

V

THE NEIGHBORS AND THE NEWCOMERS

By sunrise the next morning everybody knew that even Mrs. Pottle had failed to turn Phœbe; that her new relations were actually coming in spite of the general protest; that they were in fact already on the way and would get there that very day unless the stage broke down.

There was usually more or less uncertainty about the time of its arrival but delay only made expectation keener—if that could be. For the stage's coming and going were always most keenly interesting events. It was the sole link between this remote corner of the earth and the outside world and it made only two trips a week with the mail. No one in the community wrote or received many letters, to be sure, but of course there was always a chance that some one—especially Arabella—

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might get a letter and then there was also the prospect of an occasional passenger. Few travellers ever set out for the village yet nevertheless a good many rather singular wayfarers reached it, for the reason that Hillery Kibbey, the stage-driver, never passed any one a-foot on the road without offering a free ride. To have done that would have been against the kind custom of the country and Hillery himself was a friendly soul, fond of company and glad to have any one to talk to on his long route. Indeed his remarkable conversational powers were among the several causes of his great and long popularity. But there was another and a more exclusive reason for his being particularly well known and liked by the leading ladies of the village.

This was a habit that they all had of getting him to fetch, from the larger shops in the large town at the other end of his route, certain choice articles of dress which were not to be found nearer by. No one knew how the habit had first been formed but it had long been firmly established thus making Hillery a person of recognized social importance. He not only brought every dress-bonnet of any real



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elegance that came to the village for years and years, but he took it back again when it was not quite right—as it hardly ever was—and with elaborate verbal directions for its alteration into the bargain. It was really wonderful that he could remember so much that he did not understand. But the dullest of us can learn a good deal when it is as much to our interest as this was to his. Moreover Hillery was by no means dull and naturally obliging.

Under the circumstances it was both necessary and pleasant that the very first ladies in all the country round, should have long and confidential confabs with Hillery every time he came and nearly every time he went. For if it chanced that one of them wanted nothing done for herself, she was naturally none the less interested in knowing what he was doing for the other ladies. And Hillery soon managed to make it quite clear that the surest way to prevent his forgetting the smallest detail of an order, and the only way to secure his undivided attention, was to invite him to dinner or supper. The men for their part were quite willing to have him invited, because they all

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liked him and then he always brought the latest news. However it was to the squire's house that he was bidden more often than anywhere else and there that he fared best. In the early spring or fall at the critical seasons when the beaver or the leghorn dress-bonnets of the squire's lady were at stake, Hillery was sometimes invited to spend the night in the best spare-room, and the stage horses also feasted in the squire's roomy stables. And so with the passing of the placid years a rather keen rivalry had sprung up among the ladies of the neighborhood over the good offices of the stage-driver. In the prosperous days that this story tells of he seldom had to go to the tavern. House after house became as home to him till there were only two that he did not visit and both of them—oddly enough—belonged to his best customers. One was the home of Mrs. Arabella, or rather Mrs. Captain Lightfoot as she preferred to be called. She had a right to the title, inasmuch as she said that her husband had written back that he had acted as captain of the company of gold-hunters with whom he had gone to California. Certainly her claim



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was never disputed and could not have been had anybody ever wished to dispute it for nobody knew anything except what she gave out — in her vaguely important way — from his letters and those were longer and longer in coming. It was two years now since the last one had come yet that wonderful golden glamour — that glittering mist — which wrapped the Argonauts remained as dazzling as ever. It gilded even those whom they had left behind and Arabella still shone brilliantly by this reflected light. It was indeed a source of pride to the entire community to have a real Argonaut's lady in the neighborhood. In fact there was no little surprise that so distinguished a personage should be content in so remote a spot. But whenever anything of the kind was said to Arabella herself she always gave a charming explanation which satisfied everybody.

"It is solely on Mandy Pottle's account," she used to say with a confidential lowering of her pleasant voice. "We were schoolmates, you know. I have relied on her for guidance all my life. She has such a strong character and such sound judgment — and I'm as helpless as

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a baby. Oh no, I couldn't think of going away from her now when I haven't the captain to lean on. No, indeed — I couldn't possibly live away from dear Mandy Pottle."

