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without moving her stern gaze from the widow Wall's uneasy face. "Now, Phœbe, you know what I've come for quite as well as I do. And it will save trouble for you and me and everybody, if you will just speak out quickly and plainly and tell me the truth—right off the reel. There's no sense in any kind of shilly-shally, nor a bit of use either, for I mean to know. *Now* then! Is it true that you have written inviting that whole Rowan tribe to come here and live with you—on the little you've got in this old shell of a house?"

Phœbe hung her head in silence. She had nothing to say, no excuse to give nor even any explanation.

"Then it is true!" Mrs. Pottle accused.

The widow Wall sighed uneasily. It distressed her to see any one in trouble. Then she was uncomfortable herself being stared at so.

"Don't bother, Jane," said Mrs. Pottle, sharply. "And you've asked all of 'em," she added, speaking to Phœbe but looking harder than ever at the widow Wall.

"There are only two of them," pleaded Phœbe.

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"Only two indeed!" repeated Mrs. Pottle, tartly. "And pray who are *they*?"

"Just his father and his wife," Phœbe faltered.

"Whose wife?" demanded Mrs. Pottle.

"*His* father's, William's stepmother," said Phœbe faintly, growing more nervous and frightened with every word.

"Land o' the living!" cried Mrs. Pottle. "Just listen to that, Jane Wall—if you please." She stared blankly for a moment doubting if she had heard aright. Then she went on: "And you've asked this old woman to come and live with you—when you've never laid eyes on her, don't know the first thing about her, and she isn't even your husband's mother."

"She was just as kind to him as if she had been," Phœbe forced herself to say, though she could not lift her brimming eyes. "He told me so over and over— —that's the reason."

"Her husband's stepmother," almost screamed Mrs. Pottle. "A *step*mother-in-law! Now I ask you again, Jane Wall—on your word of honor as a lady, if you ever heard of such a thing in all your born days?"

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"No, I *never*," retorted the widow Wall, with a sudden scared flash of spirit. "And what's more, it ain't *my* fault and you needn't look at me like that, either."

There was no sign that Mrs. Pottle heard though her gaze never once flickered. But when she spoke again after a moment's silence, it was with some little gentleness and patience. Perhaps she had seen how Phœbe was trembling though she tried her very best not to see.

"It would have been better if I had come sooner, as I thought of doing. The only reason I didn't was because it was my duty to give that aunt of yours one more chance to do hers. Of course I knew she wouldn't—no matter how much time she had. But her not doing *her* duty is no excuse for my not doing *mine*. That's why I waited till she had gone home."

At this she caught a sly twinkle in the widow Wall's eye and stiffened with indignation. But she did not deign to notice it by a word, and went on with a visible effort keeping to her tone of judicial calmness.

"And I certainly ought to have known just

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how she would do after all the tussles I've had with her all these years, trying to make her see what she owed you. And I shan't forget the sort of thanks I got, either;" tightening her lips and looking still more severely at the widow Wall. "But as I was saying—her not doing her duty *then* was no more excuse for my neglecting mine than it is *now*,—as I told her right to her face when she let you leave school to nurse your uncle, instead of doing it herself for her own brother, or having her daughter do it. Anne was through school—goodness knows."

Phœbe tried to say that she would never have been willing to let any one else nurse her uncle. She also strove to say that she was fond of her aunt who had always been most kind, but there was a moment's pause while she mustered courage to speak.

The widow Wall broke in excitedly and with a good deal of feeling: "For my part it always seems to me that Anne Crabtree is more to be pitied than blamed, poor down-trodden thing that's never been allowed to say her soul was her own. There's more people, too—that would keep other folks from saying so if they

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could, — people a-plenty that would make other folks live like toads under a harrow. And I'm never going to sit by and hear poor Anne blamed for what she can't help. No, I'm not — no matter what happens. So there!"

"Really, Jane," said Mrs. Pottle, icily. "I should be greatly obliged if you would not interrupt me. You have put what I was going to say clean out of my head. Oh — yes — I remember."

