

## The Little Hills

named Thoreau. Listen carefully—for this is much better said than I could say it: ‘After all what does the practicalness of life amount to? The things immediate to be done are very trivial. I could postpone them all to hear this locust sing.’ There! *That’s* what I mean. Think of coming under such an influence. Do you still wonder that I fear it? For you must remember that there is a special obligation upon me—and all my cloth—to work for our faith and for humanity with head and hands as well as heart and soul.”

She murmured that perhaps the writer did not mean just what he had said.

“Perhaps not,” he granted, smiling. “But that is their tone and pose. They live to celebrate the turning of a polliwog into a frog, and to ridicule man’s bravest climbing over the little hills of life.”

## XI

### MRS. CRABTREE'S CALL

OF course they were seen coming as well as going. There could be no unseen passing over the big road in daylight. The kind people living in the old houses under the great trees felt too great an interest in their good neighbors for that. Then there was so little to see that anybody’s going by made an event. But it was not often that such a visible, audible flutter flew along the entire leafy length of the street, as now fluttered after this little group.

It had been strange and unexpected enough to see Phœbe start out so early in the morning. The good housekeepers were so taken by surprise at first that they could hardly believe their own eyes. They all instinctively turned and looked at the morning-glories, those floral clocks which are never wrong when the sun shines. There was no mistake, the transparent

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blue bugles were still blowing silently even on the sunniest side of the front porches. In the shady fence corners plenty of primroses too were still wide open—and every golden cup brimming with dew. Thrusting the vines aside, the housewives shook their puzzled heads at one another. What in the world could Phœbe mean? The beds were not yet made, not even Mrs. Pottle's and her house was always in perfect order before anybody else had begun to sweep. Then she had many servants while Phœbe had only one, a sulky cook who never did anything that she could help and with the two newcomers now to wait upon. Puzzled and disapproving comments were exchanged in low tones through the morning-glories over the whitewashed fences after Phœbe and Mother Rowan had gone beyond hearing.

But most of the ladies were still busy with their own household duties, and the general excitement lulled till Phœbe's return caused it to break out afresh and even more violently than before. Indeed a head came quite through the morning-glories here and there and the neighbors rarely forgot their manners so far

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as that. But then the boughs hung so low as quite to cut off the view at the turn of the big road. And so they could hardly credit what they saw—looking straight at the three ladies and the gentleman now in sight. For none of them knew the new minister very well. He had kept to himself in a way that they were unused to and did not like. Most of them would have said that Phœbe hardly knew him at all. Yet there he and she came, walking down the big road side by side laughing and talking, with his head bent very close to hers. No wonder that the morning-glories were fluttering as if suddenly stirred by the wings of many startled birds. And close behind were the minister's queer aunt whom they all called "a fly-up-the-creek"—and who looked like a blurred ambrotype—peering vaguely into the fence corners; and the tall stranger with the small head and the grim face—who walked like a soldier—never once glancing beyond her own straight path. Some of the spectators were thrown so far off their polite balance as to think of following the party to Phœbe's house, in order to find out what it meant. But in another moment they knew that this would never do.

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And then there was Mrs. Pottle who had not given a sign of what she intended in regard to these new relations of Phœbe's.

So that nobody dared move in the matter till the spirit of contrariness suddenly seized old Mrs. Crabtree. She had hardly thought of her niece's grave undertaking beyond laughing at it. But she happened to be more idle and bored than usual that day — sitting beside the open window — when she saw Phœbe and those who were with her. And she noticed the agitation of the morning-glories that followed their passing. In the dearth of any other entertainment this amused her a little, and it presently occurred to her that there might be more amusement in taking a closer look at the old folks who had "feathered in" on Phœbe. The inert old lady was subject to somewhat energetic impulses at long and irregular intervals, and usually acted upon them without delay. And she did so now. Getting out of her low chair with some difficulty she did not call her daughter from the next room to fetch her bonnet, but took up an old parasol which chanced to be lying near. With this in her hand she went sideways down the front steps.

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At the gate she opened the parasol and found that one of its lean ribs stood out quite bare of silk. But there was enough left to cover her handsome old head and she never allowed a trifle to stand in the way of her amusing herself. Then the sun was only pleasantly warm as yet.

