

A
DESERTED
VILLAGE

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ALL my life I had frequently heard of an old New England town whose name was always quaintly joined with the names of its county and colony or State, but not until the month of June, 1890, did I see the town itself or any one who had ever been there. One of my earliest recollections is of hearing the story told how Captain Knowlton had led to the battle of Bunker Hill a company of minute-men from Ashford, Windham County, Connecticut, and that this was the first uniformed company from beyond

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the confines of their own colony that the people of Massachusetts had seen. As scenes familiar to us in childhood, when revisited after years of absence, appear, as it were, in miniature, so this march of Captain Knowlton and his men, which had appeared, to my boyish imagination, a more daring and stupendous undertaking than the Anabasis of the Greeks or Napoleon's crossing of the Alps, now hardly finds a place in history.

Some letters that fell into my hands many years ago kept alive my curiosity about this old town.

As a child I was sometimes permitted, particularly on rainy Sundays, to amuse myself with the contents of an ancient chest, containing the accumulated family relics of two hundred years and more.

The chest itself had an air of mystery in my youthful eyes, being constructed of heavy oak, and bound with curious hand-wrought iron-work. It was about four feet long, two feet in width, and a foot and a half in depth. No one could tell me where

it came from, or when or for whom it was made. A tray, that could be lifted out by two curiously woven rope handles, filled the upper two thirds of the box. In this tray were many warlike weapons and accoutrements, that often equipped a juvenile army in a secluded garret. There was an old flint-lock pistol, with the name of a Dutch maker of Leyden, and the date 1610 on the handle, that was supposed to have been used with deadly effect by numerous generations of New England warriors. It seemed to me as though it must have proved a weapon more of offense than of defense to the person in whose hands it was discharged.

There were also a veritable sword of Bunker Hill, and the remnants of several Continental uniforms. Often do I recall the grotesque picture of three or four childish forms arrayed in this antique toggery, with a background of rafters and cobwebs, dim and shadowy in the fading light of a winter's afternoon.

When the key to this old chest was turned

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over to me, it was with strict injunctions not to take out the tray or touch the mysterious-looking packages that filled the lower part of the box. Advancing years and increasing curiosity led to a modification of the parental mandate, and then came a time when the tray, with all its contents, that had seemed so attractive to my boyish fancy, was taken out whenever the chest was opened, and put aside unnoticed. A lot of dusty, crumpled letters, extending over a period of nearly two centuries, had usurped the place in my affections that had formerly been filled by the battered and rusty arms and faded uniforms.

In looking over this collection of letters in later years, I have wondered how many of them came to be preserved. Some of them ought to have been destroyed by their recipients. Many of them—like many other letters of ancient and modern times—ought never to have been written.

The earliest letter in the collection is dated Lynn Regis, England, 1640, and is directed to Salem by the ship *Hopewell*, from Boston.

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It is a long letter, full of information that was doubtless of great interest to the young emigrant to whom it was sent. It refers to "a great stir that has been made by a St. Ives farmer named Cromwell in opposing the nefarious enterprise for reclaiming the Bedford levels, contrary to the wishes of the people, who have long enjoyed the use of these commons. So great popularity did he acquire by his activity in this matter, that he was voted for to go to Parliament from Cambridge, and he defeated his opponent, John Cleveland, who is somewhat known as a poet, by one vote. I think this man, though he is only a farmer and the son of a brewer of Huntingdon, will make himself heard in Parliament."

One package of these letters, and the one that kindled afresh my interest in the New England town of which I had heard so often when a boy, was made up entirely of letters that passed between different members of a family, some of whom lived in Reading, Essex County, Massachusetts, and others in Ashford, Windham County, Connecticut.

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How this package came to be in the chest I can only guess. When I found it, it was securely tied with red tape, and marked "L. B., Executor." The earliest letter in this package is from a young man of twenty-three to his father, and is dated Ashford, Thanksgiving Day, 1727. "This will reach you by the hand of Esquire Ebenezer Parker, who will return to Reading to-morrow. I bought from him on my coming here near one hundred and fifty acres for one hundred pounds, counting in some good sheep. The land is mostly wooded like the hill part of our farm in Reading, but there are two fields in which the Indians raised some corn, and there is good pasture and water. Last winter I lived with our old friend Mr. Abbot, the carpenter who came here about ten years ago. I worked with him about the minister's house and the meeting-house. With the money sent us from the South Church we will glaze the meeting-house and partly glaze the minister's house.

"It will please you to know that we have successfully overcome an attempt to heat

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the meeting-house. Four weeks ago I moved into my own house, well built of logs, with two good rooms and a loft, and with glazed windows. My first visitor was a wolf, whom I found seated in my kitchen, when I returned to the house one evening about three weeks ago. As soon as he saw me he walked very slowly toward the door, keeping his eye all the time upon me; but when he was once out of the door he started at a gallop and was out of sight before I could reach my musket.

“I have been made sergeant in our militia company. We drill every Saturday, and we have need of good drilling in the use of firearms, on account of the wolves and Indians.

“Will you give the enclosed letter to Rebecca? I have written her that I shall come for her next spring. This morning, being Thanksgiving Day, Mr. Hale preached for upwards of two hours. It was a good discourse and full of much encouragement, which we need, as our crops are scant. The wolves have killed many sheep and

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there is great scarcity of food. Do not tell Rebecca about the Indians and wolves."

This letter was my first formal introduction, as it were, to Ashford and Ashford's first minister, Reverend James Hale.

Another letter from the same writer to an elder brother in Reading is dated forty years later—July 1, 1767. The fact that this elder brother was senior deacon of the First Church of Reading, accounts for the details relating to the dismissal of the Reverend John Bass, the successor of the worthy Mr. Hale.

