

The Captain.

He walked home down the old road, watching the snatches of sunset through the tall poplars that rose on either side. They stood like tall sentinels, watching over the highway. But, looking at their stately stems, one felt only a disappointing sense of what might have been. Some were dying at the high crown, some were brown and withered below. Some had died down and started again in thick, stubby growths, half way up the trunk; some stood with naked branches, sere and dead. The captain whistled an old lar song. The poplars always gave him a dismal, uneasy feeling.

He did not look dismal or uneasy as he strode along, his keen grey eyes returning from the familiar fields and hills to look longest at the little brown house from which he had taken Lucy. Away beyond the smooth slope that stretched out before him, the road turned to the hills, and there, in a cottage hidden away in drooping elms, Lucy awaited him. He knew how she would come out to the gate, with her halting step, and wait; with the last sun-rays shining on her brown hair. All day long, while that sun shone down hot and blinding, he had stood on a dizzy scaffolding, making the timbers ring with his steady hammer. Never scaffolding had seemed dizzy to the captain before. On swaying ropes and reeling masts his eye had learned to keep its clear gaze true. His hand and foot never trembled on the highest ladder.

The wind stirred the dark poplars. The captain looked at a tall, majestic tree, rising on a little knoll, distinct against the glowing west. It rose, stately and green, far up, but at the very top a withered branch crowned the fair column. The next tree, with its thin, skeleton branches, was a grim spectre of what the towering monarch soon would be.

The captain shivered. He was glad when he had reached the gate, and Lucy's smile had sent the black shadows flying from his

brow. He laughed at them now, over the cheery little table, and told her his strange fancy.

"Do you know, little wife, that your husband is getting foolish in his old age?"

Lucy looked at the captain's clear eyes, and his brown cheeks where a touch of red showed through the tan. She laughed—such a merry little laugh! The captain looked at his strong right hand. "It was a crazy notion, Lucy, but I imagined that my hand trembled as I held the hammer."

Lucy's face sobered. "Very likely it did, Dennis. You are tired. You have been at work for two weeks now, and it is no wonder that trusty hand is getting weary. You must take better care of it." And she stroked the hard, brown fingers gently.

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"It is strange," said sister Martha, "why that trembling continues." It was Thanksgiving day, and John and Martha always came to spend it with the captain and Lucy. Lame Lucy would always be a "home wife," the captain had said, and a dear home wife John and Martha found her. They sat about the little polished stove—such a little stove that made such a great fire—and listened to one of the captain's stories. It was the usual finishing touch to a merry evening. When the captain was unusually merry, he ended with a performance that he called a "South Sea Island jig." He executed the feat tonight, whistling Yankee Doodle as an appropriate accompaniment.

But sister Martha looked grave when she and John walked home in the starlight, with the captain's "good night" ringing in their ears. "Did you notice," she said, "that Lucy does not pour Dennis' cup nearly full?"

"What of that, Martha?"

"I think Dennis could not hold it steady."

"Why, Martha, you are getting fidgety as an old woman. Dennis was never jollier in his life than tonight. If he wore a drinking man, there might be some cause for alarm. That nervous twitching will soon go over."