KEZIAH COFFIN

by Joseph C. Lincoln

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Illustrated by Ellsworth Young

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CHAPTER I.

In Which Keziah Hears Two Proposals and the Beginning of a Third.

Trumet in a fog; a fog blown in during the night by the wind from the wide Atlantic. So wet and heavy that one might taste the salt in it and think that houses along the main road were but dim shapes behind its grey drapery, and only the gates and fences of the front yards were plainly in evidence to the passersby. The Methodist plum and hyberry bushes on the corner were speckled with beady drops. The pole on Cannon Hill, where the beacon was hoisted when the packet from Boston dropped anchor to the bay, was white and slippery. The new weathervane, a gilded whale, presented to the "Regular" church by Captain Sebediah Mayo, retired whaler, swam in seas of cloud. The lichened angel of the little "Come-Outer" chapel dripped at sedate intervals. The brick walk leading to the door of Captain Elkanah Daniels's fine residence held undignified puddles in its hollows. And, through the damp silences, the muttered growl—if the surf, three miles away at the foot of the sandy bluffs by the lighthouse, sounded omnipresent.

Directly opposite Captain Elkanah's front gate, on the other side of the main road, stood the little story-and-a-half house, also the captain's property, which for fourteen years had been tenanted by Mrs. Keziah Coffin and her brother, Solomon Hall, the shoemaker. But Solomon had, the month before, given up his fight with debt and illness and was sleeping quietly down in Trumet's none populous center, the graveyard. And Keziah, left alone, had decided that the rent and living expenses were more than her precarious earnings as a seamstress would warrant, and, having bargained with the furniture dealer in Wellmouth for the sale of her household effects, was now busy getting them ready for the morrow—when the dealer's wagon was to call. She was going to Boston, where a distant and condescending rich relative had intervened himself to the extent of finding her a place as sewing woman in a large tailoring establishment.

The fog hung like a wet blanket over the house and its small yard, where a few venerable pear trees, too conservative in their old age to sweeten a bad even though it was almost May, stood bare and forlorn. The day was dismal. The dismantled dining room, its tables and chairs pushed into a corner, and its faded ingrain carpet partially stripped from the floor, was dismal. Likewise comforting all things, one might have expected Keziah herself to be even more dismal. But, to all outward appearance, she was not. A large portion of her thirty-two years of life had been passed under a wet blanket, so to speak, and she had not permitted the depressing covering to shut out more sunshine than was absolutely necessary. If you can't get cream, you might as well learn to tame your sense of skim milk," said practical Keziah.

She was on her knees, her calico dress sleeves, patched and darned, but absolutely clean, rolled back, unconcealing a pair of plump, strong arms, a square of tacks below her, and a tack hammer with claw head in her hand. She was taking up the carpet. Grace Van Horne, Captain Elkan Hammond's niece, who had called to see if there was anything she might do to help, was sorting towels, tablecloths and the like from the drawers in a tall bureau and, folding them and laying them in an old and battered trunk. The pair had been discussing the sale which will Trumet had discussed for three weeks, namely, the "calling" by the parishioners of the new church of the Rev. John Cleaty, the young divinity student who had taken the place of Mr. Nelson Longley, minister for the past twenty years. Discussion to the contrary notwithstanding, Mr. Longley was beloved John was expected to all duty of the like. The "called" parsonage, a Kedzie's parsonage inside the "Regular" church property, was some three blocks from the city by the "Come-Outer" chapel, and the Rev. John had written that he should arrive Saturday afternoon.

"He, I say, he is very handsome," remarked Mrs. Van Horne, who was with a somewhat jealous sniffy her back toward Keziah. Mrs. Van Horne showed passed long enough to draw the tacks in the carpet and the floor to the sunny and then needs rest.

"Humph!" she observed. "A good many people said I saw a better looking man in Boston. Don't be shocked, Keziah; I remember we used to speak well of the kind you want considerably. Just as good looking as anybody, much, even if I wanted to. But I give you the encouragement, and a good deal more, you all single instead of taking a spouse, I believe they called it, and as I started to say, one of the bodies folks in it was the Old Colony Limited and he was pretty good-lookin'."

Grace laughed, even though she had been somewhat shocked.

"Why, Aunt Keziah!" she exclaimed—those who knew Keziah Coffin best usually called her aunt, though real nephews and nieces she had none—"why, Aunt Keziah! What do you mean by comparing the—the person you just mentioned with a minister?"

"Oh, I wasn't comparin' 'em. I'll leave that for you Come-Outers to do. Just this carpet! Because it I never saw such long tacks. I do believe whoever put 'em down drove 'em clean through the center of the earth and let the Chinymen chitch 'em on t'other side. I haul up a chunk of the cellar floor with every one. Ah, hum!" with a sigh. "I realize they ain't any more anxious to leave Trumet than I am. But, fara the minister's concerned, didn't I hear of your Uncle Eben sayin' in prayer meetin' only a fornit's or so ago that all hands who lived in Come-Outers were own children to Satan? Mr. Eliery must take after his father some. Surprisin', ain't it, what a family the old critter's got?"

The girl laughed again. For one brought up, since her seventh year, in the strictest of Come-Outer families, she laughed a good deal. Many Come-Outers considered it wicked to laugh. Yet Grace did it, and there was a laugh behind her and distinctly pleasantness to see.

"Aunt Keziah," she said, "why do you go away? What makes you? Is it absolutely necessary?"

"Why do I go? Why, for the same reason that the feller that was thrown overboard left the ship—cause I can't stay."