Nobody ever thought of doubting her sincerity. Even old Mrs. Crabtree agreed that it was quite true that Arabella could not live anywhere else — without a penny in the world to live on — while she certainly could live here on the fat of the land, just as long as she would let Mandy Pottle tell her when to breathe. But then that old game-maker was always saying something sharp about somebody. Arabella was really held in the highest respect. Whenever the stage came in the few men who were waiting for business letters always stood back — hats in hand — to allow Arabella to pass into the post-office first. And the shoemaker who was also the postmaster never dreamt of serving anybody else till he had gone over the whole mail to see if there was a letter for her from the captain. Then everybody always looked sorry — and surprised too — that there was not one. That is everybody did except Arabella herself. She was always perfectly certain that it would come



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in the very next mail and fluttered out of the post-office just as gayly as she fluttered in, bowing and smiling with her pink ribbons flying and tripped off on her high heels. Those high heels by the way, gave Hillery Kibbey a great deal of trouble because they were not much worn and hard to find. Sometimes he had to have them made and advance the money out of his own pocket. But he had no need to grumble knowing from experience that Mrs. Pottle would pay him — with a handsome profit — when Arabella could not, which was almost invariably the case. Then Hillery admired Arabella considering her the finest lady of his acquaintance, as indeed she was. Also she had such a taking way of asking him to drop in any time for a light, tasty snack that he hardly noticed her failure to name any special time. Moreover he did notice that she seldom forgot to get Mrs. Pottle to invite him and often hinted till the squire, out of all patience, shouted clear across the big road telling him to fetch the stage horses too.

The other house which never entertained him was old Mrs. Crabtree's. He had no special liking for that lady whom he usually

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spoke of as "a caution." Nevertheless she was a good customer sending by him for books nearly every trip and paying liberally without looking too closely into profits either. But business can never be everything to the most enterprising man of proper self-respect. It nettled Hillery to see old Mrs. Crabtree sitting at her window without taking the trouble to nod or even turn her head when he drove up with the books. He was not used to being treated as a mere cartier and the fact that the scornful old lady sent her daughter out with other orders and the cash in hand, did not sooth his wounded pride in the least. For Anna Crabtree — poor soul — was one of those persons who are never taken into account. And finally Hillery set his wits to work. It was not easy for him to find a way to reach "the grand Mogul" as he sometimes called the old lady. She cared for nothing but books and Hillery read only an occasional newspaper, having a very poor opinion of anybody who did read much, especially books. Yet he was not one to allow his own preference or personal prejudice to stand in the way when he once set out to do a thing. Accord-



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ingly it was not a great while before he stopped—drawing up the stage before Mrs. Crabtree's window—with a respectful and self-respecting good-morning which was followed by a fresh piece of literary news. He had got it from the clerk of the book-store in exchange for a big twist of the finest old tobacco. But old Mrs. Crabtree had no means of knowing that and stared at him blankly for a moment. Then she understood well enough to laugh and forthwith began a long and lively confab. Henceforth this was repeated nearly as often as he passed, for he continued the study of literature along with his pursuit of the fashions. His success in this line was even more remarkable than his mastery of millinery, if not quite so generally appreciated. It is true that it never brought him and old Mrs. Crabtree any nearer together than the gate and the window but Hillery was quite content. He had properly asserted himself and from this time on had only the best of feeling in the matter. However on this memorable morning in June he could not stop even for the usual confab. And the old lady seeing the stage go by and catching a glimpse of its passengers,

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suddenly bethought herself that it might perhaps be amusing to hear something about the arrival.