The earth was moist and cool from the night's shower, and the air was sweet with the scent of the wet clover-blossoms that reddened the meadows lying close by. In the gardens behind the houses the flowers were freshly fragrant. Old Mrs. Crabtree drank in all this beauty and sweetness, walking along the middle of the big road in order to see both sides. Moving slowly and heavily, for she was short and stout and lazy as well as old, she lost nothing of the neighbors' domestic affairs, that were to be seen through the open windows and doors. Passing the squire's house she saw Mrs. Pottle quite distinctly — still bustling about — and that alert lady saw her too. But the only greeting exchanged between them was an offhand nod on the one side and a stiff bow on the other. That was just what old Mrs. Crabtree wanted. She chuckled till her

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shapely bulk shook, knowing as well as if she had had eyes in the back of her handsome old head, that Mrs. Pottle — very much flustered — was peeping through her parlor curtains at that very moment trying to see where she was going.

Other eyes also were following her with more open curiosity. For she very seldom left her own house and hardly ever walked. Moreover everybody was afraid of her and we all feel a particularly keen interest in everything done by those whom we fear. The widow Wall was so taken aback on seeing her that she nearly dropped the little basket of green peas which she had been gathering. That would have been too bad for they were the first to ripen in the whole neighborhood. All the other pea-vines were still more white than green with a snowy fringe of scented bloom. And she meant to give these earliest, tenderest peas to Phœbe. Even a handful of sweet and tender peas would help now that the poor child had so many to provide for and so little to do it with. Then — so the widow Wall said to herself — Mandy Pottle would hear of the present and it should teach her that some

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people had the spunk to do what they liked with their own, no matter how overbearing she might try to be. Yes, poor little Phœbe was going to have this first basketful of green peas, be the consequences what they might. At these boldly rebellious thoughts, this forlorn wisp of harmless humanity stood very straight among the blossoming vines. She dumbly declared again that Mandy Pottle should see that even a poor widow with nobody to take her part, had some pride and feelings and knew how to stand up for them too. No, Mandy Pottle was not going to have her own way in everything all the time hereafter, no matter what she might say and do. In the excitement of this desperate resolve she flung up her head and fell to picking the peas faster than ever. But it was just at this moment that she caught sight of old Mrs. Crabtree and forgot everything else. Hastily setting down the basket she ran round the house, and clear out into the middle of the big road without remembering that she would be seen. The sun was in her eyes, but she managed to see by shading them with her hands. And so she stood till there could be no more doubt about

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the old lady's actual turning in at Phœbe's gate.

"Ah—ha!" the widow Wall cried aloud quite recklessly, feeling for the moment almost a liking for old Mrs. Crabtree: "*There* now, Mandy Pottle! After this we'll all see who is mistress and whether a body may breathe when she pleases or not!" running back to the garden in great haste to finish gathering the peas, so that she might take them to Phœbe and find out just what the old lady said and did.

Meantime Mrs. Crabtree was going straight ahead without paying the least attention to the stir which her appearance had created, though she saw it plainly enough. And she would not let Phœbe turn back when she met her at the gate starting out on an errand. Indeed she was rather pleased at the prospect of seeing the newcomers without any chance of interference with her investigation. There was no sign of them however, when she reached the porch and took her own time to subdue the unruly rib of the parasol. She got it down at last and used the stick as a cane in making her difficult way up the steps. There were two large rocking-chairs on the porch and

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she dropped heavily into the larger. It was a moment or so before her breath came back. When it had come she untied her bonnet-strings and threw them over her shoulders. Then she pounded loudly on the porch floor with the handle of the parasol. She must have been startled by the promptness of the response had she been at all nervous. For Mother Rowan sprang up in the front door as if she had been shot there by a powerful spring. But old Mrs. Crabtree was not nervous and the instantaneous snapping of those hostile black eyes pleased her at once.

"How-d'y," she drawled in her charming voice: "I'm Phœbe's aunt. You, I presume, are her husband's mother."

"*You* can call me that if you want to," said Mother Rowan. "But *my* way is to call things by their true names. There's no reason that I know of, to make me deny being poor William's stepmother. Do you know of any?"

"Bless me! No," cried old Mrs. Crabtree, glad she had come.

But Mother Rowan gave her no time to say anything more. She darted out on the porch and popped into the other chair, whirling it

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round so that she faced the enemy squarely, toe to toe and eye to eye.

"For if you — or anybody else — did know a thing or a time that I didn't do my best by him in — I'd just like to hear what and when it was."

