

Richards Laura Elizabeth Howe

Mrs. Tree's Will



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CHAPTER I

THE WILL ITSELF

"Suppose you tell me all about it, Mr. Hollopeter!" said Mr. Bliss.

Mr. Homer Hollopeter sighed deeply; wiped his brow with a sky-blue article, evidently under the impression that it was a pocket-handkerchief; sighed again yet more deeply on perceiving that it was a necktie; put it back in his pocket, and looked plaintively at the minister.

"I should be pleased to do so, Mr. Bliss," he said. "It would be – a relief; a – an unburdening; an – outlet to imprisoned nature."

"You see," the little minister went on soothingly, "our dear old friend's death occurring while I was away, and I returning only just in time for the funeral, I have not really heard the particulars yet. I might – that is – Mrs. Weight kindly called on me last evening, probably with a view to giving me some information, but I was unable to see her, and I should prefer to hear from you how it all happened."

"Yes – a – yes!" said Mr. Homer, nervously. "Mrs. Weight is a – a person – a – in short, she is a person not connected with the family. Well, Mr. Bliss, the end came very suddenly; very suddenly indeed. It was a great shock; a great – blow; a great – unsettling of the equilibrium of daily life. The village has never known such a sensation, sir, never."

"Mrs. Tree died in the evening, I believe?" said Mr. Bliss.

"At nine o'clock, sir," said Mr. Homer. "Jocko, the parrot, had had some trifling indisposition, and Cousin Marcia had sent for Miss Penelope Pardon, who, as you are doubtless aware, has some knowledge of the feathered tribes and their peculiar ailments. It chanced that I came in to bring a letter, which would, I fancied, give Cousin Marcia singular pleasure. It was from little Vesta – I would say from Mrs. Geoffrey Strong, Mr. Bliss: she has always been a favorite niece – grandniece, I should say, of Mrs. Tree. I found my cousin somewhat excited; she was speaking to Miss Pardon with emphasis, and, as I entered, she struck the floor with her stick and said: 'Cat's foot! don't tell me! folderol!' and other expressions of that nature, as was her custom when moved. Seeing me, she turned upon me with some abruptness and addressed me in the following words: 'Well, Homer, here you are mooning about as usual. You ought to be in a cage, and have Penny to take care of you. How would you like this for a cage?' She waved her stick round the room, and then, grasping it nervously, shook it at me with violence.

"'Homer Hollopeter,' she said, 'what is the name of this village?'

"Somewhat startled at this outburst, I repeated her remark. 'The name, Cousin Marcia?'

"'The name!' she said, violently. 'The real name! out with it, ninnyhammer!'

"I replied firmly, – it is a point on which I have always felt strongly, Mr. Bliss, – 'The real name of this village, Cousin Marcia, is Quahaug.'

"Mrs. Tree sat bolt upright in her chair. 'Homer Hollopeter,' she said, 'you have some sense, after all! Hooray for Quahaug!'

"Mr. Bliss, they were her last words. She sat looking at me, erect, vivacious, the very picture of life; and the next instant the stick dropped from her hand. She was gone, sir. The spirit had – departed; – a – removed itself; – a – winged its way to the empyrean."

He paused, half-drew out the blue necktie, then replaced it hurriedly.

"It was a great shock," he said; "I shall never be the same man again, never! Miss Pardon was most kind and attentive. She supplied me with – a – volatile salts, and in other ways ministered to my

outer man till I was somewhat restored; but the inner man, sir, the – a – rainbow-hued spirit, as the poet has it, is – a – bruised; is – a – battered; is – a – marked with the impress of a grievous blow. At my age I can hardly hope to recover the equilibrium which – "

"Come! come! Mr. Hollopeter," said the little minister; "you must not be despondent. Consider, our dear old friend had rounded out her century; the ripe fruit dropped quietly from the bough. It is true that her loss is a grievous one to all our community."

"It is, sir! it is, sir!" said Mr. Homer. "To imagine this community without Cousin Marcia is to imagine the hive without its queen; the – a – flock without its leader; the – a – finny tribe – but this is not a metaphor which can be pursued, Mr. Bliss; and, indeed, I see our friends even now approaching to join in the ceremony – a – the – I may say solemnity, which we have come hither to observe."

The foregoing conversation was held in Mrs. Tree's parlor. I say Mrs. Tree's, advisedly, for, though the bright, energetic spirit that had so lately held sway there was gone, her presence still remained to fill the room. Indeed, this room, with its dim antique richness, its glimmer of gold lacquer, its soft duskiness of brocade and damask, its treasures of rare and precious woods, and, above all, its fragrance of sandalwood and roses, had always seemed the fit and perfect setting for the ancient jewel it held. To the poetic imagination of Mr. Homer Hollopeter, Mrs. Tree had always seemed out of place elsewhere. He had almost grudged the occasions, rare of late years, when she went abroad in her camel's-hair shawl and her great velvet bonnet. There seemed no reason why she should ever stir from her high-backed chair of carved ebony. He saw her in it at this moment, almost as plainly as he had seen her three days ago; the tiny satin-clad figure, erect, alert, the little hands resting on the ebony crutch-stick, the eyes darting black fire, the lips uttering pungent words that bit like cayenne pepper, yet were wholesome in their biting, – was it possible that she was no longer there? Mr. Homer had feared his cousin Marcia more than any earthly thing, but still he had loved her sincerely; and now the tears were in his mild blue eyes as he turned from this vision of her to greet the incoming guests. Since the death of Doctor Stedman and his dear wife the year before, Mr. Homer was Mrs. Tree's only kinsman living in the village, and Doctor Strong, now staying at the Blyth house with his wife, had begged him to take up his quarters at Mrs. Tree's for the present. He had a special reason for asking it, he said. Mr. Homer would find out later what it was. So, meekly and sadly, Mr. Homer had brought a limp carpet-bag, and asked Direxia Hawkes, the old servant, to put him wherever it would be least inconvenient; and the old woman, half-blind with weeping, had fiercely made ready the best bedroom, and was trying with bitter energy to feed him to death.

Who are these who enter the quiet room, greeting Mr. Homer with a silent nod or a low-toned word or two? We know most of them. First come Dr. Geoffrey Strong and Vesta, his wife, a noble-looking pair. Geoffrey holds his head as high, and his eyes are as bright and keen as ever; and, if a silver thread shows here and there in his crisp brown hair, Vesta thinks him none the less handsome for that. There is no silver in Vesta's own hair; the tawny masses are as beautiful as ever. Her figure is a little fuller, as becomes the mother of four. Geoffrey tells the children in confidence that their mother is the exact counterpart of the Venus of Milo, and says he has no doubt that the latter lady had tawny hair. Vesta has put on a simple black dress, but there is no special sign of "mourning" about it.

