

KEZIAH COFFIN

By JOSEPH C. LINCOLN

THIS new serial story we are about to run is a bit of Down-East fiction with the chief character one of the brightest and best of women—one who had survived the wreck of her own happiness to be strengthened for helping others to hold theirs. She is housekeeper for the town minister, and is a shrewd, nimble-witted and generous member of society. She has much to do in directing the trying love affair between the pastor and a member of another "fold," and the development of story is

A Story of Yankee Humor, Pathos and Love

Delightful and Filled with Many Laughable Situations

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KEZIAH COFFIN

by Joseph C. Lincoln

Author of Cy Whittaker's Place Cap'n Eri, Etc.

Illustrations 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. So thick that houses along the main road were but dim shapes behind its gray drapery, and only the gates and fences of the front yards were plainly in evidence to the passers-by. The beach plum and bayberry bushes on the dunes were spangled with beady drops. The pole on Campon Hill, where the beacon was hoisted when the packet from Boston dropped anchor in the bay, was shiny and slippery. The new weathervane, a gilded whale, presented to the "Regular" church by Captain Zebediah Mayo, retired whaler, swam in a sea of cloud. The lichened eaves 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 undimmed puddles in its hollows. And, through the damp stillness, the muttered growl of the surf, three miles away at the foot of the sandy bluffs by the lighthouse, sounded ominous.

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 most 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 interested 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 venture a bud 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. Considering all things, one might have expected Keziah herself to be even more dismal. But, to all outward appearances, she was not. A large portion of her thirty-nine 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 love your sasser of skim milk," said practical Keziah.

She was on her knees, her calico dress sleeves, patched and darned, but absolutely clean, rolled back, uncovering a pair of plump, strong arms, a saucer of tacks before her, and a tack hammer with a claw head in her hand. She was taking up the carpet. Grace Van Horne, Captain Eber Hammond's ward, who had called to see if there was anything she might do to help, was removing towels, tablecloths, and the like from the drawers in a tall "high-boy," folding them and placing them in an old and battered trunk. The pair had been discussing the subject which all Trumet had discussed for three weeks, namely, the "calling" to the pastorate of the "Regular" church of the Rev. John Ellery, the young divinity student, who was to take the place of old Parson Langley, minister in the parish for over thirty years. Discussion in the village had now reached a critical point, for the Reverend John was expected by almost any coach. In those days the days of the late fifties, the railroad down the Cape extended only as far as Sandwich; passengers made the rest of their journey by stage. Many came direct from the city by the packet, the little schooner, but Mr. Ellery had written that he should probably come on the coach.

"They say he's very nice-looking," remarked Miss Van Horne soberly, but with a mischievous glance under her dark lashes at Keziah. The lady addressed paused long enough to transfer several tacks from the floor to the saucer, and then made answer. "Humph!" she observed. "A good many years ago I saw a theater show up to Boston. Don't be shocked; those circumstances we hear so much tell of—the kind you can't control—have kept me from goin' to theaters much, even if I wanted to. But I did see this entertainment, and a fool one 'twas, too, all singin' instead of talkin'—opera, I believe they called it. Well, as I started to say, one of the leadin' folks in it was the Old Harry himself, 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 person you just mentioned with a minister!"

"Oh, I wasn't comparin' 'em; I'll leave that for you Come-Outers to do. D'rat this carpet! Seems's if 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 clinch 'em on t'other side. I haul up a chunk of the cellar floor with every one. Ah, hum!" with a sigh, "I call'te they ain't any more anxious to leave home than I am. But, far's the minister's concerned, didn't I hear of your Uncle Eben sayin' in prayer meetin' only a fortnit or so ago that all hands who wa'n't Come-Outers were own children to Satan? Mr. Ellery 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 hers was a laugh pleasant to hear and distinctly pleasant 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 hove 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 Cap'n Elkanah to turn you out when—"

"Don't talk that way. He ain't turnin' me out. He ain't lettin' houses for his health and he'll need the money to buy his daughter's summer rigs. She ain't had a new dress for a month, pretty near, and here's a young and good-lookin' parson heavin' in sight. Maybe Cap'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. "Perhaps she'll adopt him."

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 grave.

"Now, Auntie," she said, "please listen. I'm in earnest. It seems to me—"

"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 take care of 'em, it's you. You can tote my things right in," she added, turning to her grinning driver, "and you, Bishy, go right in with 'em. The idea of your settin' outside takin' it easy when your poor wife ain't been buried more'n an hour!"

