

KEZIAH COFFIN

by
Joseph C. Lincoln
Author of
Cy Whittaker's Place
Cap'n Eri, Etc.
Illustrations by
Ellsworth Young



SYNOPSIS.

Mrs. Keziah Coffin, supposed widow, is arranging to move from Trumet to Honee, following the death of her brother, for whom she had kept house. Kyan Pepper, widower, offers marriage, and is indignantly refused.

CHAPTER I—Continued.

There was a sound of scrambling. More soot floated in the air. Then around the corner of the high-boy appeared Mr. Pepper, crawling on his hands and knees. His hair was streaked with black; his shirt front and collar and shirt sleeves were spotted and smeared with black; and from his blackened cheeks his red whiskers flamed like the last glowing embers in a fire-scarred ruin.

"I was just tryin' to help Keziah take down her stovepipe," he explained. "You see, she didn't have no man to—"

"Yes, I see. Well, I judge you got it down. Now you go out to the sink and wash your face. Heavens and earth! Look at them clothes!"

"I do hope you didn't hurt yourself, Abishai," said the sympathetic Keziah. Then, as remembrance of what had led to the upset came to her, she added: "Though I will say 'twas your own fault and nobody else's."

Lavinia whirled on her.

"Dear me! Ain't we innocent! We've got plenty of money, we have. Widowers with property ain't no attraction to us. Everybody knows that—oh, yes! And they never talk of such a thing—oh, no! Folks don't say that—that— Well, with a snarl in the direction of the kitchen, "are you anywhere nigh clean yet? Get your coat and hat on and come home with me."

She jerked her brother into the blue coat, jammed the tall hat down upon his head, and, seizing him by the arm, stalked to the door.

"Good day, marm," she said. "I do hope the next widower you get to take down your stovepipe—yes, indeed! ha! ha!—I hope you'll have better luck with him. Though I don't know who 'twould be: there ain't no more idiots in town that I know of. Good day, and thank you kindly for your attentions to our family."

Keziah turned from the door she had closed behind her visitor. "Well!" she ejaculated. "Well!"

Steps, measured, dignified steps, sounded on the walk. From without came a "Hum—ha!" a portentous combination of cough and grunt. Grace dodged back from the window and hastily began donning her hat and jacket.

"It's Cap'n Elkanah," she whispered. "I must go. This seems to be your busy morning, Aunt Keziah. I—here she choked again—"really, I didn't know you were so popular."

Keziah opened the door. Captain Elkanah Daniels, prosperous, pompous and unbending, crossed the threshold. Richest man in the village, retired shipowner, pillar of the Regular church and leading member of its parish committee, Captain Elkanah looked the part. He removed his hat, cleared his throat behind his black stock, and spoke with impressive deliberation.

"Keziah," he said, "Keziah, I came to see you on a somewhat important matter. I have a proposal I wish to make you."

He must have been surprised at the effect of his words. Keziah's face was a picture, a crimson picture of paralyzed amazement. As for Miss Van Horne, that young lady gave vent to what her friend described afterwards as a "squel," and bolted out of the door and into the grateful seclusion of the fog.

CHAPTER II.

In Which Keziah Unearths a Prowler. The fog was cruel to the gossips of Trumet that day. Mrs. Didda Rogers, who lived all alone, except for the society of three cats, a canary, and a white poodle named "Bunch," in the little house next to Captain Elkanah's establishment, never entirely recovered from the chagrin and disappointment caused by that provoking mist.

The fog prevented Mrs. Rogers' noting the entrance of Mr. Pepper at the Coffin front gate. Also his exit, under sisterly arrest. It shut from her view the majestic approach of Captain Elkanah Daniels and Grace's flight, her face dimpled with smiles and breaking into laughter at frequent intervals. For a young lady, supposed to be a devout Come-Outer, to hurry along the main road, a handkerchief at her mouth and her eyes sparkling with fun, was a circumstance calculated to furnish material for enjoyable scandal. And Didda missed it.

Other happenings she missed, also. Not knowing of Captain Daniels' call upon Keziah, she was deprived of the pleasure of wonder at the length of his stay. She did not see him, in company with Mrs. Coffin, go down the road in the opposite direction from that taken by Grace. Nor their return and parking at the gate, two hours later. It was three o'clock in the afternoon before a visitor came again to the Coffin front gate, entered the yard and rapped at the side door.

Keziah opened the door.

"Halloo!" she exclaimed. "Back, are you? I begun to think you'd been scared away for good."

Grace laughed as she entered. "Well, auntie," she said, "I don't wonder you thought I was scared. Truly, I didn't think it was proper for me to stay. First Kyan and then Cap'n Elkanah, and both of them expressing their wishes to see you alone—er—pointedly. I thought it was time for me to go. Surely, you give me credit for a little delicacy."

