

Emancipation

Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman

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OLD Billy Thomas sat beside the window. He had the weekly religious newspaper on his knee. He was not reading it. He never read it. If questioned, he could not have told why he so apparently cherished it. There was certainly no affectation about Billy, and least of all affectation with regard to religion. He was a very good old man, leavened to his own amusement with a queer, childish mischievousness bordering upon the malicious. This leaven might not have developed had it not been for his daughter Esther, who all unwittingly was especially fitted to produce such development. Now Esther was not at home. She had gone down street on an errand.

Billy was very carefully attired. His collar was immaculate. Esther had brushed his coat twice that very day. Billy, left to himself, would never have brushed his coat. He had arrived at an age when his house of life had become to a certain degree perfectly uninteresting to him. All he asked of it was a comfortable acquiescence with his wishes. He desired no rheumatic pains. Stiffness he recognized as incident to his endurance in his present form upon the earth; he bore that with cheerful stolidity. He wished for warmth and food for that worn old habitation of flesh, and he wished more than for anything else for a certain freedom. That he did not have. Esther very innocently prevented that. Billy was like a child who frets because he is not allowed to kick and sprawl and change monotonous order to disorder. In reality, Billy practically wished to make his mud-pies of life instead of sitting there so carefully combed and brushed, with his religious newspaper unread on his knees. He was thinking about his daughter with a sort of rueful love and admiration and dissent. He said to himself, as he often said to Sam Ellis: "Esther is the salt of the earth. She's as pretty as they make 'em, and neat, and a good cook, and she does her duty by me, and she has a hard time of it. She would have a harder if she didn't naturally expect so much of men-folks and make allowances. My daughter is as good and pretty a woman as you can find in a week of Sundays, but sometimes I sorter wish she was as easy-goin' as her ma was. Maybe if her ma had lived Esther would have been more like her. She wouldn't have tried half as hard and she would have been a darned sight better off, and so would other folks."

Billy, thinking of Esther, realized that his heart, loving as it was toward her, inclined toward rebellion. A queer expression was in his bright old eyes. Suddenly he crumpled the religious paper viciously, and threw it down on the floor. Then he stamped on it. Then he looked alarmed. He bent over stiffly, gathered it up and refolded it. Then he looked out of the window at the yard and the horse-chestnut-tree holding its young umbrella-shaped leaves over its straight trunk. Old Billy gazed, and his face — a very simple old face as to line and feature — became complex.

He looked away from the window at the room perfectly ordered. There was not a speck of dust. The vases on the mantel-shelf stood each in its appointed place. The books on the table were arranged in exact little piles. The lamp stood in the mathematical center. The table-cover hung with absolute correctness. The chairs were ranged about the room as if by line and rule. Not one picture hung off the true level.

Old Billy regarded everything gloomily. After a while he got up and walked past the table, and without apparent intent knocked against it. A little vase containing exactly six daffodils was upset. The water trickled slowly over the chenille table-cloth and dripped to the floor. A pile of books was pushed awry. Old Billy next encountered a steel engraving, "The Landing of the Pilgrim Fathers." After he had passed, the picture hung decidedly off the plumb-line. Then old Billy, on his way back to his chair, stumbled over a mat and left it turned up at one end.

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He sat down and regarded things with a grin. He looked like a malevolent child. He was an old man, but full of wiry strength. His thick, gray hair and beard had the outward spring of strong wire. His eyes were sparkingly alert.

Old Billy gazed out of the window. It was nearly time for Esther's return. He was still uneasy. He gazed as far down the road as he could, but saw no sign of Esther. He rose quickly and fairly ran out of the room. He returned, and again jostled the table and "The Landing of the Pilgrim Fathers," and this time he touched the mantel-shelf. When he sat down again he could see distinctly a shadow, as of dust, over the front of the shelf and on the glass of the picture. Another pile of books on the table was awry. Old Billy raised a hand with the forefinger stiffly crooked, and rubbed it across the crystal-like window. There was left a smear, as of lard. Old Billy put his hands on the under side of his coat-tails and rubbed off the butter and flour on them. Then he chuckled. "Ruther guess Betsey would laugh till she cried, ef she was here," he said aloud. When Esther entered he was reading his religious weekly.

