Гарриет Бичер-Стоу

Oldtown Fireside Stories

Гарриет Бичер-Стоу

Oldtown Fireside Stories

«Public Domain»

Бичер-Стоу Г.

Oldtown Fireside Stories / Г. Бичер-Стоу — «Public Domain»,

© Бичер-Стоу Г.
© Public Domain

Содержание

THE GHOST IN THE MILL 5
THE SULLIVAN LOOKING-GLASS 11
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 15

Harriet Beecher Stowe
Oldtown Fireside Stories

THE GHOST IN THE MILL

"Come, Sam, tell us a story," said I, as Harry and I crept to his knees, in the glow of the bright evening firelight; while Aunt Lois was busily rattling the tea-things, and grandmamma, at the other end of the fireplace, was quietly setting the heel of a blue-mixed yarn stocking.

In those days we had no magazines and daily papers, each reeling off a serial story. Once a week, "The Columbian Sentinel" came from Boston with its slender stock of news and editorial; but all the multiform devices—pictorial, narrative, and poetical—which keep the mind of the present generation ablaze with excitement, had not then even an existence. There was no theatre, no opera; there were in Oldtown no parties or balls, except, perhaps, the annual election, or Thanksgiving festival; and when winter came, and the sun went down at half-past four o'clock, and left the long, dark hours of evening to be provided for, the necessity of amusement became urgent. Hence, in those days, chimney-corner story-telling became an art and an accomplishment. Society then was full of traditions and narratives which had all the uncertain glow and shifting mystery of the firelit hearth upon them. They were told to sympathetic audiences, by the rising and falling light of the solemn embers, with the hearth-crickets filling up every pause. Then the aged told their stories to the young, —tales of early life; tales of war and adventure, of forest-days, of Indian captivities and escapes, of bears and wild-cats and panthers, of rattlesnakes, of witches and wizards, and strange and wonderful dreams and appearances and providences.

In those days of early Massachusetts, faith and credence were in the very air. Two-thirds of New England was then dark, unbroken forests, through whose tangled paths the mysterious winter wind groaned and shrieked and howled with weird noises and unaccountable clamors. Along the iron-bound shore, the stormful Atlantic raved and thundered, and dashed its moaning waters, as if to deaden and deafen any voice that might tell of the settled life of the old civilized world, and shut us forever into the wilderness. A good story-teller, in those days, was always sure of a warm seat at the hearthstone, and the delighted homage of children; and in all Oldtown there was no better story-teller than Sam Lawson.

"Do, do, tell us a story," said Harry, pressing upon him, and opening very wide blue eyes, in which undoubting faith shone as in a mirror; "and let it be something strange, and different from common."

"Wal, I know lots o' strange things," said Sam, looking mysteriously into the fire. "Why, I know things, that ef I should tell,—why, people might say they wa'n't so; but then they *is* so for all that."

"Oh, *do*, do, tell us!"

"Why, I should scare ye to death, mebbe," said Sam doubtingly.

"Oh, pooh! no, you wouldn't," we both burst out at once.

But Sam was possessed by a reticent spirit, and loved dearly to be wooed and importuned; and do he only took up the great kitchen-tongs, and smote on the hickory forestick, when it flew apart in the middle, and scattered a shower of clear bright coals all over the hearth.

"Mercy on us, Sam Lawson!" said Aunt Lois in an indignant voice, spinning round from her dishwashing.

"Don't you worry a grain, Miss Lois," said Sam composedly. "I see that are stick was e'en a'most in two, and I thought I'd jest settle it. I'll sweep up the coals now," he added, vigorously applying a turkey-wing to the purpose, as he knelt on the hearth, his spare, lean figure glowing in the blaze of the firelight, and getting quite flushed with exertion.

"There, now!" he said, when he had brushed over and under and between the fire-irons, and pursued the retreating ashes so far into the red, fiery citadel, that his finger-ends were burning and tingling, "that are's done now as well as Hepsy herself could 'a' done it. I allers sweeps up the haarth: I think it's part o' the man's bisness when he makes the fire. But Hepsy's so used to seein' me a-doin' on't, that she don't see no kind o' merit in't. It's just as Parson Lothrop said in his sermon,—folks allers overlook their common marcies"—

"But come, Sam, that story," said Harry and I coaxingly, pressing upon him, and pulling him down into his seat in the corner.

"Lordy massy, these 'ere young uns!" said Sam. "There's never no contentin' on 'em: ye tell 'em one story, and they jest swallows it as a dog does a gob o' meat; and they're all ready for another. What do ye want to hear now?"