"If anybody puts on crape for me," Mrs. Tree used to say, "I'll get up and pull it off 'em. So now they know. Nasty, unhealthy stuff! There's a piece to go on the door. Tommy Candy knows where it is; and that's all I'll have."

Here is Tommy Candy now, a tall lad of twenty, walking lame and leaning on a stick; his hair, which used to stand up in stiff spikes all over his head, is brought under some control, but there is no suppressing the twinkle in his gray eyes. Even now, when he is in sincere grief for his best friend, his eyes will twinkle as he looks out of the window and sees the elephantine form of Mrs. Weight lumbering up the garden path. And who is this behind her? Talk of crape, – why, here is a figure literally swathed in it. The heavy veil is only pushed aside to give play to a handkerchief with an inch-deep black border, which is pressed to the eyes; a sob shakes the buxom figure. Who is this grief-

smitten lady? Why, this is Mrs. Maria Darracott Pryor, Mrs. Tree's own and only lawful niece, the Next of Kin. She brushes past Vesta and her husband with a curt nod, rustles across the room, and lays her head on the arm of the ebony chair. At this Homer Hollopeter and Geoffrey Strong both start from their seats. Mr. Homer's gentle eyes gleam with unaccustomed fire; he opens his mouth to speak, but closes it again; for the intruder stops – falters – gives a scared look about her, and, tottering back, subsides on a sofa at the side of the room. Here she sobs ostentatiously behind her handkerchief, and takes eager note of the rest of the company.

She was followed by Mrs. Deacon Weight, from across the way, whom Direxia admitted "this once!" as she said to herself with silent ferocity; William Jaquith and his lovely wife; finally, the lawyer, a brisk, dapper little man, who came in quickly, sat down by the violet-wood table, and proceeded without delay to open his budget.

"I, Marcia Darracott Tree, being of sound mind, which is more than most folks I know are – "

There was a movement, slight but general, among the company. No one quite smiled, but the faces of those who had loved Mrs. Tree lightened, while those of the others stiffened into a rigidity of disapproval. To one and all it seemed as if the ancient woman were speaking to them. The little lawyer paused and gave a quick glance around the room.

"It may be well for me to state in the beginning," he said, "that this instrument, though beyond question irregular in its form of expression, is – equally beyond question – perfectly regular in its substance; an entirely valid instrument. To resume: 'of sound mind,' – I need not repeat the excursus, – 'do hereby dispose of my various belongings, all of which are absolutely and without qualification within my own control and possession, in the following manner, to wit, namely, and any other folderol this man may want to put in.' Ahem! My venerable friend was very pleasant with me while I was drawing up this instrument, – very pleasant; but she insisted on my writing her exact words.

"To Vesta Strong I give and bequeath my jewels, with the exceptions hereinafter specified; my lace; the velvet and satin dresses in the cedar chests; the camel's-hair shawls; the silver, both Darracott and Tree; and anything else in the house that she may fancy, with the exceptions hereinafter mentioned. She'd better not clutter up her house with too many things; it is full enough already, with Blyth and Meredith truck.

"To Geoffrey Strong I give any of my books that he likes, except the blue Keats; the engraved sapphire ring, and fifty thousand dollars.

"Homer Hollopeter is to have the blue morocco Keats, presented by the author to my father, because he has always wanted it and never expected to get it."

The tears brimmed over in Mr. Homer's eyes. "I certainly never did expect this," he said, with emotion. "I have held the precious volume in my hands reverently – a – humbly – a – with abasement of spirit, but I never thought to possess it. I am indeed overcome. Pardon the interruption, sir, I beg of you."

The lawyer gave Mr. Homer a look, half-quizzical, half-compassionate. "Your name occurs again in this instrument, Homer," he said; "I will not say more at present. To resume:

"To Direxia Hawkes I give five thousand dollars and a home in this house as long as she lives, on condition that she never cleans more than one room in it at a time, and that she makes the orange cordial every year according to my rule, without making any fool changes."

Direxia Hawkes, a tiny withered brownie, had been standing by the door since she admitted the last comer. She now threw her apron over her head and began to sob. "Did you ever?" she cried. "Tell me that woman is dead! She's more alive than the hull bilin' of this village, I tell you. Sixty years I've been trying to get a mite of ginger into that cordial, and now I never shall. There! I don't want to no more, now she ain't here to tell me I sha'n't. Oh, dear! Oh, dear!"

Vesta Strong went to the old woman's side and comforted her tenderly. The sobs died away into sniffs, and the lawyer continued:

"To William Jaquith I leave twenty thousand dollars and the house he now occupies; also all the property, real and personal, of my grandson, Arthur Blyth, deceased.

"To my niece, Maria Darracott Pryor," – the little lawyer paused and glanced over his spectacles. With each of the bequests enumerated, Mrs. Pryor had become more and more rigid. The black-edged handkerchief was forgotten, and she sat with her chin raised and her prominent short-sighted eyes glancing from one to another of the fortunate legatees with an expression which, to say the least, was not affectionate. "From envy, hatred, and malice," Geoffrey had whispered a moment before.

"Hush, Geoffrey," said Vesta.

But at the mention of her own name, Mrs. Pryor's expression changed; the rigor yielded to a drooping softness; she heaved a deep sigh and raised the handkerchief to her eyes again.

"Dearest Cousin Marcia!" she murmured; "she remembered even in her closing moments that I was her next of kin; so touching. The Darracott blood – "

"To my niece, Maria Darracott Pryor, I give and bequeath – the sum of – three dollars and sixty-seven cents, being the price of a ticket back where she came from. If she tries to stay in my house, tell her to remember the *last time*."

"I greatly regret these discourteous observations," said the little lawyer, deprecatingly, "but my venerable friend was – a – positively determined on inserting them, and I had no alternative, I assure you."

He looked with some alarm at Mrs. Pryor as he spoke, and, indeed, that lady's countenance was dreadful to look upon. Every part of her seemed to clink and crackle as she rose to her feet, her eyes snapping, her teeth fairly chattering with rage.

"You call this a will, do you?" she cried. "You call this law, do you? We'll see about that. We'll see if the next of kin is to be insulted and trodden upon by a low attorney and a set of beggars on horseback. We'll see – "

But the little lawyer, who came from the neighboring town, had gone to the Academy with Maria Darracott, and, though a man of punctilious courtesy, had no idea of being called a low attorney by any such person. He therefore interrupted her with scant ceremony.

