

Tales For a Winter Evening

His Native Heath

From the "Old Home House"

By JOSEPH C. LINCOLN

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NEVER could quite understand why the folks at Wellmouth made me selectman. Anyway, I was elected unanimously at the meeting, and Peter was mighty anxious for me to take the job. "Harris," says Peter, "I judge that a selectman is a sort of dwarf older than you. Now, I've had friends who've been selectmen, and they say it's a sure thing, like shaking with your own hand, if you're straight there's the honor and the advertisement; if you're crooked there's the graft. Either way the house wins. Go in, and glory be with you."

So I finally agreed to serve, and the very first meeting I went to the question of Asah Blueworthy and the poorhouse comes up. Zoeth Tiddit was town clerk; he puts it this way: "Gentlemen," he says, "we have here the usual application from Asah Blueworthy for aid from the town. I don't know of these much use for me to read it—it's tolerable familiar. Suffering from lumbago and rheumatism, um, yes. 'Out of work'—um, just so. 'Respectfully begs that the board will—' etcetera and so forth. Well, gentlemen, what's your pleasure?"

Darius Gott, he speaks first, and dry and drawling as ever. "Out of work, hey?" says Darius. "Mr. Chairman, I should like to ask if anybody here remembers the time when Asah was in work?"

Nobody did, and Cap'n Benjah Poundberry (he was chairman at that time) he fetches the table a veil with his starboard fist and comes out emphatic.

"Feller members," says he, "I don't know how the rest of you feel, but it's my opinion that this loaf has done too much for that lazy loafer already."

"He ain't sick, except sick of work. Now, it's my idea that, long as he's bound to be a pauper, he might 's well be treated as a pauper. Let's send him to the poorhouse."

"But," says I, "he owns his place down there by the shore, don't he?"

All hands laughed—that is, all but Cap'n Benjah. "Own nothing," says the cap'n. "The whole rat trap, from the keel to main truck, ain't worth more'n \$300, and I loaned his sister Thankful \$400 on it years ago, and the mortgage fell due last September. Not a cent of principal, interest nor rent have I got since. Whether he goes to the poorhouse or not, he goes out of that house of mine tomorrow. A man can smite me on one cheek and I may turn 'other, but when, after I have turned it, he finds fault 'cause my face hurts his hand, then I rise up and quit. You hear me?"

Nobody could help hearing him unless they was deaf; then the feller that fell out of the balloon and couldn't hear himself strike, so all hands agreed that sending Asah Blueworthy to the poorhouse would be a good thing. "I would be a lesson," Asah would give the poorhouse one more excuse for being on earth. Wellmouth's a fairly prosperous town, and the paupers had died, one after the other, and no new ones had come, until all there was left in the poorhouse was old Betsy Muller, who was down with creeping palsy, and Deborah Badger, who'd been keeper ever since her husband died.

The poorhouse property was valuable, too, especially for a summer cottage, being out at the end of Robbin's point, away from the town, and having a fine view right across the bay. Zoeth Tiddit was a committee of one with power from the town to sell the place, but he hadn't found a customer yet. And, if he did sell it, what to do with Debby was more or less of a question. She'd kept poorhouse for years and had no other home nor no relations to go to.

Well, we voted to send Asah to the poorhouse, and then I was appointed a delegate to see him and tell him he'd got to go. I wasn't enthusiastic over the job, but everybody said I was exactly the feller for the place.

"To tell you the truth," draws Darius, "you, being a stranger, are the only one that Asah couldn't talk over. So, as there wa'n't no way out of it, I drove down to Asah's that afternoon. He lived off on a side road by the shore, in a little rundown shanty that was as no account as he was. When I moored my horse to the 'heavenly wood' tree by what was left of the fence, I would have bet my soul-ester that I caught a glimpse of Brother Blueworthy peering round the corner of the house. But when I turned that corner there was nobody in sight."

I knocked on the door, but nobody answered. After knocking three or four times I tried kicking, and the second kick he didn't seem to hear. Inside a groan that was as toneless as a sound as ever I heard. No human noise in my experience came within a mile of it for dead, downright misery—unless, maybe, it's Cap'n Jonabab trying to sing in meeting Sundays.

"Who's that?" walls Asah from 't'other side of the door. "Did anybody knock?"

"Knock," says I. "I all but kicked your everlasting derelict out of water. It's me, Wingate—one of the selectmen. Tumble up, there! I want to talk to you."

Blueworthy didn't exactly tumble, so's to speak, but the door opened, and he comes shuffling and groaning into sight. His face was twisted up, and he had one hand spread fingered on the small of his back.