Now, the fact was, that Sam's stories had been told us so often, that they were all arranged and ticketed in our minds. We knew every word in them, and could set him right if he varied a hair from the usual track; and still the interest in them was unabated. Still we shivered, and clung to his knee, at the mysterious parts, and felt gentle, cold chills run down our spines at appropriate places. We were always in the most receptive and sympathetic condition. To-night, in particular, was one of those thundering stormy ones, when the winds appeared to be holding a perfect mad carnival over my grandfather's house. They yelled and squealed round the corners; they collected in troops, and came tumbling and roaring down chimney; they shook and tattled the buttery-door and the sinkroom-door and the cellar-door and the chamber-door, with a constant undertone of squeak and clatter, as if at every door were a cold, discontented spirit, tired of the chill outside, and longing for the warmth and comfort within.

"Wal, boys," said Sam confidentially, "what'll ye have?"

"Tell us 'Come down, come down!'" we both shouted with one voice. This was, in our mind, an "A No. 1" among Sam's stories.

"Ye mus'n't be frightened now," said Sam paternally.

"Oh, no! we ar'n't frightened ever," said we both in one breath.

"Not when ye go down the cellar arter cider?" said Sam with severe scrutiny. "Ef ye should be down cellar, and the candle should go out, now?"

"I ain't," said I: "I ain't afraid of any thing. I never knew what it was to be afraid in my life."

"Wal, then," said Sam, "I'll tell ye. This 'ere's what Cap'n Eb Sawin told me when I was a boy about your bigness, I reckon.

"Cap'n Eb Sawin was a most respectable man. Your gran'ther knew him very well; and he was a deacon in the church in Dedham afore he died. He was at Lexington when the fust gun was fired agin the British. He was a dreffle smart man, Cap'n Eb was, and driv team a good many years atween here and Boston. He married Lois Peabody, that was cousin to your gran'ther then. Lois was a rael sensible woman; and I've heard her tell the story as he told her, and it was jest as he told it to me,—jest exactly; and I shall never forget it if I live to be nine hundred years old, like Mathuselah.

"Ye see, along back in them times, there used to be a fellow come round these 'ere parts, spring and fall, a-peddlin' goods, with his pack on his back; and his name was Jehiel Lommedieu. Nobody rightly knew where he come from. He wasn't much of a talker; but the women rather liked him, and kind o' liked to have him round. Women will like some fellows, when men can't see no sort o' reason why they should; and they liked this 'ere Lommedieu, though he was kind o' mournful and thin and shad-bellied, and hadn't nothin' to say for himself. But it got to be so, that the women would count and calculate so many weeks afore 'twas time for Lommedieu to be along; and they'd make up ginger-snaps and preserves and pies, and make him stay to tea at the houses, and feed him up on the best there was: and the story went round, that he was a-courtin' Phebe Ann Parker, or Phebe Ann was a-courtin' him,—folks didn't rightly know which. Wal, all of a sudden, Lommedieu stopped comin' round; and nobody knew why,—only jest he didn't come. It turned out that Phebe Ann Parker had

got a letter from him, sayin' he'd be along afore Thanksgiving; but he didn't come, neither afore nor at Thanksgiving time, nor arter, nor next spring: and finally the women they gin up lookin' for him. Some said he was dead; some said he was gone to Canada; and some said he hed gone over to the Old Country.

"Wal, as to Phebe Ann, she acted like a gal o' sense, and married 'Bijah Moss, and thought no more 'bout it. She took the right view on't, and said she was sartin that all things was ordered out for the best; and it was jest as well folks couldn't always have their own way. And so, in time, Lommedieu was gone out o' folks's minds, much as a last year's apple-blossom.

"It's relly affectin' to think how little these 'ere folks is missed that's so much sot by. There ain't nobody, ef they's ever so important, but what the world gets to goin' on without 'em, pretty much as it did with 'em, though there's some little flurry at fust. Wal, the last thing that was in anybody's mind was, that they ever should hear from Lommedieu agin. But there ain't nothin' but what has its time o' turnin' up; and it seems his turn was to come.

"Wal, ye see, 'twas the 19th o' March, when Cap'n Eb Sawin started with a team for Boston. That day, there come on about the biggest snow-storm that there'd been in them parts sence the oldest man could remember. 'Twas this 'ere fine, siftin' snow, that drives in your face like needles, with a wind to cut your nose off: it made teamin' pretty tedious work. Cap'n Eb was about the toughest man in them parts. He'd spent days in the woods a-loggin', and he'd been up to the deestrict o' Maine a-lumberin', and was about up to any sort o' thing a man gen'ally could be up to; but these 'ere March winds sometimes does set on a fellow so, that neither natur' nor grace can stan' 'em. The cap'n used to say he could stan' any wind that blew one way 't time for five minutes; but come to winds that blew all four p'ints at the same minit,—why, they flustered him.