"We must, I fear, postpone discussion," he said, "until the instrument has been heard in its entirety by all present. To resume."

Mrs. Pryor glanced about her with challenging eyes and heaving breast, but, seeing that no one paid much heed to her, all looks being bent on the reader, she subsided once more into her seat, a statue of vindictive protest.

"To Thomas Candy I give five thousand dollars, and another five thousand dollars on his attaining the age of twenty-five if he shall have been able by that time to carry out the plan and maintain the condition now to be specified."

The little lawyer paused again and glanced round the expectant circle. His shrewd brown face was immovable, but his black eyes twinkled in spite of himself.

"I have already observed," he said, "that this instrument is an unusual, I may say, a singular one. My venerable friend was most emphatic in her enunciation of the following – a – condition, which – which I forbear to characterize." He glanced at the empty chair. One would have thought that for him it was not empty. Then he went on:

"The condition now to be specified.

"To Homer Holloper and Thomas Candy I give and bequeath this house and garden, the furniture, etc. (after Vesta Strong has taken what she wants), the collections of foreign woods, uncut gems, butterflies, carved ivories, natural curiosities, shells, coins, etc., etc., etc., to be held by them in trust, and arranged by them as a museum for the perpetual benefit of this village; and I give them over and above the before mentioned legacies two thousand dollars yearly for the maintenance of this museum and for additions thereto: all this on condition that this village shall resume and maintain

its original and true name of Quahaug, which it would never have lost if Captain Tree and I had not been in the South Seas while that old noddy, Melancthon Swain, was minister here.

"All the rest and residue of my estate I give and bequeath to the aforesaid Homer Hollopeter, and I appoint him my residuary legatee, and I hope there's fuss enough about it."

The little lawyer stopped reading and pushed back his chair. In doing so, he may have inadvertently touched the empty chair, for at that instant an ebony crutch-stick, which had been leaning against it, fell forward on the floor with a loud rattle. Mrs. Pryor shrieked and fell into real and violent hysterics. She was supported out of the room by Doctor Strong and his wife. Mrs. Weight rolled out after them, snorting indignant sympathy, and the assembly broke up in confusion.

CHAPTER II

WHAT THE MEN SAID

I have elsewhere described the village post-office, both as it appeared at the time of Mr. Homer Hollopeter's election as postmaster and as later adorned and beautified by him.¹ It had been a labor of love with Mr. Homer, not only to make the office itself pleasant, to transform it, as he said, "into a fitting shrine for the genius of epistolary intercourse," but to make the outside of the building pleasant to the eye. Clematis and woodbine were trained up the walls and round the windows, and the once forlorn-looking veranda was a veritable bower of morning-glory and climbing roses.

On this veranda, the day after the reading of Mrs. Tree's will, the village elders were gathered, as was their custom, awaiting the arrival of the afternoon mail. They sat in a row, their chairs tilted back against the wall, their faces set seaward. The faces were all grave, and a certain solemnity seemed to brood over the little assembly. From time to time one or another would take his pipe from his mouth, and the others would look at him doubtfully, as if half-expecting a remark, but the pipe would be replaced in silence. At length Salem Rock, a massive gray-haired man of dignified and sober aspect, spoke.

"Well, boys," he said, "somebody's got to say something, and, as nobody else seems inclined, I s'pose it's up to me as the oldest here. Not but what I feel like a child to-day, – a little mite of a child. Boys, this village has met with a great loss."

There was a general murmur of "That's so!" "It has." "That's what it's met with!"

"I can't seem to sense it!" Salem Rock continued. "I can't seem to make it anyways real, that Mis' Tree is gone. I can't help but think that if I went there to that house to-day, as I was free to go any time I wanted anything as good advice could give – or help either – or anybody else in this village as ever needed anything – I can't help but think that if I went there to that house to-day I should find Mis' Tree sittin' in her chair, chirk as a chipmunk, and hear her say, 'Now, Salem Rock, what mischief have you been up to?' I was allus a boy to her – we was all boys."

"That's so!" the chorus murmured again. "That was what we was; boys!"

"And when I think," Salem Rock went on, "that I shall never more so go and so find her again – sittin' in that chair – nor hear her so speak – I tell you, boys, it breaks me all up; it doos so."

Again there was a sympathetic murmur; heads were shaken, and feet shuffled uneasily. The men were all glad to have a voice for their grief, but all had not the gift of speech.

"I remember" – Salem Rock was still the speaker; he was a slow, thoughtful man, and gathered momentum as he went on – "the first time ever I saw Mis' Tree, to remember it. I couldn't ha' been more than six years old, and I was sittin' in the front dooryard makin' mud pies, and she came in on some errand to mother. Mother used to spin yarn for her, same as my woman does now – did, I'm obleeged to say. Wal, she had on her grand bunnit and shawl, and I had never seen nothin' like her before. Ma'rm never took me to meetin' till I was seven, and she showed judgment. Wal, sirs, that ancient woman – she wasn't ancient then, of course, but yet she wasn't young, and she appeared ancient to me – looked me over, and spoke up sharp and crisp. 'Stand up, boy,' she says, 'and take your hat off; quick!'

"I tell ye, there didn't no grass grow under me! I was up fast as my legs could scramble.

"That's right!" she says; 'always stand up and take off your hat when a lady comes into the yard.'

"'Be you a lady?' says I. Lord knows what kind of notion I had; children don't always know what they are saying.

"'I am the Queen of the Cannibal Islands!' says she.

¹ "Mrs. Tree."

"I never misdoubted but what she was, and I didn't know what Cannibal Islands meant.

"What's your name?' says I.

"I'll tell you what my husband's name is,' says she. 'His name is

"Chingy Fungy Wong,
Putta-potee da Kubbala Kong,
Flipperty Flapperty Busky Bong,
The King of the Cannibal Islands.'

"Then she went into the house, and I stood starin' after her with my mouth gappin' open. She didn't stay long, and, when she came out again, up I jumps without waitin' to be told. She looks at me ag'in, that quick way she had, like a bird. 'Finished your pie?' says she.

"Yes'm,' says I.

"Is it a good pie?' says she.

"I guess so!' says I.