Then without once glancing at Phœbe whose welfare she had most sincerely at heart, and without the slightest doubt of being able to manage and settle the whole affair, as she had managed and settled the affairs of the neighborhood for many years, she took everything into her own ready and capable hands. She began by declaring the plan to be utterly impracticable and went into details to prove what she said. It was easy to do this, knowing every penny that Phœbe had, and where it came from and how it was spent. For all the neighbors knew all about each other's concerns and could not have helped knowing had they wished to do so. Indeed most of them would have thought it most un-neighborly — positively un-

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christian — to shirk such knowledge. Mrs. Pottle by virtue of her position as public guardian felt this even more strongly than the rest, especially when it concerned Phœbe whom she loved in much the same fussy, over-bearing way that she would have loved a daughter. The sad plight of her favorite suddenly fired all her old smouldering resentment against Mrs. Crabtree. Looking over the situation she saw plainly that it was the aunt who had been to blame from first to last. Phœbe had always been neglected, even in early childhood, but for what she herself could do. Turning back to a bitter day in midwinter she recalled catching a glimpse of the child flying down the big road after a mover's wagon, bare foot and bare head, with her brown curls blowing in the freezing wind, holding her little woollen hood in one hand and her shoes and stockings in the other. And there sat her aunt by the front window looking on without raising a finger to stop her, not saying a word, only smiling and clapping her hands as the little figure flew by, as much as to say: "Clip it, Phœbe. Clip it — for Mrs. Pottle's after you." And the little bare feet had clipped it so fast that she had not been

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able to overtake her in time to prevent the giving of the things to a shivering child in the wagon. But it was some satisfaction to remember — thinking of it now — that she had shaken her well right there in the middle of the big road under her aunt's very nose. Yes, she had always done what she could for the soft, foolish little thing. Her conscience was quite clear. Nevertheless it was a wonder that a child thus left to run wild ever should have lived to be grown, not any wonder that the same impulsive, unreasoning, misguided sympathy and generosity should have brought her to the present strait.

"Your wanting to do this wouldn't be so utterly out of the question if these old folks didn't have anybody of their own to take care of them," Mrs. Pottle granted. "But the old lady has a daughter — well married too with a good home and husband —"

"That's the very reason," said Phœbe, eagerly. The sudden sound of her own unsteady voice frightened her, but she bravely kept on with what she felt bound in justice to say: "Mother Rowan's daughter has written me a beautiful letter. I should like you to read it because it makes

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everything so clear. It says — so beautifully — how dearly she would love to have her mother come and live with her, that it is hard to get her own consent to let her live with any one else. But she can't do as she would like because her husband isn't willing for her to ask Father Rowan — who isn't any real kin, — and she thinks it would be wicked to part the old people."

"Does she, indeed!" cried Mrs. Pottle, sarcastically. "She's mighty high-minded to be sure. And so *that's* the way she has managed to shift her own burden to your shoulders! Well, I shall make it my business to see that it is shifted back again where it belongs. And I will do it this very night too — or know the reason why. Just as soon as the squire comes home to supper I shall ask him to write a letter that will settle the whole bother. Being a squire he knows how to lay down the law — I'm bound to say that much for him."

"No, no — please don't," entreated Phœbe. "I want them —"

"Now, just listen to me for a moment, child," Mrs. Pottle said almost gently; "you surely know by this time that I've only your good at heart."

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"Indeed — indeed I do," cried Phœbe looking up wistfully.

"Well, then you can't suppose that I am going to allow you to saddle yourself with such an unheard-of burden as this," said Mrs. Pottle. "My conscience won't let me. I'm bound to interfere — since that aunt of yours won't. Whatever she may do or not do, I am never going to sit still with my hands on my lap and let you saddle yourself for life with this preposterous load. And so once for all I tell you again that it is utterly out of the question, and will prove it to you. Even if the burden were rightfully yours — which it isn't — you could not do what you are thinking of. In the first place you haven't the room. There is only one bedroom in this little house, and you need that for yourself. In the second place you haven't the means. It is just as much as you can do to get along without any one else. In the third—"

"Oh — yes, indeed there is plenty of room," cried Phœbe so eager to seize this first chance to discuss the plan as a bare possibility, that she forgot to be afraid. "They are to have my room and I am to sleep in the shed-room. There isn't even any need to put a cot in the

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parlor. I thought out that, just now — and so nearly everything is settled."