"Wal, that was the sort o' weather it was all day: and by sundown Cap'n Eb he got clean bewildered, so that he lost his road; and, when night came on, he didn't know nothin' where he was. Ye see the country was all under drift, and the air so thick with snow, that he couldn't see a foot afore him; and the fact was, he got off the Boston road without knowin' it, and came out at a pair o' bars nigh upon Sherburn, where old Cack Sparrock's mill is.

"Your gran'ther used to know old Cack, boys. He was a drefful drinkin' old crittur, that lived there all alone in the woods by himself a-tendin' saw and grist mill. He wasn't allers jest what he was then. Time was that Cack was a pretty consid'ably likely young man, and his wife was a very respectable woman,—Deacon Amos Petengall's dater from Sherburn.

"But ye see, the year arter his wife died, Cack he gin up goin' to meetin' Sundays, and, all the tithing-men and selectmen could do, they couldn't get him out to meetin'; and, when a man neglects means o' grace and sanctuary privileges, there ain't no sayin' *what* he'll do next. Why, boys, jist think on't!—an immortal crittur lyin' round loose all day Sunday, and not puttin' on so much as a clean shirt, when all 'spectable folks has on their best close, and is to meetin' worshippin' the Lord! What can you spect to come of it, when he lies idlin' round in his old week-day close, fishing, or some sich, but what the Devil should be arter him at last, as he was arter old Cack?"

Here Sam winked impressively to my grandfather in the opposite corner, to call his attention to the moral which he was interweaving with his narrative.

"Wal, ye see, Cap'n Eb he told me, that when he come to them bars and looked up, and saw the dark a-comin' down, and the storm a-thickenin' up, he felt that things was gettin' pretty consid'able serious. There was a dark piece o' woods on ahead of him inside the bars; and he knew, come to get in there, the light would give out clean. So he jest thought he'd take the hoss out o' the team, and go ahead a little, and see where he was. So he driv his oxen up ag'in the fence, and took out the hoss, and got on him, and pushed along through the woods, not rightly knowin' where he was goin'.

"Wal, afore long he see a light through the trees; and, sure enough, he come out to Cack Sparrock's old mill.

“It was a pretty consid’able gloomy sort of a place, that are old mill was. There was a great fall of water that come rushin’ down the rocks, and fell in a deep pool; and it sounded sort o’ wild and lonesome: but Cap’n Eb he knocked on the door with his whip-handle, and got in.

“There, to be sure, sot old Cack beside a great blazin’ fire, with his rum-jug at his elbow. He was a drefful fellow to drink, Cack was! For all that, there was some good in him, for he was pleasant-spoken and ‘bliging; and he made the cap’n welcome.

“‘Ye see, Cack,’ said Cap’n Eb, ‘I ‘m off my road, and got snowed up down by your bars,’ says he.

“‘Want ter know!’ says Cack. ‘Calculate you’ll jest have to camp down here till mornin’,’ says he.

“Wal, so old Cack he got out his tin lantern, and went with Cap’n Eb back to the bars to help him fetch along his critturs. He told him he could put ‘em under the mill-shed. So they got the critturs up to the shed, and got the cart under; and by that time the storm was awful.

“But Cack he made a great roarin’ fire, ‘cause, ye see, Cack allers had slab-wood a plenty from his mill; and a roarin’ fire is jest so much company. It sort o’ keeps a fellow’s spirits up, a good fire does. So Cack he sot on his old teakettle, and made a swingeing lot o’ toddy; and he and Cap’n Eb were havin’ a tol’able comfortable time there. Cack was a pretty good hand to tell stories; and Cap’n Eb warn’t no way backward in that line, and kep’ up his end pretty well: and pretty soon they was a-roarin’ and haw-hawin’ inside about as loud as the storm outside; when all of a sudden, ‘bout midnight, there come a loud rap on the door.

“‘Lordy massy! what’s that?’ says Cack. Folks is rather startled allers to be checked up sudden when they are a-carryin’ on and laughin’; and it was such an awful blowy night, it was a little scary to have a rap on the door.

“Wal, they waited a minit, and didn’t hear nothin’ but the wind a-screechin’ round the chimbley; and old Cack was jest goin’ on with his story, when the rap come ag’in, harder’n ever, as if it’d shook the door open.

