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TRANSPLANTING OLD TREES

It was quite true that Phœbe needed no pity just then. She had never been happier in her whole life than she was now while helping Father Rowan into the house. He was not yet able to walk alone even with the aid of his cane. Then he was a short, stout, clumsily built old man and could hardly have been anything but awkward even in his best days. Yet she liked him from the first glance that passed between them before he got out of the stage. For she had looked into it with shrinking haste, hurriedly seeking the likeness which she dreaded to find. There was not a trace of it in his broad, red, good-natured face. She felt guilty because she could not help feeling glad.

That was why she suddenly bent her shoulder to its task, so willingly and strongly, that Mother Rowan on the other side had

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hardly any weight to bear. Anne carried his cane and between them they finally managed to get him up the steps and through the passage and into the chamber.

“There now!” Phœbe beamed in saying this. “You are sitting in your own arm-chair. This room is yours too — yours and Mother Rowan’s. And I do hope you both may like it. Only let me know if there’s anything you would wish changed. Perhaps you might prefer to have the bed somewhere else. I put your chair here close to the front window so that you might look out on the big road. There’s a good deal of passing sometimes. Maybe you will like to see it — till you’re well again and can go everywhere. When you are tired we can move you over by the back window where you may look at the garden and smell the spice pinks. But you’ll soon be going about.”

Then crossing her little hands she stood by his side looking around the chamber with a glow of open pride. It had taken a great deal of hard work to make it look so well and she had done it all herself. Her sulky servant had bluntly refused to turn a hand, being as much opposed to this addition to the family as the

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rest of her friends and with more personal cause. But Phœbe was not thinking of these matters now as she looked around the shadowed chamber smiling happily to see how very nice and quiet and cool it was. The walls were freshly whitewashed and the spotless floor was nearly as white as the walls and brightened by gay home-made rugs. Her finest, whitest fringed counterpane and her nicest pillow-cases with the widest ruffles made the high old bed look like a newly fallen snow-drift. The white muslin curtains were ruffled too and drawn back, to let in the cool green light that came through the vines, and the soft breeze with its scent of roses. But the prettiest of all was the wide fireplace filled with the misty green of asparagus boughs. It seemed to her that nothing could be more exquisite. She had allowed most of the tender white stalks that peeped up in her asparagus bed to turn into this mist of verdure when she would have liked to eat them. And now proud of her success she turned shyly and glanced at Mother Rowan to see if she had yet seen how very, very beautiful it was — floating out of the deep fireplace covering the whitened bricks with emerald clouds.

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That alert lady of quick motions had already taken off her queer black bonnet and had laid it down, an ink spot on the whiteness of the counterpane. Her singularly small head with its abnormally dark hair was thus fully revealed. She was folding her mourning veil and now spread it over the bonnet. It was remarkable that so slight a thing could be done with such decision and energy. Then she turned sharply and her snapping black eyes swept the room in a single glance of startling keenness which stopped abruptly at the fireplace.

“All that green stuff has got to come out — first thing,” she said shortly. “It’s unhealthy and cluttering to boot. Then *he* — him over yonder a-sitting by the window — thinks he’s bound to have a fire night and morning all the year round,” she said, with a toss of her head toward her husband but without a glance. “There’s no sense in it and I’d just about broken him of thinking he had to have one when he hurt his leg. Since then he lets on that he’s chilly and I can’t tell whether he is or not.”

“Yes indeed, of course he is. Thank you for telling me,” said Phœbe cheerfully, ashamed of feeling so much disappointed over such a

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trifle. "Certainly I'll take the boughs out right away. I want you both to have everything just as you like and are used to. But I won't know unless you tell me, so please do."

She knelt down before the hearth and began to remove the delicate, feathery sprays. But she could hardly stifle a sigh to think that this exquisite greenness — left a little longer in the garden — would have been gemmed with ruby seeds. Then an anxious pang sent these fancies flying. A fire all the year round! She stood up suddenly and cast an uneasy glance through the back window. No, the woodpile was not in sight. It had sunk below the row of pink and white hollyhocks. She had never given a thought to fuel in making her plans for a larger family. Very little had been needed for the cooking of her own food and there has been no other need for it heretofore in the summer time. Kneeling down again before the fireplace she wondered how she might manage to get some wood. But she looked up brightly smiling, though a little startled by the tone in which her name was called.

"Yes, it's always been his way to slide along

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on the soft side," said Mother Rowan snapping her eyes: "but it's never been mine. I believe in doing what's right no matter how hard it is for me or anybody else. Right's right and wrong's wrong — just the same — no matter who likes it and who don't. When a thing's got to be done, the sooner it is the better according to *my* notion. There's no shilly-shally about me nor any deceitfulness either. And that's the reason I've made up my mind to tell you the downright truth at the very start."

