

#### IV

##### THE NEW MINISTER

A FAINT whispering drew her wistful gaze upward. It was like a spirit chorus. The swallows — shadow-birds of the twilight — were circling the parsonage chimney at last. Their slanting wings now wavered in a long dark line, undulating like an endless scarf against the darkening sky. It was waving about her own chimney too, but she could not see it there directly overhead. A little later she would hear the soft fluttering of unseen wings that never failed to come softly floating down from their resting-place to hers. And she always listened for the pleasant sound without knowing that her utter loneliness craved even this mere murmur of life.

Alone again in her seat under the vines, she watched the circling swallows so intently that she forgot all the grave thinking there still was

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to do, and did not see John Wood, the new minister, till he stood at her feet. Then she sprang up startled and frightened. Her first thought was that he had come like the others to tell her what a great mistake she was making. As a minister it was his right, perhaps his duty. She never questioned any one's right to advise or warn her, never doubted the motive of a word thus spoken. But she was very tired just now and always very shy. Then she hardly knew him at all. He and his aunt were almost strangers, and they had come at a time when she could pay slight attention to anything except her own sorrow. Since then the church had been undergoing repairs, so that there had been no opportunity to hear him preach.

But she managed to meet him now with a smile and hold out her hand. They had seen each other often across the big road and had met more than once for a moment and in the presence of others. But they had never been so close together as they were now standing thus face to face and alone, she looking down through the fragrant opening in the flowering vines and he looking up from the sunken door-stone. For there was still light a-plenty, the

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witching light that glimmers over the shadowed earth with the closing of heaven's west windows. So that they could see distinctly enough and to both of them it seemed as if they were meeting and seeing one another for the first time. It was a complete and pleasing surprise to her that he was so good-looking and so tall with such fair hair and such fine gray eyes. To him it came as a revelation that a little brown woman could be so beautiful without a single perfect feature. Her face was the sweetest, the most wistfully lovely that he had ever looked into. Yet he could hardly tell what made it so. Perhaps the long lashes that cast those exquisite shadows around the brown eyes, gave it this tender charm. He thought they did.

He sat down on the edge of the porch when she invited him to take a seat, saying that he liked to watch the swallows circling, as he had seen her watching them as he crossed the big road. And he saw the quick glance that she gave him and idly wondered why it is, that the most innocent and honest of us always feel that uneasy pang, on learning that we have been observed unawares. Smiling at the

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thought he went on talking of the swallows, only waiting now and then for her to speak a bashful word or two. But there were momentary silences while they watched the beautiful, mystical spectacle with uplifted faces from which the smiles had faded. For there is something solemn in all real beauty and mystery.

"How beautiful and mysterious they are," he said. "Little shadow-ships of the air — with two slender wings for sails and two slenderer feathers for rudders — launched upon the golden ocean of sunset and sailing into the silver sea of shadows." He turned with a smile. "That faint twittering might come from bird-spirits abroad."

"Indeed the swallows are very much alive," she answered in the same tone, speaking much less diffidently than usual because it was such a relief to talk about anything except the one thing that she feared to hear mentioned. And then she knew more about birds than most things, having lived with them rather than people all her life. "And the bravest little bodies — far braver than many big birds. There! See that. Look — look!"

For the cry of an owl had rung from the

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great elm and — sure enough — as if to prove what she said, the long dark line did drop and straighten in arrowlike pursuit of the hawking enemy. Then — safe once more — it drooped again and peacefully began to weave narrowing circles around the chimney as before.