"I don't care!" The girl's dark eyes flashed indignantly. "I think it's too bad of Capt'n Elkanah to turn you out when—"

"Don't talk that way. He didn't turn'em out. He didn't tell'em' houses for me to go and buy his daughter's summer rigs. She can't have a new dress for a month, pretty near, and here's a young and good-lookin' minister coming to visit. Maybe Capt'n Elkanah would think a minister was high-toned enough even for Annabel to marry."

"He's only twenty-three, they say," remarked Grace, a trifle maliciously.

Annabel was the only child of Captain Elkanah Daniels, who owned the finest house in town. She was the belle of Trumet, and had been for a good many years.

Grace smiled, but quickly grew serious.

"Now, Auntie," she said, "please listen. I'm in earnest. It seems to me that you might do quite well at dressmaking here in town, if you had a little—well, ready money to help you at the start. I've got a few hundred dollars in the bank, presents from uncle, and my father's insurance money. I would love to lend it to you, and I know uncle would."

Mrs. Coffin interrupted her.

"Dary fool! Keziah, I hope I haven't got where I need to borrow money yet a while. Thank you just as much, deary, but long's I've got two hands and a pair of legs, I'll make the way rather reasonably full, I wouldn't wonder. No, I aren't think of it, no death anybody ever WOULD. The negative was so decided that Grace was silenced, her disappointment showed in her face, however, and Keziah hastened to change the subject.

"How do you know," she observed, "but what my guts to Boston may be the thing that ever happened to me? You can't tell. No one despair. Annabel ain't given up hope yet, why should I? Hey? Ain't that somebody coming?"

Her companion sprang to her feet and ran to the window. There she broke into a smothered laugh.

"Why, it was Perper!" she cried. "He must be coming to see you, Aunt Keziah. Look at his new hat and his Sunday clothes. Goracious! I must be going. I didn't—I mustn't let him see me."

Keziah dropped the tack hammer and arose.

"Kyun?" she repeated. "What in the world is that wild bird comin' here

She Broke into a Smothered Laugh.

for? To talk about the minister, I s'pose. Here on earth I ain't a decent chance to let him out alone before he comes to see him out alone. Perper's trying to be a regular Kyun" (Cayenne) Pepper because of the red lantern and one of Trumet's "characters," and he is. He was born in the village and, when a youngster, had the death of their parents, he undertaken the job of "bringing up" her brother, and not sympathize with these ambitions. Consequently, when Kyun ran away also followed him to Boston, sailed aboard the vessel where he had shipped, and enlisted him, literally and figuratively. One of the mates venturing to offer objection, Lavinia turned upon him and gave him a piece of her mind, to the immense delight of the crew and the loungers on the wharf. Then she returned with the vagrant to Trumet.

That was Kyun's sole venture, so far as sailoring was concerned, but he ran away again when he was twenty-five. This time he returned of his own accord, bringing a wife with him, one Evelyn Gort of Oakdale. Evelyn tells a sad story herself, and first interview with Lavinia ended with the latter's leaving the house in a huff, swearing never to set foot in it again. This oath she broke the day of her stepsister-in-law's funeral. She appeared, after the ceremony, at the gage on the wagon with Kyun and Evelyn and, she was sitting on the front stoop of his dwelling with, as people say, a most resigned expression on his meek countenance, looked out and saw her.

"Ma land! Lavinia," he exclaimed, turning pale. "Where'd you come from?"

"Never mind where I come from," observed his sister promptly. "You just be thankful I've come. If ever a body needed some one to look after 'em, I'm you. You can tote my things right in," she added, addressing the wagon driver, "and you, Bishy, go right in with 'em. Don't stand there like a fool and gape at me when your poor wife ain't been buried more an hour!"

"But—but—Lavinia," protested poor Kyun, speaking for the first time, "I couldn't take it easy afore she was buried, could I?"

"Do right, I" was the answer. "March!"

Abishai marched, and had marched under the iron hand ever since. She kept house for him, and did it well, but one fear was his some good female might capture him, and she watched him with a jealous eye. He was the town assessor and tax collector, but when he visited Boston or elsewhere on business, Lavinia always accompanied him, to help him in his duties, she said.

Consequently, when he appeared, unchaperoned, on the back building by the side door of the Coffin homestead, Keziah and her friends were surprised. "He's dressed to kill," whispered Grace, as the woman in question left her hat, and in this fog! I do believe he's come another proposal."

Mr. Pepper entered diffidently.

"I—I—" he began.

"Well, what's the matter? Speak up, if you can. Lavinia's gone up to Sarah's to visit church sewing circle, and I don't wanted to speak with you about anything, Keziah, no—I don't. I didn't see you, Grace. Good morning."

He didn't seem overjoyed to see Miss Van Horne, as it was. In fact, he reddened perceptibly and looked toward the door. The girl, her eyes twinkling, took up her jacket and hat and hummed a tune. Keziah, meanwhile, was busy, in their turn, with the tacks, and Mr. Pepper disappeared with a mighty crash behind the high-backed sofa, and remained there.

Miss Pepper was the first to speak.

"Abishai," she commanded, "come out of that this minute."

"I—I—I can't."

"Come! Will you?"

"Let me alone! I can't, without be fear and, compare them own self and the chair. I'm—I'm—I'm stuck! I can't stay compar from—without, whether the chair or not. I'm—I'm—I'm—I'm against them! I'm however sets the chair, let him fall! no convenience I'm—I'm—I'm—