“‘Wal,’ says old Cack,’ if ‘tis the Devil, we’d jest as good’s open, and have it out with him to onst,’ says he; and so he got up and opened the door, and, sure enough, there was old Ketury there. Expect you’ve heard your grandma tell about old Ketury. She used to come to meetin’s sometimes, and her husband was one o’ the prayin’ Indians; but Ketury was one of the rael wild sort, and you couldn’t no more convert *her* than you could convert a wild-cat or a painter [panther]. Lordy massy! Ketury used to come to meetin’, and sit there on them Indian benches; and when the second bell was a-tollin’, and when Parson Lothrop and his wife was comin’ up the broad aisle, and everybody in the house ris’ up and stood, Ketury would sit there, and look at ‘em out o’ the corner o’ her eyes; and folks used to say she rattled them necklaces o’ rattlesnakes’ tails and wild-cat teeth, and sich like heathen trumpery, and looked for all the world as if the spirit of the old Sarpent himself was in her. I’ve seen her sit and look at Lady Lothrop out o’ the corner o’ her eyes; and her old brown baggy neck would kind o’ twist and work; and her eyes they looked so, that ‘twas enough to scare a body. For all the world, she looked jest as if she was a-workin’ up to spring at her. Lady Lothrop was jest as kind to Ketury as she always was to every poor crittur. She’d bow and smile as gracious to her when meetin’ was over, and she come down the aisle, passin’ oot o, meetin’; but Ketury never took no notice. Ye see, Ketury’s father was one o’ them great powwows down to Martha’s Vineyard; and people used to say she was set apart, when she was a child, to the sarvice o’ the Devil: any way, she never could be made nothin’ of in a Christian way. She come down to Parson Lothrop’s study once or twice to be catechised; but he couldn’t get a word out o’ her, and she kind o’ seemed to sit scornful while he was a-talkin’. Folks said, if it was in old times, Ketury wouldn’t have been allowed to go on so; but Parson Lothrop’s so sort o’ mild, he let her take pretty much her own way. Everybody thought that Ketury was a witch: at least, she knew consid’able more’n she ought to know, and so they was kind o’ ‘fraid on her. Cap’n Eb says he never see a fellow seem scareder than Cack did when he see Ketury a-standin’ there.

"Why, ye see, boys, she was as withered and wrinkled and brown as an old frosted punkin-vine; and her little snaky eyes sparkled and snapped, and it made yer head kind o' dizzy to look at 'em; and folks used to say that anybody that Ketury got mad at was sure to get the worst of it fust or last. And so, no matter what day or hour Ketury had a mind to rap at anybody's door, folks gen'lly thought it was best to let her in; but then, they never thought her coming was for any good, for she was just like the wind,—she came when the fit was on her, she staid jest so long as it pleased her, and went when she got ready, and not before. Ketury understood English, and could talk it well enough, but always seemed to scorn it, and was allers mo win' and mutterin' to herself in Indian, and winkin' and blinkin' as if she saw more folks round than you did, so that she wa'n't no way pleasant company; and yet everybody took good care to be polite to her. So old Cack asked her to come in, and didn't make-no question where she come from, or what she come on; but he knew it was twelve good miles from where she lived to his hut, and the snow was drifted above her middle: and Cap'n Eb declared that there wa'n't no track, nor sign o' a track, of anybody's coming through that snow next morning."

"How did she get there, then?" said I.

"Didn't ye never see brown leaves a-ridin' on the wind? Well,' Cap'n Eb he says, 'she came on the wind,' and I'm sure it was strong enough to fetch her. But Cack he got her down into the warm corner, and he poured her out a mug o' hot toddy, and give her: but ye see her bein' there sort o' stopped the conversation; for she sot there a-rockin' back'ards and for'ards, a-sippin her toddy, and a-mutterin', and lookin' up chimbley.

"Cap'n Eb says in all his born days he never hearn such screeches and yells as the wind give over that chimbley; and old Cack got so frightened, you could fairly hear his teeth chatter.

"But Cap'n Eb he was a putty brave man, and he wa'n't goin' to have conversation stopped by no woman, witch or no witch; and so, when he see her mutterin', and lookin' up chimbley, he spoke up, and says he, 'Well, Ketury, what do you see?' says he. 'Come, out with it; don't keep it to yourself.' Ye see Cap'n Eb was a hearty fellow, and then he was a leetle warmed up with the toddy.

"Then he said he see an evil kind o' smile on Ketury's face, and she rattled her necklace o' bones and snakes' tails; and her eyes seemed to snap; and she looked up the chimbley, and called out, 'Come down, come down! let's see who ye be.'

"Then there was a scratchin' and a rumblin' and a groan; and a pair of feet come down the chimbley, and stood right in the middle of the haarth, the toes pi'ntin' out'rds, with shoes and silver buckles a-shinin' in the firelight. Cap'n Eb says he never come so near bein' scared in his life; and, as to old Cack, he jest wilted right down in his chair.

"Then old Ketury got up, and reached her stick up chimbley, and called out louder, 'Come down, come down! let's see who ye be.' And, sure enough, down came a pair o' legs, and j'ined right on to the feet: good fair legs they was, with ribbed stockings and leather breeches.

"'Wal, we're in for it now,' says Cap'n Eb. 'Go it, Ketury, and let's have the rest on him.'

