

LITERATURE.

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UNDER THE STUMP;
OR SAMPSON KEPPER'S COURTSHIP.

Any shrewd observer of men and manners could have immortalized his name in Grassborough, by explaining, clearly and satisfactorily, the reason why Mr. Sampson Kepper remained a bachelor at two score.

The facts of the case are as follows:—Sampson Kepper, Esq., at five and twenty, was looked upon as a prize by all the marriageable young ladies in Grassborough. Possessed of good looks and an excellent farm, agreeable manners and a large, comfortable house, a pair of whisks and two pairs of oxen, Sampson could have "taken his pick," among the maidens of Grassborough, any one of whom would have been delighted with his preference. He was a kind-hearted fellow, too—was Sampson Kepper; and I have often heard him described as having a distinguished fondness for gooseberry pies, nice children, fine horses, and ladies in general.

At that delightful age—five and twenty!—Sampson did actually betray an inclination for connubial happiness. He commenced paying his addresses to the amiable Miss Lucretia Lane, a worthy and pretty young lady, who, it was said by every body—with the exception of a multitude of rival beauties—would make him an excellent wife.

Now Sampson waited on Lucretia—"courted her," as Grassborough gossips termed it, for five years; and it was well known to Sampson's friends that more than fifty times during that period, he was on the point of offering her his hand. But Sampson did not make such an offer for reasons—which Grassborough would have been very glad to know.

The Lanes lost patience with the heir of the house of Kepper. Lucretia, they said, was at his disposal; but they could see no sense in requiring years to make up his mind to marriage. They threw out certain hints, which offended Sampson and distressed his faithful mistress; hints designed to hasten the approach of a chilling shower-bath on the ardor of Mr. Kepper. He avoided Lucretia's society for a month. At the end of that time, convinced of the utter impossibility of living without her, he called on her one Sunday night, as in former times. To his astonishment he found her occupying the small parlor in company with Mr. Brooks, a wealthy widower of thirty-five. Mr. Brooks and Lucretia sat together in the chimney corner, and Sampson, with his surtout on, sank into a seat opposite.

"Fine evening," said Sampson, in an unsteady voice.

"Nay," said Lucretia, changing color rapidly, and looking at the back-log.

It was snowing and blowing outside at a frightful rate!

The widower settled his chin in his neck-cloth with a pompous air, and tried to look unconcerned. Lucretia coughed and blushed, and moved about in her chair, as if she had eaten something which distressed her; while Mr. Kepper glanced uneasily from his hat to the door, and played with his thumbs, like any timid young man, who, intending to go to a champagne supper, should penetrate the sanctimonious silence of a Quaker meeting, by mistake.

"Hem! thought I'd call in and see how you were," observed Sampson, after a long pause, turning in his chair, and crossing his legs, with an attempt to appear at ease.

"Thank you—hope you will—you'll come again," faltered Lucretia.

And not another word was spoken for half an hour!

At length Sampson, after a series of preliminary "hems" and anxious glances at his hat, summoned courage to say—

"Guess I'll be going!"

With a movement towards the door.

"What's your hurry?" asked Lucretia, in a feeble tone.

"Nothing particular—guess though I'd better be going. Good night!"

"Good night—if you must go."

Stumbling over a chair in his endeavor to appear unconcerned, and buttoning the right-hand lappel of his surtout to the left-hand tassel of his dress coat—an error which he did not discover until he had reached the snow-banks before his own door!—Mr. Kepper took his departure, leaving Lucretia with the widower, in a regular courting attitude.

No sooner was our hero gone, than Miss Lane who had kept gradually hitching her chair away from the widower, made an errand to the fire, an excuse for hitching it back again.

"Nice young man—Mr. Kepper," observed the widower, glancing at Lucretia over his dickey, and laying his arm on the back of her chair.

"Nay," said Lucretia, stooping to place a stick on the andirons.

Mr. Brooks perceived that the glow of the fire made her face look very red.

"Used to be pretty neighborly, I understand."

"Ye—yes—quite!"

Lucretia was crimson.

"Nothing but a friend, I suppose."

"Oh, no! no!"

"Hem! and if I should—that is, if any one else should wish to marry you, he wouldn't be in the way?"

"I don't know why he should," faltered Lucretia.

The widower's arm slipped from the back of the chair, and fell, somehow, around her waist; and the widower being an absent minded person, neglected to put it back again.

"That's according!"—(how the fire did glow in Lucretia's face!)—"according to who the person is!"

The clasp of the arm about her waist tightened.

