

Richards Laura Elizabeth Howe

Mrs. Tree



Laura Richards

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Laura E. Richards

Mrs. Tree

CHAPTER I. WEDDING BELLS

"Well, they're gone!" said Direxia Hawkes.

"H'm!" said Mrs. Tree.

Direxia had been to market, and, it was to be supposed, had brought home, beside the chops and the soup-piece, all the information the village afforded. She had now, after putting away her austere little bonnet and cape, brought a china basin, and a mystic assortment of white cloths, and was polishing the window-panes, which did not need polishing. From time to time she glanced at her mistress, who sat bolt upright in her chair, engaged on a severe-looking piece of knitting. Mrs. Tree detested knitting, and it was always a bad sign when she put away her book and took up the needles.

"Yes'm; they're gone. I see 'em go. Ithuriel Butters drove 'em over to the Junction; come in yesterday o' purpose, and put up his team at Doctor Stedman's. Ithuriel thinks a sight of Doctor Strong. Yes'm; folks was real concerned to see him go, and her too. They made a handsome couple, if they be both light-complected."

"What are you doing to that window, Direxia Hawkes?" demanded Mrs. Tree, looking up from her knitting with a glittering eye.

"I was cleanin' it."

"I'm glad to hear it. I never should have supposed so from looking at it. Perhaps you'd better let it alone."

"You're a terrible tedious woman to live with, Mis' Tree!" said Direxia.

"You're welcome to go any minute," replied Mrs. Tree.

"Yes'm," said Direxia. "What kind of sauce would you like for tea?"

"Any kind except yours," said Mrs. Tree; and then both smiled grimly, and felt better.

Direxia polished away, still with an anxious eye on the old woman whom she loved fiercely.

"He sent a message to you, last thing before he drove off. He wanted I should tell you – what's this now he said? 'Tell her to keep on growing young till I come back,' that was it. Well, he's a perfect gentleman, that's what he is."

Something clicked in Mrs. Tree's throat, but she said nothing. Mrs. Tree was over ninety, but apart from an amazing reticulation of wrinkles, netted fine and close as a brown veil, she showed little sign of her great age. As she herself said, she had her teeth and her wits, and she did not see what more any one wanted. In her morning gown of white dimity, with folds of soft net about her throat, and a turban of the same material on her head, she was a pleasant and picturesque figure. For the afternoon she affected satin, either plum-colored, or of the cinnamon shade in which some of my readers may have seen her elsewhere, with slippers to match, and a cap suggesting the Corinthian order. In this array, majesty replaced picturesqueness, and there were those in Elmerton who quailed at the very thought of this tiny old woman, upright in her ebony chair, with the acanthus-leaf in finest Brussels nodding over her brows. The last touch of severity was added when Mrs. Tree was found knitting, as on the present occasion.

"Ithuriel Butters is a sing'lar man!" Direxia went on, investigating with exquisite nicety the corner of a pane. "He gave me a turn just now, he did so."

She waited a moment, but no sign coming, continued. "I was to Miss Phœbe 'n' Vesty's when he druv up, and we passed the time o' day. I said, 'How's Mis' Butters now, Ithuriel?' I said. I knew she'd been re'l poorly a spell back, but I hadn't heard for a consid'able time.

"I ain't no notion!" says he.

"What do you mean, Ithuriel Butters?" I says.

"Just what I say," says he.

"Why, where is she?" I says. I thought she might be visitin', you know. She has consid'able kin round here.

"I ain't no idee," says he. 'I left her in the bur'in'-ground, that's all I know.'

"Mis' Tree, that woman has been dead a month, and I never knew the first word about it. They're all sing'lar people, them Butterses. She was a proper nice woman, though, this Mis' Butters. He had hopes of Di-plomy one spell, after his last died —*she* was a reg'lar fire-skull; he didn't have much peace while she lived — died in a tantrum too, they say; scol't so hard she bust a vessel, and it run all through her, and car'd her off — but Di-plomy couldn't seem to change her state, no more'n Miss Phœbe 'n' Vesty.

"My sakes! if there ain't Miss Vesty comin' now. I'll hasten and put away these things, Mis' Tree, and be back to let her in."

Miss Vesta Blyth came soberly along the street and up the garden path. She was a quaint and pleasant picture, in her gown of gray and white foulard, with her little black silk mantle and bonnet. Some thirty years ago Miss Vesta and her sister Miss Phœbe had decided that fashion was a snare; and since then they had always had their clothes made on the same model, to the despair of Prudence Pardon, the dressmaker.

But when one looked at Vesta Blyth's face, one was not apt to think about her clothes; one rather thought, what a pity one must look away from her presently! At least, that was what Geoffrey Strong used to say, a young man who loved Miss Vesta, and who was now gone away with his young wife, leaving sore hearts behind.

Direxia Hawkes came out on the porch to meet the visitor, closing the door behind her for an instant.

"I'm terrible glad you've come," she said. "She's lookin' for you, too, I expect, though she won't say a word. There! she's fairly rusted with grief. It'll do her good to have somebody new to chaw on; she's been chawin' on me till she's tired, and she's welcome to."

"Yes, Direxia, I know; you are most faithful and patient," said Miss Vesta, gently. "You know we all appreciate it, don't you, my good Direxia? I have brought a little sweetbread for Aunt Marcia's supper. Diploma cooked it the way she likes it, with a little cream, and just a spoonful of white wine. There! now I will go in. Thank you, Direxia."

"Dear Aunt Marcia," the little lady said as she entered the room, "how do you do to-day? You are looking so well!"

"I've got the plague," announced Mrs. Tree, with deadly quiet.

"Dearest Aunt Marcia! what can you mean? The plague! Surely you must have mistaken the symptoms. That terrible disease is happily, I think, restricted to —"

"I've got twenty plagues!" exclaimed the old lady. "First there's Direxia Hawkes, who torments my life out all day long; and then you, Vesta, who might know better, coming every day and asking how I am. How should I be? Have you ever known me to be anything but perfectly well since you were born?"