"But—but—Lavinny," protested poor Kyan, speaking the truth unwittingly. "I couldn't take it easy afore she was buried, could I?"

"Go right in," was the answer. "March!"

Abishal marched, and had marched under his sister's orders ever since. She kept house for him, and did it well, but her one fear was that some female might again capture him, and she watched him with an eagle eye. He was the town assessor and tax collector, but when he visited dwellings containing single women or widows, Lavinia always accompanied him, "to help him in his figgerin'," she said.

Consequently, when he appeared, unchaperoned, on the walk leading to the side door of the Coffin homestead, Keziah and her friend were surprised. "He's dressed to kill," whispered Grace, at the window. "Even his tall hat; and in this fog! I do believe he's coming courting, Aunt Keziah!"

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 should love to lend it to you, and I know uncle would—"

Mrs. Coffin interrupted her. "Cat's foot!" she exclaimed. "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 mouth, I'll make the two keep t'other reasonably full, I wouldn't wonder. No, I shan't think



She Broke Into a Smothered Laugh. of it, so don't say another word. No." 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 goin' to Boston may be the best thing that ever happened to me? You can't tell. No use despairin', Annabel ain't given up hope yet; why should I? Hey? Ain't that somebody comin'?"

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

"Why, it's Kyan Pepper!" she exclaimed. "He must be coming to see you, Aunt Keziah. And he's got on his very best Sunday clothes. Gracious! I must be going. I didn't know you expected callers."

Keziah dropped the tack hammer and stood up.

"Kyan!" she repeated. "What in the world is that old idiot comin' here for? To talk about the minister, I s'pose. How on earth did Lavinny ever come to let him out alone?"

Mr. Pepper, Mr. Abishal Pepper, locally called "Kyan" (Cayenne) Pepper because of his red hair and thin red side whiskers, was one of Trumet's "characters," and in his case the character was weak. He was born in the village and, when a youngster, had, like every other boy of good family in the community, cherished ambitions for a seafaring life. His sister, Lavinia, ten years older than he, who, after the death of their parents, had undertaken the job of "bringin' up" her brother, did not sympathize with these ambitions. Consequently, when Kyan ran away she followed him to Boston, stalked aboard the vessel where he had shipped, and collared 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 Kyan's sole venture, so far as sailing 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 Gott of Ostable. Evelyn could talk a bit herself, and her first interview with Lavinia ended with the latter's leaving the house in a rage, swearing never to set foot in it again. This oath she broke the day of her sister-in-law's funeral. Then she appeared, after the ceremony, her baggage on the wagon with her. The bereaved one, who was sitting on the front stoop of his dwelling with, so people say, a most resigned expression on his meek countenance, looked up and saw her.

"My land! Lavinny," 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 take care of 'em, it's you. You can tote my things right in," she added, turning to her grinning driver, "and you, Bishy, go right in with 'em. The idea of your settin' outside takin' it easy when your poor wife ain't been buried more'n an hour!"

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Mr. Pepper entered diffidently. "I—I—" he began. "Well, the fact is, I came out by myself. You see, Lavinny's gone up to Sarah B.'s to talk church doin's. I—I—well, I kind of wanted to speak with you about somethin', Keziah, so— Oh! I didn't see you, Grace. Good mornin'!"

He didn't seem overjoyed to see Miss Van Horne, as it was. In fact, he reddened perceptibly and backed toward the door. The girl, her eyes twinkling, took up her jacket and hat. "Oh! I'm not going to stop, Mr. Pepper," she said. "I was only helpin' Aunt Keziah a little, that's all. I must run on now."

"Run on—nonsense!" declared Keziah decisively. "You're goin' to stay right here and help us get that stovepipe down. And Bishy'll help, too. Won't you, Bishy?"

The stovepipe was attached to the "air-tight" in the dining room. It—the pipe—rose perpendicularly for a few feet and then extended horizontally, over the high-boy, until it entered the wall. Kyan looked at it and then at his "Sunday clothes."

"Why, I'd be glad to, of course," he declared with dubious enthusiasm. "But I don't know's I'll have time. Perhaps I'd better come later and do it. Lavinny, she—"

"Oh, Lavinny can spare you for a few minutes, I guess; specially as she don't know you're out. Better take your coat off, hadn't you? Grace, fetch one of those chairs for Ky—for Bishy to stand on."