"Ketury didn't seem to mind him: she stood there as stiff as a stake, and kep' callin' out, 'Come down, come down! let's see who ye be.' And then come down the body of a man with a brown coat and yellow vest, and j'ined right on to the legs; but there wa'n't no arms to it. Then Ketury shook her stick up chimbley, and called, '*Come down, come down!*' And there came down a pair o' arms, and went on each side o' the body; and there stood a man all finished, only there wa'n't no head on him.

"'Wal, Ketury,' says Cap'n Eb, 'this 'ere's getting serious. I 'spec' you must finish him up, and let's see what he wants of us.'

"Then Ketury called out once more, louder'n ever, 'Come down, come down! let's see who ye be.' And, sure enough, down comes a man's head, and settled on the shoulders straight enough; and Cap'n Eb, the minit he sot eyes on him, knew he was Jehiel Lommedieu.

"Old Cack knew him too; and he fell flat on his face, and prayed the Lord to have mercy on his soul: but Cap'n Eb he was for gettin' to the bottom of matters, and not have his scare for nothin'; so he says to him, 'What do you want, now you hev come?'

"The man he didn't speak; he only sort o' moaned, and p'inted to the chimbley. He seemed to try to speak, but couldn't; for ye see it isn't often that his sort o' folks is permitted to speak: but just then there came a screechin' blast o' wind, and blowed the door open, and blowed the smoke and fire all out into the room, and there seemed to be a whirlwind and darkness and moans and screeches; and, when it all cleared up, Ketury and the man was both gone, and only old Cack lay on the ground, rolling and moaning as if he'd die.

"Wal, Cap'n Eb he picked him up, and built up the fire, and sort o' comforted him up, 'cause the crittur was in distress o' mind that was drefful. The awful Providence, ye see, had awakened him, and his sin had been set home to his soul; and he was under such conviction, that it all had to come out,—how old Cack's father had murdered poor Lommedieu for his money, and Cack had been privy to it, and helped his father build the body up in that very chimbley; and he said that he hadn't had neither peace nor rest since then, and that was what had driv' him away from ordinances; for ye know sinnin' will always make a man leave prayin'. Wal, Cack didn't live but a day or two. Cap'n Eb he got the minister o' Sherburn and one o' the selectmen down to see him; and they took his deposition. He seemed railly quite penitent; and Parson Carryl he prayed with him, and was faithful in settin' home the providence to his soul: and so, at the eleventh hour, poor old Cack might have got in; at least it looks a leetle like it. He was distressed to think he couldn't live to be hung. He sort o' seemed to think, that if he was fairly tried, and hung, it would make it all square. He made Parson Carryl promise to have the old mill pulled down, and bury the body; and, after he was dead, they did it.

"Cap'n Eb he was one of a party o' eight that pulled down the chimbley; and there, sure enough, was the skeleton of poor Lommedieu.

"So there you see, boys, there can't be no iniquity so hid but what it'll come out. The Wild Indians of the forest, and the stormy winds and tempests, j'ined together to bring out this 'ere."

"For my part," said Aunt Lois sharply, "I never believed that story."

"Why, Lois," said my grandmother, "Cap'n Eb Sawin was a regular church-member, and a most respectable man."

"Law, mother! I don't doubt he thought so. I suppose he and Cack got drinking toddy together, till he got asleep, and dreamed it. I wouldn't believe such a thing if it did happen right before my face and eyes. I should only think I was crazy, that's all."

"Come, Lois, if I was you, I wouldn't talk so like a Sadducee," said my grandmother. "What would become of all the accounts in Dr. Cotton Mather's 'Magnilly' if folks were like you?"

"Wal," said Sam Lawson, drooping contemplatively over the coals, and gazing into the fire, "there's a putty consid'able sight o' things in this world that's true; and then ag'in there's a sight o' things that ain't true. Now, my old gran'ther used to say, 'Boys, says he, 'if ye want to lead a pleasant and prosperous life, ye must contrive allers to keep jest the *happy medium* between truth and falsehood.' Now, that are's my doctrine."

Aunt Lois knit severely.

"Boys," said Sam, "don't you want ter go down with me and get a mug o' cider?"

Of course we did, and took down a basket to bring up some apples to roast.

"Boys," says Sam mysteriously, while he was drawing the cider, "you jest ask your Aunt Lois to tell you what she knows 'bout Ruth Sullivan."

"Why, what is it?"

"Oh! you must ask her. These 'ere folks that's so kind o' toppin' about sperits and sich, come sift 'em down, you gen'lly find they knows one story that kind o' puzzles 'em. Now you mind, and jist ask your Aunt Lois about Ruth Sullivan."

THE SULLIVAN LOOKING-GLASS

“Aunt Lois,” said I, “what was that story about Ruth Sullivan?”