"No, dear Aunt Marcia, I am thankful to say I have not. It is such a singular blessing, that you have this wonderful health."

"Well, then, why can't you let my health alone? When it fails, I'll let you know."

"Yes, dear Aunt Marcia, I will try."

"Bah!" said Mrs. Tree. "You are a good girl, Vesta, but you would exasperate a saint. I am not a saint."

Miss Vesta, too polite to assent to this statement, and too truthful to contradict it, gazed mildly at her aunt, and was silent.

Mrs. Tree, after five minutes of vengeful knitting, rolled up her work deliberately, stabbed it through with the needles, and tossed it across the room.

"Well!" she said, "have you anything else to say, Vesta? I am cross, but I am not hungry, and if I were I would not eat you. Tell me something, can't you? Isn't there any gossip in this tiresome place?"

"Oh, Aunt Marcia, I cannot think of anything but our dear children, Geoffrey and Vesta. We have just seen them off, you know. Indeed, I came on purpose to tell you about their departure, but you seemed – Aunt Marcia, they were sad at going, I truly think they were. It was here they first met, and found their young happiness – the Lord preserve them in it all their lives long! – there were tears in Little Vesta's eyes, dear child! but still, they are going to their own home, and of course they were full of joy too. Oh, Aunt Marcia, I must say, dear Geoffrey looked like a prince as he handed his bride into the carriage."

"Was he in red velvet and feathers?" asked Mrs. Tree. "It wouldn't surprise me in the least."

"Oh, no, dear Aunt Marcia! Nothing, I assure you, gaudy or striking, in the very least. He wore the ordinary dress of a gentleman, not conspicuous in any way. It was his air I meant, and the look of – of pride and joy and youth – ah! it was very beautiful. Vesta was beautiful too; you saw her travelling-dress, Aunt Marcia. Did you not think it charming?"

"The child looked well enough," said Mrs. Tree. "Lord knows what sort of wife she'll make, with her head stuffed full of all kinds of notions, but she looks well, and she means well. I gave her my diamonds; did she tell you that?"

Miss Vesta's smooth brow clouded. "Yes, Aunt Marcia, she told me, and showed them to me. I had not seen them for years. They are very beautiful. I – I confess –"

"Well, what's the matter?" demanded her aunt, sharply. "You didn't want them yourself, did you?"

"Oh! surely not, dear Aunt Marcia. I was only thinking – Maria might feel, with her two daughters, that there should have been some division –"

"Vesta Blyth," said Mrs. Tree, slowly, "am I dead?"

"Dear Aunt Marcia! what a singular question!"

"Do I look as if I were going to die?"

"Surely not! I have rarely seen you looking more robust."

"Very well! When I *am* dead, you may talk to me about Maria and her two daughters; I sha'n't mind it then. What else have you got to say? I am going to take my nap soon, so if you have anything more, out with it!"

Miss Vesta, after a hurried mental review of subjects that might be soothing, made a snatch at one.

"Doctor Stedman came to see the children off. I think he is almost as sorry to lose Geoffrey as we are. It is a real pleasure to see him looking so well and vigorous. He really looks like a young man."

"Don't speak to me of James Stedman!" exclaimed Mrs. Tree. "I never wish to hear his name again."

"Aunt Marcia! dear James Stedman! Our old and valued friend!"

"Old and valued fiddlestick! Who wanted him to come back? Why couldn't he stay where he was, and poison the foreigners? He might have been of some use there."

Miss Vesta looked distressed.

"Aunt Marcia," she said, gently, "I cannot feel as if I ought to let even you speak slightly of Doctor Stedman. Of course we all feel deeply the loss of dear Geoffrey; I am sure no one can feel it more deeply than Phœbe and I do. The house is so empty without him; he kept it full of sunshine and joy. But that should not make us forgetful of Doctor Stedman's life-long devotion and – "

"Speaking of devotion," said Mrs. Tree, "has he asked you to marry him yet? How many times does that make?"

Miss Vesta went very pink, and rose from her seat with a gentle dignity which was her nearest approach to anger.

"I think I will leave you now, Aunt Marcia," she said. "I will come again to-morrow, when you are more composed. Good-by."

"Yes, run along!" said Mrs. Tree, and her voice softened a little. "I don't want you to-day, Vesta, that's the truth. Send me Phœbe, or Malvina Weight. I want something to 'chaw on,' as Direxia said just now."

"The dogs! I was going to say," exclaimed Direxia, using one of her strongest expressions. "You never heard me, now, Mis' Tree!"

"I never hear anything else!" said the old lady. "Go away, both of you, and let me hear myself think."

CHAPTER II. MISS PHŒBE'S OPINIONS

"I cannot see that your aunt looks a day older than she did twenty years ago," said Dr. James Stedman.

Miss Vesta Blyth looked up in some trepidation, and the soft color came into her cheeks.

"You have called on her, then, James," she said. "I am truly glad. How did she – that is, I am sure she was rejoiced to see you, as every one in the village is."

Doctor Stedman chuckled, and pulled his handsome gray beard. "She may have been rejoiced," he said; "I trust she was. She said first that she hoped I had come back wiser than I went, and when I replied that I hoped I had learned a little, she said she could not abide new-fangled notions, and that if I expected to try any experiments on her I would find myself mistaken. Yes, I find her quite unchanged, and wholly delightful. What amazing vigor! I am too old for her, that's the trouble. Young Strong is far more her contemporary than I am. Why, she is as much interested in every aspect of life as any boy in the village. Before I left I had told her all that I knew, and a good deal that I didn't."

"It is greatly to be regretted," said Miss Phœbe Blyth, pausing in an intricate part of her knitting, and looking over her glasses with mild severity, "it is greatly to be regretted that Aunt Marcia occupies herself so largely with things temporal. At her advanced age, her acute interest in – one, two, three, purl – in worldly matters, appears to me lamentable."

"I often think, Sister Phœbe," said Miss Vesta, timidly, "that it is her interest in little things that keeps Aunt Marcia so wonderfully young."