"All wrapped up in your paper, father?" she remarked in her clear, fine voice. Old Billy read on. Esther crossed the room to put away her hat and coat. She removed the hat carefully and put it on the closet shelf; removed her coat, adjusted it over a hanger, and replaced it upon its hook. Then she turned, her thin hands mechanically smoothing her satin-smooth hair.

Esther was a pretty creature in an unassertive fashion. She was made of charming shadows instead of colors; of charming delays rather than progressions. Her soft hair, neither black nor brown, although glossy, showed no highlights; her smooth cheeks, flawless in texture, had no bloom; her gray eyes gave out no sparks of inward fire even when Esther was firm.

Esther was firm after a curious fashion. She never ordered, but her attitude was in itself equivalent to a whole broadside of orders. She never raised her voice, she often did not express a wish, but her silence held the force of ultimate command. Her aged father, retaining, as he still did in very high measure, the fire of youth, was no match for her. His rebellious desires, his impatience for his own way, were blunted before her as before a porcelain wall of purest, impenetrable femininity. Billy's Betsey, easy-going as she had been, had possessed a temper which her man could meet in fair fight, and either win or be worsted. Esther had apparently no temper whatever. She had simply character, resistant in its primary quality. Old Billy never argued with his daughter. He was reduced to the slyness of petty diplomacy. The time was at hand when he would once more gather himself up for a last aggressive move, but it had not yet arrived. He continued to sit perfectly still, with his eyes fixed upon the printed page before him.

Esther surveyed the disorder of the room. Old Billy felt her eyes turn toward him. He made no sign. He knew from past experience that she would not exclaim nor question. Esther straightened carefully "The Landing of the Pilgrim Fathers," the vases on the shelf, the pile of books on the table. She glided out of the room and returned with cloths. She wiped the water from the overturned vase. She replaced the daffodils. She dusted off the flour. After she had straightened and dusted everything, and readjusted the rug which Billy had kicked, she put away the duster. Billy never raised his eyes.

Then, Esther saw the smear on the window-glass. Even then she did not exclaim. She stood staring at it. The faintest pink had come over her smooth cheeks. Her eyes, while still devoid of sparkle, were alive with wonder. At last she spoke.

"Have you been having some bread and butter, father?" she asked.

Billy apparently did not hear.

"Have you been having some bread and butter, father?" repeated Esther.

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"Hey?"

"Have you been having some bread and butter?"

"No, Esther, I 'ain't," replied Billy, and returned again to his paper.

Esther said no more. She again went out for a cloth. This time she brought a basin of hot water and some polishing-powder. She could not well reach the window, and Billy moved, hitching his chair slightly.

Esther worked, cleaning off the smear and polishing the glass. She eyed it, not quite satisfied. When she went out, evidently to try her polish on the outside, thinking that some of the trouble must be there, Billy clapped his hand over his mouth and nearly choked with repressed mirth. When Esther appeared on the other side of his window with her polish, he was reading his paper with an intensely sober face.

Billy enjoyed himself immensely. These little tricks were his only amusement. He loved his daughter, but deep-rooted in his nature was the love of mischief, even against one whom he loved. He derived a peculiar pleasure from its exercise in the case of Esther, because she was so completely unsuspecting. What she did suspect her father did not even dream. Had he dreamed it, he would have enjoyed it to the full. Poor Esther Thomas feared her father was gradually losing his wits from old age. She had a fair amount of reason. She knew perfectly well in what a state of order and cleanliness she had left the house when she went out. She knew, of course, that flour and lard do not of their own volition get on tables and shelves and windows. Her father had been the only person in the house. Esther was aware that her father must be the culprit. He had put her order in disorder; he had sprinkled flour over spotless surfaces; he had smeared the clear window-glass. Esther knew this, but her mind could grasp no motive within reason for the deeds. She had no conception of mischief for the sake of mischief, of uneasiness finding its safety-valve. She therefore told herself sadly that "poor father was failing," and she must be even more watchful regarding her duty toward him.

Esther Thomas was a sweet woman. She was sweet like a flower, blooming only under certain restrictions, facing always one way. After she had cleaned the window she went into the kitchen and washed carefully the cloth and her hands.