"I'll buy it,' says she. 'Here's the money!' and she gives me a bright new ten-cent piece, – it was the first ever I had in my life, – and walked off quick and light before ever I could say a word. Well, now, sirs, if children ain't cur'us things! I was a slow child most ways, – ben slow all my life long, but it come over me then quick as winkin', she had paid for that pie, and it was hers, and she'd got to have it. I never said a word, but just toddled after down street, holdin' that mud pie as if it was Thanksgivin' mince. I couldn't catch up with her; she walked almighty fast them days, and my legs were short, but I kep' her red shawl in sight, and I see where she went in. Time I got up to the door it was shut, but I banged on it in good shape, and D'reckshy Hawkes come and opened it. She was allus sharp, D'reckshy was, and she couldn't abide no boys but her two, as she called 'em, Arthur and Willy, and they weren't neither one of 'em born then.

"What do you want, boy?' she says, sharp enough.

"I don't want nothin'!' says I. 'I brung the pie.'

"What pie?' says she.

"Her'n,' says I. 'She bought it off'n me; her that went in just now, with the red shawl.'

"D'reckshy looked me over, and looked at the pie. I make no doubt but she was just goin' to send me about my business, but before she could speak I heard Mis' Tree's voice. She had seen me from the window, I expect.

"D'reckshy Hawkes,' she says, 'take that pie into the pantry and send the child to me.'

"My sakes, Mis' Tree!' said D'reckshy, 'it ain't a pie; it's a *mud* pie!'

"Do as I tell you!' says Mis' Tree, and D'reckshy went; but she give me a shove toward the parlor door, and there I see Mis' Tree sittin' in her chair. That was the first time. Well, sirs, we are all perishable clay."

Another silence fell; the pensive pipes puffed; the keen eyes scanned the prospect.

"Looks as if 'twas tryin' to git up some kind o' weather out there!" said Seth Weaver.

"Doos so!" responded Ebenezer Hoppin. "It's ben tryin' two-three days, but it don't seem to have no pertickler *success*."

"Old Mis' Tree hadn't no use for weather," said Jordan Tooke. "Some women-folks are scairt to death of a rainstorm; you'd think they were afraid of washin' out themselves, same as they be about their clo'es; but she wa'n't that kind; rain or snow, shine or shower, she did what she had a mind to.

"Weather never took no heed of me,' she used to say, 'and I ain't goin' to take no heed of it.' No more she did!"

Seth Weaver shook his head, with a reminiscent chuckle. "Ever hear what she said to that feller that come here one time from Salt Marsh and druv the ten-cent team a spell?"

The others shook their heads and turned toward him with an air of relief. Collective sorrow is embarrassing to men.

"There wa'n't much to him," said Seth, "and what there was was full half the time. He didn't stay here long. This village didn't appreciate him the way he liked to be appreciated. Wal, it was snowin' one day, quite a storm it was, and Mis' Tree had sent for him, – Anthony bein' laid up or somethin'. Ezra Doolittle – that was his name, and it suited him – had bit off more jobs than he could swaller, and when he got round to Mis' Tree's he was half an hour late, and she told him so pretty plain. He had just enough liquor aboard to make him saucy. 'Wal,' he says, 'you're lucky to git me at all. I've druv from Hell to Jerusalem to git here now.'

"Mis' Tree was all ready for him; she spoke up quick as kindlin': 'You'll git back quicker,' she says, 'cause you know the way.'

"I was just drivin' by on my milk route, and she caught sight of me.

"'Seth,' she says, 'I want to go to Mis' Jaquith's. Can you take me?'

"'I'd be pleased to,' says I, 'if you don't mind the pung, Mis' Tree.'

"She was into that pung before you could say 'sausage!'

"'Whip up!' she says; 'get ahead of that feller!' and I laid into my old mare, and off we went kingdom-comin' down the ro'd, me in my old red pung and my buffalo coat, and Mis' Tree in her velvet bunnit and fur cloak, and that feller standin' in the ro'd with his mouth open, same as you were, Salem, with your mud pie. Well, sir, that was a meal o' victuals for me. I sent the old mare along for all she was wuth, and we got down to Jaquith's inside of ten minutes. Pretty good time, considerin' what the ro'd was. Got there, and out that old lady hops like a girl.

"'Good boy, Seth!' she says.

"She wanted to give me a dollar, 'cause she had taken me off my route, but I says, 'I guess not, Mis' Tree!' I says. 'I've ben layin' for you ever since you helped mother when she had the fever, and now I've got my chance!' So she laughs and says, call for her on my way back, and I did; but when I found a fourteen-pound turkey sittin' up against my door Christmas mornin', – I wasn't buyin' turkeys that year myself, – I knowed where it come from, and no words said. But what took me was the way she spoke up to that feller. Now some women would have complained, and some would have scol't, and they'd all have gone with the feller 'cause he had a covered team, – but not she! 'You'll get back quicker,' she says, 'from knowin' the way!' and into my team like a flash. Gorry! that's the kind of woman I like to see."

"You'll never see another like her!" said Salem Rock. "The likes of Mis' Tree never has ben seen and never will be seen, not in this deestrick. Her tongue was as quick as her heart was kind, and when you say that you've said all there is to say. I s'pose there ain't one of us but could tell a dozen stories like yours, Seth. I dunno as it's proper to tell 'em just now," he paused; "and yet," he continued, "I dunno *but* it is. She was – so to say – she was all of a piece. You can't think of her without the sharp way she had."

"That's so," Seth assented; "that's so every time. There wa'n't nobody thought more of Mis' Tree than what I did, but yet what keeps comin' up to me ever since she was laid away is them quick, sharp kind o' things she'd say. Now take what she said to Mis' Nudd, Isril Nudd's widder. You all know what Isril was; he was mean as dirt and sour as pickles. He'd scrimped his wife, and he'd half-starved her, and some said he'd beat her, but I never knew how that was. Anyway, Marthy Nudd had as poor a time of it as any woman in this village, and everybody knew it. And yet, when he died she mourned for him as if he was Moses and Simeon and the Angel Gabriel all in one. Well, she come to Mis' Tree beggin' for the loan of some shawl or bunnit or toggery to wear, I dunno what; and she was goin' on about her poor husband, and how she had tried to do her duty by him, and hoped he knew it now he was in heaven, and all that kind of talk. Old Mis' Tree let her say about so much and then she stopped her. You know the way she'd hit the floor with her stick. Rap! that stick would go, and any one's heart would sit right up in their boosum.

"That'll do, Marthy!" she says. 'Now listen to me. You say Isril is in heaven?'

"Oh, yes'm, yes, Mis' Tree," says Marthy. 'He's numbered with the blest, I don't make no doubt on it.'

"And you've got the four hundred dollars life insurance that you told me was due?"

"Yes'm, that's all safe; my brother's put it in the bank for me.'