"Following your suggestions we sent to Mr. Bass this epistle: 'Rev'd Sir: These are to let you know the grounds of our uneasiness. In the first place, we think you are gone from what you profest to the Council that ordained you in the matter of original sin. You then profest to believe that it was not only our infelicity, but our sin that we fell in Adam; and now you seem to hold only the depravity and deny the guilt; it appears to us by your preaching, praying and conversing. 1. In your

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preaching you neglect to preach of the doctrine of Original Sin, and the necessity of the New Birth, as we find recorded in John iii., where are Christ's own words ; and you seem to lay the chief stress of our salvation on our moral obedience (we hold obedience necessary, as the fruit and effect of faith) ; but in the matter of justification to have no part. 2. You don't preach up the doctrine of election as it is recorded in Romans ii., 5, 6, and multitudes of other texts that plainly point out our Personal, Absolute, Eternal Election ; also the doctrine of Particular Redemption, and doctrine of Perseverance ; which are doctrines plainly set forth in the Word of God, and necessary to be preached by every minister of Christ, as fundamental articles of the Christian Religion ; in which we say you are very defective.

“ ‘Again when some signified their uneasiness with one or two of the brethren for denying the above said points, you seemed to justify them, by preaching from Acts v., 38, 39. Also a further confirmation of your holding the same principle is :

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“ ‘When you baptize children you don’t so much as mention one word of the child’s being guilty of sin, or of Christ’s blood being applied to the mystical washing from Sin, or any other words that represent the child being guilty of original sin. Again we say, that in your conversation you discover the same principle, while you approve of and plead for Mr. Taylor’s book, that so plumply denies the doctrine of Original Sin. Now from all these things we think neither your preaching nor your principles are good.’

“ This epistle was signed by ten of the leading men of the Church.

“ At the Church meeting held last Saturday week the charges therein made were read to Mr. Bass, and he making no answer thereto, this sifting question previously prepared was read to him by the clerk: ‘Sir, don’t you think that a child brings sin enough into the world with it to damn it forever?’ To which Mr. Bass boldly responded, ‘I do not.’ The following resolution offered by Captain Watkins was unanimously adopted:

“ ‘That Mr. Bass had departed from the

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Confession of Faith given to the Church previous to his ordination, and from the doctrine of Original Sin as set forth in the Catechism; denying the Covenant made with Adam for himself and his posterity; and was also deficient in teaching the doctrines of Particular Redemption, Effectual Calling and the Perseverance of the Saints.' The adoption of this resolution cut off Mr. Bass from church fellowship, and he left the church with this final entry on the records:

" 'I was dismissed from my pastoral relation to the church and people of Ashford, by the Rev. Consociation of the County of Windham, for dissenting from the Calvinistic sense of the Quinquarticular Points, which I ignorantly subscribed to before my ordination; for which, and all of my other mistakes, I beg the pardon of Almighty God.' I think the record is complete and that we were abundantly justified in dismissing Mr. Bass.

"Your eldest nephew has joined the society of the West Parish, and I was pres-

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ent at the raising of their new meeting-house last Saturday.

“The church had first voted to have gin at the raising, but I convinced my son, who is as you may remember the treasurer of the society, that on such occasions quantity is of more importance than quality, and he secured a resolution providing for one barrel of rum and sugar in proportion, the rum and sugar to be first paid, then the workmen at two shillings sixpence per day. The raising was successfully accomplished with proper solemn rejoicings.”

Theology seems to have been the most serious occupation and the chief diversion of our New England ancestors.

But at the time this letter was written other matters, more absorbing even than theology or the raising of meeting-houses, were stirring the passions and arousing the patriotism of these hardy citizens of Ashford.

After speaking of many matters of a purely private nature, the writer proceeds :

“I rejoice to hear of the action of the

Sons of Liberty at Boston. We of Connecticut are down on the vile Stamp Act and the importers. We will wear homespun and drink Hyperion tea until the abominable law is repealed.

“The following resolutions are posted in all our churches and taverns :

“That the infamous conduct of the Yorkers in violating the patriotic engagement of the merchants is a daring insult upon the spirit and understanding of the country, an open contempt of every benevolent and patriotic sentiment, and an instance of treachery and wickedness sufficient to excite astonishment in every witnessing mind, and we doubt not but that their actions will appear infamous till the ideas of virtue are obliterated in the human mind and the advocates of liberty and patriotism are persecuted out of the world.

“That if the people of America properly attend to the concern of salvation and unitedly resolve upon an unshaken perseverance in the affair of non importation till there is a total repeal of the revenue acts,

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and an ample redress of American grievances, we shall be a free and flourishing people.'

"The anger and spite of the royal ministry seem to be directed chiefly at Boston and her patriots. If Boston should need help, her Connecticut friends will be there first. There are no better soldiers in the North than Colonel Putnam, Major Durkee, and our own Captain Knowlton of Ashford.

"My aim is still good and my grandson James can now carry a musket, and if Captain Knowlton leads his Company against the British, Rebecca will insist on my going with him to see that nothing happens to your nephew and his son."

Nearly eight years passed after the writing of this letter before the "shot heard round the world" was fired on Lexington Green and at Concord Bridge. About ten o'clock in the morning of Wednesday, April 19, 1775, while the fighting was still going on, Israel Bessel started on his famous ride to alarm the country—"quite to Connecticut," his orders read. By noon of the

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20th Ashford had heard the news, and her men were arming. Putnam, with his usual impetuosity, started at once for Boston without waiting for his men. In three days four thousand of Connecticut's picked militia were on their way to the relief of Boston, and in Captain Knowlton's Company from Ashford marched an old man in his seventieth year, with his son and grandson beside him. The service on this expedition was brief, and the Connecticut troops were at home again within a month. They did not rest long. Before the middle of June, Colonel Putnam was in command of a regiment of Connecticut soldiers stationed at Cambridge. On the evening of the 16th of June a body of one thousand men was sent to fortify Bunker Hill. Of this number two hundred were Connecticut men under the command of the dashing Knowlton, including his own Ashford Company. In the next day's battle the son of the old Ashford patriot fought by the side of his Reading cousin, and Knowlton's men shared the honors of the day with Prescott's heroes.

