just called them the new Smiths. Mrs. Smith died when their only child, Mary, was a little girl, and Mr. Smith grew gradually into our esteem. The fact was, he was so good-looking and good-humored and high-tempered (he showed his teeth when he was in a rage, just as a dog does) Old Chester had to like him – even though it wished he was a better landlord to Miss Lydia, to whom he rented a crumbling little house just outside his gates. In matters of business Mr. Smith exacted his pound of flesh – and he got it! In Lydia's case it sometimes really did represent "flesh," for she must have squeezed her rent out of her food. Yet when, after her frightful extravagance in giving that party on money we had given her for the rebuilding of her chimney, Mr. Smith rebuilt it himself, and said she was a damned plucky old bird. – "Looks like a wet hen," said Mr. Smith, "but plucky! plucky!" – After that, our liking for him became quite emphatic. Not that Old Chester liked his epithets or approved of his approval of Miss Lydia's behavior (she bought kid gloves for her party, if you please! and a blue-silk dress; and, worse than all, presents for all Old Chester, of canary birds and pictures and what not, *all out of our hundred dollars!*) – we did not like the laxity of Mr. Smith's judgments upon the Grasshopper's conduct, but we did approve of his building her chimney, because it saved us from putting our hands in our own pockets again.

In the brown dusk of the September evening, Miss Lydia, watching her landlord roll past in his carriage, gave him a friendly nod. "He's nice," she said, "and so good-looking!" Her eyes followed him until, in the shadows of the great trees of the driveway, she lost sight of him. Then she fell to thinking about his daughter, a careless young creature, handsome and selfish, with the Smith high color and black eyes, who was engaged to be married to another handsome young creature, fatter at twenty-three than is safe for the soul of a young man. Miss Lydia did not mind Carl's fat because she had a heart for lovers. Apparently her own serial and unhappy love affair had but increased her interest in happier love affairs. To be sure, Mary's affair had had the zest of a little bit of unhappiness – just enough to amuse older people. The boy had been ordered off by his firm in Mercer, at a day's notice, to attend to some business in Mexico, and the wedding, which was to have been in April, had to be postponed for six months. Carl had been terribly down in the mouth about it, and Mary, in the twenty-four hours given them for farewells, had cried her eyes out, and even, at the last minute, just before her young man started off, implored her father to let them get married – which plea, of course, he laughed at, for the new Mr. Smith was not the sort of man to permit his only daughter to be married in such hole-and-corner fashion! As it happened, Carl got back, quite unexpectedly, in September – but his prospective father-in-law was obdurate.

"It won't hurt you to wait. 'Anticipation makes a blessing dear!' December first you can have her," said the new Mr. Smith, much amused by the young people's doleful sentimentality.

Miss Lydia, now, slapping the mosquitoes, and thinking about the approaching "blessing," in friendly satisfaction at so much young happiness being next door to her, hugged herself because of her own blessings.

"I don't want to brag," she thought, "but certainly I am the luckiest person!" To count up her various pieces of luck (starting with the experience of being jilted): She had a nice landlord who looked like Zeus, with his flashing black eyes and snow-white hair and beard. And she had so many friends! And she believed she could manage to make her black alpaca last another winter. "It is spotted," she thought, "but what real difference does a spot make?" (Miss Lydia was one of those rare people who have a sense of the relative values of life.) "It's a warm skirt," said Miss Lydia, weighing the importance of that spot with the expense of a new dress; "and, anyway, whenever I look at it, it just makes me think of the time I spilled the cream down the front at Harriet Hutchinson's. What a good time I had at Harriet's!" After that she reflected upon the excellent quality of her blue silk. "I shall probably wear it only once or twice a year; it ought to last me my lifetime," said Miss Lydia... It was just as she reached this blessing that, somewhere in the shadows, a quivering voice called,

"Miss Sampson?" and out of the darkness of the Smith driveway came a girlish figure. The iron gates clanged behind her, and she came up the little brick path to Miss Lydia's house with a sort of rush, a sort of fury; her voice was demanding and frightened and angry all together. "Miss Lydia!"