Aunt Lois’s quick black eyes gave a surprised flash; and she and my grandmother looked at each other a minute significantly. “Who told you any thing about Ruth Sullivan,” she said sharply.

“Nobody. Somebody said *you* knew something about her,” said I.

I was holding a skein of yarn for Aunt Lois; and she went on winding in silence, putting the ball through loops and tangled places.

“Little boys shouldn’t ask questions,” she concluded at last sententiously. “Little boys that ask too many questions get sent to bed.”

I knew that of old, and rather wondered at my own hardihood.

Aunt Lois wound on in silence; but, looking in her face, I could see plainly that I had started an exciting topic.

“I should think,” pursued my grandmother in her corner, “that Ruth’s case might show you, Lois, that a good many things may happen,—more than you believe.”

“Oh, well, mother! Ruth’s was a strange case; but I suppose there are ways of accounting for it.”

“You believed Ruth, didn’t you?”

“Oh, certainly, I believed Ruth! Why shouldn’t I? Ruth was one of my best friends, and as true a girl as lives: there wasn’t any nonsense about Ruth. She was one of the sort,” said Aunt Lois reflectively, “that I’d as soon trust as myself: when she said a thing was so and so, I knew it was so.”

“Then, if you think Ruth’s story was true,” pursued my grandmother, “what’s the reason you are always cavilling at things just ‘cause you can’t understand how they came to be so?”

Aunt Lois set her lips firmly, and wound with grim resolve. She was the very impersonation of that obstinate rationalism that grew up at the New-England fireside, close alongside of the most undoubting faith in the supernatural.

“I don’t believe such things,” at last she snapped out, “and I don’t disbelieve them. I just let ‘em alone. What do I know about ‘em? Ruth tells me a story; and I believe her. I know what she saw beforehand, came true in a most remarkable way. Well, I’m sure I’ve no objection. One thing may be true, or another, for all me; but, just because I believe Ruth Sullivan, I’m not going to believe, right and left, all the stories in Cotton Mather, and all that anybody can hawk up to tell. Not I.”

This whole conversation made me all the more curious to get at the story thus dimly indicated; and so we beset Sam for information.

“So your Aunt Lois wouldn’t tell ye nothin’,” said Sam. “Wanter know, neow! sho!”

“No: she said we must go to bed if we asked her.”

“That ‘are’s a way folks has; but, ye see, boys,” said Sam, while a droll confidential expression crossed the lack-lustre dolefulness of his visage, “ye see, I put ye up to it, ‘cause Miss Lois is so large and commandin’ in her ways, and so kind o’ up and down in all her doin’s, that I like once and a while to sort o’ gravel her; and I knowed enough to know that that ‘are question would git her in a tight place.

“Ye see, yer Aunt Lois was knowin’ to all this ‘ere about Ruth, so there wer’n’t no gettin’ away from it; and it’s about as remarkable a providence as any o’ them of Mister Cotton Marther’s ‘Magnilly.’ So if you’ll come up in the barn-chamber this arternoon, where I’ve got a lot o’ flax to hatchel out, I’ll tell ye all about it.”

So that afternoon beheld Sam arranged at full length on a pile of top-tow in the barn-chamber, hatchelling by proxy by putting Harry and myself to the service.

"Wal, now, boys, it's kind o' refreshing to see how wal ye take hold," he observed. "Nothin' like bein' industrious while ye'r young: gret sight better now than loafin off, down in them medders.

"'In books and work and useful play
Let my fust years be past:
So shall I give for every day
Some good account at last.'"

"But, Sam, if we work for you, you must tell us that story about Ruth Sullivan."

"Lordy massy! yis,—course I will. I've had the best kind o' chances of knowin' all about that 'are. Wal, you see there was old Gineral Sullivan, he lived in state and grande'r in the old Sullivan house out to Roxberry. I been to Roxberry, and seen that 'are house o' Gineral Sullivan's. There was one time that I was a consid'able spell lookin' round in Roxberry, a kind o' seein' how things wuz there, and whether or no there mightn't be some sort o' providential openin' or suthin'. I used to stay with Aunt Polly Ginger. She was sister to Mehitable Ginger, Gineral Sullivan's housekeeper, and hed the in and out o' the Sullivan house, and kind o' kept the run o' how things went and came in it. Polly she was a kind o' cousin o' my mother's, and allers glad to see me. Fact was, I was putty handy round house; and she used to save up her broken things and sich till I come round in the fall; and then I'd mend 'em up, and put the clock right, and split her up a lot o' kindlings, and board up the cellar-windows, and kind o' make her sort o' comfortable,—she bein' a lone body, and no man round. As I said, it was sort o' convenient to hev me; and so I jest got the run o' things in the Sullivan house pretty much as ef I was one on 'em, Gineral Sullivan he kept a grand house, I tell you. You see, he cum from the old country, and felt sort o' lordly and grand; and they used to hev the gretest kind o' doin's there to the Sullivan house. Ye ought ter a seen that 'are house,—gret big front hall and gret wide stairs; none o' your steep kind that breaks a feller's neck to get up and down, but gret broad stairs with easy risers, so they used to say you could a cantered a pony up that 'are stairway easy as not. Then there was gret wide rooms, and sofys, and curtains, and gret curtained bedsteads that looked sort o' like fortifications, and pictur's that was got in Italy and Rome and all them 'are heathen places. Ye see, the Gineral was a drefful worldly old critter, and was all for the pomps and the vanities. Lordy massy! I wonder what the poor old critter thinks about it all now, when his body's all gone to dust and ashes in the graveyard, and his soul's gone to 'tarnity! Wal, that are ain't none o' my business; only it shows the vanity o' riches in a kind o' strikin' light, and makes me content that I never hed none."