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Many of the letters refer to scenes and events of the war, and up to the time of his death they are full of the praises of Knowlton. One gives an account of his death. In the fighting around New-York in the summer of 1776, Washington became acquainted with Knowlton, and when the commander-in-chief, after his retreat from New-York, formed a regiment of picked men for special service, the command was given to Knowlton, with the rank of lieutenant-colonel. The regiment was known through the war as Knowlton's Rangers, although its gallant first commander lived but a few months after its organization. He was shot through the body at the battle of Harlem Heights on September 16, 1776, while leading in person an attack upon the enemy at the head of his regiment.

His last words were, to Captain Brown, "I do not value my life if we do but get the day," and to his son, "You can do me no good; go fight for your country." On the following day he was buried with military honors on the spot where he fell.

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In his despatch announcing the death of Knowlton, Washington spoke of him as a man "who would have been an honor to any country; the favorite of superior officers, the idol of his soldiers and fellow-townsmen, he fell universally lamented."

A few extracts from one more letter in this package will help to show why I wished to visit Ashford. This is probably the last letter written by the Reading emigrant of 1726, now in his eighty-sixth year. It is dated Ashford, Windham County, Connecticut, May 20, 1790, and is written to his nephew at Reading, the nephew who fought with the writer's son at Bunker Hill.

"I received great comfort from your letter written at the time of Jacob's death. It is a hard lot to outlive your only son. He never recovered from the wound received at Flatbush Pass. I do not think he could have died perfectly happy until the Constitution had been adopted and Washington inaugurated. But he had the great delight a few days before his death of taking the President by the hand. General Washing-

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ton stopped at Ashford last November, making his appearance unexpectedly at Clark's tavern on the evening of Saturday the 7th, where he rested on the Sabbath Day according to commandment.

"He drove in his state carriage with Major Jackson and Private Secretary Lear. Besides the coachmen there were two footmen on the carriage, and four servants followed on horse-back. The President attended divine service in the morning at the first church, sitting in the minister's pew.

"Although I have been told he favors the Episcopal service, he seemed much interested in the sermon. Our minister, Reverend Enoch Pond, preached from the text Hebrews iii., 3 and 4. 3. 'For this man was counted worthy of more glory than Moses, inasmuch as he who hath builded the house hath more honor than the house. 4. For every house is builded by some man: but he that built all things is God.' An incident occurred during the service that caused even the stern features of General Washington to relax.

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“You remember Lieutenant Daniel Knowlton, brother of Captain Knowlton who commanded Jacob’s Company? Since his imprisonment in the Jersey prison-ship he hates the very name of Briton. Mr. Pond gave out for the second hymn a missionary hymn in the old hymn-book which we still use, having for a refrain the words ‘Give Britain praise.’ As soon as the hymn had been read Lieutenant Knowlton rose from his seat and requested that this hymn should be omitted and some other sung in its stead, but the minister paid no attention to his request, and the choir beginning to sing, our friend marched slowly out of the meeting-house, declaring that he could not worship with a congregation that gave Britain praise in anything.

“Many of us called upon the President in the afternoon, and he received us graciously, enquiring particularly about General Putnam, Captain Marcy and other soldiers that he had met during the war. As we sat in the tavern parlor Mr. Clark asked the President to write his name on one of the win-

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dow panes with a diamond ring that he wore on his left hand.

“General Washington answered with a smile that seemed very agreeable and pleasant, that he would do more than that to please a man who kept such a good tavern. Whereupon he begged Mr. Clark to accept from him a small silver snuff-box, and taking off his ring scratched his name on the glass. The President and his party left Ashford early Monday morning, and many people were greatly disappointed at not seeing him.

“Since the adoption of the Constitution and the quickening of all trades and industries resulting therefrom, Ashford has increased in wealth and population. We now number near three thousand souls, and the travel through the town is increasing every year. The new Providence turnpike joins the Boston road less than half a mile east of Clark’s tavern, and often I have seen a continuous line of stages, chaises and wagons loaded with freight passing for several hours in front of the tavern.

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"Last week I rode to Pomfret and spent the day with our old Commander, General Putnam. He seemed in the best of health, but this morning we have word that he died yesterday, having been ill only two days. He was thirteen years younger than me, and often boasted of his health and great strength.

"My friends are going fast, and if the Almighty will take Rebecca and me together I hope we shall not have long to wait.

"The two young men, Samuel Eaton and Jared Spooner, who graduated at Yale two years ago and whom Mr. Pond has been preparing for the Christian ministry, have been sent at the expense of the church to two feeble churches in Schoharie County, York State. As you know, our church has long been known for its missionary zeal, and I hope it will long continue to send the light to regions lying in darkness."

It would be tedious to give further extracts from these letters, and I hope I have said enough about what I heard as a child, and read in later years, to make it clear that

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my desire to visit Ashford was not without a reasonable foundation.

Every one has in mind some historic spot that seems more interesting than all others. One wants to locate the Garden of Eden, another to stand where the ark grounded on Ararat; one finds inspiration at Bethlehem, another at Mecca; one crosses the ocean to visit the plain of Senlac, while another feels that he is at the birthplace of the greatest of nations as he stands on Plymouth Rock. And so it came to pass that very early in life I became possessed with a strong desire, that increased with increasing years, to visit Ashford, Windham County, Connecticut. I wanted to see the graves of the old Reading emigrants; to walk among their farms; to stand on Ashford Green where Knowlton marshaled his Company that eventful April morning more than a hundred years ago; to read the old records of the town-meetings that voted vengeance on the tyrants; to sit in the old tavern and look through the window on which Washington had scratched his name; to verify or,

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if possible, disprove by the testimony of the original archives the story that the West Parish Society at the raising of its meeting-house substituted a larger quantity of rum for the gin that had been originally ordered.

Many years elapsed before my wish was gratified. In the mean time Ashford always appeared to my fancy under one or the other of two aspects. More often I thought of her as the old colonial town, with her sturdy minute-men, jolly taverns, dashing coaches, her town-meetings, cattle-shows, and training days. Then I would think of her with regret as the Ashford I expected to see, the noisy, puffing little New England railroad town, with the humming and buzzing of a dozen mills for making paper, boots and buttons, and the chatter of a thousand French-Canadian operatives.