“Put on your bonnet Anne, and run up to Phœbe's. The old folks are in the stage sure enough. It couldn't be anybody else. Don't stop to get your dress-bonnet—your sunbonnet will do. There it is. Only make haste—I want to hear all about it. Hurry! One looks about as well on you as the other,” eyeing her as she usually did—with the critical intolerance of an old woman who has been a beauty for a plain woman who is no longer young; an intolerance that seems curiously unaffected by the closest ties of blood. “Run along as you are. What's the odds! Then I want to know just what they all do and say when the stage gets there—it's too warm and too much trouble for me to go myself. Now mind that you keep your eyes open. For goodness' sake don't go—as usual—with your head in a bag.”

Anne had been more than willing to make her escape in all haste. She was already on her way up the big road and began to breathe more freely beyond the reach of her mother's voice. Glancing timidly from side to side she



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wondered that no one else was in sight. The housewives always came out with their sewing to save time, and sat on the front porches in full view while waiting to see the stage pass. There never was the slightest attempt to hide the interest that they all felt, nor any reason for trying to conceal it. But on this memorable morning in June most of them deemed it more delicately respectful on Phœbe's account, that they should for once watch and wait indoors, with discreet openings between the ruffles of the white curtains. Only Mrs. Pottle and the widow Wall had been seen and they had gone together up the big road but ten minutes before, the squire's wife having called by for her friend. As they now walked along under the trees Mrs. Pottle remarked that things sometimes came about so that a sense of duty would not allow you to consider solely what was due to yourself. She then explained why she was out now when she would have much preferred staying at home, and attending to her own affairs since she got such scant thanks for attending to other people's. It was quite time — so she said — that some decisive step was taken to put a stop to the scandal of that yeast-jar.

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"Now just think of it, Jane," she appealed almost pathetically. "On the front gate-post of a nice parsonage that a respectable congregation has bought and paid for. It fairly makes my blood boil to remember the strawberries that I've capped — yes, and picked too bending down stout as I am and in the broiling sun — to say nothing about the cream that I've whipped, to help make the money that went into that parsonage. Besides there are all the tussles I had with the squire to make him do *his* part."

"'Pears to me he should have wanted to do it without any making," said the widow Wall tactlessly: "he's a member too."

"Of course he did." Mrs. Pottle fired instantly. "That was only his way of getting me all worked up as he glories in doing — and you know it, Jane — just as well as I do. There *are* men though — anyway there *used* to be —"

The widow Wall hastily opened and shut the parsonage gate with such a clatter that the rest of the taunt was lost — if it was intended for one: "Land alive, look at that!" she cried pointing to a row of large pale blue flowers. "Common Jimson weeds — if my eyes see



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straight—spread out on the front porch as if they were something rare. Well—I never!”

“And seed pods too—sure as we are standing here—hung up in the wind to sow the whole neighborhood,” scolded Mrs. Pottle. “When I’ve pulled the weeds out of the parsonage garden with my own hands and stood over the black boys for hours at a time. The next thing we know she’ll be planting these torments that we had so much trouble to get rid of. Yes, it’s certainly time that something was done before the parsonage goes teetotally to rack and ruin.”

“The flowers really are pretty,” said the widow Wall with her quick eyes for the ornamental, looking closer at the blossoms of the Jamestown weed. “They are like fine artificials and I wouldn’t mind having some of the same kind on my dress-bonnet. My taste always was dressier than yours, Mandy. But maybe that was because you are stouter and—”

“There now!” exulted Mrs. Pottle turning round after knocking hard. “What did I tell you! The front door’s shut and the side door standing wide open—with the chickens walk-

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ing through the passage and not a soul to be seen or heard about the place. Well—I told you all how it would be when you would have another single preacher.”

“Maybe he will find a wife among us,” said the widow Wall with a conscious smile. “He’s real handsome and very intelligent and not at all too young either,” as she spoke, perking in the quaintest manner imaginable.

“Marry!” scouted Mrs. Pottle. “Ridiculous! Who under the shining sun could he find *here* to marry?”

The widow Wall bridled, but fortunately her friend was knocking loudly on the front door and did not notice.