“My aunt doesn’t like the swallows,” he said lightly. “She declares that they are a bother and always sending grass and feathers down the chimney. She doesn’t like anything that makes housekeeping harder. In fact she doesn’t like to keep house. She only does it for me because I haven’t a wife and because she thinks no minister who boards can ever be properly respected. Maybe she’s right — probably she is. At all events I appreciate the great, daily effort she makes. Her taste is for natural history. I’m sure that she has a grudge against the swallows only because she can’t get at them. I caught her examining a bit of one of their eggs — a pearly fragment flecked with red — under her microscope the other day. You see our old home is in a large town so that this is her first good chance to study Nature — and she’s finding wonders,” he said, laughing. “Every night since we’ve

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been here she has heard a queer, shivering cry, a sort of feathered moan from over this way — ”

“Oh — yes — that’s the screech-owl,” said Phœbe eagerly, quite forgetting her diffidence. “She can see it too if she likes almost any night — by keeping quiet and having patience. It’s a comical little bunch of speckled feathers — all head and eyes. But sometimes — ”

A sudden recollection sobered her and she shivered, recalling a dreadful midnight not long before when she had been awakened by a wild beating of invisible wings in utter darkness.

“At first I was so terrified that I didn’t know what it was, or what in the world to do,” she said shivering again: “It was so dark that I couldn’t see a thing. I didn’t dare get out of bed and was too scared to remember the candle and matches on the chair beside me. When I did think of them I was afraid to put out my hand. So there I lay — quaking — with those awful wings almost touching my head as they dashed by. At last though I got the candle lit somehow and saw

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a screech-owl sitting on the top of the window, turning its big horned head clear round as if it would twist it off—and glaring at me with its awful eyes. Mercy! It makes me shudder to think of it. And I didn't know any more what to do then than before and was worse frightened too—if that could be. But presently he began to swell out and to snap his bill as if getting ready to bite. I couldn't stand that and got up and stood still by the bed—trying hard to think what to do. There wasn't anybody to call—nobody to help me—not a living soul in the house but myself. I didn't dare take my eyes off him to look round but presently I thought of the long-handled broom standing in the corner. It took me some time to edge over to it without turning my back on the owl—and he never blinked once. But it took still longer to catch him under the broom. For every time I tried he dashed round the room like a fierce goblin, hissing and snapping his bill and swelling out, bigger and bigger. But I did get him after a while and raked him down the wall, slowly and carefully, trying not to hurt him. Hurt *him?* Mercy! It put me up to all I knew

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to keep him from hurting *me*. Gracious! how he fought. I could hardly hold him down now that I had him—and so was worse off than ever for I couldn't let go—couldn't even rake him over nearer the window hoping he'd fly out as he had flown in. It looked like I'd have to stand there holding the broom with both hands, till somebody came in the morning. But my sleeve brushed my work-basket and that gave me an idea. If I could turn the basket over him and weight it down, that would keep him safe and give him plenty of air. For I had taken out the silk lining that very day and hadn't put in the fresh one. Well—that's what I did—though I don't know how to this very minute and weighted the basket down with my heaviest book. Oh! oh—How weak I was!”

The new minister was looking at her though the dusk was so deep now that he could not see the rueful little face very clearly. But he saw with wonderful clearness the quaint, pathetic, pretty, lonely little figure of helplessness that her simple words brought before him. And seeing it he wondered why this guileless story which was evidently meant

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to amuse him should have moved him instead.

"Well, that wasn't all—not nearly all," sighed Phœbe so intent that she did not notice the look or the silence. "Naturally worn out I went back to bed because I couldn't stand up and actually fell asleep still so frightened that my heart was beating by leaps. I don't know how long it was before I was awakened by the very same thing—only the wings sounded larger and wilder and to beat the blackness more fiercely. I nearly lost my wits. Surely he would eat me up this time. Putting him under the basket had made him still more angry and dangerous. I didn't stop to wonder how he had got out. I just drew the cover over my head and kept it there—cuddling down and shuddering—till I nearly smothered. With the fright and fatigue I could hardly breathe anyway, and had to take the cover off my face before long, and lie there almost fainting with those awful wings rushing by. At last I couldn't stand it another moment. It seemed better to get up and let him bite me and have the worst over. And so I got up and lit the candle and started in reck-

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less desperation to get the broom again as it was the only weapon I had. But in crossing the room I turned over my work-basket—and *out flew the other owl*—for this wasn't the same one as I thought. There were two of the frightful goblins now, both dashing madly about, hissing and snapping their bills and swelling themselves out."