"Grace Van Horne! there's born fools enough in this town without your tryin' to be one. Grace, I ain't goin' to leave Trumet, not for the present, anyhow. 'I've got a way of earnin' my livin' right here. I'm goin' to keep house for the new minister."

The girl turned, her hat in her hand. "Oh!" she cried in utter astonishment. Keziah nodded. "Yes," she affirmed. "That was what Elkanah's proposal amounted to. Ha, ha! Deary me! When he said 'proposal,' I own up for a minute I didn't know what was comin'. After Kyan I was prepared for 'most anything. But he told me that Lurany Phelps, who the parish committee had counted on to keep house for Mr. Ellery, had sent word her sister was sick and couldn't be left, and that somebody must be hired right off 'cause the minister's expected by day after tomorrow's coach. And the cap'n was made a delegate to come and see me about it. Come he did, and we settled it. I went down to the parsonage with him before dinner and looked the place over. There's an awful lot of sweepin' and dustin' to be done afore it's fit for a body to live in."

Grace extended her hand. "Well, Aunt Keziah," she said, "I'm ever and ever so glad for you. I know you didn't want to leave Trumet and I'm sure everyone will be delighted when they learn that you're going to stay."

"Humph! that includes Lavinia Pepper, of course. I cal'late Lavinia's delight won't keep her up nights. But I guess I can stand it if she can. Now, Grace, what is it? You ain't real pleased? Why not?"

The girl hesitated. "Auntie," she said, "I'm selfish, I guess. I'm glad for your sake; you mustn't think I'm not. But I almost wish you were going to do something else. You are going to live in the Regular parsonage and keep house for all of our parsons, a Regular minister. Why, so far as my seeing you is concerned, you might as well be in China. You know Uncle Eben."

"Yes," she said, "I know him. Eben Hammond thinks that parsonage is the presence chamber of the Evil One, I presume likely. But, Grace, you mustn't blame me, and if you don't call I'll know why and I shan't blame you. We'll see each other once in a while; I'll take care of that."

The packing took about an hour. When it was finished, the carpet rolled up, and the last piece of linen placed in the old trunk, Keziah turned to her guest.

"Now, Grace," she said, "I feel as though I ought to go to the parsonage. I can't do much more'n look at the cobwebs tonight, but tomorrow those spiders had better put on their ascension robes. The end of the world's comin' for them, even though it missed fire for the Millertines when they had their doin's a few years ago. You can stay here and wait, if 'twon't be too lonesome. We'll have supper when I get back."

She threw a shawl over her shoulders, draped a white knitted "cloud" over her head, and took from a nail a key, attached by a strong cord to a block of wood eight inches long.

"Elkanah left the key with me," she observed. "No danger of losein' it, is there. Might as well lose a lumber yard."

They left the house and came out into the wet mist. Then, turning to the right, in the direction which Trumet, with unconscious irony, calls "downtown," they climbed the long slope where the main road mounts the

outlying ridge of Cannon Hill, passed Captain Mayo's big house—the finest in Trumet, with the exception of the Daniels mansion—and descended into the hollow beyond. Here, at the corner where the "Lighthouse Lane" begins its winding way over the rolling knolls and dunes to the light and the fish shanties on the "ocean side," stood the plain, straight-up-and-down meeting house of the Regular society. Directly opposite was the little parsonage, also very straight up and down. Both were painted white with green blinds. This statement is superfluous to those who remember Cape architecture at this period; practically every building from Sandwich to Provincetown was white and green.

They entered the yard, through the gap in the white fence, and went around the house, past the dripping evergreens and the bare, wet lilac bushes, to the side door, the lock of which Keziah's key fitted. There was a lock on the front door, of course, but no one thought of meddling with that. That door had been opened but once during the late pastor's thirty-year tenantry. On the occasion of his funeral the mourners came and went.

Mrs. Coffin thrust the key into the keyhole of the side door and essayed to turn it.

"Humph!" she muttered, twisting to no purpose; "I don't see why— This must be the right key, because— Well, I declare, if it ain't unlocked already! That's some of Cap'n Elkanah's doin's. For a critter as fussy and particular about some things, he's careless enough about others. Mercy we ain't had any tramps around here lately. Come in."

She led the way into the dining room of the parsonage. Two of the blinds shading the windows of that apartment had been opened when she and Captain Daniels made their visit, and the dim gray light made the room more lonesome and forsaken in appearance than a deeper gloom could possibly have done. The black walnut extension table in the center, closed to its smallest dimensions because Parson Langley had eaten alone for so many years; the dark walnut chairs set back against the wall at regular intervals; the rug carpet and braided mats—homemade donations from the ladies of the parish—on the green painted floor; the dolorous pictures on the walls; "Death of Washington," "Stoning of Stephen," and a still more deadly "fruit piece" committed in oils years ago by a now deceased boat painter. The blinds and a window being opened, more light entered the room. Grace glanced about it curiously.

