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THE UNEXPECTED THAT ALWAYS HAPPENS

ON the first stroke of four o'clock all the front gates opened under the great trees along the big road, and the ladies set out for the tea-party dressed in their best, and trying to walk as slowly as though nothing unusual were going on.

It was a soft gray day. A tender haze floated down from the gentle hills enfolding this quiet corner of the green earth. A moist breeze blew over the flowering gardens and across the blooming clover fields, but it was barely a scented sigh. Even the larks in the meadows were silent for once. The fragrant stillness was so complete that the faint cooing of a dove came from the cool shadows of the far-off woods.

But the opening of the gates changed all this. A startled pair of red wings flew up and down

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again, alighting on the widow Wall's garden fence where they began whirling, dancing and singing as excitedly as if they too had been invited to the tea-party. But they flitted away when she waved her hand at them. She wanted to hear as well as see everything that was to be heard or seen. It had been hard enough to wait for the striking of the hour. Indeed she had run into the garden more than once to take a look at those fragile flowers—the four-o'clocks—which open their blue eyes when the morning-glories cease blowing their silent trumpets. But it seemed as if they never would awaken on that memorable afternoon. She had been dressed even to the careful putting on of her darned lace mitts for at least two hours. Then she was tired of standing behind the window curtain and watching the big road. Yet she could not possibly sit down and be still—wrought up to such a pitch—and it was really necessary to keep a constant lookout in order to know when Mrs. Pottle went by to the tea-party. For of course none of the other ladies could think of going till she had gone. So that the widow Wall could only watch and fidget wondering what could make her so late.

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She had some slight inkling of the truth, which was that certain critical preparations for the feast must be left to the latest moment in order to be quite perfect. And, sure enough, when Mrs. Pottle did go by at last she bore a covered dish—too delicate to be intrusted to any one else—in her own steady and capable hands.

The widow Wall was almost upon her heels following as close behind as she might venture, longing to know what was in that dish. Yet she could not help stopping to look up the big road to see who else was coming. Most of the guests were already in sight though not near enough for her to recognize their features. But she knew that the little figure in black almost lost under the long veil was Phœbe. And the tall one with her—walking like a soldier marching into battle—must be her stepmother-in-law. There could not be much doubt about the identity of the third lady either. Only the new minister's eccentric aunt would be darting about in that wild manner and stopping now and then to look at some ridiculous bug or troublesome weed. Nobody with her wits about her would be keeping sensible people from coming on to

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the tea-party, as she was doing. There were other ladies beyond this group—the owner of the table-cloths for one—but they were of no special interest to the widow Wall. Turning she now looked down the big road and saw old Mrs. Crabtree and Anne. On a first impulse she walked faster. Few loitered to meet that old lady. But after a hasty pace or two the widow Wall cast another glance. The mother and daughter were so seldom seen away from home or anywhere together, that the very fact was enough to draw a curious gaze. Then the widow Wall's curiosity was great and just as she glanced round again there came a dazzling burst of sunshine out of the veiled blue. In it she noticed that the old lady was wearing her famous brocade, a faded remnant of former splendor. It was not often that the neighbors got a glimpse of it. She was too lazy to put it on or even get it out and let them look at it. There was a tradition that tarnished threads of real gold and silver were interwoven with its dim garlands of silken flowers. But Mrs. Pottle had always hooted at the idea, and remembering that, it now struck the widow Wall that this was a good chance to see for

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herself, and perhaps be able hereafter "to face Mandy down." There would not be much of an opportunity to examine the silk after reaching Arabella's on account of the crowd and the house being so small. Accordingly she stood still in the middle of the big road waiting for them to draw nearer. It seemed as if the stiff brocade — standing out like an old-fashioned parasol — really did glitter in the sun as though it were true about the gold and silver. She could see quite distinctly. Then she chanced to turn her attention from the mother to the daughter, and — as she declared afterward in telling Phœbe about it — she "nearly fell down right in her own tracks." She did not know at first what was the matter with Anne, what in the world made her look so strange. But in another moment she knew. The false front had come! Hillery Kibbey had executed his commission faithfully as he always did. No hair could possibly have been thicker or blacker or more bushy than that which now surrounded poor Anne's wasted, wan, pinched and freckled face. The effect was so extraordinary that the widow Wall could only stare with dropped jaw. She wondered what the old lady thought, whether

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her sharp eyes were growing dull, or whether they had not looked at her daughter at all which appeared most likely. Then looking again at Anne she saw such a pitiful appeal in the pale little eyes that her own kind heart was touched. She looked away just as soon as she could, and moving closer to Anne's side drew her thin arm within hers which was not much more round or strong. And so they went on at a safe distance ahead of the old lady, clear to Arabella's. In telling Phœbe about it the widow Wall said that she was so sorry for poor Anne that she was not ashamed to go in with her.