"My dear Vesta," replied Miss Phœbe, impressively, "at ninety-one, with eternity, if I may use the expression, sitting in the next room, the question is whether any assumption of youthfulness is desirable. For my own part, I cannot feel that it is. I said something of the sort to Aunt Marcia the other day, and she replied that she was having all the eternity she desired at that moment. The expression shocked me, I am bound to say."

"Aunt Marcia does not always mean what she says, Sister Phœbe."

"My dear Vesta, if she does not mean what she says at her age, the question is, when will she mean it?"

After a majestic pause, Miss Phœbe continued, glancing at her other hearers:

"I should be the last, the very last, to reflect upon my mother's sister in general conversation; but Doctor Stedman being our family physician as well as our lifelong friend, and Cousin Homer one of the family, I may without impropriety, I trust, dwell on a point which distresses me in our venerable relation. Aunt Marcia is – I grieve to use a harsh expression – frivolous."

Mr. Homer Hollopeter, responding to Miss Phœbe's glance, cleared his throat and straightened his long back. He was a little gentleman, and most of what height he had was from the waist upward; his general aspect was one of waviness. His hair was long and wavy; so was his nose, and his throat, and his shirt-collar. In his youth some one had told him that he resembled Keats. This utterance, taken with the name bestowed on him by an ambitious mother with literary tastes, had colored his whole life. He was assistant in the post-office, and lived largely on the imaginary romance of the letters which passed through his hands; he also played the flute, wrote verses, and admired his cousin Phœbe.

"I have often thought it a pity," said Mr. Homer, "that Cousin Marcia should not apply herself more to literary pursuits."

"I don't know what you mean by literary pursuits, Homer," said Doctor Stedman, rather gruffly. "I found her the other day reading Johnson's Dictionary by candlelight, without glasses. I thought that was doing pretty well for ninety-one."

"I – a – was thinking more about other branches of literature," Mr. Homer admitted. "The Muse, James, the Muse! Cousin Marcia takes little interest in poetry. If she could sprinkle the – a – pathway to the tomb with blossoms of poesy, it would be" – he waved his hands gently abroad – "smoother; less rough; more devoid of irregularities."

"Cousin Homer, could you find it convenient not to rock?" asked Miss Phœbe, with stately courtesy.

"Certainly, Cousin Phœbe. I beg your pardon."

It was one of Miss Phœbe's crosses that Mr. Homer would always sit in this particular chair, and would rock; the more so that when not engaged in conversation he was apt to open and shut his mouth in unison with the motion of the rockers. Miss Phœbe disapproved of rocking-chairs, and would gladly have banished this one, had it not belonged to her mother.

"I have occasionally offered to read to Cousin Marcia," Mr. Homer continued, "from the works of Keats and – other bards; but she has uniformly received the suggestion in a spirit of – mockery; of – derision; of – contumely. The last time I mentioned it, she exclaimed 'Cat's foot!' The expression struck me, I confess, as – strange; as – singular; as – extraordinary."

"It is an old-fashioned expression, Cousin Homer," Miss Vesta put in, gently. "I have heard our Grandmother Darracott use it, Sister Phœbe."

"There's nothing improper in it, is there?" said Doctor Stedman.

"Really, my dear James," said Miss Phœbe, bending a literally awful brow on her guest, "I trust not. Do you mean to imply that the conversation of gentlewomen of my aunt's age is apt to be improper?"

"No, no," said Doctor Stedman, easily. "It only seemed to me that you were making a good deal of Mrs. Tree's little eccentricities. But, Phœbe, you said something a few minutes ago that I was very glad to hear. It is pleasant to know that I am still your family physician. That young fellow who went off the other day seems to have taken every heart in the village in his pocket. A young rascal!"

Miss Phœbe colored and drew herself up.

"Sister Phœbe," Miss Vesta breathed rather than spoke, "James is in jest. He has the highest opinion of –"

"Vesta, I *think* I have my senses," said Miss Phœbe, kindly. "I have heard James use exaggerated language before. Candor compels me to admit, James, that I have benefited greatly by the advice and prescriptions of Doctor Strong; also that, though deploring certain aspects of his conduct while under our roof – I will say no more, having reconciled myself entirely to the outcome of the matter – we have become deeply attached to him. He is" – Miss Phœbe's voice quavered slightly – "he is a chosen spirit."

"Dear Geoffrey!" murmured Miss Vesta.

"But in spite of this," Miss Phœbe continued, graciously, "we feel the ties of ancient friendship as strongly as ever, James, and must always value you highly, whether as physician or as friend."

"Yes, indeed, dear James," said Miss Vesta, softly.

Doctor Stedman rose from his seat. His eyes were very tender as he looked at the sisters from under his shaggy eyebrows.

"Good girls!" he said. "I couldn't afford to lose my best – patients." He straightened his broad shoulders and looked round the room. "When I saw anything new over there," he said, "castle or picture-gallery or cathedral, – whatever it was, – I always compared it with this room, and it never stood the comparison for an instant. Pleasantest place in the world, to my thinking."

Miss Phœbe beamed over her spectacles. "You pay us a high compliment, James," she said. "It is pleasant indeed to feel that home still seems best to you. I confess that, great as are the treasures of art, and magnificent as are the monuments in the cities of Europe, I have always felt that as places of residence they would not compare favorably with Elmerston."

"Quite right," said Doctor Stedman, "quite right!" and though his eyes twinkled, he spoke with conviction.

"The cities of Europe," Mr. Homer observed, "can hardly be suited, as places of residence, to – a – persons of literary taste. There is" – he waved his hands – "too much noise; too much – sound; too much – absence of tranquillity. I could wish, though, to have seen the grave of Keats."

"I brought you a leaf from his grave, Homer," said Doctor Stedman, kindly. "I have it at home, in my pocketbook. I'll bring it down to the office to-morrow. I went to the burying-ground on purpose."