"So this is going to be your new home now, Aunt Keziah," she observed. "How queer that seems."

"Um—h'm. Does seem queer, don't it? Must seem queer to you to be so near the headquarters of everything your uncle thinks is wicked. Smell of brimstone any, does it?" she asked with a smile.

She threw open another door. A room gloomy with black walnut and fragrant with camphor was dimly visible.

"Cheerful's a tomb, ain't it?" was Mrs. Coffin's comment. "Well, we'll get some light and air in here pretty soon. Here's the front hall and there's the front stairs. The parlor's off to the left. We won't bother with that yet a while. This little place in here is what Mr. Langley used to call his 'study.' Halloo! how this door sticks!"

The door did stick, and no amount of tugging could get it open, though Grace added her efforts to those of Keziah.

"'Tain't locked," commented Mrs. Coffin, "cause there ain't any lock on it. I guess it's just swelled and stuck from the damp. Though it's odd, I don't remember— Oh, well! never mind. Let's sweeten up this settin' room a little. Open a window or two want to do anything before it gets dark. I'm goin' into the kitchen to get a broom."

She hurried out, returning in a moment or two with a broom and a most disgusted expression.

"How's a body goin' to sweep with that?" she demanded, exhibiting the frayed utensil, the business end of which was worn to a stub. "More like a shovel, enough sight. Well, there's pretty nigh dust enough for a shovel, so maybe this'll take off the top layer. 'S'pose I'll ever get this house fit for Mr. Ellery to live in before he comes? I wonder if he's a particular man?"

Grace, who was struggling with a refractory window, paused for breath. "I'm sure I don't know," she replied. "I've never seen him."

"Nor I either. Sol was so bad the Sunday he preached that I couldn't go to meetin'. They say his sermon was fine; all about those who go down to the sea in ships. That's what got the parish committee, I guess; they're all old salts. I wonder if he's a fine-lookin' as they say?"

Miss Van Horne tossed her head. She was resting, prior to making another assault on the window.

"I don't care. I know he'll be a con-celled little snip and I shall hate the sight of him. Mind me! I told you I was a selfish pig. But don't you ask me to like this precious minister of yours, because I shan't do it. He has no business to come and separate me from the best friend I've got. I'd tell him so if he was here— What was that?"

Both women looked at each other with startled faces. They listened intently.

"Why, wa'n't that funny!" whispered Keziah. "I thought I heard—"

"You did hear. So did I. What do you suppose—"

"S-a-s-h-h!" it sounded from the front room somewhere. And yet there can't be anybody in there, because— My soul! there 'tis again. I'm goin' to find out."

She grasped the stubby broom by the handle and moved determinedly toward the front hall. Grace seized her by the arm.

"Don't you do it, auntie!" she whined frantically. "Don't you do it! It may be a tramp."

"I don't care. Whoever or whatever it is, it has no business in this house, and I'll make that plain in a hurry. Just like as not it's a cat got in when Elkanah was here this forenoon. Don't be scared, Grace. Come right along."

The girl came along, but not with enthusiasm. They tiptoed through the dark, narrow hall and peered into the parlor. This apartment was dim and still and gloomy, as all proper parlors should be, but there was no sign of life.

Mrs. Coffin was glancing back down the hall with a strange expression on her face. Her grip upon the broom handle tightened.

"What is it?" pleaded the girl in an agonized whisper.

"Grace," was the low reply, "I've just remembered somethin'. That study door isn't stuck from the damp, because—well, because I remember now that it was open this mornin'."

Before her companion could fully grasp the import of this paralyzing fact, Keziah strode down the hall and seized the knob of the study door.

"Whoever you are in there," she commanded sternly, "open this door and come out this minute. Do you hear? I'm orderin' you to come out."

There was an instant of silence; then a voice from within made answer, a man's voice, and its tone indicated embarrassment.

"Madam," it said, "I—I am—I will be out in another minute. If you will just be patient—"

"Come out then!" snapped Keziah. "Come out! Patience! Of all the cheek! Why don't you come out now?"

"Well, to be frank, since you insist,"

snapped the voice, "I'm not fully dressed."

This was a stunner. For once Keziah did not have a reply ready. She looked at Grace and the latter at her. Then, without words, they retreated to the sitting room.

