KEZIAH COFFIN

by

Joseph C. Lincoln

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Illustrations by Ellsworth Young

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SYNOPSIS.

Mrs. Keziah Coffin, supposed widow, is arranging to marry Jonathan Snow, but is first following the death of her husband, whom she had kept house. Kezia Coffin's husband, Joe, had left her, but mysteriously returned. Capt. Elkanah Dyke, leader of the Regular church, offers to help her, but she refuses, saying she is new widowed, and she decides to return to Trumet. Keziah takes charge of Rev. Ezra Hammond, who has been injured in an accident, and is the comfort toward members of the parish.

CHAPTER III—Continued.

"Keziah," he commanded, "Hum—ha! Keziah, come in here a minute."

Keziah came in response to the call, her sewing in her hand. The renovation of the parsonage had so far progressed that she could now find time for a little sewing, after the dinner dishes were done.

"Keziah," said the captain pompously, "we expect you to look out for Mr. Ellery in every respect. The parish committee—experts that—you—"

"I try," said Mrs. Coffin shortly.

"Yes. Well, that's all. You can go. We must be going, too, Mr. Ellery. Please consider our house at your disposal any time. Be neighborly—hum—ha!—be neighborly."

"Yes," purred Annabel. "Do come and see us often. Congregationalism is very scarce in Trumet, for me especially. We can head together. Are you fond of Moore, Mr. Ellery? I just dote on him."

The last "hum-ha" was partially drowned by the click of the gate. Keziah closed the dining-room door.

"Mrs. Coffin," said the minister, "I think trouble the parish committee. I'm sure of that. I'm perfectly satisfied."

Keziah sat down in the rocker and her needle moved rapidly for a few moments. Then she said, without looking up:

"That's good. I owe up I like to hear you say it. And I am glad there are some things I do like about this new place of mine. Because—well, because there's likely to be others that I don't like at all."

On Friday evening the minister conducted his first prayer meeting. Before it, and afterwards, he heard a good deal concerning the Come-Outers. He learned that Captain Eben Hammond had preached against him in the chapel on Sunday. Most of his own parishioners seemed to think it a good joke.

The sun of the following Friday morning rose behind a curtain of fog as dense as that of the day upon which Ellery arrived. A fat calm in the forenoon, the wind changed about three o'clock, and, beginning with a sharp and sudden squall from the north-west, blew hard and steady. Yet the fog still cloaked everything and refused to be blown away.

"Gosh! out in this, Mr. Ellery?" exclaimed Keziah, in amazement, as the minister put on his hat and coat shortly after evening. "Makes alive! you won't be able to see the way to the gate. It's as dark as a sinner's pocket and thicker than tomato soup. Is a poor man's family, as my father used to say. You'll be wet through. Where in the world are you bound for this night?"

The minister equivocated. He said he had been in the house all day and felt like a walk.

"Walk, nothin' like an umbrella, then," was the housekeeper's advice. "You'd need it before you got back I reckon."

It was dark enough and thick enough, in all conscience. The main road was a black, wet void, through which gleams from lighted windows were big vague, yellow blotches. The umbrella was useful in the same way that a blind man's cane is useful, in feeling the way. Two or three strangers who met the minister carried lanterns. John Ellery stumbled on through the mist till he reached the "Corners" where the church was located and the roads forked. There, he halted for the night, into the way called locally "Shadrach's Turn-off." A short distance down the "Turn-off" stood a small, brown, shingled building, no windows aloft, opposite its door, on either side of the road, grew a spreading horse-chestnut tree surrounded by a cluster of swamp blackberry bushes. In the black shadow of the horse-chestnut Mr. Ellery stood still. He was debated in his mind a question, should he or should he not enter that building?

As we stood there, groups of people suffered from the fog and dodging and passed by in the dark. Some of them he knew, some, during his furlough in Trumet, he was to know, they were strangers to him. A lantern danced and wabbled up the "Turn-off" from the direction of the bay shore and the parsonage—a tall man in a coat, and a little man that it was carried by, and led him with long, wabbly jerks and then he would, when he walked with a slight limp. Beside him was a third person, a woman, or a black poke bonnet and a shawl. In the rear of the party was another woman, a young woman, judging by the way she was dressed and her jolly, vivacious step. The trio halted on the platform of the building. The old man blew out the lantern. Then he threw the door open and a stream of yellow light poured over the group.

The young woman was Grace Van Horne. The minister recognized her at once. Undoubtedly, the old man with the limp was her guardian, Captain Eben Hammond, who by common report, had spoken of him, Ellery, as a "blind pilot."

The door closed. A few moments thereafter the sound of a scream was taken away from within the building. It waited and quivered and groaned. Then, with a confidence that was startling, came the first verse of a hymn, sung with tremendous enthusiasm:

"Oh, who shall answer when the Lord His mansions shall assess?"

The twilight hymn was still ringing when the watcher across the street stepped out from the shadow of the horsebean. Without a pause he strode over to the platform. At other moment and the door had shut behind him.

The minister of the Trumet Regular church had entered the Come-Outer chapel to attend a Come-Outer prayer meeting!

CHAPTER IV.

In Which the Parson Cruises in Strange Waters.

The Come-Outer chapel was as bare inside, almost, as it was outside. The wooden walls, a beamed ceiling, a raised platform at one end with a table and chairs and the melodeon upon it, rows of wooden benches for the congregation—that was all. As the minister entered, the worshipers were standing up to sing. Three or four spasmodic oil lamps but dimly illumined the place and made recognition uncertain.

The second verse of the hymn was just beginning as Ellery came in. Most of the forty or more grown people in the chapel were too busy wrestling with the tune to turn and look at him. A child here and there in the back row raised a curious neck but resigned back again as parental fingers forced at his ear. The minister noted to a dark corner and took his stand in front of a vacant seat.

The man whom Ellery had decided must be Captain Eben Hammond was standing on the low platform beside the table. A rather fierce, patriarchal with its flowing white hair and beard, particularly in the set, smooth-shaven lips and lofted brows. Captain Eben held an open hymn book back in one hand and beat time with the other. He wore brass-bowed spectacles well down toward the tip of his nose, swinging a heavy, stubby finger and his deep, rich, quavering voice of no particular register, he led off the third verse:

"Oh, who shall weep when the roll is called
And who shall shout for joy?"

The singing over, the worshipers sat down. Captain Eben took a fat turnip watch from his pocket and slipped his forward. The thin, nearsighted young woman who had been bumped over the keyboard of the melodeon, straightened up. The worshipers relaxed a little and began to look about.

Then the captain adjusted his spectacles and opened a Bible, which he took from the table beside him. Clearing his throat, he announced that he minister put on his hat and coat shortly after evening. "Makes alive! you won't be able to see the way to the gate. It's as dark as a sinner's pocket and thicker than tomato soup. Is a poor man's family, as my father used to say. You'll be wet through. Where in the world are you bound for this night?"

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