"Dear, dear," says he. "I'm dreadful sorry to have kept you waiting, Mr. Wingate. I've been wrestling with this terrible lumbago, and I'm 'fraid it's affecting my hearing. I'll tell you—"

"Yes? Well, you needn't mind," I says. "Cordling to common tell, you was born with that same kind of lumbago, and it's been getting no better fast ever since. Jest drag your sufferings out on to this bench and come to anchor. I've got considerable to say, and I'm in a hurry."

Well, he grunted and groaned and shuffled along. When he'd got plauted on the bench he didn't let up any—kept on with the misery.

"Look here," says I, losing patience, "when you get through with the Job business I'll leave ahead and talk. Don't let me interrupt the lamentations on no account. Finished? All right."

And then I told him just how matters stood. You never see a man more surprised or worse out up. Him to the poorhouse—him, one of the oldest families on the Cape? Well, the dilly-dilly didn't work, so he commenced on the lumbago, and that didn't work neither. But do you think he give up the ship? Not much! He commenced to explain why he hadn't been able to earn a living and the reasons why he'd ought to have another chance.

I actually pitied him. It seemed a shame that a feller who could argue like that should have to go to the poorhouse. He'd ought to run a summer hotel. Thinks I, "I'm an idiot, but I'll make him one more offer."

So I says: "See here, Mr. Blueworthy, I could use another man by the stable at the Old Home House. If you want the job you can have it, only you'll have to work, and work hard."

Well, sir, would you believe it? His face fell like a cookbook cake. "I'll consider your offer," he says. "Well, I'll be yanked!" says I and went off and left him considering. I don't know what his considerations amounted to. All I know is that next day they took him to the poorhouse.

And from now on this yarn has got to be more or less hearsay. It seems that while I was down notifying Blueworthy Cap'n Poundberry had gone over to the poorhouse to tell the Widow Badger about her new boarder. The widow was glad to hear the news.

"He'll be somebody to talk to, at any rate," says she. "Poor old Betsy Muller ain't exactly what you'd call company for a sociable body. But I'll mind what you say, Cap'n Benjah. I'll make that lazy man work or know the reason why."

So when Asah arrived per truck with a 2 o'clock the next afternoon Mrs. Badger was ready for him. The minute he landed she sent him out by the barn with orders to chop a couple of cords of oak stabs that was piled there. He grunted and commenced to develop lumbago symptoms, but she cured 'em in a hurry by remarking that her doctor's book said vigorous exercise was the best physic for that kind of disease and so he must chop hard. She waited till she heard the ax "chunk" once or twice, and then she went into the house, figuring that she'd gained the first lap anyhow.

But in an hour or so it come over her all of a sudden that 'twas awful quiet out by the wood pile. She hurried to the back door, and there was Asah setting on the ground in the shade, his eyes shut and his back against the chopping block and one poor, lonesome slab in front of him with a couple of splinters knocked off it. That was his afternoon's work.

Maybe you think the widow wa'n't mad. She tipped out to the wood pile, grabbed her new boarder by the coat collar and shook him till his head played "Johnny Comes Marching Home" against the chopping block.

"You lazy thing, you!" says she, with her eyes snapping. "Wake up and tell me what you mean by sleeping when I told you to work!"

"Sleep?" stutters Asah, kind of reaching out with his mind for a life preserver. "I—I wa'n't asleep."

"You wa'n't, hey?" says Deborah. "Then 'twas the best imitation ever I see. What was you doing, if 'tain't no personal a question?"

"I—I guess I must have fainted. I'm subject to such spells. You see, m'am, I ain't been well for—"

"Yes, I know. I understand all about that. Now, you march your boots into that house, where I can keep an eye on you, and help me get supper."

Blueworthy, he marched, but 'twas't as joyful a parade as an Old Fellers' picnic. He could see he'd made a misce—a clean miss, and the white belt in the pocket. He knew, too, that he'd got to work, and he had a good impression the first thing, and instead of that he'd gone and "foozled his approach," as that city feller said last summer when he ran the catboat plump into the end of the pier. Deborah, she went out into the kitchen, but she ordered Asah to stay in the dining room and set the table—told him to get the dishes out of the closet.

All the time he was doing it he kept thinking about the mistake he'd made and wondering if there wa'n't some way to square up and get solid, with the widow. If he could only find out something that Deborah Badger was particular interested in, then he believed he could make a ten strike. And all at once down in the corner of the closet he see a big pile of papers and magazines. The one on top was

the Banner of Light, and underneath that was the Mysterious Magazine.

Then he remembered all of a sudden the town talk about Debby's belief in mediums and specks and fortune tellers and such. And he commenced to set up and take notice.

At the supper table he was as mum as a rindown clock just set in his cupboard and looked at Mrs. Badger. She got nervous and a short kind of spell and finally he's out with, "What are you staring at me like that for?"

He didn't answer for a minute, but he looked over her head and then away across the room, as if he was watching something that moved.