"I hope you won't be alarmed," continued the voice, broken by panting pauses, as if the speaker was struggling into a garment. "I know this must seem strange. You see, I came on the coach as far as Bayport and then we lost a wheel in a rut. There was a—oh, dear! where is that—this is supremely idiotic!—I was saying there happened to be a man coming this way with a buggy and he offered to help me along. He was on his way to Wellmouth. So I left my trunk to come later and took my valise. It rained on the way and I was wet through. I stopped at Captain Daniels' house and the girl said he had gone with his daughter to the next town, but that they were to stop here at the parsonage on their way. So—there! that's right, at last!—so I came, hoping to find them. The door was open and I came in. The captain and his daughter were not here, but, as I was pretty wet, I thought I would seize the opportunity to change my clothes. I had some dry—er—things in my valise and I—well, then you came, you see, and—I assure you I—well, it was the most embarrassing—I'm coming now."

The door opened. The two in the sitting room huddled close together, Keziah holding the broom like a battle-axe, ready for whatsoever might develop. From the dimness of the tightly shuttered study stepped the owner of the voice, a stranger, a young man, his hair rumpled, his tie disarranged, and the buttons of his waistcoat filling the wrong buttonholes. Despite this evidence of the hasty toilet in semidarkness, he was not unprepossessing. Incidentally, he was blushing furiously.

"I didn't speak," he said, "because you took me by surprise and I wasn't, as I explained—er—presentable. Besides, I was afraid of frightening you. I assure you I hurried as fast as I could, quietly, and when you began to talk—his expression changed and there was a twitch at the corner of his mouth—"I tried to hurry still faster, hoping you might not hear me and I could make my appearance—or my escape—sooner. As for entering the house—well, I considered it, in a way, my house; at least, I knew I should live in it for a time, and—"

"Live in it?" repeated Keziah. "Live in it? Why! mercy on us! you don't mean to say you're—"

She stopped to look at Grace. That young lady was looking at her with an expression which, as it expressed so very much, is beyond ordinary powers of description.

"My name is Ellery," said the stranger. "I am the minister—the new minister of the Regular society."

Then even Keziah blushed.

Then even Keziah blushed.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)



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From the Dimness of the Tightly Shuttered Study Stepped the Owner of the Voice.

SAW NO CAUSE FOR WORRY

Small Boy Pretty Well Satisfied that the Future Was Not Likely to Be a Hard One.

The Cleveland Plain Dealer says: A Lakewood woman was recently reading to her little boy the story of a young lad whose father was taken ill and died, after which he set himself diligently to work to support himself and mother. When she had finished the story she said: "Dear Billy, if your papa were to die would you work to support your dear mamma?"

"Naw!" said Billy, unexpectedly. "But why not?"

"Ain't we got a good house to live in?"

"Yes, dearie—but we can't eat the house, you know."

"Ain't there a lot o' stuff in the pantry?"

"Yes, but that won't last forever."

"It'll last till you git another husband, won't it? You're a pretty good looker, ma!"

Mamma gave up right there.

Mooted Question.

"How's Willie getting on at that free thought Sunday school you're sending him to?"

"First rate, from last accounts. He asked his pretty lady teacher who it was that first bit the apple in the Garden of Eden. Willie says she looked him straight in the eye and said nobody knew; that they'd been trying to figure out for the last 6,000 years."

His Point of Vantage.

The mayor of a small town was trying a negro for abusing his wife. She claimed he got drunk and tried to beat her, and she hit him.

The mayor turned to their little girl and asked:

"Girl, was your father under the influence of whisky when your mother hit him?"

"No, sah. He was under the kitchen table," she very quickly replied.—Mack's National Monthly.

Submits Tame.

"Is Scriblet what you would call a struggling author?"

"No, indeed. When an editor puts him out he doesn't offer the slightest resistance."

A Woman's Way.

"What sort of woman is she?"

"Why, she's the sort of woman that finds delight in reading all the stuff that's printed about the new babies of the idle rich."

A HOT ONE.



Ho—My future was in your hands, and you've decided. Now that you have refused me, I'm going to the devil.

She—I'd suggest that you go somewhere where you are less well known.

Eggs Clotworthy Ate.

Harry Clotworthy, who is an expert on military affairs, entered the diningroom of the National Press club one morning and carried with him a ravenous appetite. Having eaten one breakfast, which consisted largely of eggs, he ordered another breakfast, which consisted even more largely of eggs. At his request he went to the writing-room to get off some letters. Half an hour later the steward of the club found the colored waiter loafing about the entrance of the writing-room and asked him what he meant by being absent from his post.

"I got a good excuse," exclaimed the waiter, exhibiting the check for the egg breakfast. "Mr. Clotworthy done eat \$2 worth of eggs and I ain't goin' to let him git away from here without payin' for them, high as eggs is now."

Usual One.

"What is the latest thing which Mrs. Cooke has in the way of a pickle?"

"I guess it is her husband."

Many a man's bad luck is due to the fact that he has neither inherited ability nor acquired industry.

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