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in haste that was almost flight. Again she felt her first impulse, to run away, to go inside and lock everybody out, barring even the back door. It was her own house and she lived alone. No one could come in if she should refuse to open the door. But on the threshold she paused and stood still. There was no use in trying to escape this last and worst ordeal. It could only be put off. She would be forced to meet it sooner or later. The latest could not be longer than the morrow. Her door must be opened early on the next morning to receive her guests. And so she went slowly back to her seat feeling almost relieved, as a child does when he sees punishment near and longs to get it over. But she could not help shrinking and quivering at the first murmur of their voices. For she knew what they were talking about though she could not hear the words. She could see them now quite distinctly and there was something so like them both in the very way they walked, that the shadow of a smile suddenly crossed her distressed face. There was even a quick, unconscious flutter of dimples under the big tears rolling down her cheeks.

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OF course the squire's lady led by a pace, laying down the law over her shoulder, while the widow Wall followed agreeing — till she got a chance to disagree. That is the way they had gone through life ever since they had started to the same school on the same day. For Mrs. Pottle often owned that they were about the same age, though she never failed to add that she hardly expected anybody to believe it.

In truth nature as well as circumstances had given her the advantage. She was good-looking, large, strong, energetic, and with resolution in every line and movement of her powerful body. Her friend was far from good-looking, unreasonably tall, languid, thin, mild — as a rule — and limply irresolute even in the matter of a figure. Moreover to make the contrast

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still greater just now, the breeze caught Mrs. Pottle's skirts which seemed to be starched even more stiffly than usual, and blew them out till she looked a good deal larger than she really was. But there was no sort of uncertainty about the size of the place which she occupied in the community. That was much larger than any one else's. Indeed it had been said that when she took cold the whole neighborhood sneezed. And if this was true it was little enough for the neighbors to do, in view of all that she was always doing for everybody, no matter whether anybody wanted her to do it or not. But unfortunately the public is not much more grateful for undesired kindness than the individual. So that many of this good woman's unselfish and untiring efforts for the general welfare went unrewarded even by appreciation, and were often cruelly misunderstood. The unkindest cuts of all had come from old Mrs. Crabtree who never cared what she said so long as the listeners laughed. For this game-making old lady was fully — and perhaps a little proudly — aware of the tradition that she was somewhat of a wit. And that is a reputation hard to keep up anywhere without

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unkindness. It must be whetted continually upon everything in reach if it be kept sharp, and no whetstone is so ready and handy as human nature. Here in this quiet place there was nothing whatever for old Mrs. Crabtree to whet hers on, except the simple neighbors and their quaint ways. Mrs. Pottle merely suffered with the rest but rather more frequently because she had no saving sense of humor, which might sometimes have withheld temptation from this heartless game-maker. She used often to say to the widow Wall, almost with tears in her eyes, that no tongue ever could tell all that she had put up with from old Mrs. Crabtree, solely for Phœbe's sake.

“Ten to one but she's already backed her up in this very thing, just to make it harder for me,” said Mrs. Pottle, over her shoulder. “For you know — as well as I do, Jane — that *she* don't really care one mite *what* Phœbe or anybody does unless it's something to laugh at and make fun of.”

There was no reply from the widow Wall. None was needed or expected. Her mere presence was all that her self-reliant friend required. A born leader like Mrs. Pottle must

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have a follower, an admiring and applauding one if possible, and the fewer opinions that follower has of her own the better. This humble soul though not very quick-witted, had long ago found out the fact, and of late years it was only by queer fits and starts that she ventured to assert herself. As far back as she could remember she had given up to Mandy Pottle. With a weak nature the force of habit is stronger in the long run than inclination. Then in this case submission had its substantial rewards. The squire was the richest man in the whole country, and his wife was most generous to those who did what she wished them to do. And the widow Wall was doing it now as nearly as she could by going with her "to save Phœbe at the eleventh hour," as Mrs. Pottle had said in a solemn whisper. This happened to be one of the few matters in which the widow Wall really did agree with her friend. It must be admitted that she never would have thought of going, of taking any active measures, or indeed, of doing anything at all. But she was quite willing to go when Mrs. Pottle asked her to, and so it was that they were now on their way.

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The usually serious state of Mrs. Pottle's mind grew more serious with every step, and the ordinarily severe expression of her honest face, had never been more severe than it was when they reached Phœbe's front gate.

A single glimpse of its grimness made her heavy heart sink still lower, but she went to meet them with such courage as was hers to muster. She shook hands and managed to murmur something about its being cooler on the porch. The ladies sat down in the chairs that she placed for them in the coolest spot beneath the vines. The next step according to polite custom was to invite them to take off their bonnets. But as she moved mechanically to give the customary invitation she suddenly noticed that they were both wearing sun-bonnets, and the fact meant so much that she shrunk back and stood still, trembling and afraid to speak or move.