On Friday June 20, 1890, I went to the Michigan Central ticket office in Chicago, told the agent that I would like a ticket to Boston, with a stop-over privilege, so that I could run down to Ashford. I had no well-defined idea from what point I ought

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to run down, having only in mind in a general way the location of Connecticut as south of Massachusetts, and confidently left all troublesome details to the agent. After selling tickets to common, every-day towns to ten or a dozen men who had come into the office after me, the agent turned to me with the characteristic urbanity of the ticket-agent and snapped out, "What Ashford?" I was conscious of having described my destination imperfectly, and with proper humility I informed him that I wished to go to Ashford, Windham County, Connecticut.

After selling a ticket to Buffalo and two tickets to Troy, he turned his back upon me and spent some minutes examining railway guides and maps, called another man to him with whom he held a whispered consultation, went to the other end of the counter and sold six excursion tickets to as many bright young women — school-teachers I took them to be — to Niagara Falls, then returned, and, facing me with that smile of ineffable sweetness that transforms the features of a ticket-agent when he is conscious that

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he can truthfully and justifiably give you the least welcome piece of information, said in a low, distinct, contemptuous voice, "There is no such place as Ashford on any railroad." I found upon investigation that he was not only correct, but that the town did not appear on any railroad map. I had, however, been corresponding with the postmaster of the town for over a year, so I knew that there must be some way of reaching it. Before taking the train at three o'clock in the afternoon, I found a county map of Connecticut, that showed me Ashford six miles west of the New York and New England Railroad and nine miles east of the New London Northern Railroad. So my course seemed reasonably clear. I would get off at Palmer on the Boston and Albany, and going down on the New London Northern road, I would surely find some stopping-place where I could be driven to Ashford. Sunday night I spent at Palmer, and bright and early Monday morning I appeared at the ticket office at the station. Chastened and enlightened by my former experience, I simply asked the agent

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if he could tell me the quickest way to reach Ashford, Windham County, Connecticut, and he simply replied that he had never heard of the place. I took an accommodation train, and made up my mind to get off at the station that seemed to be nearest Ashford according to my map. I put my case to the conductor. He had heard of Ashford, but did not know how it was reached ; had never heard of anybody going there. After making the tour of his train he came back to tell me that he had found out that the mail went to Ashford by stage from Willimantic. So at Willimantic I determined to stop. At ten o'clock the train puffed into this bustling manufacturing town. The station-master told me that it was ten miles to Ashford, and that the stage left Willimantic at nine o'clock every other morning, reaching Ashford at four in the afternoon, proceeding, as nearly as I could make out by his description, by a sort of triangulation across the country like a boat tacking against a strong head wind. As I could not wait two days to take the next

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stage (the Monday stage having left an hour before my arrival), I asked the station-master to direct me to some one who could drive me to Ashford. He took me to the back door of the station, pointed out a livery stable, and told me to go there and to ask for Ephraim. Ephraim proved to be a typical Yankee hostler, with an uncommonly long nose, coarse auburn hair, freckled face, small blue eyes, heavy mustache much lighter in color than his hair, a low, pleasant voice, and a very deliberate manner.

When I told him where I wanted to go, he said he knew the roads thereabouts, and could drive me there in a couple of hours. Then a smile took possession of him that never left him until I left him at the close of the day—the sort of a smile I have often seen on the faces of rural New Englanders in their intercourse with city folks, a smile in which amusement, compassion, and contempt seem to be equally blended.

I have always thought that he doubted my sanity when he learned that I had come from Chicago for the express purpose of

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visiting Ashford. Oh, what a ride that was! It had rained in the night; there was no dust, the roads were hard and smooth, the air was full of the perfume of flowers, sweet grass and ferns, and musical with the songs of meadow-larks, orioles, and bobolinks. Ephraim knew the boundaries of every farm, and the history and legends of the whole county. He was better than his word, and before noon he pulled up his horse before a low, rambling, weather-stained building, overshadowed by monster elms, and I knew by the faded sign above the door, "Dyer N. Clark," that I was at the threshold of the oldest tavern in Ashford, a famous hostelry that had been kept and handed down from father to son for a hundred and fifty years. The house stands near the road, and my eyes took in at once the long line of ruined sheds standing at one side of the tavern, that formerly gave shelter to the numerous private and public conveyances that once stopped at this popular inn. The venerable landlord, then over eighty, was

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sitting on the porch in his shirt-sleeves, with a broad-brimmed straw hat on his head. He remained seated as I came toward him, greeted me in a quiet, matter-of-fact way, as though he had been expecting me, but, as if my coming was a source of merri-ment to him, and in answer to my inquiry whether I could find a dinner for Ephraim and myself and our horse, "calculated I could find something for the horse, but that the peddler had n't been around yet, and it was some doubtful whether the women could find much for us." While waiting for dinner, or whatever our midday repast should prove to be, I walked across the green to call upon my correspondent, the postmaster.

I found him to be a physician and a very intelligent man, nearly eighty years of age, Doctor John H. Simmons. His house is the finest in town, standing on one side of the green near the meeting-house. The government establishment over which he presided consisted of a set of about fifty pigeon-holes, standing upon a table in a large, bright sitting-room that opened di-

rectly upon a large porch. Doctor Simmons was also the clerk of the first society, and I spent an hour or more looking over the records of the meetings that had been held since 1715. To my great delight I found that when the West Parish church disbanded about 1850, the records had been turned over to the mother church. But I was grieved to find among the first entries the confirmation of the statement in the old letter that at the raising of the meeting-house rum was used in place of gin, simply because more of it could be had at the same price.

In the course of a delightful conversation with the doctor, I chanced to mention the singular incident related of Lieutenant Knowlton in one of the old letters in my collection. He told me that this was one of the familiar traditions of Ashford, that it was mentioned in the local histories, and that he thought there was a full account of the incident in the church records.

I expressed my surprise that the loyal citizens of Ashford, in the glorious year of

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the establishment of the National Government, and in the presence of the first President of the Republic, should have sung a hymn giving to Great Britain praise that would seem to belong more properly to the Almighty.