"Did you so?" exclaimed Mr. Homer, his mild face growing radiant with pleasure. "That was kind, James; that was – friendly; that was – benevolent! I shall value it highly, highly. I thank you, James. I – since you are interested in the lamented Keats, perhaps you would like" – his hand went with a fluttering motion to his pocket.

"I must go now," said Doctor Stedman, hastily. "I've stayed too long already, but I never know how to get away from this house. Good night, Phœbe! Good night, Vesta! You are looking a little tired; take care of yourself. 'Night, Homer; see you to-morrow!"

He shook hands heartily all around and was gone.

Mr. Homer sighed gently. "It is a great pity," he said, "with his excellent disposition, that James will never interest himself in literary pursuits."

His hand was still fluttering about his pocket, and there was an unspoken appeal in his mild brown eyes.

"Have you brought something to read to us, Cousin Homer?" asked Miss Phœbe, benevolently.

Mr. Homer with alacrity drew a folded paper from his pocket.

"This is – you may be aware, Cousin Phœbe – the anniversary of the birth of the lamented Keats. I always like to pay some tribute to his memory on these occasions, and I have here a slight thing – I tossed it off after breakfast this morning – which I confess I should like to read to you. You know how highly I value your opinion, Cousin Phœbe, and some criticism may suggest itself to you, though I trust that in the main – but you shall judge for yourself."

He cleared his throat, adjusted his spectacles, and began:

"Thoughts suggested by the Anniversary of the Natal Day of the poet Keats."

"Could you find it convenient not to rock, Cousin Homer?" said Miss Phœbe.

"By all means, Cousin Phœbe. I beg your pardon. 'Thoughts' – but I need not repeat the title.

"I asked the Muse if she had one
Thrice-favored son,
Or if some one poetic brother
Appealed to her more than another.
She gazed on me with aspect high,
And tear in eye,
While musically she repeats,
'Keats!'

"She gave me then to understand,
And smiled bland,
On Helicon the sacred Nine

Occasionally ask bards to dine.
'For most,' she said, 'we do not move,
Though we approve;
For one alone we leave our seats:
"Keats!""

There was a silence after the reading of the poem. Mr. Homer, slightly flushed with his own emotions, gazed eagerly at Miss Phœbe, who sat very erect, the tips of her fingers pressed together, her whole air that of a judge about to give sentence. Miss Vesta looked somewhat disturbed, yet she was the first to speak, murmuring softly, "The feeling is very genuine, I am sure, Cousin Homer!" But Miss Phœbe was ready now.

"Cousin Homer," she said, "since you ask for criticism, I feel bound to give it. You speak of the 'sacred' Nine. The word sacred appears to me to belong distinctly to religious matters; I cannot think that it should be employed in speaking of pagan divinities. The expression – I am sorry to speak strongly – shocks me!"

Mr. Homer looked pained, and opened and shut his mouth several times.

"It is an expression that is frequently used, Cousin Phœbe," he said. "All the poets make use of it, I assure you."

"I do not doubt it in the least," said Miss Phœbe. "The poets – with a few notable exceptions – are apt to be deplorably lax in such matters. If you would confine your reading of poetry, Cousin Homer, to the works of such poets as Mrs. Hemans, Archbishop Trench, and the saintly Keble, you would not incur the danger of being led away into unsuitable vagaries."

"But Keats, Cousin Phœbe," began Mr. Homer; Miss Phœbe checked him with a wave of her hand.

"Cousin Homer, I have already intimated to you, on several occasions, that I cannot discuss the poet Keats with you. I am aware that he is considered an eminent poet, but I have not reached my present age without realizing that many works may commend themselves to even the most refined of the masculine sex which are wholly unsuitable for ladies. We will change the subject, if you please; but before doing so, let me earnestly entreat you to remove the word 'sacred' from your poem."

CHAPTER III. INTRODUCING TOMMY CANDY AND SOLOMON, HIS GRANDFATHER

"Here's that boy again!" said Direxia Hawkes.

"What boy?" asked Mrs. Tree; but her eyes brightened as she spoke, and she laid down her book with an expectant air.

"Tommy Candy. I told him I guessed you couldn't be bothered with him, but he's there."

"Show him in. Come in, child! Don't sidle! You are not a crab. Come here and make your manners."

The boy advanced slowly, but not unwillingly. He was an odd-looking child, with spiky black hair, a mouth like a circus clown, and gray eyes that twinkled almost as brightly as Mrs. Tree's own.

The gray eyes and the black exchanged a look of mutual comprehension. "How do you do, Thomas Candy?" said Mrs. Tree, formally, holding out her little hand in its white lace mitt. It was afternoon, and she was dressed to receive callers.

"Shake hands as if you meant it, boy! I said *shake hands*, not flap flippers; you are not a seal. There! that's better. How do you do, Thomas Candy?"

"How-do-you-do-Missis-Tree-I'm-pretty-well-thank-you-and-hope-you-are-the-same."

Having uttered this sentiment as if it were one word, Master Candy drew a long breath, and said in a different tone, "I came to see the bird and hear 'bout Grampy; can I?"

"*May* I, not *can* I, Tommy Candy! You mayn't see the bird; he's having his nap, and doesn't like to be disturbed; but you may hear about your grandfather. Sit down on the stool there. Open the drawer, and see if there is anything in it."

The boy obeyed with alacrity. The drawer (it belonged to a sandalwood table, inlaid with chess-squares of pearl and malachite), being opened, proved to contain burnt almonds in an ivory box, and a silver saucer full of cubes of fig-paste, red and white. Tommy Candy seemed to find words unequal to the situation; he gave Mrs. Tree an eloquent glance, then obeyed her nod and helped himself to both sweetmeats.

"Good?" inquired Mrs. Tree.

"Bully!" said Tommy.

"Now, what do you want to hear?"

"About Grampy."

"What about him?"

"Everything! like what you told me last time."

There was a silence of perfect peace on one side, of reflection on the other.

"Solomon Candy," said Mrs. Tree, presently, "was the worst boy I ever knew."