"But, Sam, I hope General Sullivan wasn't a wicked man, *was* he?"

"Wal, I wouldn't say he was railly wickeder than the run; but he was one o' these 'ere high-stepping, big-feeling fellers, that seem to be a hevin' their portion in this life. Drefful proud he was; and he was pretty much sot on this world, and kep' a sort o' court goin' on round him. Wal, I don't jedge him nor nobody: folks that hes the world is apt to get sot on it. Don't none on us do more than middlin' well."

"But, Sam, what about Ruth Sullivan?"

"Ruth?—Oh, yis!—Ruth—

"Wal, ye see, the only crook in the old Gineral's lot was he didn't hev no children. Mis' Sullivan, she was a beautiful woman, as handsome as a pictur'; but she never had but one child; and he was a son who died when he was a baby, and about broke her heart. And then this 'ere Ruth was her sister's child, that was born about the same time; and, when the boy died, they took Ruth home to sort o' fill his place, and kind o' comfort up Mis' Sullivan. And then Ruth's father and mother died; and they adopted her for their own, and brought her up.

"Wal, she grew up to be amazin' handsome. Why, everybody said that she was jest the light and glory of that 'are old Sullivan place, and worth more'n all the pictur's and the silver and the jewels, and all there was in the house; and she was jest so innercent and sweet, that you never see nothing to

beat it. Wal, your Aunt Lois she got acquainted with Ruth one summer when she was up to Old Town a visitin' at Parson Lothrop's. Your Aunt Lois was a gal then, and a pretty good-lookin' one too; and, somehow or other, she took to Ruth, and Ruth took to her. And when Ruth went home, they used to be a writin' backwards and forads; and I guess the fact was, Ruth thought about as much of your Aunt Lois as she did o' anybody. Ye see, your aunt was a kind o' strong up-and-down woman that always knew certain jest what she did know; and Ruth, she was one o' them gals that seems sort o' like a stray lamb or a dove that's sort o' lost their way in the world, and wants some one to show 'em where to go next. For, ye see, the fact was, the old Gineral and Madam, they didn't agree very well. He wa'n't well pleased that she didn't have no children; and she was sort o' jealous o' him 'cause she got hold o' some sort of story about how he was to a married somebody else over there in England: so she got sort o' riled up, jest as wimmen will, the best on 'em; and they was pretty apt to have spats, and one could give t'other as good as they sent; and, by all accounts, they fit putty lively sometimes. And, between the two, Ruth she was sort o' scared, and fluttered like a dove that didn't know jest where to settle. Ye see, there she was in; that 'are great wide house, where they was a feastin' and a prancin' and a dancin', and a goin' on like Ahashuerus and Herodias and all them old Scripture days. There was acomin' and goin,' and there was gret dinners and gret doin's, but no love; and, you know, the Scriptur' says, 'Better is a dinner o' yarbs, where love is, than a stalled ox, and hatred therewith.'

"Wal, I don't orter say *hatred*, arter all. I kind o' reckon, the old Gineral did the best he could: the fact is, when a woman gits a kink in her head agin a man, the best on us don't allers do jest the right thing.

"Any way, Ruth, she was sort o' forlorn, and didn't seem to take no comfort in the goin's on. The Gineral he was mighty fond on her, and proud on her; and there wa'n't nothin' too good for Ruth. He was free-handed, the Gineral wuz. He dressed her up in silks and satins, and she hed a maid to wait on her, and she hed sets o' pearl and dimond; and Madam Sullivan she thought all the world on her, and kind o' worshipped the ground she trod on. And yet Ruth was sort o' lonesome.

"Ye see, Ruth wa'n't calculated for grande'r. Some folks ain't.