"Very well, Marthy Nudd; if you've got Isril into heaven and got four hundred dollars life insurance on him, that's the best piece of work ever you done in your life, or ever will do. Cat's foot!" she says; 'folderol!' she says, 'don't talk to me!' and she shoved her out with her stick and wouldn't hear another word. Gorry! I wouldn't ben Marthy Nudd – "

"Didn't hurt Marthy none, I expect," said Ebenezer Hoppin. "She's one of them kind, sorter betwixt putty and Injia rubber; you can double her up easy, but first thing you know she's out smooth again. Some say she's liable to marry Elihu Wick, over to the Corner. She'd find him some different from Isril."

"What kind of feller is he?" asked Jordan Tooke.

"Oh, a string and shingle man. Give him pork and give him sunset, and he won't ask nothin' more. Marthy won't get no four hundred dollars insurance on him, but he'll go to heaven all right. There isn't a mite o' harm in 'Lihu, and Marthy has earned her rest, I will say."

"Speakin' of insurance," said Salem, slowly, "reminds me we ain't said anything about Mis' Tree's will. It is a sing'lar will, boys."

There was a moment's pause. Heads were shaken and feet were shuffled uneasily.

"Mighty sing'lar," said Hiram Gray.

"Beats all I ever heard of," said Jordan Tooke.

Seth Weaver kept a loyal silence. Salem gave him a look, and, receiving a nod in reply, went on:

"Seth and myself was talkin' it over as we came along, kinder takin' our bearin's, and this is the way it looks to us. Mis' Tree was born in this village, and lived in it a hundred and two years, and died in it; and her folks, the Trees and the Darracotts, have lived and died here since there was a village to die in. Not one of them hundred 'n' two years – since she was of knowledgeable age, – but she was doin' good – in her own way – from the first day of January to the last day of December. Not one of us sittin' here on this piazzy but she's done good *to*, one way or another. Therefore and thereon-account of – " Salem was obviously and justifiably proud of this phrase, and repeated it with evident enjoyment; "therefore and thereon-account of, I say, and Seth says with me, that if Mis' Tree wanted this village should be called Cat's-foot, or Fiddlesticks, or Folderol, or Fudge, I for one and he for another would give our votes to have it so called."

A confusion of tongues ensued, some agreeing, some protesting, but, while the discussion was at its height, the stage drove up and the day's session was over.

CHAPTER III

WHAT THE WOMEN SAID

A few days after this, the Ladies' Society met at the house of Miss Bethia Wax. There had been much discussion among the members of the Society as to whether it were fitting to hold a meeting so soon after the death of the foremost woman of the parish. Mrs. Worritt said she for one would be loth to be found wanting in respect for one who had been, as it were, a mile-stone and a beacon-light in that village. Mrs. Weight, on the other hand, maintained that business was business, and that the heathen in their blindness needed flannel petticoats just as much as they did last week. Miss Wax herself, a lady with a strong sense of the proprieties, was in doubt as to which course would preserve them most strictly. Finally the matter was submitted to Mrs. Geoffrey Strong for decision.

"There is only one wish in my mind, Vesta," said Miss Wax, "and that is to show the highest respect for our venerable friend, and I speak, I am sure, for the whole Society. The question is, how best *to* show it."

Vesta Strong reflected a moment. "I think, Miss Wax," she said, "it will be wisest to hold the meeting. I am quite sure Aunt Marcia would have wished it. But you might, perhaps, give it a rather special character; make it something of a memorial meeting. What do you think of that?"

Miss Wax's face brightened.

"Excellent," she said. "Vesta, I do think that would be excellent. I am real glad I came to you. I will have the room draped in mourning. Tapes has some nice black bombazine, a little injured by water, but – "

Vesta suppressed a shudder. "Oh, no, Miss Wax!" she said. "I wouldn't do that. Aunt Marcia did not like display of any kind, you know. Your pleasant parlors just as they are will be much better, I am sure."

"I do aim at showing my respect!" pleaded Miss Wax. "Perhaps we might all wear a crape rosette, or streamer. What do you think of that?"

But Vesta did not think well even of this, and Miss Wax reluctantly abandoned the plan of official mourning, though determined to show her respect in her own way as regarded her own person. She was a very tall woman, with a figure which, in youth, had been called willowy, and was now unkindly termed scraggy. She had been something of a beauty, and there was a note of the pathetic in her ringlets and the few girlish trinkets she habitually wore, – a coral necklace, which at sixteen had set off admirably the whiteness of her neck, but which at fifty did not harmonize so well with the prevailing sallow tint; a blue enamel locket on a slender gold chain, etc. She was very fond of pink, and could never forget, poor lady, that Pindar Holloper had once called her a lily dressed in rose-leaves. But, though a trifle fantastic, Miss Bethia was as good a soul as ever wore prunella shoes, and her desire to do honor to Mrs. Tree's memory was genuine and earnest. Her soul yearned for the black bombazine hangings, but she was loyal to Vesta's expressed wish, and contented herself with removing certain rose-colored scarfs and sofa-pillows, which on ordinary occasions of entertainment were the delight of her eyes. She had gathered all the white flowers she could find, and had arranged a kind of trophy of silver coffee-spoons on the mantelpiece, surrounding a black velvet band, on which was worked in silver tinsel the inscription:

"HER WE HONOR."

Miss Bethia had meant to have a photograph of Mrs. Tree in the centre of this sombre glory, but no photograph was to be had. Mrs. Tree had stoutly refused to be photographed, or to have her portrait painted in her later years.

"Folderol!" she used to say, when urged by loving friends or relatives. "When I go, I'm going, all there is of me. I shall leave my gowns, because they are good satin, but I'm not going to leave my old rags, nor the likeness of old rags. Cat's foot! don't talk to me!"

So, except the miniature which was Vesta Strong's choicest treasure, the portrait of the brilliant, flashing little beauty whom Ethan Tree named the Pocket Venus when first he saw her, and whom he vowed then and there to woo and win, there was no portrait of Mrs. Tree; but Miss Wax put a cluster of immortelles above the inscription, and hoped it would "convey the idea."

In her own person, as has already been said, Miss Bethia felt that she could brook no dictation, even from Vesta. Accordingly, as the hour of the meeting approached, she arrayed herself in a trailing robe of black cashmere, with long bands of crape hanging from the shoulders. Examining with anxious care her slender stock of trinkets, she selected a mourning brooch of the size of a small saucer, which displayed under glass an urn and weeping willow in the choicest style of hair jewelry, and two hair bracelets, one a broad, massive band clasped with a miniature, the other a chain of globules not unlike the rockweed bladders that children love to dry and "pop" between their fingers. Hair jewelry survived in Elmerton long after it was forgotten in other places. Miss Wax herself was a skilful worker in it, and might often be seen bending over the curious little round table, from the centre of which radiated numerous fine strands of hair, black, brown, or golden, hanging over the edge and weighted with leaden pellets. To see Miss Bethia's long fingers weaving the strands into braids or chains was a quaint and pleasant sight.