My incredulity seemed to interest and amuse the doctor immensely. He rose from the old-fashioned high-backed chair in which he had been sitting, and went to an antique piece of furniture that stood between two windows on the south side of the room. This piece of furniture was made of mahogany, to which age had given a dark, transparent look, and consisted of a set of shelves standing upon a chest of drawers that had a slanting cover or top that could be opened downward to a horizontal position and used as a writing-desk. The shelves were concealed behind two doors made with little diamond-shaped panes of glass, behind which hung faded green curtains. Opening one of these doors, the doctor took down five or six time-worn volumes, and laid them on the table before

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me. They were the hymn-books that had been used in the old church at Ashford from 1730 or thereabouts down to the present time.

The doctor reminded me that in the early days hymn-books, like all other books, were hard to come by, and that hymn-books with the music for the tunes in them were very rare. Hence the hymn-books that were used were seldom changed, and hymns that had once become familiar continued to be sung simply because they were familiar, and with little if any regard for their meaning. I was greatly interested in the doctor's views on what might be called the descent of hymns, and ventured the suggestion that the custom of singing outgrown hymns was not confined to the last century or to the First Church at Ashford. "Yes," said the doctor, with something of a twinkle in his eye; "I suppose even in Chicago you continue to draw inspiration from the mountains of Greenland and the island of Ceylon."

In accordance with the doctor's theory

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of the survival of hymns, it seemed quite probable that the hymn which gave such offense to Lieutenant Knowlton might have been sung long after its words would have been distasteful to the patriotic citizens of Ashford if they had given any heed to their meaning. But I still wondered what manner of hymn it could be that contained the odd refrain "Give Britain praise." The doctor thought we should find the hymn in some of the old collections. He had a vague impression that it was a missionary hymn, as stated in the letter, in which the islands of Tahiti and Pellew were adjured to "give Britain praise" for bringing gospel privileges within their reach. My time was short, and a cursory search through the old volumes failed to discover the hymn.

We found, however, greatly to my surprise, many old hymns by standard authors in which Briton appears to be synonymous with Christian, and the British people are the children of promise. After reading a few of these hymns, I no longer had any doubt of the existence of the hymn contain-

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ing the refrain that aroused the ire of the victim of the British prison-ship.

With the doctor's permission I copied a few verses from several of these hymns extolling the part played by Britain in carrying out the designs of Omnipotence.

Go, favored Britons, and proclaim
The kind Redeemer you have found,
And speak his ever-precious name
To all the wond'ring nations round.

O, that from Britain now might shine
This heavenly light, this truth divine,
Till the whole universe should be
But one great temple, Lord, to thee.

He to our lot a land assigns,
His favored Britons' boast,
And blest with gifts of various kinds
The health-incircled coast.

Great God of hosts, attend our prayer,
And make the British Isles thy care.

May Britain as one man be led
To make the Lord her fear and dread ;
Our souls no other fear shall know,
Though earth were leagued with hell below.

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O, where is sov'reign mercy gone?
Whither has Britain's God withdrawn?

Let Babylon's proud altars shake,
And light invade her darkest gloom;
The yoke of iron bondage break,—
The yoke of Satan and of Rome.

With gentle beams on Britain shine,
And bless her princes and her priests,
And by their energy divine
Let sacred love o'erflow their breasts.

Our foes shall dread Jehovah's sword,
And conquering Britain shout the Lord.

And still till time shall be no more,
The mighty concourse shall increase;
For Britons gain in heathen lands
New subjects to the Prince of Peace.

This tendency of the hymn-writers of the eighteenth century to regard the British as the chosen people and to confuse Britain with Providence received a vigorous check from one William Billings. In 1770 he published his "New England Psalm Singer."

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This book contained a martial hymn beginning with this stanza :

O, praise the Lord with one consent,
And in this grand design,
Let Britain and the colonies
Unanimously join.

After the signing of the Declaration of Independence a second edition of this book appeared. Many of the hymns have been altered to harmonize with the sentiments of the people who still persevered in their faith in a Divine Providence, although they had cast off their allegiance to Great Britain. The first stanza had taken on this form :

Let tyrants shake their iron rod
And slavery clank her galling chains,
We'll fear them not, we'll trust in God,
New England's God forever reigns.

The doctor had both editions of Mr. Billings's book in his collection, and I was glad of an opportunity of comparing them and making these extracts.

He told me that he had heard from his father, who was a colonel in General Put-

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nam's brigade, that these songs in their later • patriotic dress, set to familiar hymn-tunes, were great favorites with the Revolutionary soldiers from the New England States.

While I was busy with my copying, I glanced from time to time at the doctor, who was slowly turning over the leaves of a little brown volume that was almost as thick as it was broad. Although it was not long past midday, there was a sort of twilight air about the large room, back of the post-office, in which we had been sitting. In front of one of the two windows grew a tall lilac-bush covered with large clusters of milk-white blossoms. The other window was screened by a broad trellis over which a luxuriant rose-vine had hung a waving tapestry of leaf and flower. As I looked up at the doctor, after finishing my copies, I saw that he held the plump little brown book in his right hand, and that he was keeping a place with his forefinger between the leaves. He was unmindful of everything about him. With a distant look in his eyes, he gazed over his spectacles into

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* the impenetrable drapery of the rose-vine, while a changing smile that played about his features seemed to indicate that he was lost in pleasing reminiscence. I would not for the world have disturbed the old gentleman, and as I sat looking quietly about the room, my attention was attracted by the voices of birds near the window. Through an opening in the foliage and blossoms of the lilac-bush I saw a charming picture. In a gnarled and ancient apple-tree that grew a few yards from the house I saw a robin dividing an angleworm among her young ones, while her mate sat on a neighboring limb and nodded his head approvingly.

I remember that all I could see of the young robins was their five little bills, above the edge of the nest, open so wide that they looked like the tops of five little pitchers.

I was just beginning to wonder which would last the longer, the angleworm or the doctor's reverie, when the sound of the little volume falling upon the floor recalled him from his dreams.