Grace obediently brought the chair. It happened to be the one with a rickety leg, but its owner was helping the reluctant Abishal remove the long-tailed blue coat which had been his wedding garment and had adorned his person on occasions of ceremony ever since. She did not notice the chair.

"It's real good of you to offer to help," she said. "Grace and I didn't hardly dast to try it alone. That pipe's been up so long that I wouldn't wonder if 'twas chock-full of soot. If you're careful, though, I don't believe you'll get any on you. Never mind the floor; I'm goin' to wash that before I leave."

Reluctantly, slowly, the unwilling Mr. Pepper suffered himself to be led to the chair. He mounted it and gingerly took hold of the pipe.

"Better loosen it at the stove hole first," advised Keziah. "What was it you wanted to see me about, Bishy?"

"Oh nothin', nothin'," was the hasty response. "Nothin' of any account—that is to say—"

He turned redder than ever and wrenched at the pipe. It loosened at its lower end and the wires holding it in suspension shook.

"I guess," observed the lady of the house, "that you'd better move that chest of drawers out so's you can get behind it. Grace, you help me. There! that's better. Now move your chair."

Kyan stepped from the chair and moved the latter to a position between the high-boy and the wall. Then he remounted and gripped the pipe in the middle of its horizontal section.

"Don't be in such a hurry," interrupted Keziah. "Does stick in the chimney, don't it? Tell you what you can do, Grace; you can go in the woodshed and fetch the hammer that's in the table drawer. Hurry up, that's a good girl."

Kyan protested that he did not need the hammer, but his protest was unheeded. With one more glance at the couple, Grace departed from the kitchen, biting her lips. She shut the door carefully behind her. Mr. Pepper labored frantically with the pipe.

"No use to shake it any more till you get the hammer," advised Keziah.



"Get Down Off That Chair!"

"Might's well talk while you're waitin'!" What was it you wanted to tell me?" "Keziah, you're a single woman."

His companion let go of the chair, which she had been holding in place, and stepped back.

"He is loony!" she exclaimed under her breath. "I—"

"No, no! I ain't loony. I want to make a proposal to you. I want to see if you won't marry me. I'm sick of Lavinny. Let's you and me settle down together. I could have some peace then. And I think a whole lot of you, too." He added, apparently as an afterthought. "Don't stop to argue, Keziah. I've got 'most fifteen hundred dollars in the bank. Lavinny keeps the pass book in her bureau, but you could get it from her. I own my house. I'm a man of good character. You're poor, but I don't let that stand in the way. Anyhow, you're a first-rate housekeeper. And I really do think an awful lot of you."

Mrs. Coffin stepped no farther in the direction of the kitchen. Instead, she strode toward the rickety chair and its occupant. Kyan grasped the pipe with both hands.

"You poor—miserable—impudent—" began the lady.

"Why, Keziah, don't you want to?" He spoke as if the possibility of a refusal had never entered his mind. "I call'te you'd be glad. You wouldn't have to go away then, nor— My soul and body! some one's knockin' at the door! And this dummed pipe's fetched loose!"

The last sentence was a smothered shriek. Keziah heeded not. Neither did she heed the knock at the door. Her hands were opening and closing convulsively.

"Be glad!" she repeated. "Glad to marry a good-for-nothin' sand-heap like you! You sassy— Get down off that chair and out of this house! Get down this minute!"

"I can't! This stovepipe's loose, I tell you. Be reasonable, Keziah. Do—don't you touch me! I'll fall if you do. Ple-ase, Keziah!— O Lordy! I knew it. Lavinny!"

The door opened. On the threshold, arms akimbo and lips set tight, stood Lavinia Pepper. Her brother's knees gave way; in their collapse they struck the chair back; the rickety leg wobbled. Kyan grasped at the pipe to save himself and, the next moment, chair, sections of stovepipe, and Mr. Pepper disappeared with a mighty crash behind the high-boy. A cloud of soot arose and obscured the view.

Keziah, too indignant even to laugh, glared at the wreck. In the doorway of the kitchen Grace Van Horne, hammer in hand, leaned against the jamb, her handkerchief at her mouth and tears in her eyes. Lavinia, majestic and rigid, dominated the scene. From behind the high-boy came coughs, sneezes and emphatic ejaculations.

Miss Pepper was the first to speak. "Abishal Pepper," she commanded, "come out of that this minute."

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. Abishal," 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 anywheres high 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 checked 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 of 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.

(Continued on page 7)

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