Her toilet completed, the good lady surveyed herself earnestly in the oval mirror, gave a gentle sigh, half approval, half regretful reminiscence, and went down to the parlor. Here she seated herself in her favorite chair and her favorite attitude. The chair was an ancient one, of slender and graceful shape; and the attitude – somehow – was a good deal like the chair. Both were as accurate reproductions as might be of a picture that hung over Miss Bethia's head as she sat, the portrait of a handsome young woman with long, black ringlets, arched eyebrows, and dark, expressive eyes. Miss Bethia had been said to resemble this portrait of her great-great-aunt, and the resemblance was one which she was loth to relinquish. Accordingly, she loved to sit under it, in the same chair that the picture showed, leaning one elbow on the same little table, her cheek resting on the same fingers of the same hand, – the index and middle fingers, – while the others curved outward at a graceful angle. When seated thus, somebody was pretty sure to call attention to the resemblance, and not the most ill-natured gossip could grudge Miss Bethia the mild pleasure that beamed in her eyes whenever it was noted.

There might be a slight resemblance, she would say modestly. It had been remarked upon, she might say, more than once. The lady was her relative, and likenesses ran strong in her family.

Tommy Candy had once irreverently named Miss Wax's parlor "the Wax Works," and the name had stuck, as naughty nicknames are apt to do. It was indeed quite a little museum in itself of the fruit of bygone accomplishments. Wax fruit, wax flowers – chiefly roses – in profusion, all carefully guarded by glass; pictures in worsted work, pictures in hair work, all in home-made frames of pinked leather, of varnished acorns, of painted velvet; vases and jars decorated with potichomanie, with decalcomanie, with spatter-work. One would think that not one, but seven, Misses Wax had spent their entire lives in adorning this one room.

But the first guests to arrive on this occasion gave little heed either to the room or to the attitude of their hostess, even though, as usual, Miss Wax sat still for a moment, with an air of gentle appeal, before rising to receive them. Mrs. Deacon Weight is older than when we last met her, and her surname is even more appropriate than it was then; three hundred pounds of too, too solid flesh are encased in that brown alpaca dress, and her inspiration in trimming it with transverse bands of black velvet was not a happy one. Mrs. Weight was accompanied by Miss Eliza Goby, a lady whose high complexion and protruding eyes made her look rather more like a boiled lobster than anything else.

These two ladies, having obeyed the injunction of Miss Wax's handmaid to "lay off their things" in the best bedroom, entered the parlor with an eager air.

Miss Wax, after her little pause, came forward to meet them.

"Good afternoon, Malvina," she said; "Eliza, I am pleased to see you, I am sure. Be seated, ladies, please." She waved her hand gracefully toward a couple of chairs, and resumed her attitude, though more from force of habit and a consciousness that others more appreciative were coming than from any sense of impressing these first comers.

Mrs. Weight seated herself with emphasis, and drew her chair near to that of her hostess, motioning her companion to do likewise.

"Bethia," she said, "we came early o' purpose, because we were wishful to see you alone for a minute before folks came. We want to know what stand you are prepared to take."

"That's it!" said Miss Goby, who had a short, snapping utterance, such as a lobster might have if it were endowed with powers of speech. "What stand you are prepared to take!"

"Stand?" repeated Miss Wax. "I do not quite comprehend you, ladies. I usually rise to receive each guest, and then resume my seat; it seems less formal and more friendly; and it fatigues me very much to stand long," added the poor lady, with a glance at the portrait.

"Land!" said Mrs. Weight. "That isn't what we mean, Bethia. We mean about this will of Mis' Tree's."

"Oh!" said Miss Wax. As she spoke, she sat upright, and the attitude was forgotten.

"We are wishful to know," said Mrs. Weight, "whether you think that the name of a place is to be changed back and forth to suit the fancy of folks as weren't in their right minds, and are dead and buried besides. What I say is for this room only, ladies. I am not one to spread abroad, and I should be lawth indeed to speak ill of the dead, and them I've lived opposite neighbors to for thirty years, – whether neighborly in their actions or not, I will not say. But what I do say is, there's them in this village as has been browbeat and gormineered over for the hull of their earthly sojourn, and *they* don't propose to be browbeat and gormineered over from beyond the grave, in which direction forbid it as a Christian and the widder of a sainted man that I should say."

Before Miss Wax could reply, a murmur of voices was heard in the hall, and the next moment the Society entered in a body. There were women of all ages, from old Mrs. Snow, who now stood in the proud position of oldest inhabitant, down to Annie Lizzie Weight, who was only seventeen. Miss Penny Pardon was there; Mrs. Pottle, the doctor's wife; and little Mrs. Bliss from the parsonage. There were perhaps thirty women in all, representing the best society of Elmerton.

Miss Wax received them with a troubled air, very different from her usual pensive calm. A red spot burned in the centre of each cheek, and her eyes were bright with suppressed excitement. Mrs. Pottle, observing her, decided that she was in for a fever, and cast her mind's eye over the doctor's engagements for the next few weeks. "She's liable to have a long run of it!" said Mrs. Pottle to herself. "I'm thankful that Doctor Strong went back yesterday, so the poor soul will have proper treatment."

This was not a social, but a working, meeting. Every woman came armed with thimble and work-bag, and a large basket being produced, flannel and calico were dealt out by Miss Wax, and all set busily to work. But Miss Wax, instead of taking up her own needle, exchanged a few words with Mrs. Bliss. Mrs. Ware, a sweet-faced woman of fifty, invited by a look, joined them, and there was a low-voiced consultation; then Miss Wax rose and stood under the portrait and beside the mantelpiece with its trophy of black and silver.

"Ladies of the Society," she said; her thin treble voice trembled at first, and she fingered her bead reticule nervously, but she gathered strength as she went on. "Ladies of the Society, I asked our pastor's wife to address you, but Mrs. Bliss has a cold and feels unable so to do. I will therefore say a few words, though well aware how unfitted I am for such a task." She paused, and touched her lips delicately with a black-bordered handkerchief.

"This occasion, ladies, is a mournful one to most – I trust I may say to all – in this village. It is some years since – owing to advancing years – we have seen Her we honor at the meetings of this Society; but she was in former years a prop and a pillar of this Society, as she was of this village; and it is the desire of many, as expressed to me, that this meeting should be a memorial in honor of – of Her we honor, – Mrs. Ethan Tree."