"Your husband was a short, kind of fleshy man, as I remember, wa'n't he?" says he absent-minded-like.

"Course he was. But what in the world—"

"'Twa'n't him, then. I thought not. 'Twa'n't my husband? What do you mean?"

And then Asah begun to put on the fine touches. He leaned across the table and says he in a sort of mysterious whisper, "Mrs. Badger," says he, "do you ever see things?"

"Mercy me!" says the widow. "No! Do you?"

"Sometimes seems 's if I did. Jest now as I set here looking at you it seemed as if I saw a man come up and put his hand on your shoulder."

"Well, you can imagine Debby. She jumped out of her chair and whirled around like a kitten in a fit. "Good land!" she hollers. "Where? What? Who was it?"

"I don't know who 'twas. His face was covered up, but it kind of come to me—a communication, as you might say—that some day that man was going to marry you."

"Land of love! Marry me? You're crazy! I'm scart to death."

Cherub Devine

By Sewell Ford



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made Debby all the more anxious to talk about 'em. She found out that her new boarder was subject to trances and had second sight and could draw horoscopes, and I don't know what all. Particular she wanted to know more about that "man" that was going to marry her, but Asah would not say much about him.

"All I can say is," says Asah, "that he didn't appear to me like a common man. He was sort of familiar looking, and yet there was something distinguished about him, something uncommon, as you might say. But this much comes to me strong: He's a man any woman would be proud to get, and some time he's coming to offer you a good home. You won't have to keep poorhouse all your days."

So the widow went up to her room with what you might call a case of world—

"Your husband was a short, kind of fleshy man, wa'n't he?"

that poorhouse. Mrs. Badger was too much interested in specks and fortunes to think of asking him to work, and it did hit at such a thing he had another trance and see that man, and 'twas all she could do to keep her mind on her work. And we poor fools of selectmen was congratulating ourselves that Asah Blueworthy was doing something toward earning his keep at last. And then—long in July 'twas—Betsy Muller died.

One evening, just after the Fourth, Deborah and Asah was in the dining room figuring out fortunes with a pack of cards when there comes a knock at the door. The widow answered it, and there was an old chap dressed in a blue suit and a stunning pretty girl in that summer woman make believe is a sea going get through and as miserable as two hens in a rain barrel.

It turned out that the man's name was Lamont, with a colonel's pennant and a million dollar mark on the forehead of it, and the girl was his daughter Mabel. They'd been paying \$5 a day each for sea air and clam soup over to the Wagonset House in the Harbors, and either the soup or the air had affected the colonel's head till he imagined he could sail a boat all by his ownty-duty. Well, he'd sailed one across the bay and got becalmed, and then the tide took him with the shoals at the mouth of Wellmouth creek, and there, owing to a mislay of foot, shoals, dark and an overdose of foolishness, the boat had upset and foundered and the Lamonts had waded half a mile or so to shore. Once on dry land they'd headed up the bluff for the only port in sight, which was the poorhouse, although they didn't know it.

The widow and Asah made 'em as comfortable as they could, rigged 'em up in dry clothes which had belonged to departed paupers and got 'em something to eat. The Lamonts was what they called "enchanted" with the whole establishment.

"This," said the colonel, with his mouth full of brown bread, "is delightful, really delightful. The New England hospitality that we read about, so free from ostentation and conventionality."

As for Mabel, she was one of them gushy, goo-gooey kind of girls, and she was as struck with the shabbing as her dad. She said the house itself was a "perfect dear."

And after supper they paired off and got to talking, the colonel with Mrs. Badger and Asah with Mabel. Now, I can just imagine how Asah talked to that poor, unsuspecting young female. He sartin did love an audience, and here was one that didn't know him on his history or nothing. He played the sad and mysterious. You could see that he was a blighted bud, all right. He was a man with a hidden sorrier, and the way he'd sigh and change the subject when it come to embarrassing questions was enough to bring tears to a graven image, let alone a romantic girl just out of boarding school.

Then after a spell of this Mabel wanted to be shown the house, so as to see the "sweet, old fashioned rooms." So Asah led the way, like the talking man in the dime magazine. And the way them Lamonts agonized over every rag mat and curved bedstead was something past belief. When they was saying good night—they had to stay all night because their own clothes wa'n't dry, and those they had on were more picturesque than stylish—Mabel turns to her father and says she:

blurt out that he didn't own the place. The Lamonts was astonished. The colonel wanted to know if it belonged to Mrs. Badger.

"Why, no," says Asah. "The fact is—that is to say—you see—"

And just then the widow opened the kitchen window and called to 'em.

"Colonel Lamont," says she, "there's a sailboat beating up the harbor, and I think the folks on it are looking for you."