Tommy grinned gleefully, his mouth curving up to his nose, and rumbled his spiky hair with a delighted gesture.

"Nobody in the village had any peace of their lives," the old lady went on, "on account of that boy and my brother Tom. We went to school together, in the little red schoolhouse that used to stand where the academy is now. We were always friends, Solomon and I, and he never played tricks on me, more than tying my pigtail to the back of the bench, and the like of that; but woe betide those that he didn't take a fancy to. I can hear Sally Andrews now, when she found the frog in her desk. It jumped right into her face, and fell into her apron-pocket, – we wore aprons with big pockets then, – and she screamed so she had to be taken home. That was the kind of prank Solomon was up to, every day of his life; and fishing for schoolmaster's wig through the skylight,

and every crinkum-crankum that ever was. Master Bayley used to go to sleep every recess, and the skylight was just over his head. Dear me, Sirs, how that wig did look, sailing up into the air!"

"I wish't ours wore a wig!" said Tommy, thoughtfully; then his eyes brightened. "Isaac Weight's skeered of frogs!" he said. "The apron-pockets made it better, though, of course. More, please!"

"Isaac Weight? That's the deacon's eldest brat, isn't it?"

"Yes'm!"

"His grandfather was named Isaac, too," said Mrs. Tree. "This one is named for him, I suppose. Isaac Weight – the first one – was called Squash-nose at school, I remember. He wasn't popular, and I understand Ephraim, his son, wasn't either. They called *him* Meal-bag, and he looked it. Te-hee!" she laughed, a little dry keckle, like the click of castanets. "Did ever I tell you the trick your grandfather and my brother played on old Elder Weight and Squire Tree? That was great-grandfather to this present Weight boy, and uncle to my husband. The old squire was high in his notions, very high; he thought but little of Weights, though he sat under Elder Weight at that time. The Weights were a good stock in the beginning, I've been told, but even then they had begun to go down-hill. It was one summer, and Conference was held here in Elmerton. The meetings were very long, and every soul went that could. Elmerton was a pious place in those days. The afternoon sessions began at two o'clock and lasted till seven. Their brains must have been made of iron – or wood." Mrs. Tree clicked her castanets again.

"Well, sir, the last day there was a sight of business, and folks knew the afternoon meeting would be extra long. Elder Weight and his wife (she was a Bonny; he'd never have been chosen elder if it hadn't been for her) were off in good season, and locked the door behind them; they kept no help at that time. The squire was off too, who but he, stepping up the street – dear me, Sirs, I can see him now, in his plum-colored coat and knee-breeches, silk stockings and silver buckles to his shoes. He had a Malacca cane, I remember, with a big ivory knob on it, and he washed it night and morning as if it were a baby. He was a very particular man, had his shirt-frills done up with a silver friller. Well, those boys, Solomon Candy and Tom Darracott (that was my brother), watched till they saw them safe in at the meeting-house door, and then they set to work. There was no one in the parsonage except the cat, and at the Homestead there was only the housekeeper, who was deaf as Dagon, well they knew. The other servants had leave to go to meeting; every one went that could, as I said. Tom knew his way all over the Homestead, our house being next door. No, it's not there now. It was burned down fifty years ago, and Tom's dead as long. They took our old horse and wagon, and they slipped in at the window of the squire's study, took out his things, – his desk and chair, his footstool, the screen he always kept between him and the fire, and dear knows what all, – and loaded them up on the wagon. They worked twice as hard at that imp's doing as they would at honest work, you may be bound. Then they drove down to the parsonage with the load, and tried round till they found a window unfastened, and in they carried every single thing, into the elder's study, and then loaded up with his rattletraps, and back to the Homestead. Working like beavers they were, every minute of the afternoon. By five o'clock they had their job done; and then in goes Tom and asks dear old Grandmother Darracott, who could not leave her room, and thought every fox was a cosset lamb, did she think father and mother (they were at the meeting too, of course) would let him and Sol Candy go and take tea and spend the night at Plum-tree Farm, three miles off, where our old nurse lived. Grandmother said 'Yes, to be sure!' for she was always pleased when the children remembered Nurse; so off those two Limbs went, and left their works behind them.

"Evening came, and Conference was over at last; and here comes the squire home, stepping along proud and stately as ever, but mortal head-weary under the pride of his wig, for he was an old man, and grudged his age, never sparing himself. He went straight into his study – it was dusk by now – and dropped into the first chair, and so to sleep. By and by old Martha came and lighted the candles, but she never noticed anything. Why people's wits should wear out like old shoes is a

thing I never could understand; unless they're made of leather in the first place, and sometimes it seems so. The squire had his nap out, I suppose, and then he woke up. When he opened his eyes, there in front of him, instead of his tall mahogany desk, was a ramshackle painted thing, with no handles to the drawers, and all covered with ink. He looked round, and what does he see but strange things everywhere; strange to his eyes, and yet he knew them. There was a haircloth sofa and three chairs, and on the walls, in place of his fine prints, was a picture of Elder Weight's father, and a couple of mourning pictures, weeping-willows and urns and the like, and Abraham and Isaac done in worsted-work, that he'd seen all his days in the parsonage parlor. Very likely they are there still."

"Yes," said Tommy, "I see 'em in his settin'-room."

"*Saw*, not *see*!" said Mrs. Tree. "Your grandfather spoke better English than you do, Tommy Candy. Learn grammar while you are young, or you'll never learn it. Well, sir, the next I know is, I was sitting in my high chair at supper with father and mother, when the door opens and in walks the old squire. His eyes were staring wild, and his wig cocked over on one ear – he was a sight to behold! He stood in the door, and cried out in a loud voice, 'Thomas Darracott, who am I?'"

"My father was a quiet man, and slow to speak, and his first thought was that the squire had lost his wits.

"'Who are you, neighbor?' he says. 'Come in; come in, and we'll see.'"

"The squire rapped with his stick on the floor. 'Who am I?' he shouted out. 'Am I Jonathan Tree, or am I that thundering, blundering gogglepate, Ebenezer Weight?'"

