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FARMER'S WISDOM

KEZIAH COFFIN
by
Joseph C. Lincoln
Author of
Cy Whittaker's Place
Cap'n Eri, Etc.
Illustrations by
Ellsworth Young
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"If you do know," he said, "you must realize that my place is with her. Now, when she is in trouble—"

"It ain't the congregation, John," she said. "Nor Trumet, nor your ministry. That means more'n you think it does, now; but it ain't that. You mustn't go to her because—well, because she don't want you to."

"Doesn't want me? I know better!" He laughed in supreme scorn.

"She doesn't want you, John. She wouldn't see you if you went. She would send you away again, sure, sartin' sure. She would. And if you didn't go when she sent you, you wouldn't be the man I hope you are. John, you mustn't see Grace again. She ain't yours. She belongs to some one else."

"John, Grace Van Horne is goin' to marry Cap'n Nat Hammond. There! that's the livin' truth."

She led him over to the rocking-chair and gently forced him into it. He obeyed, although with no apparent realization of what he was doing. Still with her hand on his shoulder she went on speaking. She told him of her visit to the Hammond tavern, saying nothing of Mr. Pepper's call nor of her own experience in the grove. She told of Captain Eben's seizure, of

what the doctor said, and of the old Come-Outer's return to consciousness. Then she described the scene in the sick room and how Nat and Grace had plighted troth. He listened, at first stunned and stolid, then with growing impatience.

"So you see," she said. "It's settled; they're engaged, and Dr. Parker will tell everybody of the engagement this very mornin'. It wasn't any great surprise to me. Those who have been brought up together; 'twas the natural thing that was almost bound to happen. Eben's heart was set on it for years. And she'll have a good husband, John, that I know. And she'll do her best to make him happy. He's a good man and—"

"But I know—"

"Do you suppose she would come to you if she knew it would be your ruin?"

He hesitated. The last time they met, ages before—no, only the previous afternoon—she had told him it was his happiness and his future only that she thought of. He choked and drew his hand across his eyes.

"Mrs. Coffin," he said, "you tell me so. You say she doesn't want me. I tell you that the only thing that will keep me from her is hearing that from her own lips. When she tells me to leave her I will, and not before."

"She'll tell you, John; she'll tell you. And I know Grace. She's made up her mind and won't change it. But I do ask you this: I ask you not to go now. Wait a little while, do. I left her asleep, worn out by what she's been through and under the effects of the doctor's sleepin' medicine. He said she must rest or he was afraid her brain would give out. For her sake, then, wait a little. Then, if you don't hear from her, maybe I can arrange a meetin' place where you can see her without anyone's knowin' it. I'll try. But do wait a little while, for her sake, won't you?"

At last he was listening and hesitating.

"Won't you?" begged Keziah.

"Yes," he answered slowly. "I'll wait. I'll wait until noon, somehow, if I can. I'll try. But not a minute later. Not one. You don't know what you're talking about, Mrs. Coffin."

"Yes, I do. I know well. And I thank you for her sake."

But he did not have to wait until noon. At six o'clock, through the dew-soaked grass of the yard, came the Higgins boy. For the first time in his short life he had been awake all night and he moved slowly.

The housekeeper opened the door. He held up an envelope, clutched in a grimy hand.

"It's for you, Mrs. Keziah," he said. "Grace she sent it. There ain't no chawer."

Mrs. Coffin closed the door and tore open the envelope. Within was another addressed in Grace's handwriting, to Mr. Ellery. The housekeeper entered the study, handed it to him and turned away.

"Dear John," wrote Grace. "I presume Aunt Keziah has told you of uncle's death and of my promise to Nat. It is true. I am going to marry him. I am sure this is right and for the best. Our friendship was a mistake and you must not see me again. Please don't try."

"GRACE VAN HORNE."

Beneath was another paragraph. "Don't worry about me. I shall be happy, I am sure. And I shall hope that you may be. I shall pray for that."

The note fell to the floor with a rustle that sounded loud in the stillness. Then Keziah heard the minister's step. She turned. He was moving slowly across the room.

"John, what are you going to do?" He shook his head. "I don't know," he said. "Go away somewhere, first

or stay, I guess. Go somewhere and— and try to live it down. I can't, of course, but I must try."

She put out her hand. "I know it'll be hard," she said, "stayin' here, I mean. But your duty to others—"

"Don't you think we've heard enough



"John, What Are You Going to Do?"

about duty to others? How about my duty to myself?"