He picked up the book and quickly found

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the place that he had been keeping. Then, as the smile on his face broadened and brightened, he told me that he had found in the old book a quaint and curious hymn that he used to sing when he was a boy, but that he had not heard it for over sixty years. It seemed quaint and curious indeed to me, and I copied the hymn entire. The title is

JESUS CHRIST THE APPLE TREE.

The tree of life my soul hath seen,
Laden with fruit and always green;
The trees of nature fruitless be
Compared with Christ the Apple Tree.

This beauty doth all things excel,
By faith I know but ne'er can tell,
The glory which I now can see
In Jesus Christ the Apple Tree.

For happiness I long have sought,
And pleasures dearly have I bought;
I miss'd of all, but now I see
'T is found in Christ the Apple Tree.

I 'm weary'd with my former toil,
Here I shall set and rest a while;
Under the shadow I would be
Of Jesus Christ the Apple Tree.

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With great delight I 'll make my stay,
There 's none shall fright my soul away ;
Among the sons of men I see
There 's none like Christ the Apple Tree.

I 'll sit and eat this fruit divine,
It cheers my heart like spirit'l wine ;
And now this fruit is sweet to me,
That grows on Christ the Apple Tree.

This fruit doth make my soul to thrive,
It keeps my dying faith alive,
Which makes my soul in haste to be
With Jesus Christ the Apple Tree.

While I was copying this rare bit of sacred verse, the doctor was humming to himself as though trying to recall a half-forgotten air. When I had made my copy, he surprised and delighted me by offering to sing a stanza of the hymn so that I might hear the old tune to which it was sung seventy years ago and more.

The music was surely as quaint as the words of the hymn. It was a slow, long-meter tune, a little—but only a very little—like the familiar tune of Rockingham, and the first syllable of the word apple was carried up and down a little ladder of eighths as though

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the singer were loath to let it go, perhaps for fear of dropping the whole apple. The old gentleman sang in a softly modulated tenor voice, a little husky and with a perceptible quaver, but a sweet voice withal for a man who had been singing upward of seventy years. As the doctor's voice died away in the apple-tree in the hymn, the robin in the apple-tree beside the window broke into a lusty, merry song, as though he were saying to his mate and their young brood, "What a sad, doleful piece of business these poor mortals make of it when they try to sing the glories of the tree whose shining olive verdure canopies our summer home." Through the open windows came a gentle, wandering breeze, bringing with it the perfume of lilacs and roses, and the softly blended, innumerable murmurings of the summer noon.

That was an hour not soon to be forgotten. For a little while I seemed to have drifted quite away from my familiar mooring, and a question that I had in mind to ask the doctor went clean out of my

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thoughts. I wanted to ask him whether he thought that this singular hymn was a paraphrase of the symbolic praise of the apricot—mistranslated apple—in the Song of Solomon; or whether he thought that our colonial ancestors, who undoubtedly had the best possible reasons for holding the apple-tree in high esteem on account of the beauty of its foliage and blossoms, the abundance of its healthful fruit, and the adaptability of its clean, fine-grained wood for carving into useful implements and for fuel, really regarded hard cider as the best emblem of “spirit’l wine.”

As I rose to take my leave of my friend the doctor, whose gentle courtesy I shall never forget, he insisted on going with me to his gate, where he pointed out to me the way to the town clerk whom I wished to visit. He described him as a young man who kept the only store in town.

Davis E. Baker, the custodian of the municipal records of Ashford, was a man about fifty years old. I found him at his store, which he obligingly locked when he knew my errand, and offered to show me the

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records himself, which he kept at his house, about a quarter of a mile from the store.

As we came down the steps of the store there appeared in front of us the most comical combination of man, beast, and vehicle that I have ever seen. It looked as if it belonged to the procession that passed Clark's tavern a hundred years ago. The man was very old and thin and bent, but he had a bloom upon his face like that upon the oak-leaf in autumn, and his voice was high and chirrupy like a bird's. He had several boxes of wild strawberries in his curious little cart, which he had evidently brought to Mr. Baker's establishment bent upon barter; but, seeing the proprietor lock the store, he piped out a cheery greeting in a quavering treble, and endeavored by a vigorous slapping of the reins to convince his little beast of the beauty and poetry of motion. As I stood watching the quaint little equipage, with its antique little occupant, a sudden turn in the road at the foot of the hill shut it from my view; and as I turned around Mr. Baker said to me, as though making some remark about a permanent object in the

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landscape, "He is nearly ninety, and has never seen a railroad." I thought what a paradise Ashford would be to the author of "The Stones of Venice."

The town clerk proved to be like all of the inhabitants of Ashford that I met, very courteous in manner and of a very contemplative turn of mind. As we walked very slowly toward his house, he seemed to be pondering some matter that perplexed him considerably, to judge from the expression of his face. Before we had gone half-way, he stopped and calculated he had better go back to the store; he might miss a customer; his wife would show me the records. I doubted whether any one else would enter the store that day; but as he was evidently determined upon retreat after a careful consideration of his surroundings, there was nothing for me to do but to try to get what I wanted from his conjugal deputy. She came to the door in response to my rap with an old brass knocker, a pleasant-faced, intelligent woman, with steaming soap-suds running down her

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plump arms and dripping from her hands. She blushinglly excused her appearance, as it was washing-day, wiped her hands on her apron, and, unlocking a small iron safe, laid before me on her parlor table several volumes bound in tough sheep's hide, the complete records of Ashford, Windham County, Connecticut, from 1715 to 1890, with the entries of every birth, death, marriage, and conveyance of land within the town limits in 175 years. I soon found what I wanted in the first book of records given to the town by James Corbin, one of the original settlers. The entries for the first fifteen years are all in the small handwriting of John Mixer, the first town clerk. On the 304th page of this volume I found the entry of a deed dated "the first year of the reign of his Majesty King George the Second," from Ebenezer Parker, Esquire, Gentleman, of the town of Reading, in the County of Essex, Province of Massachusetts, to Jacob Snow, husbandman, sometime of said Reading, now of Ashford, in the County of Windham, Province of Con-

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necticut. The description was by reference to hickory, ash, and chestnut trees, a charred stump, a rock, and the bank of a pond, and purported to convey 150 acres, the farm to which our young emigrant of 1726 brought his Rebecca through the forests and over the hills, along what was known as the old Connecticut road. From these records I saw that the last wolf bounty was paid by Ashford in 1735, and the last bear was killed in the town in 1740.