Phoebe was rather frightened by this time and her transparent, uplifted face showed it yet she was still bravely smiling.

"For it would be downright deceitful to let you start out a-thinking that I wanted to come here — amongst strangers and begin all over again at my age and with him in that fix — for I didn't — and don't — want any such thing. 'Twould be against nature if I did with a daughter of my own to live with. Now then — we both know just where we stand for that's the truth with the bark on it."

Phoebe hastily stood up with her arms full of the green mist. Her face flushed and her

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lips began to quiver while her eyes filled with tears.

"Tut-tut! What's the use of all that?" growled Father Rowan. "Sounds to me mighty ungrateful. For my part I haven't heard anything about our living with Kate. If she asked us *I* don't know it," he said with a glance of defiance at his wife.

There was a defiant note in his deep, hoarse voice also. It made Phœbe think of an amiable bear growling through the bars of his cage, just to say what he could do if he were free and had a mind to. Then there was a humorous twinkle in his kind eyes as he looked round at her. She drew nearer to him already feeling that they must stand by one another if they were to stand at all. But neither ventured to speak seeing how those black eyes snapped from one to the other.

"Well, it wasn't *my* fault that we didn't get here while we had a home of our own to come to," declared Mother Rowan squaring herself. "We weren't kept away till too late, because *I* went off and got *my* leg broken while I was out on a—"

It was lucky that Hillery Kibbey appeared

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just then in the open door with the little trunk, and set it down on the bare floor with a noise that drowned everything else. Phœbe followed him into the passage and paid the cost of the journey out of her scanty store. Then she hurried back to help unpack so that the travellers might get settled as soon as possible.

"Till you are I can't feel sure of keeping you for good—not till the last thing is taken out of the trunk and put away," she said smiling timidly, with her sweet young face close to the grim old one. "Let me—"

"No, thank you," Mother Rowan replied without any answering smile. "It's better for me to handle my own things—and his too—so that I can know where to lay my hand on whatever I want—or he does—any hour of the day and night. Then—not to be deceitful—I'm bound to say that I never did like having my clothes—or his—pulled and hauled by anybody else."

The blood flashed over Phœbe's sensitive face coloring it more vividly than before. Yet a pretty flutter of dimples came with the rush of lovely color. For there was something comical in the wife's never speaking the hus-

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band's name and in her always speaking at him, not once to him. It was already plain enough that this was a habit and not an accident. And so Phœbe's half-amused, half-frightened gaze now followed Mother Rowan who was going back and forth between the trunk and the wardrobe.

"It won't be easy getting along without the big deep closet I've been used to," she said. "But I reckon I can somehow. I certainly ought to know by this time how to make the best of things no matter how bad they may be. And I always *have* made the best of 'em!" she cried pausing with an armful of rusty garments, and queer odds and ends. Her eyes snapped as if they surely must send out sparks. "*That* I have! I can say that much for *myself* — whatever other folks may say for *themselves*," she said, jerking her head toward her husband. "Nobody living — or dead either for that matter — ever can say that I haven't," she said in fiery challenge. "If poor William were alive and here this minute and could speak, he'd tell you the very same thing."

Phœbe shrunk closer to Father Rowan's side breathing quickly. The little hand on his

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shoulder suddenly began to tremble so that he hastily put up his big one to pat it and hold it steady. But she felt that he shrank too and noted that he had no more to say than herself. Both of them wanted to run away and hide from those snapping eyes.

"Yes, he would," Mother Rowan went on busy again in laying the things on the wardrobe shelves. "He'd tell you that I've never shirked — that I've always stood just as close to the mark as I could — come what would."

"He *did* tell me," said Phœbe faintly, hanging her head. "He told me over and over what a hard life of self-sacrifice yours had been and how kind —"

But her voice suddenly failed and her eyes slowly brimmed as she looked up. She no longer saw this gaunt, grotesque figure. A noble character and an intrepid soul rose before her in its place. She remembered now all that she had heard of this strange woman's goodness: all her tireless striving against overwhelming misfortune: all her dauntless courage under lifelong discouragement: all her forgetfulness of self when self-sacrifice was bitterly hard: all her queer tenderness: all her unflinching kind-

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ness to a weak and ailing child — not her own. Phœbe's tender heart was deeply stirred. She felt keenly ashamed that she could not bring herself to say what she felt, that she dared not put her arms around that unbending neck and draw it down, and kiss those thin and harshly straightened lips. For she could not do anything but stand silent and gaze in wistful helplessness, still shrinking and quivering.

"No, nobody ever can charge *me* with making a difference between his son and my daughter like the common run of stepmothers," Mother Rowan continued in utter absorption. "So far as I could manage it, they always fared alike. That was the way as long as poor William lived and it's the same way now that he's dead. I've done by him just as I would have done by her. I've got him a handsome tombstone."