"My dear Madam," said Mrs. Crabtree looking blandly over her spectacles. "Why! I've always been on the stepmother's side."

"Well, *I* haven't!" Mother Rowan said fiercely. "The common run of 'em deserve what they get. I've never had any use for the tribe and I've always despised to be mixed up with 'em. I *won't* either and never would be. That's the reason I was so particular about doing what I could for poor William. From the very minute I married his father when he wasn't more than six months old —"

"Oh!" old Mrs. Crabtree could not help breaking in. "You certainly got an early start if there's anything in that."

"'Twasn't *my* place to mourn for his first wife," Mother Rowan retorted with a fiery jerk of her small head toward the room in which the old man sat. "I had *my* hands full — a-mourning for my own first husband. And my child not much older than his."

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"Then honors were easy," said old Mrs. Crabtree affably, looking under her spectacles this time. She was beginning to enjoy herself very much indeed.

Mother Rowan knew nothing about whist but there was something in the tone of this reference that made her suspicious. She scanned the fine, bland old face before her very sharply before going on: "And I *did* mourn for him just the same as if he hadn't been as good as dead for years. Long sickness and worrying peevishness never made the difference with me that they do with some people. I've a mighty poor opinion of any woman that won't do her best — no matter what she feels — so long as she can stand on her feet and has strength in her arms and breath in her body. That kind of woman — and there are plenty of 'em — is just as despicable to me as the common run of stepmothers. There can never be any charge of shirking brought against me. No, sir-ree! I stood up to my duty through thick and thin and I wore mourning a full year, for I kept on wearing it after I married *him*. He didn't care and it wouldn't have mattered if he had. I always do what I think is right no

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matter who likes it, and who don't. But he was a bit down-hearted too — left alone with a baby and a sickly one at that. My Mary was hearty yet I never made a mite of difference between 'em. I can say *that* for myself now — and say it again when I come to hold up my right hand before the Great Bar."

An uneasy shade crossed old Mrs. Crabtree's face. She saw the strange look of exaltation, the same that Phœbe had seen, and understood it better. It gave her a glimpse of a benighted soul striving through mists toward some dimly lighted height. And that was most disquieting. It made her think and she did not wish to think — only to be amused. This was not at all amusing. She turned with a yawn and looked down the big road, meaning to start home as soon as she felt a little more rested.

Mother Rowan's gaze also wandered yet her thoughts held fast to the subject that absorbed her. It was ever easy to turn them to it and hard to turn them from it. Her voice had softened and grew almost gentle as she went on: "The hardest part was to get somebody to take care of the two children

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while I was teaching school nearly a mile away. For I had to help make the living. *He* never had any knack for making money. Mary could have got along somehow — she was such a pine knot — but William couldn't. He was real puny and needed lots of strong medicine and warm clothes. And he had 'em — that he did — so far as I could earn what he needed. But I had to leave home nearly all day to do it. Of course *he* was always ready to offer to stay with the children. But my back was no sooner turned than he was off to the groggery. At first while the children were little I tied them to the bedposts — one at the head and one at the foot — to keep 'em out of the fire. Then I used to put molasses on their little hands and gave them both a nice fuzzy white feather. Picking it from one hand to the other kept 'em real busy till I got back."

"It must have. I can't imagine any more inexhaustible source of entertainment."

"Other times before they had any jaw teeth, I would take two nice pieces of fat bacon — both exactly the same size — and tie them fast to the ends of two clean, strong strings.

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Then I used to tie the other end of one of these strings to each child's big toe. Fixed that way they *couldn't* choke themselves no matter how hard they might try to swallow the chunks whole. For just as soon as they began to choke they'd begin to kick — jerking the strings — and up the bacon was bound to come."

"So that they *could* eat their cake and have it too."

"They never had a mite o' cake," said Mother Rowan sharply. "Mary might have had it just as well as not. She could digest anything that she could swallow. But William couldn't and I never made any difference nor let her have one single thing that he didn't have. There's nobody —"

"Certainly — yes — of course not, I'm sure," said old Mrs. Crabtree hastily, having no notion of being made sad again. "And what else did you do?"

There was an air of flattering interest in the way this was said.

Mother Rowan was momentarily disarmed: "Well — I hardly knew what to do as they got to be bigger and the spring came on.