"Ah! hem! and if—if it was me?"

"You! ha! there's no danger of that, I guess!" said Lucretia, trying to "laugh it off."

Another movement of the arm—and Lucretia's head lay on the widower's shoulder.

"But I am in earnest," exclaimed Mr. Brooks.

"Oh! I didn't suppose—if that's the case," stammered Lucretia, pretending to struggle a little.

This afforded the widower an excuse for clasping her waist still closer. He laid his whisks against her wet cheek, to the imminent peril of Sampson Kepper's happiness, and the smoothness of his own Sunday dickey. Then you might have heard a kiss.

"There! now say you'll have me," exclaimed the widower.

"If you—want me to!"

Lucretia thought of Sampson and hesitated. She had a lingering affection for that young gentleman; but then, he had really exhausted her patience. Sampson was certainly a desirable man, but Lucretia was twenty-three. It would be sweet to become Mrs. Kepper, but it was awful to think of becoming an old maid. The widower's affections at that moment struck Lucretia as a happy medium—a comfortable certainty, though they promised no uncommon happiness; and she murmured—

"I will."

And this is the manner in which Sampson, through a habit of too much caution and indecision, lost the fairest maiden in Grassborough, after courting her five years!

Mr. Brooks took his young wife home, to fill the place of a mother to five children; and Sampson, who had a married sister, with a small family, in straightened circumstances, resolved to give his poor relations a home in his house, and live with them an old bachelor, to the end of his days. On losing Lucretia, Sampson, in despair, had made a vow never to marry.

Eight years afterwards, however, Mr. Kepper had occasion to reconsider his vow. Mr. Brooks died suddenly, leaving Lucretia the mother of three children, and the step-mother of as many more. Sampson was fond of children, and Lucretia was more of an angel now than ever. He visited her, carried presents to her children, and did everything in his power to console her in her affliction, and the young widow dried her tears, planted some delicate flowers on the grave of the lamented Brooks, and smiled encouragingly on her old lover.

People began to talk again. Sampson and

Lucretia were going to be married now, at all events, said the gossips. But two years passed; every body was puzzled; and the fact that Mr. Kepper was a bachelor at fifty was a mystery.

The truth is Sampson had not been cured of his old habit of procrastination. To marry the mother of six children, and take them and her home—for Sampson could never have made up his mind to settle down on the Brooks estate—would be to disturb the peace of his sister's family, who had been living on him nearly ten years. Besides, Jane, his sister, and Mr. Bunker, his brother-in-law, who had a great influence on his irresolute mind, discouraged him from assuming such a responsibility, as the matrimonial station occupied by the lamented Brooks.

"I should be glad to see you married and happy, dear," Mrs. Bunker would say; "for notwithstanding all our affection for you, I am afraid you are sometimes dissatisfied with your present way of living."

"Oh, I assure you again, sister," Sampson would say, "I appreciate your attentions!"

"And I am sure we delight in doing for you. Still, if you desire to marry, take somebody worthy of you, and nothing will please me better."

"But, Mrs. Brooks!"

"A widow with six children! I beg of you, if you value your peace of mind, don't marry another man's family. Look for somebody else."

Jane could very safely give her brother this advice, for she very well knew he would never marry any one but Lucretia.

So Sampson hesitated. Although he sighed for the widow, he felt that it would be ungrateful to marry against the wishes of those, who were so kind and so disinterested, in furnishing him comfort; and who thought so little of the property which would fall to them, provided he died a bachelor, that they were perfectly willing—almost anxious—that he should marry—any body except a widow with six children!

Such was the state of affairs, when Sampson went one day to cut a saw log out of the trunk of a large maple, which the wind had torn up by the roots, not far from the house. Having thrown his vest on the ground, and rolled up his sleeves, Mr. Kepper commenced chopping off the log about three feet from the butt.

It was a "hard job," Sampson afterwards said;—and as the sun came pouring down upon him, he was quite exhausted, and heated, before the first "cut" was off. Leaving the main portion of the trunk hanging by a "chip" to the stump, in order that blocks might be placed under it, to keep it from falling quite to the ground, Sampson struck his axe into the log, and began to look for a shady place to sit down.

Near by stood a stately basswood, from the roots of which sprung up a luxuriant growth of shoots, surrounding the parent tree. Reflecting that these would not only shade him from the sun, but also serve as a protection against the swarm of flies, he determined to find a resting place among them, and began, accordingly, to push them aside, in search of the most comfortable spot.