"Oh," cried Phœbe recoiling before she could control herself under this shock.

"Why *not*?" challenged Mother Rowan on the defensive at once. Then the jealousy that was always smouldering blazed up. "Hadn't I a *right* to do for him just the same as before?"

"Yes — no — I only — it seems so soon —"

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faltered Phœbe forced to say something, and not knowing what she did murmur.

"Maybe it does to *you*," retorted Mother Rowan. "A perfect stranger couldn't be expected to feel toward him as I do after bringing him up. And so far as *that* goes he would have to wait a whet for a tombstone if I had sat back — holding *my* hands — and waited till he got one from his own flesh and blood."

"There — that'll do," growled Father Rowan.

It seemed to Phœbe that the broad, bent old shoulders shrunk a little more notwithstanding this sturdy protest. But her whole attention — frightened, bewildered, fascinated — was fixed on that small face. She did not know in the least what its singular expression meant. She was not learned enough in life's lessons to read the tragic story which it told in a way that was piteously absurd. The look on that forbidding face was really one of pure exaltation. It was an expression of spiritual triumph which had come at last to a grimly unimaginative nature, after years of fierce striving toward a single ideal. For this honest woman of narrow mind and strenuous soul had only one — her duty to her stepson — her whole hard life through.

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But she had done her best to reach it, had never ceased trying to hitch her humble "wagon to a star," the sole fixed star that she ever could see, always shining high and far over a dark and stony waste. Poor Mother Rowan! Let none of us dare laugh. For who of us has striven so hard and so long to reach any of the many stars that we are permitted to see?

And this was the supreme achievement of her long struggle. No wonder then that it now absorbed her so that she did not hear or see anything else. She sat down, forgetting the unpacking, and absently took up a turkey-wing and began fanning herself in excited jerks.

"It's a real large, handsome tombstone too," she went on proudly, nodding her small head till the tiny gold hoops in her ears swung to and fro. "And I didn't have to pay full price for it either because I got it at an auction."

"An auction!" repeated Phoebe vaguely, thinking that she had not heard aright.

"Yes — an auction," said Mother Rowan, tartly. "Tombstone dealers have to sell out sometimes just like other folks. But a tomb-

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stone auction don't often come off just in the nick o' time as this one did. Why, it was the very week after poor William died." Then something that she saw in Phoebe's face caused her to fire up again. "And he needed the stone just as much first as last — I suppose. There's never any dilly-dally about me. No, I went right over to look at the stones before they were put up for sale. I made up my mind that he should have the best there was if I could raise the money for it. And you never can tell what you're getting if you bid in a hurry without knowing what you're doing. Then I wasn't a-going to give William any second-hand stone that had been made for somebody else. My conscience was clear of imposing on him while he was alive and I certainly didn't intend to begin playing him any mean tricks at this late day," she said with almost amiable fluency. "So I went beforehand and picked out the nicest, biggest stone there was in the whole lot. Then I hurried home and got out all the money I had and counted it very carefully. Most of the Mexican dollars that poor William had brought me from Mexico were in the same little bag just as he

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had given them to me. He was free-hearted when he had anything. I hadn't spent a dollar either except for the linen to make those fine, cool shirts—the ones I sent to him after he got sick—”

“Yes — I remember,” murmured Phœbe hastily, hanging her head.

“And I had some more too, a few more dollars that I'd earned teaching school,” Mother Rowan said, turning suddenly and snapping her eyes at the silent form beside the window. “I hardly know how they had escaped *his* clutches when the rest of my school money was sunk — without leave or license from me — in that worthless, bad-smelling land. A farm! *Him* with a farm — when he knew just as much what to do with it as a cat would know what to do with two tails.”

“Now — I tell you again — that's enough — a-plenty!” roared Father Rowan whose subjection was only recent and not yet complete.

His wife did not look at him again and ignored what he said: “I counted it all up — what I had earned and the Mexican dollars that poor William had given me. It seemed as if there ought to be enough. But you

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never can tell about an auction. Some people are real mean about bidding against you and running things up. The best way is to go early enough to get a front seat where you can catch the eye of the auctioneer. I was a-standing on the top door-step when the door was opened on the morning of the auction and so got my pick of the seats. I happened to know the auctioneer too, and I do believe he knocked the tombstone down to me just as soon as he honestly could. Anyway I got the very one I'd set my heart on — the largest and handsomest there was in the whole lot. And there it is — all ready,” she said, turning toward Phœbe with the manner of one who expects to be congratulated.

“Where?” faintly asked Phœbe who could think of nothing else to say.

“Under shelter of course,” said Mother Rowan huffily. “Where else should it be? And it's a-going to stay there too, till I can get it set up. It shall never be said of *me* that I gave *my* stepson a rain-stained and weather-streaked tombstone. Furthermore the storage on it is paid for two months. There's nothing more to do except see about having it put up