“Ah-ha! just as I expected,” Mrs. Pottle fumed. “Nobody at home. Ten to one but that half-cracked old woman is off to the woods again, taking the new minister with her. Well, we’ll sit down here on the front porch anyhow long enough to rest. For it’s as much mine and yours as anybody’s. That’s just what makes me say what I do about that yeast-jar on the front gate-post. She has no more right to set it there than to bring it down and put it on ours.”



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"Well—some people seem to think sometimes that they have some right to do as they like," said the widow Wall showing the resentment that she dared not express more directly.

But this also was lost on Mrs. Pottle who was leaning forward to watch the big road with keen attention. For the stage was now rumbling toward Phœbe's gate, and to see it arrive had been the real object of this visit to the parsonage. Mrs. Pottle had not known that there was no one at home, but she had made up her mind to insist upon sitting on the front porch. From that point she could have a clear, close view of Phœbe's front gate which she knew no other way to get. Offended dignity would not let her go to the house and she was too curious about the newcomers to miss seeing their arrival.

"There they come," cried the widow Wall: "and there's Phœbe now standing out at the gate—waiting for them—poor thing."

"She's brought it on herself. There wasn't any need for her to saddle herself with such a burden." Mrs. Pottle's heart hardened suddenly, seeing all this going on without having any part in it.

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"Hillery is driving straight on without stopping to leave the mail-bag. Just look how grand he sits up—and the wide swath he cuts,—in turning to pull up before Phœbe's gate. My goodness! Did you see that? Why, the old lady hopped out without waiting for Phœbe or anybody to open the stage-door. She just flung it back herself. And she ain't old at all. Her hair's black as a crow," said the widow, enviously. "But then maybe her face is wrinkled," hopefully, "you can't tell this far."

"All the worse then—there is always something wrong when the hair stays black after the face gets wrinkled," declared Mrs. Pottle with conviction.

Her own comely, rosy face bore few lines and there were plenty of silver threads in her abundant dark hair. The widow Wall glanced at her in open admiration and with secret envy. The look could not but please Mrs. Pottle. Then both the ladies turned again to look at what was going forward around Phœbe's front gate.

"See her small head. Isn't it the smallest you ever saw on such a tall woman?" said the widow Wall. "She's lanky too. Now I'm tall myself—but nobody ever could accuse me of



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being slab-sided. Just see how she towers head and shoulders above Phœbe and Anne and her head is smaller than theirs. Both of them and the old lady all seem to be having lots of trouble to get the old man out of the stage. Phœbe is such a mite and Anne's no help to anybody. Don't you think we ought to go over—"

"No, I don't," said Mrs. Pottle shortly and tartly. "And I do think you might have more consideration for me than to mention such a thing, after seeing the way Phœbe treated me last night. What's more—you were partly to blame for it."

The retort came with unexpected spirit: "I didn't say one thing that I didn't mean. And I don't believe Phœbe did either—so there! I'm mighty certain anyhow that she believes it's right to bring these old folks here. And I wouldn't like even to say she wasn't—much less try to keep her from doing what she thinks she ought to do. There ain't many people, Mandy, that are always as sure they're right and everybody else is wrong—as *you* are."

"Well Jane, if you've come here only to quarrel it seems better to be going home. It

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was *my* impression that we were coming as christians for the good of our church," rising haughtily. "But of course you can do as you've a mind to. I decline to stay a moment longer," moving toward the steps. "Then I want to send a basket of June apples over to Arabella."

The widow Wall followed rather frightened at her own revolt, as she always was at these uncontrollable flashes of spirit. Then she was chronically jealous of her friend's kindness to Arabella as Mrs. Pottle knew. Feeling very uncomfortable indeed she walked on in silence at a loss for something to say. They kept to the other side of the big road, but could see plainly enough all that was going on around the stage.

"The old gentleman's leg must be bad yet," the widow Wall mustered courage to say. "Old bones are hard to mend—sometimes they don't knit at all. Just look, Mandy, they are almost carrying him in the house. My! There's plenty of trouble ahead for Phœbe—poor little thing."

But Mrs. Pottle was not to be so easily placated and said severely that it was silly to waste sympathy where it was neither deserved nor wanted.