Miss Lydia, startled from her blessings, screwed up her eyes, then, recognizing her visitor, exclaimed: "Why, my dear! What is the matter?" And again, in real alarm, "What *is* it?" For Mary Smith, dropping down on the step beside her, was trembling. "My dear!" Miss Lydia said, in consternation.

"Miss Sampson, something – something has happened. A – a – an accident. I've come to you. I didn't know where else to go." She spoke with a sort of sobbing breathlessness.

"You did just right," said Miss Lydia, "but what – "

"You've got to help me! There's nobody else."

"Of course I will! But tell me – "

"If you don't help me, I'll die," Mary Smith said. She struck her soft clenched fist on her knee, then covered her face with her hands. "But you must promise me you won't tell? Ever – ever!"

"Of course I won't."

"And you'll help me? Oh, say you'll help me!"

"Have you and he quarreled?" said Miss Lydia, quickly. Her own experience flashed back into her mind; it came to her with a little flutter of pride that this child – she was really only a child, just nineteen – who was to be married so soon, trusted to her worldly wisdom in such matters, and came for advice.

"She hasn't any mother," Miss Lydia thought, sympathetically. "If you've quarreled, you and he," she said, putting her little roughened hand on Mary's soft, shaking fist, "tell him you're sorry. Kiss and make up!" Then she remembered why she and her William had not kissed and made up. "Unless" – she hesitated – "he has done something that isn't nice?" ("Nice" was Miss Lydia's idea of perfection.) "But I'm sure he hasn't! He seemed to me, when I saw him, a very pleasing young man. So kiss and make up!"

The younger woman was not listening. "I had to wait all day to come and speak to you. I've been frantic —*frantic*– waiting! But I couldn't have anybody see me come. They would have wondered. If you don't help me – "

"But I will, Mary, I will! Don't you love him?"

"*Love* him?" said the girl. "My God!" Then, in a whisper, "If I only hadn't loved him —*so much*... I am going to have a baby."

It seemed as if Miss Lydia's little friendly chirpings were blown from her lips in the gust of these appalling words.

Mary herself was suddenly composed. "They sent him off to Mexico at twenty-four hours' notice; it was cruel – cruel, to send him away! and he came to say good-by – And... And then I begged and begged father to let us get married; even the very morning that he went away, I said: 'Let us get married to-day. Please, father, *please!*' And he wouldn't, he wouldn't! He wanted a big wedding. Oh, what did I care about a big wedding! Still – I never supposed – But I went to Mercer yesterday and saw a doctor, and – and found out. I couldn't believe it was true. I said I'd die if it was true! And he said it was... So then I rushed to Carl's office... He was frightened – for me. And then we thought of you. And all day to-day I've just walked the floor – waiting to get down here to see you. I couldn't come until it was dark. Father thinks I'm in bed with a headache. I told the servants to tell him I had a headache... We've got to manage somehow to make him let us get married right off. But – but even that won't save me. It will be known. It will be known – in January."

Miss Lydia was speechless.

"So you've got to help me. There's nobody else on earth who can. Oh, you must – you must!"

"But what can I do?" Miss Lydia gasped.

"Carl and I will go away somewhere. Out West where nobody knows us. And then you'll come. And you'll take —*It*. You'll take care of it. And you can have all the money you want."

"My dear," Miss Lydia said, trembling, "this is very, very dreadful, but I – "

The girl burst into rending crying. "Don't you – suppose *I* know that it's – it's – it's dreadful?"

"But I don't see how I can possibly – "

"If you won't help me, I'll go right down to the river. Oh, Miss Lydia, help me! Please, *please* help me!"

"But it's impos – "

Mary stopped crying. "It isn't. It's perfectly possible! You'll simply go away to visit some friends – "

"I haven't any friends, except in Old Chester – "

"And when you come back you'll bring —*It* with you. And you'll say you've adopted it. You'll say it's the child of a friend."

Miss Lydia was silent.

"If you won't help me," Mary burst out, "I'll – "

"Does anybody know?" said Miss Lydia.

"No."

"Oh, my dear, my dear! You must tell your father."