"Why, that 'are summer she spent out to Old Town, she was jest as chirk and chipper as a wren, a wearin' her little sun-bunnet, and goin' a huckle-berryin' and a black-berryin' and diggin' sweet-flag, and gettin cowslops and dandelions; and she hed a word for everybody. And everybody liked Ruth, and wished her well. Wal, she was sent for her health; and she got that, and more too: she got a sweetheart.

"Ye see, there was a Cap'n Oliver a visitin' at the minister's that summer,—a nice, handsome young man as ever was. He and Ruth and your Aunt Lois, they was together a good deal; and they was a ramblin' and a ridin' and a sailin': and so Ruth and the Capting went the way o' all the airth, and fell dead in love with each other. Your Aunt Lois she was knowing to it and all about it, 'cause Ruth she was jest one of them that couldn't take a step without somebody to talk to.

"Captain Oliver was of a good family in England; and so, when he made bold to ask the old Gineral for Ruth, he didn't say him nay: and it was agreed, as they was young, they should wait a year or two. If he and she was of the same mind, he should be free to marry her. Jest right on that, the Captain's regiment was ordered home, and he had to go; and, the next they heard, it was sent off to India. And poor little Ruth she kind o' drooped and pined; but she kept true, and wouldn't have nothin' to say to nobody that came arter her, for there was lots and cords o' fellows as did come arter her. Ye see, Ruth had a takin' way with her; and then she had the name of bein' a great heiress, and that allers draws fellers, as molasses does flies.

"Wal, then the news came, that Captain Oliver was comin' home to England, and the ship was took by the Algerenes, and he was gone into slavery there among them heathen Mahomedans and what not.

"Folks seemed to think it was all over with him, and Ruth might jest as well give up fust as last. And the old Gineral he'd come to think she might do better; and he kep' a introducin' one and

another, and tryin' to marry her off; but Ruth she wouldn't. She used to write sheets and sheets to your Aunt Lois about it; and I think Aunt Lois she kep' her grit up. Your Aunt Lois she'd a stuck by a man to the end o' time eft ben her case; and so she told Ruth.

"Wal, then there was young Jeff Sullivan, the Gineral's nephew, he turned up; and the Gineral he took a gret fancy to him. He was next heir to the Gineral; but he'd ben a pretty rackety youngster in his young days,—off to sea, and what not, and sowed a consid'able crop o' wild oats. People said he'd been a pirating off there in South Ameriky. Lordy massy! nobody rightly knew where he hed ben or where he hadn't: all was, he turned up at last all alive, and chipper as a skunk blackbird. Wal, of course he made his court to Ruth; and the Gineral, he rather backed him up in it; but Ruth she wouldn't have nothin' to say to him. Wal, he come and took up his lodgin' at the Gineral's; and he was jest as slippery as an eel, and sort o' slid into every thing, that was a goin' on in the house and about it. He was here, and he was there, and he was everywhere, and a havin' his say about this and that; and he got everybody putty much under his thumb. And they used to say, he wound the Gineral round and round like a skein o' yarn; but he couldn't come it round Ruth.

"Wal, the Gineral said she shouldn't be forced; and Jeff, he was smooth as satin, and said he'd be willing to wait as long as Jacob did for Rachel. And so there he sot down, a watchin' as patient as a cat at a mouse-hole; 'cause the Gineral he was thick-set and short-necked, and drank pretty free, and was one o' the sort that might pop off any time.

"Wal, Mis' Sullivan, she beset the Gineral to make a provision for Ruth; 'cause she told him very sensible, that he'd brought her up in luxury, and that it wa'n't fair not to settle somethin' on her; and so the Gineral he said he'd make a will, and part the property equally between them. And he says to Jeff, that, if he played his part as a young fellow oughter know how, it would all come to him in the end; 'cause they hadn't heard nothing from Captain Oliver for three or four years, and folks about settled it that he must be dead.

"Wal, the Gineral he got a letter about an estate that had come to him in England; and he had to go over. Wal, livin' on the next estate, was the very cousin of the Gineral's that he was to a married when they was both young: the lands joined so that the grounds run together. What came between them two nobody knows; but she never married, and there she was. There was high words between the Gineral and Madam Sullivan about his goin' over. She said there wa'n't no sort o' need on't, and he said there was; and she said she hoped *she* should be in her grave afore he come back; and he said she might suit herself about that for all him. That 'are was the story that the housekeeper told to Aunt Polly; and Aunt Polly she told me. These 'ere squabbles somehow allers does kind o' leak out one way or t'other. Anyhow, it was a house divided agin itself at the Gineral's, when he was a fixin' out for the voyage. There was Ruth a goin' fust to one, and then to t'other, and tryin' all she could to keep peace beteen 'em; and there was this 'ere Master Slick Tongue talkin' this way to one side, and that way to t'other, and the old Gineral kind o' like a shuttle-cock atween 'em.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, купив полную легальную версию на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.