"Well, 'pon my word!" exclaimed Mrs. Pottle, provoked out of the judicial calmness that she had striven to maintain. "And so you have been sitting there settling it have you? while I have been talking and trying my best to keep your silly head out of a noose. I do think in my heart, Phœbe, that you are certainly the most aggravating creature alive. You never talk back and never dispute and never even argue. You just sit there with your big eyes wide open looking as if you didn't know your own mind — and the whole time you have no more idea of giving up than flying."

She paused for lack of words to express the righteous indignation that she felt, and turning suddenly looked at Phœbe for the first time. There was something in the sweet downcast face, and in the dispirited droop of the little black-clad figure that touched her. Accordingly she hastily turned her gaze upon the widow Wall once more, and with increased severity because she must go on scolding Phœbe.

"Sometimes the mild, silent way you hold to what you mean to do makes me think of the

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gossamer that perplexes and vexes me so among my roses. It is so fine that I can scarcely see it and so soft that I can barely feel it. I can't even get hold of it to break it or pull it off — and there it stays too — no matter what I do."

Phœbe looked up shyly with a confused smile not quite sure whether she was still being scolded or not, and then she exchanged a friendly glance with the widow Wall.

Seeing this glance Mrs. Pottle felt the necessity of greater firmness on her own part. "There's no use in bandying any more words," she said conclusively. "The squire shall write that letter this very night — and that's all there is about it."

"No," said Phœbe, with a new note of firmness in her gentle tones. "He must not write — you must not ask him to. Nobody must interfere. I — I must not allow it. Then — they are already on the way. They will be here to-morrow morning in the stage."

For a moment surprise and anger held Mrs. Pottle silent, then she said: "Well, they can go back again — after they have had a little visit — and it needn't be a long one either as I soon shall give them to understand."

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Phœbe arose very slowly and stood very straight and although her soft voice trembled it did not break. "No, you must not say or even hint anything of the kind. No one ever shall wound their feelings by word or look. They are not coming to make a visit. They are coming to live with me. This is to be their home as long as they live — or wish to stay — just as much their home hereafter as mine."

At these words Mrs. Pottle also arose. She was more deeply offended than she would have thought it possible that she ever could be with Phœbe. And then she was more completely defeated than she had ever been before in all her well-meant interference with the affairs of the whole neighborhood.

"Very well — then there's nothing more for me to say," she said stiffly. "After this I can go with a clear conscience. Nothing that happens can be laid at my door. But you needn't look to me for help no matter what comes. And after all *this* isn't the fault of that aunt of yours. For you have deliberately brought the whole trouble on yourself and you can't deny it. It's bad enough to be a widow

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when a body can't help it, but to go and be one *on purpose*, as you've done — ”

“Well, I must say you are not very polite, Mandy Pottle!” cried the widow Wall, flaring up. “I should just like to know what you mean by that. Bad enough to be a widow, indeed! I can let you know that in all these many years that *I've* been a widow, this is the very first time that *my* being one has ever been thrown up to *me*.” The words ended in a burst of tears.

“Pooh!” said Mrs. Pottle not unkindly. “Come along, Jane. Don't be silly. Let's be going home. There is nothing here to stay for. I don't feel bound by my conscience to allow myself to be treated with any more disrespect.”

Phœbe ran to her and clung round her begging to be forgiven. “Please — please — don't go, dear Mrs. Pottle, for you know I love you. I can't bear your going away angry with me. Forgive me. You have always been so kind — so good. I can't remember when you were not. Don't you see that I can't do anything else — in this. Indeed, indeed I can't. I must at least try to do what I think is right — or my

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heart will break. Won't you help me? You have never yet refused.”

Under the little clinging, trembling hands, the soft words, the sweet looks and the mist of tears in the brown eyes, Mrs. Pottle's anger was melting as fast as a flurry of snow under warm sunshine. But feeling that she could not in dignity allow the air to clear quite so quickly, she turned sharply to ask the widow Wall if she had the remotest notion what she was crying about. Yet while speaking she was carefully straightening that aggrieved lady's sunbonnet with a tenderness which was taken as the ample apology it was meant to be. The widow Wall accordingly dried her eyes and the two ladies then bade Phœbe good night. There was a lingering touch of reserve in Mrs. Pottle's manner but not a trace of resentment. And Phœbe sighed with relief when they set out down the big road through the gathering dusk. The worst was over now.