"My *father*?" She laughed with terror.

Then Miss Lydia Sampson did an impossible thing – judging from Old Chester's knowledge of her character. She said, "He's got to know or I won't help you."

Mary's recoil showed how completely, poor child! she had always had her own way; to be crossed now by this timid old maid was like going head-on into a gray mist and finding it a stone wall. There was a tingling silence. "Then I'll kill myself," she said.

Miss Lydia gripped her small, work-worn hands together, but said nothing.

"Oh, please help me!" Mary said.

"I will – if you'll tell your father or Doctor Lavendar. I don't care which."

"Neither!" said the girl. She got on her feet and stood looking down at little shabby Miss Lydia sitting on the step with her black frizette tumbling forward over one frightened blue eye. Then she covered her face with those soft, trembling hands, all dimpled across the knuckles.

"Carl wanted to tell. He said, 'Let's tell people I was a scoundrel – and stand up to it.' And I said, 'Carl, I'll die first!' And I will, Miss Lydia. I'll die rather than have it known. Nobody must know – ever."

Miss Lydia shook her head. "Somebody besides me must know." Then very faintly she said, "*I'll* tell your father." There was panic in her voice, but Mary's voice, from behind the dimpled hands, was shrill with panic:

"You mustn't! Oh, you promised not to tell!"

Miss Lydia went on, quietly, "He and I will decide what to do."

"No, no!" Mary said. "He'll kill Carl!"

"I shouldn't think Carl would mind," said Miss Lydia.

The girl dropped down again on the step. "Oh, what shall I do – what shall I do – what shall I do? He'll hate me."

"He'll be very, very unhappy," said Miss Lydia; "but he'll know what must be done. I don't. And he'll forgive you."

"He won't forgive Carl! Father never forgives. He says so! And if he won't forgive Carl he mustn't forgive me!" She hid her face.

There was a long silence. Then she said, in a whisper, "When will you.. tell him?"

"To-night."

Again she cringed away. "Not to-night! Please not to-night. Oh, you promised you wouldn't tell! I can't bear – Let me think. I'll write to Carl. No! No! Father *mustn't* know!"

"Listen," said Lydia Sampson; "you must get married right off. You can't wait until December. That's settled. But your father must manage it so that nobody will suspect – anything. Understand?"

"I mean to do that, anyway, but – "

"Unless you tell a great many small stories," said little, truthful Miss Lydia, "you can't manage it; but your father will just tell one big story, about business or something. Gentlemen can always tell stories about business, and you can't find 'em out. The way we do about headaches. Mr. Smith will say business makes it necessary for him to hurry the wedding up so he can go away to – any place. See?"

Mary saw, but she shook her head. "He'll kill Carl," she said again.

"No, he won't," said Miss Lydia, "because then everything would come out; and, besides, he'd get hanged."

Again there was a long silence; then Mary said, suddenly, violently:

"Well —*tell him.*"

"Oh, my!" said Miss Lydia, "my! my!"

But she got up, took the child's soft, shrinking hand, and together in the hazy silence of the summer night they walked – Miss Lydia hurrying forward, Mary holding back – between the iron gates and up the driveway to the great house.

Talk about facing the cannon's mouth! When Miss Sampson came into the new Mr. Smith's library he was sitting in a circle of lamplight at his big table, writing and smoking. He looked up at her with a resigned shrug. "Wants something done to her confounded house!" he thought. But he put down his cigar, got on his feet, and said, in his genial, wealthy way:

"Well, my good neighbor! How are you?"

Miss Lydia could only gasp, "Mr. Smith – " (there was a faint movement outside the library door and she knew Mary was listening). "Mr. Smith – "

"Sit down, sit down!" he said. "I am afraid you are troubled about something?"

She sat down on the extreme edge of a chair, and he stood in front of her, stroking his white beard and looking at her, amused and bored, and very rich – but not unkind.

"Mr. Smith – " she faltered. She swallowed two or three times, and squeezed her hands together; then, brokenly, but with almost no circumlocution, she told him..