She waved her hand toward the trophy with an air of introducing the ladies to it. For the life of her, little Mrs. Bliss could not help thinking of the Red Queen's introduction: "Pudding – Alice; Alice – Pudding!" Most of the ladies had a confused feeling that they ought to rise, and glanced at each other, half getting their work together, but Mrs. Bliss remained seated, and they followed her example. The little minister's wife had loved Mrs. Tree devotedly, but she had a keen sense of the ludicrous; and, after the unseemly recollections referred to, she could not help recalling certain words spoken to her in a clear, incisive voice not so many weeks ago: "Ladies' Society, child? Bah! Parcel of fools! I get all of their society I want, sitting here in this chair."

"It would have been my wish," Miss Wax continued, "that the Society should have testified *as* a Society to the fact that this was a memorial meeting; it would have been my wish that each lady should wear a crape rosette, or the like of that, in token of mourning; but it was not agreeable to the family, and, if we wear them in our own hearts, ladies, it may do equally as well, if worn sincerely, which I am sure most, if not all, do."

She paused again to sigh and lift the handkerchief, with her favorite delicate action of the third and fourth fingers.

"This small token," she continued, introducing the trophy anew, "is *but* a small one, and I could wish that gold instead of silver were procurable, for gold was the heart of Her we honor, and, though velvet does not precisely describe her manner, ladies, still well we know that out of the fulness of the heart the mouth speaketh, and the heart being golden, the velvet is – a – I am sure – that is to say, velvet and gold are often associated as tokens of richness, and – and the nature of Her we honor was rich in goodness, and – "

Here poor Miss Wax became hopelessly involved, and taking refuge in a fit of coughing, looked imploringly at Mrs. Bliss. Thus silently adjured, the little lady rose, and in a few quiet words expressed the hearty sympathy of all present in Miss Wax's feeling, and their gratitude to her for the graceful tribute she had preferred. A rising vote of thanks was then passed, and the Society settled to their labors.

For some time nothing was heard but requests for the shears and wonderings, who cut this gore? and the like; but the same thought was in all the ladies' minds, and as soon as was practicable the talk began again. Miss Eliza Goby nudged Miss Luella Slocum, a sharp-nosed lady with one eye that rolled like a marble and another that bored like a gimlet.

"You speak, Luella!" she said in a half-whisper. "Speak up and say what you said to me and Mrs. Weight this morning."

"I think Mrs. Weight ought to speak up herself," replied Miss Slocum, in the same tone. "She's older than me; it behooves her, a deacon's widow and all. I don't feel any call to begin, Eliza; though I am ready to testify when it comes my turn."

Apparently Mrs. Weight was of the same opinion, for she now began the attack cautiously.

"The Society having expressed its views on this subject, Miss Wax and ladies, there is another on which I feel we have a call to speak together. As one of the oldest present, and the widder of a sainted man, I may have my own opinions, and they may be of consequence, or they may not; but howbeit, there is them present as has sojourned longer than me in this earthly pilgrimage, and I should wish to hear from Mrs. Philena Snow as to what are her sentiments in regards to changing the name of this village."

Mrs. Snow, an old lady of somewhat bewildered aspect, had learned in the course of eighty-odd years that a decided opinion was sometimes a dangerous thing. Replying to Mrs. Weight's request, she

said that she didn't know as it made any perticklar difference to her what the village was called; she hadn't very much longer to stay in it, she presumed likely. It used to be Quahaug, but some thought that wasn't a pretty sounding name, and she didn't know but Elmerton was prettier; and yet there was others thought – and so the old lady murmured herself away into silence. A confused hubbub of voices arose, but little Mrs. Bliss, saying to herself, "Oh, for one hour of Dundee, – one minute of Mrs. Tree!" rose to the occasion.

"Ladies," she said, "though this village, Elmerton or Quahaug, whichever it is, has grown to seem like home, and a very dear home, to me, I still am comparatively speaking a newcomer. I should be very glad if some one lady would tell me in a few words how and why the change was originally made. Mrs. Ware, perhaps you will be so good!"

Mrs. Ware's gentle face wore a disturbed look, but she responded promptly.

"The change was made many years ago, but I remember it distinctly. The old Indian name was Quahaug, and no one ever thought of any other name till Mr. Swain came to be pastor here. Mrs. Swain had a poetic turn, and she thought Quahaug an awkward-sounding name, and made considerable talk to that effect round the village. A petition to the Legislature was circulated, and many people signed it, and so the name was changed to Elmerton. Mrs. Tree was away at the time, on a voyage around the world, and when she came back she was much incensed, I remember, and expressed herself strongly. I always thought it a pity myself to change the old name."

"Phœbe Blyth was for the change," said Miss Eliza Goby. "Ph[oe]be and I were of one mind on the subject."

"It's the only time you ever were!" thought Miss Wax, but she did not speak the thought.

"Phœbe Blyth had some peculiar ideas," said Mrs. Weight, "but she showed her sense that time. Mis' Swain was a beautiful woman, and her ideas was beautiful similarly. Why, she wrote an elegant poem about it:

"Sure ne'er a village 'neath the sun
More lovely is than Elmerton.'

Those were the first lines. I've got it copied out at home. I never thought Homer Hollopeter's poetry was a patch on Mis' Swain's."

"Homer was strong against the change," said Miss Wax. "Both Homer and Pindar, and two more intellectual men this village has never seen. I don't wish to say anything against Mrs. Swain, but I for one never thought she had anything like Homer's gift. He was asked to write a poem on the subject, but he said his Muse scorned such a name as Elmerton."

"It's the first thing ever his Muse did scorn, I guess," retorted Miss Luella Slocum. "It's my belief Homer would write verses to a scarecrow if he had nothing else to write about."

"I didn't know he ever wrote any to you, Luella," said Miss Penny Pardon, her usually gentle spirit roused to anger by this attack on one whom she considered a great though unappreciated poet.

"Ladies! ladies!" said little Mrs. Bliss, "pray let us keep to the point. We are not here to discuss Mr. Hollopeter's poetry. Perhaps we would better change the subject altogether, and confine our conversation to subjects connected with our work."

"Excuse *me*, Mrs. Bliss!" said Mrs. Weight. "Though well aware that since the death of the sainted man whose name I bear, I am of no account in this village, still I *have* my feelings and I *am* a human being, – deny it who can, – and, while I have breath to speak, – which by reason of spasms growing on me may not be long, – I will protest against changing the name of this village back to heathen and publican names, from which it was rescued by them as now fills mansions in the sky. I would not wish to be understood as reflecting on anybody, and I name no names; but them as has lived on flowery beds of ease, no matter how long, cannot expect to gormineer over this village to all eternity; and so I proclaim, – hear me who will."