"Well, well! the words were hardly out of his mouth when there was a great noise outside, and in comes Elder Weight with his wife after him, and he in a complete canipion, screeching that he was possessed of a devil, and desired the prayers of the congregation. (My father was senior deacon at that time.)"

"'I have broken the tenth commandment!' he cried. 'I have coveted Squire Tree's desk and furniture, and now I see the appearance of them in mine own room, and I know that Satan has me fast in his grip.'"

"Ah, well! It's not good for you to hear these things, Tommy Candy. Solomon was a naughty boy, and Tom Darracott was another, and they well deserved the week of bread and water they got. I expect you make a third, if all was told. They grew up good men, though, and mind you do the same. Have you eaten all the almonds?"

"'Most all!'" said Tommy, modestly.

"Put the rest in your pocket, then, and run along and ask Direxia to give you a spice-cake. Leave the fig-paste. The bird likes a bit with his supper. What are you thinking of, Tommy Candy?"

Tommy rumbled his spiky hair, and gave her an elfish glance. "Candys don't seem to like Weightses," he said. "Grampy didn't, nor Dad don't; nor I don't."

"Here, you may have the fig-paste," said the old lady. "Shut the drawer. Mind you, Solomon, nor Tom either, ever did them any real harm. Solomon was a kind boy, only mischievous – that was all the harm there was to him. Even when he painted Isaac Weight's nose in stripes, he meant no harm in the world; but 'twas naughty all the same. He said he did it to make him look prettier, and I don't know but it did. Don't you do any such things, do you hear?"

"Yes'm," said Tommy Candy.

CHAPTER IV. OLD FRIENDS

It was drawing on toward supper-time, of a chill October day. Mrs. Tree was sitting in the twilight, as she loved to do, her little feet on the fender, her satin skirt tucked up daintily, a Chinese hand-screen in her hand. It seemed unlikely that the moderate heat of the driftwood fire would injure her complexion, which consisted chiefly of wrinkles, as has been said; but she always had shielded her face from the fire, and she always would – it was the proper thing to do. The parlor gloomed and lightened around her, the shifting light touching here a bit of gold lacquer, there a Venetian mirror or an ivory statuette. The fire purred and crackled softly; there was no other sound. The tiny figure in the ebony chair was as motionless as one of the Indian idols that grinned at her from her mantelshelf.

A ring at the door-bell, the shuffling sound of Direxia's soft shoes; then the opening door, and a man's voice asking some question.

In an instant Mrs. Tree sat live and alert, her ears pricked, her eyes black points of attention. Direxia's voice responded, peevish and resistant, refusing something. The man spoke again, urging some plea.

"Direxia!" said Mrs. Tree.

"Yes'm. Jest a minute. I'm seeing to something."

"Direxia Hawkes!"

When Mrs. Tree used both names, Direxia knew what it meant. She appeared at the parlor door, flushed and defiant.

"How you do pester me, Mis' Tree! There's a man at the door, a tramp, and I don't want to leave him alone."

"What does he look like?"

"I don't know; he's a tramp, if he's nothing worse. Wants something to eat. Most likely he's stealin' the umbrellas while here I stand!"

"Show him in here," said Mrs. Tree.

"What say?"

"Show him in here; and don't pretend to be deaf, when you hear as well as I do."

"The dogs – I was going to say! You don't want him in here, Mis' Tree. He's a tramp, I tell ye, and the toughest-lookin' –"

"Will you show him in here, or shall I come and fetch him?"

"Well! of all the cantankerous – here! come in, you! she wants to see you!" and Direxia, holding the door in her hand, beckoned angrily to some one invisible. There was a murmur, a reluctant shuffle, and a man appeared in the doorway and stood lowering, his eyes fixed on the ground; a tall, slight man, with stooping shoulders, and delicate pointed features. He was shabbily dressed, yet there was something fastidious in his air, and it was noticeable that the threadbare clothes were clean.

Mrs. Tree looked at him; looked again. "What do you want here?" she asked, abruptly.

The man's eyes crept forward to her little feet, resting on the brass fender, and stopped there.

"I asked for food," he said. "I am hungry."

"Are you a tramp?"

"Yes, madam."

"Anything else?"

The man was silent.

"There!" said Direxia, impatiently. "That'll do. Come out into the kitchen and I'll give ye something in a bag, and you can take it with you."

"I shall be pleased to have you take supper with me, sir!" said the old lady, pointedly addressing the tramp. "Direxia, set a place for this gentleman."

The color rushed over the man's face. He started, and his eyes crept half-way up the old lady's dress, then dropped again.

"I – cannot, madam!" he said, with an effort. "I thank you, but you must excuse me."

"Why can't you?"

This time the eyes travelled as far as the diamond brooch, and rested there curiously.

"You must excuse me!" repeated the man, laboriously. "If your woman will give me a morsel in the kitchen – or – I'd better go at once!" he said, breaking off suddenly. "Good evening!"

"Stop!" said Mrs. Tree, striking her ebony stick sharply on the floor. There was an instant of dead silence, no one stirring.

"Direxia," she added, presently, "go and set another place for supper!"

Direxia hesitated. The stick struck the floor again, and she vanished, muttering.

"Shut the door!" Mrs. Tree commanded, addressing the stranger. "Come here and sit down! No, not on that cheer. Take the ottoman with the bead puppy on it. There!"

As the man drew forward the ottoman without looking at it, and sat down, she leaned back easily in her chair, and spoke in a half-confidential tone:

"I get crumpled up, sitting here alone. Some day I shall turn to wood. I like a new face and a new notion. I had a grandson who used to live with me, and I'm lonesome since he died. How do you like tramping, now?"

"Pretty well," said the man. He spoke over his shoulder, and kept his face toward the fire; it was a chilly evening. "It's all right in summer, or when a man has his health."

"See things, hey?" said the old lady. "New folks, new faces? Get ideas; is that it?"

The man nodded gloomily.