About two o'clock I returned to the tavern and found the landlord sitting where I had left him. "The peddler has not been around to-day," he said, "so we can't give you any fresh meat; but I guess you'll find something ready in the dining-room." In passing through the office or bar of the old inn I noticed that one corner was partitioned off by heavy wooden bars running to the ceiling, forming a compartment, with a door secured by heavy hinges and bolts, in which mail-bags and other valuable luggage were stored in the old coaching-days. The floor of the dining-room rose and fell in

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undulating swells like the surface of the ocean after a great storm, and the doors had been cut into queer rhomboidal shapes to fit the casements that had been twisted askew by time and decay. Notwithstanding the dereliction of the peddler, a well-cooked repast of broiled ham, poached eggs, johnny-cake, wild strawberries, rhubarb pie, and hot fresh tea served to recall the ancient boast of Clark's tavern that it was the best inn between Boston and Hartford. In conversation with the landlord after dinner, I found him a compendium of the legends and history of Ashford. His own memory ran back into the twenties, and the incidents of the Revolution seemed more real to him than the events of the Civil War.

I was pleased to find the memory of Knowlton still green. At one time Mr. Clark noticed me walking about the office and parlor scrutinizing the windows, and at once surmised what I was searching for. Without saying anything to me, he called his daughter, a young woman, or girl as he called her, of about forty, and

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whispered to her a moment. She disappeared, and soon returned bringing a window-frame containing six small panes of glass. In the middle pane of the lower row was the name of the Father of his Country. It was distinctly cut in the glass. The frame had been removed to prevent the glass being broken, but I was shown where it belonged, and I pictured to myself the first President and his Sabbath-afternoon party discussing the character and deeds of the brave Colonel Knowlton and the eccentric conduct of his brother, the lieutenant, which had amused them all at church that morning.

Mr. Clark told me that Ashford was situated on what was an old Indian trail, and became the first traveled road between Boston and Hartford. For over three quarters of a century the tide of emigration passed over the spot where Ashford now stands, but not till 1715 did any settlers think of stopping there.

Its hills are rocky and wooded, and its fields and meadows few. I do not know when the motto of the Connecticut Colony

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was adopted, but I have often thought that it must have been suggested by the old settlers of Ashford, conscious of some super-human aid in their struggle for existence: *Qui transtulit sustinet*. Its location on the great highway between Massachusetts and Rhode Island and New-York gave it an importance which it would never have attained as a purely agricultural town; and in the latter part of the eighteenth century it was regarded as one of the most important towns in eastern Connecticut. Mr. Clark had taken from the town records and was able to give me the population of Ashford for a series of years. In 1756 the population was 1245; in 1790, 2583; in 1800, 2445; in 1810, 2532; in 1820, 2661; in 1830, 2661; in 1840, 2651; in 1850, 1295; in 1860, 1231; in 1870, 1241; in 1880, 1041.

Since my visit I have received the figures for 1890, 778; and within a few weeks the figures taken from a recent enumeration have been sent me, showing the present population of Ashford to be less than 600. Ashford received her death sentence, like

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hundreds of other prosperous New England towns, when the railroads were built, the mail-coaches withdrawn, and the modern era of transportation opened. Large centers of population never exist except upon the lines of swiftest communication ; and so Ashford, once the proud little town through which thousands must annually pass, whose hospitality thousands were glad to enjoy, has become a deserted village, where the entertainment of the unlooked-for guest depends upon the uncertain appearance of a wandering peddler.

About three o'clock my venerable host excused himself to take an afternoon nap, which he said he had not missed in thirty years. Left to myself, I sat for an hour upon the porch of the tavern, in the shade of the old elms. Not a living being passed on the road that a hundred, nay fifty, years ago was full of bustle and life. I thought of Rebecca's husband, and wondered what he looked like as he walked into Ashford after his long tramp from Reading ; of the Reverend Mr. Hale and his long discourses ;

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of the fierce theological contest which resulted in the dismissal of the Reverend Mr. Bass.

A soft breeze set the leaves of the old elm a-twittering as though they would reveal to me the secrets of past centuries, if only I were not too stupid to understand them; an oriole trilled in the topmost branches; a pervading sense of peace and calm was over the whole scene; and it seemed impossible to believe that original sin could ever have been in harmony with such an environment.

As the clock on the meeting-house struck four, my meditations on the past had put me in a suitable frame of mind for visiting the graves of the old settlers.

I like a burying-ground, if only it be old enough: none of your modern cemeteries with glistening monoliths and hideous mausoleums, but an old-fashioned graveyard, surrounded by a crumbling stone wall half hidden beneath woodbine and wild-blackberry vines, where the moss-covered headstones have been set without regard to geometrical arrangement, where there are

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no gravel or concrete walks, but where the grass grows untrimmed between the graves and hides the inscriptions from the curious observer, where the bees in summer ply their busy occupation unmolested, and over which the snow in winter lies untrodden. Such an old graveyard is the one in Ashford, lying on the gentle slope of a hill behind the first meeting-house.

I easily found the tombstone of Mr. Hale, with this inscription :

Here lies the remains of
Rev. Mr. JAMES HALE,
the first Pastor of
the Church in Ashford, and
husband of Mad. Sarah Hale.
He left earth for heaven
(as we trust) in ye 58th
year of his age,
November 22, 1742.
Here lies a friend of Christ
and of his peoples, the Rev. J. H.

Let all that loved the man these lines present,
Follow his faith in Christ and of all their sins repent.

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It seemed to me that it was carrying the belief in the doctrine of foreordination and predestination to extreme lengths to perpetuate upon the tombstone of so good a man even a parenthetical doubt as to his fate.