"And *then* what did you do?" he asked smiling but with a tightening in his throat.

"Ran out here—over there in the furthest corner of the porch where the vines are thickest. It wasn't quite dawn," she added hastily, "and there's hardly any passing at that hour. But a rooster crowed somewhere in the neighborhood before long and that is always a cheerful sound. It makes you feel safe. Then somebody began chopping wood—way off—and I always like to hear that too. It makes you think of families—large happy families—with plenty of company—gathering around the fire even in summer time. After that I wasn't afraid. But I didn't go in till broad daylight, long after the owls were gone—for these vines were nearly as thick then as they are now."

She broke off suddenly in some confusion

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and sat still and ill at ease. Already it seemed to her unaccountable and rather unseemly, that she should have spoken so freely of these intimate matters to a comparative stranger. She felt ashamed and wondered how she could have done it. For she did not know that the shyest soul may be so lonely that it rushes to meet the first congenial spirit.

He saw her sudden embarrassment without knowing what caused it, and this unexpected withdrawal made him uneasy too. He was not yet quite familiar with his duties as a minister. It now flashed over him that he should say something about her husband, that he ought to make some reference to her recent bereavement. For he knew of it and of the sad circumstances of her marriage, having heard all that the mere lookers-on could tell. But there was something in the drooping aloofness of this little black-clad figure, though he could see it only dimly, that held him silent. Intuition led him safely away and he began to speak quietly of the real anxiety that he felt for his aunt. And he could have hit upon nothing more sure to arouse Phœbe than any appeal for sympathy and help.

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“It really was a great sacrifice for her to leave her old home and lifelong friends — who understand her harmless ways — and come here to live among strangers in a strange place. And she did it solely for my sake.” His earnest tone grew lighter and he laughed merrily. “Yes, she thinks that a minister cannot be properly respected unless he has a home of his own. Maybe — she’s right — I don’t know. But it’s certainly most unselfish of her to keep house for me — when she hates housekeeping with all her heart. I’ve always felt that we all deserve special credit for doing the things that we most dislike. And it must be especially hard to do them when we are no longer young. The very move was hard enough. Moving old people is like transplanting old trees,” he said rather sadly.

“Maybe so — I’m afraid so — very much afraid,” she said hurriedly almost as if in alarm. “That’s the very thing I’ve been thinking about — long and hard — this whole day through.”

“Yes?” he said eagerly, but had to go on without another word from her. “One reason for my coming over this evening so unceremoniously was to beg you to be neighborly with my aunt.

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You would if you knew how homesick she has been. I don't dare ask the older ladies of the church. There has been a grave breach already. That yeast-jar on the front gate-post —" he said, laughing again.

Phoebe laughed too but cordially promised to do her best.

"Then come over often to see her," he urged honestly believing that he spoke solely on his aunt's behalf. "Come early to-morrow morning and just as often and as soon as you can. Please do. We are going to the woods—I'm that anxious to please her. She is a botanist and a student of natural history—an ardent lover of bugs and weeds and other unattractive things that don't interest me in the least. But turn about is fair play and she does her best to keep house. She's still looking for wonders in this unknown country. Perhaps you would come too. Do come and go with us early to-morrow morning—before the sun gets too warm."

"Not to-morrow," with a quick change of tone as recollection chilled her and with the same sudden shrinking. "I couldn't—I'm expecting company."

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He waited, much perplexed. But she said nothing more and the constraint soon grew so great that he could only rise to go. This he did saying rather formally that he—and his aunt—would be pleased to have her come whenever she found it entirely convenient. Nevertheless he looked back more than once on the way across the big road, trying to see through the falling dusk. At the gate he stood so long, still gazing and wondering, that she also began to wonder thinking it strange that the light of his lamp did not shine out, throwing a broad, shining band almost to her feet. Other lights were already glimmering farther off under the great trees where darkness was gathering. For it was in the dark of the moon and the neighbors never lingered long away from their own thresholds unless there was bright moonlight. And the dimly lit windows never glimmered long through the thick vines and low boughs. Most of the people were ready to go to bed with the birds.