At that moment the chirping of a squirrel attracted his attention to the vast mass of earth which adhered to the upturned roots of the fallen tree. The little animal was sitting on the summit of this mass, talking saucily to Mr. Kepper, who, thinking of the corn it would consume the coming autumn, picked up a club, and with a well-aimed blow, knocked it into the deep cavity left by the exhumed roots of the tree. Mr. Kepper, with an eye to pleasing his little nephews, jumped into the hollow, picked the kicking squirrel out of the mud, and having thrown it down by his vest, proceeded to ensconce himself in the bushes.

Mr. Kepper found a most comfortable spot where he was quite concealed from the sun and flies; and there leaning against the ancient basswood, he indulged in a revery, in which a nice widow, a delightful family of children, cider in the evening, and gooseberry pie for dinner, were charmingly mixed up together.

Mr. Kepper was startled from his pleasant reflections by a dull cracking sound, in the direction of the tree on which he had been chopping; and pushing aside the bushes, he saw the "chip" breaking, by which he had left the log hanging to the stump.

"There goes the log to the ground," he muttered with some impatience.

No sooner had he spoken than the trunk dropped off, and instantaneously the huge mass of roots and earth overbalancing the stump, which was no longer attached to the tree, turned slowly back, and fell with a dull, heavy report, into its original bed.

"The dogs!" muttered Sampson, "it's lucky I didn't happen to be picking that squirrel out of the hollow just at this time!"

And he shuddered to think what a horrid death, to be crushed under an avalanche of roots and clay!

Mr. Kepper, however, sat still, and was soon lost in another revery, from which he was aroused by a most extraordinary occurrence.

It afterwards appeared that Joe Symes the "hired man," who was at work repairing a fence, near by, had twice or thrice cast his eyes in the direction of the fallen tree. Hearing the sound of Mr. Kepper's axe no longer, Mr. Symes looked shortly after, and saw that worthy man in the hole, under the roots of the tree; and in a little while, startled by a smothered concussion, he looked again, and beheld the stump turned back. At that moment Mr. Bunker appeared, and enquired for his brother-in-law. Both looked in the direction of the stump, and seeing nobody Mr. Symes suddenly exclaimed—

"I vow!"

"What?"

"I bet Kepper's ben ketched under the butt of that tree!"

Mr. Bunker thought it could not be; but Symes assuring him that the last time he saw Mr. K, he was in the hole, both ran to the spot.

"Good Lord!" cried Symes, "here's his jacket—there's his axe—I vow! he's a goner!"

This was the exclamation which aroused Mr. Kepper. He looked through the bushes, and held his breath.

"Impossible!" said Mr. Bunker, nervously. "Can't be!"

"Where's Mr. Kepper, then?" demanded Symes.

"Why, he's walked off, I suppose."

"Walked off—walked off, in a bilin' sun, without his hat? Look here!"

Symes picked up the old bachelor's hat, close by the basswood bushes, where Mr. Kepper had dropped it on going in'o his retreat!

"I declare that looks bad!" muttered Bunker.

Mr. Kepper was on the very point of showing himself, to end the joke and have a grand laugh over it, when Mr. Bunker made the remark that it looked bad.

Now Mr. K. could have not the least objection to having any man say, such a state of things looked bad. He himself would have been deeply impressed with the conviction that it looked bad had he been under the stump. Yet the manner in which Mr. B. made the remark according to Mr. K's way of thinking, looked bad in itself. To be brief, Mr. B's tone and countenance expressed a satisfaction which he could not conceal; and Mr. K. thought he would just try the experiment of sitting still.

"Looks bad! Guess it does!" cried Symes; and he swore "by George" that if Kepper wasn't under the stump, he was, and that it was a kind of duty they owed the "old feller," to dig him out.

"Dig him out! 'twould take an age!" muttered Mr. Bunker, rubbing his hands—probably to keep the flies off. "Tell you what, Joe, if he's there he's killed; and it isn't as though a little diggin' would save a man's life. So we may as well make certain that he's there before we begin."

"There! to be sure here's there. I'll go for the shovels!" exclaimed Joe. "By George! he was the best fellow in the world!" he added, with emotion. "I'll bring the shovels—or don't you think the oxen will pull the stump over? I'll bring 'em, and try it!"

Symes ran off, while Bunker remained looking complacently at the stump.

"The dogs!" muttered Kepper, giving way to the momentary fancy that he was in the bad predicament supposed—"if you stand there you'll never get me out! Why don't you go to digging?"

Bunker walked around the stump, endeavoring to look under it, where the ends of the roots