"That begins it. After awhile – I really think I must go!" he said, breaking off short. "You are very kind, madam, but I prefer to go. I am not fit –"

"Cat's foot!" said Mrs. Tree, and watched him like a cat.

He fell into a fit of helpless laughter, and laughed till the tears ran down his cheeks. He felt for a pocket-handkerchief.

"Here's one!" said Mrs. Tree, and handed him a gossamer square. He took it mechanically. His hand was long and slim – and clean.

"Supper's ready!" snapped Direxia, glowering in at the door.

"I will take your arm, if you please!" said Mrs. Tree to the tramp, and they went in to supper together.

Mrs. Tree's dining-room, like her parlor, was a treasury of rare woods. The old mahogany, rich with curious brass-work, shone darkly brilliant against the panels of satin-wood; the floor was a mosaic of bits from Captain Tree's woodpile, as he had been used to call the tumbled heap of precious fragments which grew after every voyage to southern or eastern islands. The room was lighted by candles; Mrs. Tree would have no other light. Kerosene she called nasty, smelly stuff, and gas a stinking smother. She liked strong words, especially when they shocked Miss Phœbe's sense of delicacy. As for electricity, Elmerton knew it not in her day.

The shabby man seemed in a kind of dream. Half unconsciously he put the old lady into her seat and pushed her chair up to the table; then at a sign from her he took the seat opposite. He laid the damask napkin across his knees, and winced at the touch of it, as at the caress of a long-forgotten hand. Mrs. Tree talked on easily, asking questions about the roads he travelled and the people he met. He answered as briefly as might be, and ate sparingly. Still in a dream, he took the cup of tea she handed him, and setting it down, passed his finger over the handle. It was a tiny

gold Mandarin, clinging with hands and feet to the side of the cup. The man gave another helpless laugh, and looked about him as if for a door of escape.

Suddenly, close at his elbow, a voice spoke; a harsh, rasping voice, with nothing human in it.

"Old friends!" said the voice.

The man started to his feet, white as the napkin he held.

"*My God!*" he said, violently.

"It's only the parrot!" said Mrs. Tree, comfortably. "Sit down again. There he is at your elbow. Jocko is his name. He does my swearing for me. My grandson and a friend of his taught him that, and I have taught him a few other things beside. Good Jocko! speak up, boy!"

"Old friends to talk!" said the parrot. "Old books to read; old wine to drink! Zooks! hooray for Arthur and Will! they're the boys!"

"That was my grandson and his friend," said the old lady, never taking her eyes from the man's face. "What's the matter? feel faint, hey?"

"Yes," said the man. He was leaning on the back of his chair, fighting some spasm of feeling. "I am – faint. I must get out into the air."

The old lady rose briskly and came to his side. "Nothing of the sort!" she said. "You'll come up-stairs and lie down."

"No! no! no!" cried the man, and with each word his voice rang out louder and sharper as the emotion he was fighting gripped him closer. "Not in this house. Never! Never!"

"Cat's foot!" said Mrs. Tree. "Don't talk to me! Here! give me your arm! *Do as I say!* There!"

"Old friends!" said the parrot.

"I'm going to loose the bulldog, Mis' Tree," said Direxia, from the foot of the stairs; "and Deacon Weight says he'll be over in two minutes."

"There isn't any dog in the house," said Mrs. Tree, over the balusters, "and Deacon Weight is at Conference, and won't be back till the last of the week. That will do, Direxia; you mean well, but you are a ninnyhammer. This way!"

She twitched the reluctant arm that held hers, and they entered a small bedroom, hung with guns and rods.

"My grandson's room!" said Mrs. Tree. "He died here – hey?"

The stranger had dropped her arm and stood shaking, staring about him with wild eyes. The ancient woman laid her hand on his, and he started as at an electric shock.

"Come, Willy," she said, "lie down and rest."

He was at her feet now, half-crouching, half-kneeling, holding the hem of her satin gown in his shaking clutch, sobbing aloud, dry-eyed as yet.

"Come, Willy," she repeated, "lie down and rest on Arthur's bed. You are tired, boy."

"I came –" the shaking voice steadied itself into words, "I came – to rob you, Mrs. Tree."

"Why, so I supposed, Will; at least, I thought it likely. You can have all you want, without that – there's plenty for you and me. Folks call me close, and I like to do what I like with my own money. There's plenty, I tell you, for you and me and the bird. Do you think he knew you, Willy? I believe he did."

"God knows! When – how did you know me, Mrs. Tree?"

"Get up, Willy Jaquith, and I'll tell you. Sit down; there's the chair you made together, when you were fifteen. Remember, hey? I knew your voice at the door, or I thought I did. Then when you wouldn't look at the bead puppy, I hadn't much doubt; and when I said 'Cat's foot!' and you laughed, I knew for sure. You've had a hard time, Willy, but you're the same boy."

"If you would not be kind," said the man, "I think it would be easier. You ought to give me up, you know, and let me go to jail. I'm no good. I'm a vagrant and a drunkard, and worse. But you won't, I know that; so now let me go. I'm not fit to stay in Arthur's room or lie on his bed. Give me a little money, my dear old friend – yes, the parrot knew me! – and let me go!"

"Hark!" said the old woman.

She went to the door and listened. Her keen old face had grown wonderfully soft in the last hour, but now it sharpened and hardened to the likeness of a carved hickory-nut.

"Somebody at the door," she said, speaking low. "Malvina Weight."

She came back swiftly into the room. "That press is full of Arthur's clothes; take a bath and dress yourself, and rest awhile; then come down and talk to me. Yes, you will! *Do as I say!* Willy Jaquith, if you try to leave this house, I'll set the parrot on you. Remember the day he bit you for stealing his apple, and served you right? There's the scar still on your cheek. Greatest wonder he didn't put your eyes out!"

She slipped out and closed the door after her; then stood at the head of the stairs, listening.

Mrs. Ephraim Weight, a ponderous woman with a chronic tremolo, was in the hall, a knitted shawl over her head and shoulders.