Mrs. Weight had risen to her feet, and stood heaving and panting, a mountain of protest. Mrs. Bliss would have interfered, to pour oil on the troubled meeting, but before she could speak the tall form of Miss Bethia Wax had risen, and stood rigid, pointing to the trophy.

"Ladies of the Society," she said, "and our honored pastor's wife: I cannot sit still and listen to words which are aimed at Her we honor. This is a memorial meeting, sanctioned as such by the family of Her we honor. She died as she lived, with this village on her mind and in her heart, and she has given of her basket and her store, her treasures of earth and treasures of sea, and gems of purest ray serene; she has given all, save such as needed by the family, to this village, to have and to hold till death do them part; and what I say is, shame upon us if we cannot obey the wishes of Her we honor, our benefactress, who wafts us from the other shore her parting benediction!"

But neither Mrs. Bliss nor Miss Wax could longer stem the tide of speech. It ran, swelled, overflowed, a torrent of talk.

"Never in my born days!"

"I'd like to know who had the right if she hadn't!"

"I s'pose we've got some rights of our own, if we ain't rich in this world's goods."

"I should laugh if we were to change back at this time of day."

"I should like to remind you, Mrs. Weight, that —

""While the lamp holds out to burn,
The vilest sinner may return!""

"Mrs. Bliss and ladies: I have not lived in this village seventy years to be called the vilest sinner in it. I appeal to this society if names is to be called at a meeting where the members are supposed to be Christians — "

But Mrs. Bliss, though little, could, like Hermia, be fierce, and it was in a very peremptory tone that she exclaimed:

"The discussion on this subject is closed. Sister Slocum, will you give out the hymn?" and Miss Luella Slocum, one eye gleaming hatred and the other malice, announced that the Society would now join in singing "Blest be the tie that binds!"

CHAPTER IV MOSTLY GOSSIP

"My dear Doctor Strong: – The deed is done! The selectmen met last night, and voted to memorialize the Legislature in regard to changing the name of the village; and, as the rest is a mere matter of business routine, I think we may regard the thing as settled. So, as dear Mrs. Tree said, 'Hooray for Quahaug!' The vote was not unanimous; that was hardly to be expected. John Peavey was opposed to the change, so was George Goby; but the general sentiment was strong in favor of carrying out Mrs. Tree's wishes. That, of course, is the real issue, and it is beautiful to see the spirit of affection and loyalty that animates the majority of our people. Surely, our beloved old friend has built herself a monument *are perennio* in the hearts of her neighbors.

"I write this hasty line, feeling sure that you and Mrs. Strong will be anxious to hear the outcome of the meeting.

"With kindest regards to both, and affectionate greeting to the little flock, believe me always
"Faithfully yours,
"John Bliss."

The little minister sealed and addressed his note, then took his hat and stick and started for the post-office.

"You won't forget my pink worsted, John!" and Mrs. Bliss popped her pretty head out of the window.

"Certainly not, my dear! certainly not!" said Mr. Bliss, with an air of collecting his wits hurriedly. "Pink worsted; to be sure! At Miss Pardon's, I presume?"

"Of course! Saxony; you have the sample in your pocket, pinned into an envelope. Two skeins, John dear. Now do you think you can get that right? It is a shame to make you do such things, but I cannot leave Baby, and he really needs the jacket."

"Of course, Marietta; of course, my dear! You know I am only too glad to help in little ways; I wish I could do more!"

"It is so little a man can do!" he reflected, as he paced along the village street; "and Marietta's care is incessant. Motherhood is a blessed but a most laborious state."

Arrived at the post-office, he found Seth Weaver perched on a ladder, inspecting the weather-beaten sign-board, which bore the legend, "Elmerton Post-office."

"Good morning, Seth!" said the little minister.

"Same to you, Elder!" replied Seth, taking his pipe from his mouth. "Nice day! I was lookin' to see whether we'd need us a new sign, but I guess this board'll do, come to scrape and plane it. It's a good pine board; stood a lot o' weather, this board has. My father painted this."

"Did he so, Seth?" said Mr. Bliss. "I was not aware that your father was a painter."

"Painter, carpenter, odd-job man, same's me! He learned me all his trades, and too many of 'em. It would be money in my pocket to-day if I didn't know the half of 'em."

Seth sat down on the top round of the ladder – it was a short one – and took out his knife and a bit of soft wood. The minister sighed, thinking of his sermon at home half-written, but accepted the unspoken invitation.

"How is that, Seth?" he asked, cheerfully.

Seth settled himself comfortably – it is not every man who can sit comfortably on a ladder – and, squaring his shoulders, began to whittle complacently.

"Wal, Elder, it stands to reason," he said. "A man can be one thing, or he can be two things; but when he starts out to be the hull string of fish, he ends by not bein' nary one of 'em. It takes all of a thing to make the hull of it; yes, sir. I don't mean that Father was that way; Father was a smart man; and I've tried to make a shift to keep up with the tail of the procession myself; but I tell ye there's ben times when I've wished I didn't know how to handle a livin' thing except my paint-brush. Come spring, I tell ye I lose weight, projeckin' round this village. One wants his blinds painted right off day before yesterday, and another'll get his everlastin' if his roof isn't mended before sundown. It's 'Oh, Seth, when be you comin' to hang that bell-wire?' and 'Seth, where was you yesterday when you wasn't mendin' that gate-post?' and – I dono! sometimes I get so worked up I think I'll do the way Father did. Father never bothered with 'em. He just laid out his week to suit himself. Two days he'd paint, and two days he'd odd-job, and two days he'd fish. Further and moreover, whatever he was doin', he'd do it his own way. Paintin' days, he'd use the paint he had till he used it up. Didn't make no difference what folks said to him; he was just that deaf he only heard what he wanted to, and he didn't care. Gorry! I can see him now, layin' on the blue paint on old Mis' Snow's door, and she screechin' at him, 'Green! green, I tell ye! I want it green!' Old Father, he never took no notice, and that door stayed blue till it wore off. Yes, sir! that was the way to handle 'em; but I can't seem to fetch it. Guess I was whittled out of a softer stick, kind o' popple stuff, without no spunk to it. A woman tells me she must have a new spout to her pump or she'll die, and I'm that kind of fool I think she will, and leave all else to whittle out that pump-spout. Wal, it takes all kinds. That was quite a meetin' last night, Elder."

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