For these ladies were by birth and breeding of the highest social position, notwithstanding that the widow Wall was too poor to be a leader of fashion, and the squire's lady much too busy with the public welfare. Consequently both of them had what they called dress-bonnets

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for wear upon proper and pleasant occasions, as all ladies of standing then had in that country. The squire's wife always wore a handsome beaver in the winter and an elegant leghorn in the summer, those being the finest and most modish materials that she knew anything about. The widow Wall on the other hand always wore the leghorn in winter and the beaver in summer, not because she preferred them out of season, but because she got them when her friend was done with them and gave them to her. Their sunbonnets and those of the other leading ladies, were never worn outside their own yards, except under certain circumstances always more or less deplorable. They were worn frequently to funerals, and the wearing of them then was meant and taken as a subtle expression of sympathy quite beyond all consideration of appearances. Also they were occasionally worn on visits to the sick, but only when the whole family already knew how hopeless the case was. These were the sole exceptions, and no lady of the least social importance ever thought of such a thing as appearing on the big road in her sunbonnet unless something equally sad was happening,

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had happened or was about to happen. This was all well known to Phœbe and the first sight of the sunbonnets would have alarmed her, had she not been too much agitated to notice them. It was no wonder then that she now stood helpless and dumb, almost frozen with fright.

But the widow Wall always an easy-going soul and rather absent-minded, was warm from walking and did not remember to wait for the invitation. She took off her sunbonnet at once without any sort of ceremony. And now gathering the crumpled crown in her thin hand, she began to fan herself with the flapping brim, as she swung comfortably back and forth in the low rocking-chair. Then she forgot again, and turning her kind face toward the garden, over which the scented breeze was blowing, she spoke with a smile:

"My! How sweet the borders do smell this evening. And the dew hasn't begun to fall yet, either," taking a deep breath. "Spice-pinks surely are the sweetest things that blow — and the liveliest."

"They seem so to me too," said Phœbe, quickly, eager to follow any topic that led away

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from the one she feared. "It does seem as if the scent had wings and flew about with the birds. Sometimes when it hovers around—real close and friendly—as it has done to-day—"

She broke off suddenly and turned with a start to look at Mrs. Pottle. The widow Wall also turned and looked, sitting up very straight and holding her bonnet quite still and as stiff as its lack of starch would allow. For both of them understood that severe clearing of Mrs. Pottle's throat. They knew that it meant disapproval when it did not mean displeasure. And they took it now as a stern rebuke, reminding them that this was no fit time for idle talk about flowers or any other trivial matters.

That clearing of Mrs. Pottle's throat always awed the widow Wall into silence as it did many others much less timid than she was. And it told Phœbe that there was no hope beyond a momentary delay. For a moment she hesitated in alarmed confusion, and then she remembered the fresh water which was always offered to visitors. That would serve to stave off the dreaded moment for a few minutes longer, and so murmuring an apology she ran

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out to the well. Not a word was spoken while the long well-sweep swept down very slowly, and crept up again more slowly still with its plaintive, complaining sound. And neither of the visitors said anything except to murmur thanks when the crystal drink was fetched, dripping from the cool mossy bucket. But they both took a delicate sip—though they were not in the least thirsty—as politeness required of them in turn. Then the widow Wall set the glass back on the waiter which Phœbe held without looking up. And Mrs. Pottle also was careful when doing the same, not to let her own keen gray eyes meet the soft brown ones which were seeking them in mute entreaty. She had met that gaze of Phœbe's ere this and had been disarmed by it, when she had been almost as clear and firm in her duty as she was now. Bearing this in mind she did not look at Phœbe at all but instead looked straight and hard at the widow Wall, much to the discomfort of that mild lady who suddenly and hastily put on her sunbonnet—tying it tight under her pointed chin—as she now noticed with much embarrassment that Mrs. Pottle had not taken off hers.

For the taking off and the keeping on of

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Mrs. Pottle's sunbonnet always let everybody know exactly what to expect. Perhaps its being so large and so white and so stiff may have had a good deal to do with its being so well understood by so many people for so many years. It certainly seems unlikely that any sunbonnet which was small and dingy and limp—like the widow Wall's for instance—ever could have ruled an entire community as Mrs. Pottle's large, white, stiff one did. At all events there was not a woman and hardly a man or child within its radius, but knew that when it came off there was still hope of its wearer's being coaxed and possibly dissuaded; that when it stayed on the situation was hopeless because its wearer was out in a strictly official capacity and not to be turned by her own or anybody else's feelings, from saying and doing what she conscientiously believed should be said and done. It was knowing this that now made Phœbe turn with a helpless, resigned sigh and go to the farthest seat and sit down, clasping her small brown hands to keep them from trembling so much.

"Well, Phœbe *Rowan!*" Mrs. Pottle demanded sternly forthwith without any beating

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about, though still looking hard at the widow Wall.

The beginning was even worse than Phœbe's fears. She had never been called by her surname except to be scolded which was rarely for she had never before gone counter to any one's wishes, and was much loved. Then she was not used to hearing her new name which had been hers only a few weeks. At the strange sound of it her face flushed and her heart beat faster. But the flush was not a bride's happy blush and she could not have told whether the quickened beating of her heart came from pleasure or pain. Poor little Phœbe! The memory of her marriage and all concerning it was like some troubled dream that she could not recall distinctly. She had been trying hard ever since to see clearly but the harder she tried the more unreal everything seemed. And so not knowing what to say she waited in quivering silence, pleading only with her troubled eyes, for Mrs. Pottle's tone had been a question and even an arraignment.

But that determined lady was much too intent to wait for an answer and went on