"I guess that's the last thing we ought to think about in the world, if we do try to be fair and square. Your church thinks a heap of you, John. They build on you. You've done more in the little while you've been here than Mr. Langley did in his last fifteen years."

"You've never been asked to sit quietly by and see the one you love more than all the world marry some one else."

"How do you know I ain't? How do you know I ain't goin' just that now?"

"Mrs. Coffin!"

"John Ellery, you listen to me. You think I'm a homely old woman, probably, set in my ways as an eight-decade clock. I guess I look like it and as like it. But I ain't so awful old—the edge of forty, that's all. And when I was your age I ain't so awful homely, either. I had fellers aplenty hangin' round and I could have married any one of a dozen. This ain't no boastin'; land knows I'm fur from that. I was brought up in this town and even when I was a girl at school there was only one boy I cared two straws about. He and I went to picnics together and to parties and everywhere. Folks used to laugh and say we was keepin' company, even then."

"Well, when I was eighteen, after father died, I went up to New Bedford to work in a store there. Wanted to earn my own way. And this young feller I'm tellin' you about went away to sea, but every time he come home from a voyage he come to see me and things went on that way till we was promised to each other. The engagement wasn't announced, but 'twas so, just the same. We'd have been married in another year. And then we quarreled."

"'Twas a fool quarrel, same as that kind generally are. As much my fault as his and as much his as mine, I call it. Anyhow, we was both proud, or thought we was, and neither would give in. And he says to me, 'You'll be sorry after I'm gone. You'll wish me back, then.' And says I, bein' a fool, 'I guess not. There's other fish in the sea.' He sailed and I did wish him back, but I wouldn't write fast and neither would he. And then come another man."

She paused, hesitated, and then continued.

"Never mind about the other man. He was handsome then, in a way, and he had money to spend, and he liked me. He wanted me to marry him. If the other, the one that went away, had written I never would have thought of such a thing, but he didn't write. And, my pride bein' hurt, and all, I finally said yes to the second chap."

"Well, for the first year 'twasn't so bad. Not happiness exactly, but not misery either. That come later. The people was well off and he'd never worked much of any. He did for a little while after we was married, but not for long. Then he begun to drink and carry on and lost his place. Pretty soon he begun to neglect me and at last went off to sea afore the missus. We was poor as poverty, but I could have stood that; I did stand it. I took in sewin' and kept up an appearance somehow. Never told a soul. His folks come patronizin' around and offered me money, so's I needn't disgrace them. I sent 'em rightabout in a hurry. Once in a while he'd come home, get tipsy and abuse me. Still I said nothin'. Thank God, there was no children; that's the one thing I've been thankful for."

"You can't keep such things quiet always. People are bound to find out. They come to me and said, 'Why don't you leave him?' but I wouldn't. I could have divorced him easy enough, there was reasons plenty, but I wouldn't do that. Then word came

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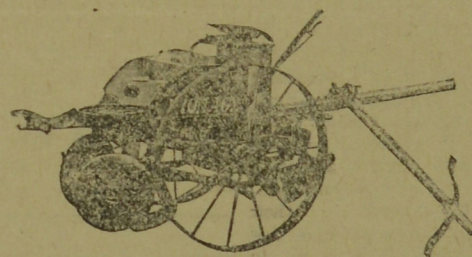
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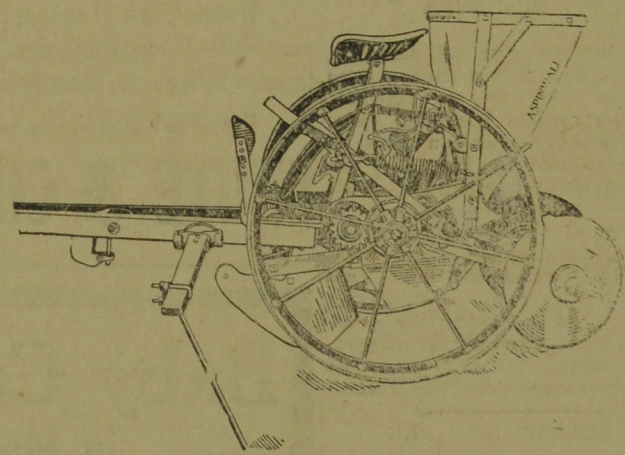
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