There was a terrible scene in that handsome, shadowy, lamplit room. Miss Lydia emerged from it white and trembling; she fairly ran back to her own gate, stumbled up the mossy brick path to her front door, burst into her unlighted house, then locked the door and bolted it, and fell in a small, shaking heap against it, as if it barred out the loud anger and shame which she had left behind her in the great house among the trees.

While Mary had crouched in the hall, her ear against the keyhole, Miss Lydia Sampson had held that blazing-eyed old man to common sense. No, he must *not* carry the girl to Mercer the next day, and take the hound by the throat, and marry them out of hand. No, he must *not* summon the scoundrel to Old Chester and send for Doctor Lavendar. No, he must *not* have a private wedding... "They must be married in church and have white ribbons up the aisle," gasped Miss Lydia, "and – and rice. Don't you understand? And it isn't nice, Mr. Smith, to use such language before ladies."

It was twelve o'clock when Miss Lydia, in her dark entry, went over in her own mind the "language" which had been used; all he had vowed he would do, and all she had declared he should not do, and all Mary (called in from the hall) had retorted as to the cruel things that had been done to her and Carl "which had just driven them *wild!*" And then the curious rage with which Mr. Smith had turned upon his daughter when she cried out, "Father, make her promise not to tell!" At that the new Mr. Smith's anger touched a really noble note:

"What! Insult this lady by asking for a 'promise'? Good God! madam," he said, turning to Miss Sampson, "is this girl mine, to offer such an affront to a friend?"

At which Miss Lydia felt, just for an instant, that he *was* nice. But the next moment the thought of his fury at Mary made her feel sick. Remembering it now, she said to herself, "It was awful in him to show his teeth that way, and to call Mary —*that*." And again, "It wasn't gentlemanly in him to use an indelicate word about the baby." Miss Lydia's mind refused to repeat two of the new Mr. Smith's words. The dreadfulness of them made her forget his momentary chivalry for her. "Mary is only a child," she said to herself; "and as for the baby, I'll take care of the little thing; I won't let it know that its own grandfather called it – No, it wasn't nice in Mr. Smith to say such words before a young lady like Mary, or before me, either, though I'm a good deal older than Mary. I'm glad I told him so!" (Miss Lydia telling Zeus he wasn't "nice"!)

This September midnight was the first Secret which pounced upon Miss Lydia. The next was the new Mr. Smith's short and terrible interview with his prospective son-in-law: "You are never to set foot in this town." And then his order to his daughter: "Nor you, either, unless you come without that man. And there are to be no letters to or from Miss Sampson, understand that! I am not going to have people putting two and two together."

Certainly no such mental arithmetic took place at the very gay Smith wedding in the second week in September – a wedding with white ribbons up the aisle! Yes, and a reception at the big house! and rice! and old slippers!

But when the gayety was over, and the bride and groom drove off in great state, Miss Lydia waved to them from her front door, and then stood looking after the carriage with strange pitifulness in her face. How much they had missed, these two who, instead of the joy and wonder and mystery of going away together into their new world, were driving off, scarcely speaking to each other, tasting on their young lips the stale bitterness of stolen fruit! After the carriage was out of sight Miss Lydia walked down the road to the rectory, carrying, as was the habit of her exasperatingly generous poverty when calling on her friends, a present, a tumbler of currant jelly for Doctor Lavendar. But when the old man remonstrated, she did not, as usual, begin to excuse herself. She only said, point-blank:

"Doctor Lavendar, is it ever right to tell lies to save other people?"

Doctor Lavendar, jingling the happy bridegroom's two gold pieces in his pocket, said: "What? What?"

"Not to save yourself," said Miss Lydia; "I know you can't tell lies to save yourself."

Doctor Lavendar stopped jingling his gold pieces and frowned; then he said: "Miss Lydia, the truth about ourselves is the only safe way to live. If other folks want to be safe let them tell their own truths. It doesn't often help them for us to do it for 'em. My own principle has been not to tell a lie about other folks' affairs, but to reserve the truth. Understand?"

"I think I do," said Miss Lydia, faintly, "but it's difficult."