All the guests gathered very promptly and Phœbe was among the first. She was exquisitely rosy from the walk and excitement. Her pretty arms and neck looked modestly lovely through the thin muslin of her simple black dress. Her brown eyes were almost as bright as soft and her brown hair curled and curled all over her little head, as if fairly rollicking in its brief escape from the gloom of that long veil. As soon as she had greeted the hostess she went straight up to Mrs. Pottle in the sweet old way and said how long it seemed since she had seen her, that she could not tell

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how it had happened but was determined that it should never happen again. Then Mrs. Pottle suddenly turned round and shook hands with Mother Rowan so cordially that that lady was instantly suspicious and resented her condescension. She would have said what she thought too, but there was no time. Arabella saw what was coming and hastily threw herself into the breach. With perfect social tact she managed to set everybody chatting at once in the liveliest, pleasantest manner in the world. There was only one other alarm. This was when Mother Rowan abruptly sat down next old Mrs. Crabtree, and that old lady threw back her handsome head and looked under her spectacles, as she always did when she meant mischief. But this danger also was averted by Arabella's instantly inviting the company in to supper a little earlier than had been arranged. In fact those in front saw Mrs. Pottle's servants scurrying out the back door. The awkward mischance might have upset almost anybody but Arabella, and indeed it was particularly embarrassing to her because of a vaguely grand way she had of referring to a retinue of servants. Moreover she had stipulated that

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her friend's servants should be kept out of sight, and that the supper should be served by her own maid, hired and capped for the occasion. Still all of us must now and then make the best of a bad fix and everybody thought that Arabella carried off this one with a great deal of grace.

Then it really was very little noticed because of the pleasant flutter over getting the ladies settled in their proper places. There was barely room for them to squeeze between the table and the whitewashed wall, but of course that only made everybody smile and talk more gayly. And most delightful was the admiring surprise over the perfectly satisfactory manner in which these had been assigned. Hereafter there could be no further question of Arabella's knowing exactly how all social matters should be arranged. Even the new minister's aunt was pleased because she sat near the big bowl of blush-roses and could watch a tiny green creature climbing a slender stem. And the widow Wall had nothing to complain of, though it was plain to her that she was expected to fit in anywhere. She was used to taking what other people did not want, and there were

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plenty of good things to eat all along the table. Then she took great pride in the blush-roses and in knowing that the ladies would know where they came from. There were more than enough for the table. She noticed proudly that bunches of them looped back the fresh muslin curtains. Yes, her blush-roses were to be seen everywhere, even among the asparagus boughs in the fireplace. She could not help calling attention to the beauty and richness of the floral decoration but the lady to whom she spoke merely nodded rather absently. For the supper was already being served by the agitated maid, who sidled cautiously round the table keeping so close to the wall that her back was soon quite white, and holding the smoking dishes very tight in both hands. Nobody was impolite enough to notice that other black hands sometimes handed her the dishes through the kitchen door. That is nobody noticed them but old Mrs. Crabtree and she made no comment—at the time.

On the whole the entertainment could hardly have begun more favorably. And every moment seemed to make its brilliant success more secure. The last of Arabella's nervousness

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now wore off. She cast an open look of triumph across the table. And Mrs. Pottle's decided nod in response said that she thought so too. Then glancing at Phœbe who sat close by her side cooing in her ear like a dove, she nodded again as much as to say that she could never forget what Arabella was doing, and would not neglect to make a proportionate return for such service. Thereupon Arabella's naturally light heart actually danced in her bosom. She leaned back in her chair beaming in silent radiance. But she soon was reminded of duty and caution, seeing old Mrs. Crabtree cut a baiting eye over at Mother Rowan who stiffened and squared herself. Wide awake in an instant Arabella sat up very straight—so that the old ladies could not catch another glimpse of one another—and began talking so quickly and fluently that they could not get a word in edgewise. A little later she arose to lead the way back to the cool parlor, and these two ladies followed as peaceably as the gentlest of the company.

No, it was neither old Mrs. Crabtree nor Mother Rowan who broke up Arabella's tea-party, in utter rout and consternation, just as it

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was closing with undimmed brilliancy. It was Father Rowan — whom nobody had thought of in connection with the occasion — who did it. And it was the squire — likewise entirely left out — who brought the disastrous news. He came dashing up in his wife's carriage instead of his own buggy. She asked why he was doing this and so caused more confusion. As he tried to explain a black boy ran up and shouted something that set most of the ladies screaming and sent some of them wildly running up the big road. In the uproar only Mother Rowan heard what the squire said. He spoke to her in a low tone, and without a word in reply she allowed him to help her into the carriage and they drove off together.

"Well — in all my born days!" cried Mrs. Pottle in high displeasure. "Since I was created —" but she paused and turned.

Phœbe clung to her with trembling little hands. "Oh — tell me," she implored. "What is it? Something must have happened to Father Rowan. I feel it. Please come with me and let's find out as quickly as we can. It was wrong to leave him so long. Mother Rowan didn't want to come but I persuaded her.

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And it's all my fault — I'm making mistakes every way — I'm to blame for this too — as well as all the rest."

"I shall not allow you to be blamed," said Mrs. Pottle warmly. "And I won't let you torment yourself, either. There, child! There! Maybe the boy knows. Ten to one but he's at the bottom of it whatever it is. Where *is* that little black rascal? Gone too — a-chasing after the carriage. 'Pon my word they all act as if they were crazy. Come — we'd better hurry on up to your house."

The other guests, or at least so many of them as had not run before, now walked behind at a respectful distance talking in hushed whispers as people do in the presence of some sudden calamity. When they reached Phœbe's gate they found the new minister standing there — waiting — with a very grave face.