"I've waited 'most an hour to see that tramp come out," she was saying. "Deacon's away, and I was scairt to death, but I'm a mother, and I had to come. How I had the courage I don't know, when I thought you and Mis' Tree might meet my eyes both layin' dead in this entry. Where is he? Don't you help or harbor him now, Direxia Hawkes! I saw his evil eye as he stood on the doorstep, and I knew by the way he peeked and peered that he was after no good. Where is he? I know he didn't go out. Hush! don't say a word! I'll slip out and round and get Hiram Sawyer. My boys is to singing-school, and it was a Special Ordering that I happened to look out of window just that moment of time. Where did you say he – "

"Oh, do let me speak, Mis' Weight!" broke in Direxia, in a shrill half-whisper. "Don't speak so loud! She'll hear ye, and she's in one of her takings, and I dono – lands sakes, I don't know what *to* do! I dono who he is, or whence he comes, but she – "

"Direxia Hawkes!" barked Mrs. Tree from the head of the stairs.

"There! you hear her!" murmured Direxia. "Oh, she is the beat of all! I'm comin', Mis' Tree!"

She fled up the stairs; her mistress, bending forward, darted a whispered arrow at her.

"Oh, my Solemn Deliverance!" cried Direxia Hawkes.

"Hot water, directly, and don't make a fool of yourself!" said Mrs. Tree; and her stick tapped its way down-stairs.

"Good evening, Malvina. What can I do for you? Pray step in."

Mrs. Weight sidled into the parlor before a rather awful wave of the ebony stick, and sat down on the edge of a chair near the door. Mrs. Tree crossed the room to her own high-backed armchair, took her seat deliberately, put her feet on the crimson hassock, and leaned forward, resting her hands on the crutch-top of her stick, and her chin on her hands. In this attitude she looked more elfin than human, and the light that danced in her black eyes was not of a reassuring nature.

"What can I do for you?" she repeated.

Mrs. Weight bridled, and spoke in a tone half-timid, half-defiant.

"I'm sure, Mis' Tree, it's not on my own account I come. I'm the last one to intrude, as any one in this village can tell you. But you are an anncient woman, and your neighbors are bound to protect you when need is. I see that tramp come in here with my own eyes, and he's here for no good."

"What tramp?" asked Mrs. Tree.

"Good land, Mis' Tree, didn't you see him? He slipped right in past Direxia. I see him with these eyes."

"When?"

"'Most an hour ago. I've been watching ever since. Don't tell me you didn't know about him bein' here, Mis' Tree, now don't."

"I won't," said Mrs. Tree, benevolently.

"He's hid away somewheres!" Mrs. Weight continued, with rising excitement. "Direxia Hawkes has hid him; he's an accomplish of hers. You've always trusted that woman, Mis' Tree, but

I tell you I've had my eye on her these ten years, and now I've found her out. She's hid him away somewheres, I tell you. There's cupboards and clusets enough in this house to hide a whole gang of cutthroats in – and when you're abed and asleep they'll have your life, them two, and run off with your worldly goods that you've thought so much of. Would have, that is, if I hadn't have had a Special Ordering to look out of winder. Oh, how thankful should I be that I kep' the use of my limbs, though I was scairt 'most to death, and am now."

"Yes, they might be useful to you," said Mrs. Tree, "to get home with, for instance. There, that will do, Malvina Weight. There is no tramp here. Your eyesight is failing; there were always weak eyes in your family. There's no tramp here, and there has been none."

"Mis' Tree! I tell you I see him with these – "

"Bah! don't talk to me!" Mrs. Tree blazed into sudden wrath. But next instant she straightened herself over her cane, and spoke quietly.

"Good night, Malvina. You mean well, and I bear no malice. I'm obliged to you for your good intentions. What you took for a tramp was a gentleman who has come to stay overnight with me. He's up-stairs now. Did you lock your door when you came out? There *are* tramps about, so I've heard, and if Ephraim is away – well, good night, if you must hurry. Direxia, lock the door and put the chain up; and if anybody else calls to-night, set the bird on 'em."

CHAPTER V.

"BUT WHEN HE WAS YET A GREAT WAY OFF"

"And so when she ran away and left you, you took to drink, Willy. That wasn't very sensible, was it?"

"I didn't care," said William Jaquith. "It helped me to forget for a bit at a time. I thought I could give it up any day, but I didn't. Then – I lost my place, of course, and started to come East, and had my pocket picked in Denver, every cent I had. I tried for work there, but between sickness and drink I wasn't good for much. I started tramping. I thought I would tramp – it was last spring, and warm weather coming on – till I'd got my health back, and then I'd steady down and get some work, and come back to Mother when I was fit to look her in the face. Then – in some place, I forget what, though I know the pattern of the wall-paper by the table where I was sitting – I came upon a King's County paper with Mother's death in it."

"What!" said Mrs. Tree, straightening herself over her stick.

"Oh, it didn't make so much difference," Jaquith went on, dreamily. "I wasn't fit to see her, I knew that well enough; only – it was a green paper, with splotchy yellow flowers on it. Fifteen flowers to a row; I counted them over seven times before I could be sure. Well, I was sick again after that, I don't know how long; some kind of fever. When I got up again something was gone out of me, something that had kept me honest till then. I made up my mind that I would get money somehow, I didn't much care how. I thought of you, and the gold counters you used to let Arthur and me play with, so that we might learn not to think too much of money. You remember? I thought I might get some of those, and you might not miss them. You didn't need them, anyhow, I thought. Yes, I knew you would give them to me if I asked for them, but I wasn't going to ask. I came here to-night to see if there was any man or dog about the house. If not, I meant to slip in by and by at the pantry window; I remembered the trick of the spring. I forgot Jocko. There! now you know all. You ought to give me up, Mrs. Tree, but you won't do that."

"No, I won't do that!" said the old woman.

She looked at him thoughtfully. His eyes were wandering about the room, a painful pleasure growing in them as they rested on one object after another. Beautiful eyes they were, in shape and color – if the light were not gone out of them.

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