Doctor Lavendar looked at his two gold pieces thoughtfully. "Lydia," he said, "it's like walking on a tight rope." Then he chuckled, dismissed the subject, and spread out his eagles on the table. "Look at 'em! Aren't they pretty? You see how glad Mary's young man was to get her. I'll go halves with you!"

Her recoil as he handed her one of the gold pieces made him give her a keen look; but all she said was: "Oh *no!* I wouldn't touch it!" Then she seemed to get herself together: "I don't need it, thank you, sir," she said.

When she went away Doctor Lavendar, looking after her, thrust out his lower lip. "*Lydia* not 'need' an eagle?" he said. "How long since?" And after a while he added, "Now, what on earth – ?"

Old Chester, too, said, "What on earth – ?" when, in December, Miss Lydia turned the key in her front door and, with her carpetbag and bandbox, took the morning stage for Mercer.

And we said it again, a few weeks later, when Mrs. Barkley received a letter in which Miss Lydia said she had been visiting friends in Indiana and had been asked by them to take care of a beautiful baby boy, and she was bringing him home with her, and she hoped Mrs. Barkley would give her some advice about taking care of babies, for she was afraid she didn't know much – ("Much'?"

Mrs. Barkley snorted. "She knows as much about babies as a wildcat knows about tatting!") – and she was, as ever, Mrs. Barkley's affectionate Lyddy.

The effect of this letter upon Old Chester can be imagined. Mrs. Drayton said, "What I would like to know is, *whose baby is it?*"

Mrs. Barkley said in a deep bass: "Where will Lyddy get the money to take care of it? As for advising her, I advise her to leave it on the doorstep of its blood relations!"

Doctor Lavendar said: "Ho, hum! Do you remember what the new Mr. Smith said about her when she gave her party? Well, I agree with him!" Which (if you recall Mr. Smith's exact words) was really a shocking thing for a minister of the gospel to say!

Mrs. William King said, firmly, that she called it murder, to intrust a child to Miss Lydia Sampson. "She'll hold it upside down and never know the difference," said Mrs. King; and then, like everybody else, she asked Mrs. Drayton's question "Whose baby is it?"

There were many answers, mostly to the effect that Lydia was so scatterbrained – as witness her "party," and her blue-silk dress, and her broken engagements, etc., etc., that she was perfectly capable of letting anybody shove a foundling into her arms! Mrs. Drayton's own answer to her question was that the whole thing looked queer – "not that I would imply anything against poor Lydia's character, but it looks *queer*; and if you count back – "

Miss Lydia's reply – for of course the question was asked her as soon as she and the baby, and the bandbox and the carpetbag got off the stage one March afternoon – Miss Lydia's answer was brief: "A friend's."

She did emerge from her secrecy far enough to say to Mrs. Barkley that she was to receive "an honorarium" for the support of the little darling. "Of course I won't spend a cent of it on myself," she added, simply.

"Is it a child of shame?" said Mrs. Barkley, sternly.

Miss Lydia's shocked face and upraised, protesting hands, answered her: "My baby's parents were married persons! After they – passed on, a friend of theirs intrusted the child to me."

"When did they die?"

Miss Lydia reflected. "I didn't ask the date."

"Well, considering the child's age, the mother's death couldn't have been very long ago," Mrs. Barkley said, dryly.

And Miss Lydia said, in a surprised way, as if it had just occurred to her: "Why, no, of course not! It was an accident," she added.

"For the mother?"

"For both parents," said Miss Sampson, firmly. And that was all Old Chester got out of her.

"Well," said Mrs. Drayton, "I am always charitable, but uncharitable persons might wonder... It was last May, you know, that that Rives man deserted her at the altar."

"Only fool persons would wonder anything like that about Lydia Sampson!" said Mrs. Barkley, fiercely... But even in Old Chester there were two or three fools, so for their especial benefit Mrs. Barkley, who had her own views about Miss Sampson's wisdom in undertaking the care of a baby, but who would not let that Drayton female speak against her, spread abroad the information that Miss Lydia's baby's parents, who had lived out West, had both been killed at the same time in an accident.