In a secluded corner of the graveyard I found two modest moss-covered stones, almost completely hidden by long grass and wild morning-glories. I felt a peculiar interest in these little slabs of blue slate, each ornamented with a death's-head between outstretched wings. One bore the name of the brave old emigrant who, with his son and grandson, marched to battle in defense of his country at the age of seventy.

Here lyes y^e body of
Serjeant JACOB SNOW,
who departed this life
June 23d. 1794
in the ninetieth year
of his age.

The other bore the name of his faithful wife,

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who had followed him into the wilderness,
and who had been faithful unto death.

Here lyes y^e body of
Mistress REBECCA,
wife of
Serjeant JACOB SNOW,
who departed this life
June 24th 1794
in y^e 87th year of her age.

This old burying-ground has been unused for nearly a hundred years, and the stones appeared to be all of blue slate and of the antique shapes in vogue in the last century. I had never seen in any New England burying-ground a white marble stone with an earlier date than 1800. So I was surprised, in looking at the stones that marked the graves of three generations of Knowltons, to see under the shadow of an ancient chestnut-tree, somewhat apart from the other stones in the plat, a white, modern stone, marking a well-kept grave covered with wild flowers.

I was on my knees reading the simple

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inscription, "Lieutenant John Knowlton, killed at the battle of Five Forks, March 31st, 1865, in the twenty-third year of his age," when I was startled at hearing a low, clear voice behind me say, "That is the most interesting stone to me in the graveyard."

If I was surprised at the voice, I was even more surprised at the appearance of the woman who stood beside me as I arose from my knees. She was not tall, but slender and delicate in figure. She was plainly dressed in a gown of some soft black material, with a spray of blooming sweet-brier in her belt. Her face was thin, but with a clear, faint color like the tint of the arbutus. Her eyes were light gray, large and steady, her forehead was low and broad, her hair a chestnut-brown with here and there a thread of white, and the mouth had the sensitive lips and delicate downward curves that always characterize the refined New England woman. She seemed to me about forty years of age. I do not know why it was, except that my mind was so occupied with the past, but I was as much confounded

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at meeting this delicate, pathetic-looking woman in that quiet churchyard as if I had been confronted with the ghost of the Reverend Mr. Hale. As soon as I could recover from my surprise I asked her, referring to her remark, if John Knowlton had been her relative. She answered, "No; my name is Rebecca Snow. But the evening before he went away he told me, under this tree, that next to his country he loved me better than all the world. That is the reason he is buried here instead of in the new cemetery." Her voice was unbroken while she spoke, but there was that look in her eyes that makes a man feel that he must say or do something. So I made some commonplace remark, intended to be consoling, about the honor of having had the affection of a brave man. "It is very easy," she said, with no trace of bitterness in her voice, but evidently intending that the subject should not be continued,— "it is very easy to look on the bright side of other folks' troubles." Then she told me that if I would like to see the oldest stone in the yard, she

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would show it to me. It was an unshaped piece of blue slate on which, scarcely legible for the thick moss, were the initials "J. C." and the date 1715. She said the letters were supposed to stand for James Corbin, one of the first purchasers of land on the site of the old town, and the public-spirited citizen who had presented the town with its first record-book. After pointing out to me one or two other curiosities, my strange acquaintance left me, and I saw her enter the house of Doctor Simmons. My host of the tavern told me that she was an orphan niece of the doctor and a great-granddaughter of her namesake who slept in the quiet burying-ground ; and that she lived on the memory of her young soldier lover who died, like his ancestor on the Heights of Harlem, fighting for his country.

The lengthening afternoon shadows warned me that it was time to return to the haunts of busy men. On the way to the tavern I stopped to bid good-by to my friend the doctor, hoping to catch another glimpse of the sweet-faced woman whose heart, I

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felt sure, was as pure as her name. But the doctor had seen me coming, and had come out of the house alone, and stood bareheaded upon the lawn to meet me. As he bade me farewell, his last words were: "Ashford has seen her best days; she is about dead now; but I hope the spirit of old Ashford will never die out in this country."

As I rode away from the old town, thinking upon the great changes that were so rapidly taking place in our population and habits of living, I was more than ever impressed by the self-denial and patriotism of the hardy founders of the once prosperous but now deserted villages of New England. For the sake of our country let us hope, with my friend the doctor, that their spirit will long continue among us.

On our way back to Willimantic we drove for several miles along the banks of a small stream that Ephraim told me was called Mount Hope, or simply Hope, River.

About two miles from the tavern we crossed this stream by a low bridge of moss-

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covered logs. On one end of the bridge stood a lad of about twelve, without hat, shoes, or stockings, fishing. As this was the only young person I had seen in the town, I was anxious to make his acquaintance. In response to my inquiry as to his name, he replied sturdily, "Thomas Knowlton Baker."

"Are you named after the famous Colonel Knowlton of the Revolution?"

"Of course!" was the emphatic answer.

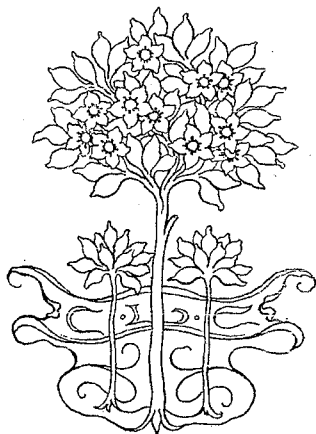
"Are you the son of the town clerk?"

He looked at me for several seconds as though wondering by what process of ratiocination I had been led to hold any doubts respecting his paternity; then, without deigning any direct answer to my question, he said with an air of pride, "Father says I will be town clerk some day."

On the other side of the bridge the road led up a short steep hill, and I stopped on its summit to take a last look at Ashford. The sun had set. In the distance, behind the white spire of the old meeting-house the golden sickle of the new moon glowed

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faintly in the glorious splendor of the summer twilight; in the foreground was the little figure of the embryo town clerk, an emblem of perennial faith, on the outskirts of a deserted village, patiently fishing in Hope River. As we drove on I fell to wondering how many years it would be before the municipal records of this deserted village would close with this entry: "To-day I am the sole surviving citizen of Ashford. Thomas Knowlton Baker, Town Clerk."



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