The colonel excused himself and run off down the hill toward the back side of the point, and Asah was left alone with the girl. He see, I s'pose, that here was his chance to make the best yarn out of what was bound to come out anyhow in a few minutes. So he fetched a sigh that sounded as if 'twas racking loose the foundations and commenced.

And then he told Mabel that her dad and her had been deceived; that that house wa'n't his nor Mrs. Badger's; 'twas the Wellmouth poor farm, and he was a pauper.

She was shocked all right enough, but afore she had a chance to ask a question he begun to tell her the story of his life. 'Twas a fine chance for him to spread himself, and I 'calate he done it to the skipper's taste.

Well, now, you take the green girl, right fresh from novels and music lessons, and spring that on her! What can you expect? Mabel, she cried and took on dreadful.

"Oh, Mr. Blueworthy," says she, grabbing the hand, "I'm so glad you told me. I'm so glad! Cheer up," she says. "I respect you more than ever, and my father and I will—"

Just then the colonel comes puffing up the hill. He looked as if he'd heard news.

Mabel took her dad's arm and went off down the hill, mopping her pretty eyes with her handkerchief and smiling back every once in awhile through her tears at Asah.

Now it happened that there was a selectmen's meeting that afternoon at 4 o'clock. I was on hand, and so was Zoeth Tiddit and most of the others. Cap'n Poundberry and Darius Gott were late. Zoeth was as happy as a clam at high water. He'd sold the poorhouse property that very day to a Colonel Lamont, from Harbors, who wanted it for a summer place.

"And I got the price we set on it, too," says Zoeth. "But that wa'n't the funniest part of it. Seem's old man Lamont and his daughter was very much upset because Debby Badger and Asah Blueworthy would be turned out of house and home 'count of the place being sold. The colonel was hot foot for giving 'em a check for \$500 to square things. Said his daughter made him promise he would. Says I: 'You can give it to Debby if you want to, but don't lay a copper on that Blueworthy fraud.' Then I told him the truth about Asah. He couldn't hardly believe it, but I finally convinced him, and he made out the check to Debby."

I took it down to her myself just after dinner. Asah was there, and his eyes pretty nigh popped out of his head.

"Look here," I says to him; "if you'd been worth a continental you might have had some of this. As it is, you'll be farmed out somewhere—that's what'll happen to you."

"And I as Zoeth was telling this in comes Cap'n Benjah. He was happy too."

"I 'calate the Lamonts must be buying all the property alongside," he says when he heard the news. "I sold that old shack that I took from Blueworthy to that Lamont girl today for \$300. She wouldn't say what she wanted of it, he was there, and I didn't care much. I was glad to get rid of it."

"I can tell you what she wanted of it," says somebody behind us. We turned round, and 'twas Gott. He'd come in. "I just met Squire Foster," he says, "and the squire tells me that that Lamont girl come into his office with the bill of sale for the property you sold her and made him deed it right over to Asah Blueworthy as a present from her."

"What?" says all hands, Poundberry loudest of all.

"That's right," said Darius. "She told the squire a long rignarous about what a martyr Asah was and how her dad was going to do something for him, but that she was going to give him his home back again with her own money. The squire tried to tell her what a no good Asah was, but she froze him quicker'n—Where you going, Cap'n Benjah?"

"I'm going down to that poorhouse," hollers Poundberry.

We all said we'd go with him, and we went, six in one carriage. As we drove away from it, going in 't'other direction.

"That looks like the Baptist minister's buggy," says Darius. "What on earth's he been down here for?"

Nobody could guess. As we run alongside the poorhouse door Asah Blueworthy stepped out, leading Debby Badger. She was as red as an auction flag.

"By time, Asah Blueworthy," hollers Cap'n Benjah, starting to get out of the carryall, "what do you mean by—Debby, what are you holding that rascal's hand for?"

But Asah cut him short. "Cap'n Poundberry," says he, dignified as a boy with a stiff neck. "I might pass over your remarks to me, but when you address my wife—"

"Your wife?" hollers everybody—everybody but the cap'n. He only sort of gurgled.

"My wife," says Asah. "When you men—church members, too, some of you—sold the house over her head I'm proud to say that I, having a home once more, was able to step forward and ask her to share it with me. We was married a few minutes ago, he says."

"And, oh, Cap'n Poundberry," cried Debby, looking as if this was the most wonderful part of it—"oh, Cap'n Poundberry," she says, "we've known for a long time that some man—an uncommon kind of man—was coming to offer me a home some day, but even Asah didn't know 'twas himself. Did you, Asah?"

We selectmen talked the thing over going home, but Cap'n Benjah didn't speak till we was turning in at his gate. Then he fetched his knee a thump with his fist and says he, by the most disgusted tone ever I heard: "A house and lot for nothing," he says, "a wife to do the work for him and \$500 to spend! Sometimes the way this world's run gives me moral indignation."

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