"What kind?"

"Carriage, I believe," said Mrs. Barkley; "but they left sufficient money to support the child. So," she added, "Old Chester need have no further anxiety about Lydia's poverty. Their names? Oh – Smith."

She had the presence of mind to tell Lydia she had named the baby, and though Miss Lydia gave a little start – for she had thought of some more distinguished name for her charge – "Smith," and the Western parents and the carriage accident passed into history.

CHAPTER II

DURING the first year that the "Smith" baby lived outside the brick wall of Mr. Smith's place, the iron gates of the driveway were not opened, because business obliged Mr. Smith to be in Europe. (Oh, said Old Chester, so that was why Mary's wedding had to be hurried up?) When he returned to his native land he never, as he drove past, looked at the youngster playing in Miss Lydia's dooryard. Then once Johnny (he was three years old) ran after his ball almost under the feet of the Smith horses, and as he was pulled from between the wheels his grandfather couldn't help seeing him.

"Don't do that tomfool thing again!" the old man shouted, and Johnny, clasping his recovered ball, grinned at him.

"He sinks Johnny 'f'aid," the little fellow told Miss Lydia.

A month or two afterward Johnny threw a stone at the victoria and involuntarily Mr. Smith glanced in the direction from which it came. But, of course, human nature being like story books, he did finally notice his grandson. At intervals he spoke to Miss Lydia, and when Johnny was six years old he even stopped one day long enough to give the child a quarter. Mr. Smith had aged very much after his daughter's marriage – and no wonder, Old Chester said, for he must be lonely in that big house, and Mary never coming to see him! Such behavior on the part of a daughter puzzled Old Chester. We couldn't understand it – unless it was that Mr. Smith didn't get along with his son-in-law? And Mary, of course, didn't visit her father because a dutiful wife always agrees with her husband! A sentiment which places Old Chester chronologically.

The day that Mr. Smith bestowed the quarter upon his grandson he spoke of his daughter's "dutifulness" to Miss Lydia. Driving toward his house, he overtook two trudging figures, passed them by a rod or two, then called to the coachman to stop. "I'll walk," he said, briefly, and waited, in the dust of his receding carriage until Miss Lydia and her boy reached him. Johnny was trudging along, pulling his express wagon, which was full of apples picked up on the path below an apple tree that leaned over the girdling wall of the Smith place.

As Miss Lydia approached her landlord her heart came up in her throat; it always did when she saw him, because she remembered the Olympian thunders he had loosed on that awful night six years ago.

"How do?" said Mr. Smith. His dark eyes under bristling, snow-white eyebrows blazed at her. He didn't notice the little boy.

"How do you do?" said Miss Lydia, in a small voice. She looked tousled and breathless and rather spotted, and so little that Mr. Smith must have felt he could blow her away if he wanted to. Apparently he didn't want to. He only said:

"You – ah, never hear from – ah, my daughter, I suppose, Miss Sampson?"

"No, sir," said Miss Lydia.

"She doesn't care to visit me without her husband, and I won't have him under my roof!" His lip lifted for an instant and showed his teeth. "I see her when I go to Philadelphia, and she writes me duty letters occasionally, but she never mentions – "

"Doesn't she?" said Miss Lydia.

"I don't, either. But I just want to say that if you ever need any – ah, extra – "

"I don't, thank you."

Then, reluctantly, the flashing black eyes looked down at Johnny. "Doesn't resemble – anybody? Well, young man!"

"Say, 'How do you do?' Johnny," Miss Lydia commanded, faintly.

"How do?" Johnny said, impatiently. He was looking over his apples and, discovering some bruised ones, frowned and threw them away.

"Where did you get your apples?" said Mr. Smith.

"On the road," said Johnny; "they ain't yours when they drop on the road."

"Say 'aren't,' Johnny," said Miss Lydia. "It isn't nice to say 'ain't.'"

"Why aren't they mine?" said the old man. He was towering up above the two little figures, his feet wide apart, his hands behind him, switching his cane back and forth like a tail.

"'Cause I've got 'em," Johnny explained, briefly.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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