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Then the doctor said William must play out of doors and I didn't know which way to turn till Uncle Sandy — a most respectable black man — was put in jail. You see one wall of the jail came right up to our side yard so that he could see the children at play. But I never would have thought of asking him to take care of them, if he hadn't hollowed at 'em without being asked one day when he saw 'em doing something *mischevous*. That put the plan in my head and I couldn't have hit on a better one. Uncle Sandy staid by the window looking down through the bars the whole time I was gone to school. He could because he hadn't anything else to do. Once when William got strangled on a bean he called the preacher who happened to be going by and sent him running for me. And I did my part by Uncle Sandy too. I never believe in taking anything for nothing. Many's the big plate of good hot victuals right off the fire that I handed up to him through the jail window. Yes, and more than one whole pie to boot."

"There couldn't be any doubt about your keeping your side of any bargain," Mrs. Crabtree said with entire sincerity.



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Mother Rowan accepted the compliment in silence, but it was easy to see that she was pleased: "The worst time of all was when the children had the measles. For of course they had 'em at the same time because when I sent Mary over to a neighbor's to get the complaint I sent William too."

"Sent them to *get* it. What do you mean?"

"Just common sense—that's all," said Mother Rowan. "It was in the neighborhood and they had to have it. The only thing for me to do was to see that they took it in the right manner at the proper season. There's never any knowing when that disorder is done with, if children are allowed to take it at random. Maybe the common run of stepmothers might be careless enough to run such a risk, but I didn't intend to have it on *my* conscience."

Old Mrs. Crabtree settled back in her chair as if she meant to stay a long time.

"There wasn't any use in shilly-shallying either. That's not my way anyhow. When I've got to do a thing I *do* it right off the reel."

"Well, I don't," said Mrs. Crabtree. "I used to—sometimes. But I never do now

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because I've found out more often than not that by putting things off I can slide out of doing them at all."

Mother Rowan eyed her grimly, thinking such laxity positively immoral.

"Of course I waited till the spring was in sight," she said sternly. "And I didn't take one bluebird's word for it. But when the swallows began to build in the chimney, I knew the right time had come. Then I washed the children's faces, William's first, and put on their clean white aprons—giving Mary the one with a darn—and sent them off hand in hand, telling them to kiss the child that had the complaint, so that they'd be sure to have it."

Old Mrs. Crabtree looked curiously at her for a moment. "You're a remarkable woman," she then said slowly. "You are just about the most remarkable person—man or woman—that I've ever come across. Never till this moment have I ever known anybody with the full courage of conviction. But—what if those children had died!"

"That was Providence's lookout—not mine! It was all I could do to attend to my own duty—let alone anybody else's. And I did attend to

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it—nobody could have done it better. No children ever had the measles more thoroughly. When they were taken down there was a sift of snow on the ground and when they could lift their heads to look out the window the orchards were in bloom. Why, I can hear their weak little voices now—a-saying how pretty everything was—and almost see their peeked little faces—hardly wider than your two fingers.”

There was a long pause after this. It seemed to old Mrs. Crabtree that there was no more to say. But finally she asked—just to keep the ball rolling—where they had lived at that time. She listened rather absently to an account of the buying of the farm on Rennox Creek, which was always covered with a scum of some ill-smelling oil. But she pricked up her ears when she heard that this oil flowing out into Cumberland River had caught fire and burned on the top of the water for fifty-five miles.

“Let’s take off five miles just to make an even number,” she suggested.

“I’ll do nothing of the kind,” said Mother Rowan firmly. “That’s what I was told. I’ll tell the story as I heard it or not at all,” and

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indeed the encyclopædia tells it in the same way to this very day.

Old Mrs. Crabtree came back to firmer footing. “Well, at all events your stepson was a good boy,” she said.

The response was warm: “I never had to slap him but once—and many’s the time I’ve been sorry for that. But if it was to do over again I don’t see how it could be different. This was the way of it. We had a real nice neighbor—a maiden lady named Miss Minty Riddle. She was just as good as gold—but mighty sensitive about being so very fleshy. One day she asked me and the children to go with her to the circus. I’d have kept Mary at home, but William was so pleased that I consented and she gave him a quarter of his own to spend. I tried to get him to save it to buy medicine. But nothing would do but he lay it out paying his way into the side-show. And so he did. Well, there we stood waiting—Miss Minty and me and Mary—with folks all around us till William came out of the side-show. He was almost crying and said real loud, with a kind of sob, ‘Here I’ve gone and spent my quarter to see the Fat Lady and she