While she was there, old Billy, gazing out, saw Sam Ellis. Right opposite the Thomas house was the little grocery-store. Sam was standing on the piazza gazing longingly over at Billy. Billy shook his head, raised his hand, and went through an elaborate code of signals: Sam understood. When Esther re-entered the room her father was having a hard coughing-spell. Old Billy had rather violent attacks of asthma. Esther went to the little chimney cupboard for a bottle of medicine.

"It ain't — there," strangled Billy.

"Why, where is it, father?"

"I — used up — the last on't — some days ago — while you was out, and I threw the bottle away. No use of old medicine-bottles settin' round," Billy coughed and wheezed.

Esther went to the closet and got her hat and coat. Old Billy, still coughing, watched her slyly.

"Where you — goin'?"

"Down to the drug-store to get another bottle of your medicine. Keep perfectly still while I am gone, father. I will be back as soon as I can."

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Billy coughed. He found it rather difficult to desist after he had watched his daughter out of sight. He still coughed while frantically beckoning Sam Ellis on the grocery piazza.

Sam shambled over and entered, grinning. Sam was a shabby figure. He came from a good old family, but he was the last shred of it, swaying and fraying before the winds of destiny, with nobody of his kith or kin to mend him, or brush him; or attend generally to his physical welfare. He lived alone in a corner of the old Ellis house. Dreadful tales were told by good housekeepers about the state of that house and especially Sam's corner. Carpets had not been taken up for half a century. Moth and rust reigned undisputed. However, Sam was a happier man than Billy. He had all that is sometimes left to the aged of the world, his own way, and he loved it.

Billy gazed at him when he entered, with a queer affection and envy. The two old men loved each other. Billy envied; Sam pitied.

"How did ye manage it?" queried Sam.

"Had a coughin'—spell, and the medicine was all gone." He winked and coughed again in spite of himself.

"You hadn't ought to take liberties with that cough," said Sam, anxiously. Out of a jungle of crisscross lines of white hairs covering his face his blue eyes gleamed tenderly upon his friend. His bald head rose dome-like and shining, but his white beard covered his cheeks and fell upon his breast. He had been a handsome man. He had never married, but he had had in his youth his love-affair. The girl whom he had loved had died.

Sam could not quite understand Billy's attitude with regard to his daughter. "Why d'ye have to manoeuver that way to get a minute to see me?" he queried, with regard to the cough-medicine. "Now Esther always seems to me real mild and gentle."

"She is. Esther's the salt of the earth, and she never gets mad nor speaks up," declared Billy.

"Then why — "

"If she did get mad I wouldn't feel called upon to manoeuver. She and me could fight it out, and I guess I'd get my own way," said Billy.

Sam took his venerable pipe out of his pocket. He looked inquiringly at Billy, who shook his head.

Sam replaced the pipe. "S'pose it wouldn't do," he admitted.

"She would smell it," said Billy. "I don't never smoke mine except once in a while in summer-time, when I can get down in the orchard, and the wind ain't toward the house, and she's gone out anyway."

"What does she say?"

"She don't say nothin'. She don't even sniff round the way some women would. Esther is a lady, if she is my daughter. I jest know it wouldn't do for me to smoke my old pipe around the house as long as she's livin' here, so I keep it in the lowermost secretary drawer."

Sam regarded Billy thoughtfully. He got up and peered down the street.

"It ain't time for her yet," said Billy.

Sam thrust his face close to Billy's and whispered, "When is she goin' to git married to the parson?"

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"She ain't never goin' to as long as I live."

"How d'ye know?"

"She told him so. She said it was her duty to stay right here and take care of me. He acted real nice about it; said I would be jest as welcome to live with 'em as if I was his own father. But she told him he couldn't leave his mother, and neither of 'em said anything, but both of 'em knew that wouldn't work — old lady Comstock livin' with her daughter-in-law's pa."

Sam chuckled. "Golly! You couldn't hev said your soul was your own, sure enough," he remarked.

Billy chuckled in response. "Reckon you're right. Betwixt Esther's holdin' her tongue and the old lady not holdin' hers, it'd been a case of the upper and nether millstones," said he. "Esther and Willard both knew that wouldn't do, and Esther, she won't leave me nohow."

"You could git along."

Billy fairly snorted. "Git along! I ruther reckon I could! I could git Sarah Miles to come here. She's spry and a good housekeeper, and she 'ain't never tried to have her way. She 'ain't got any way. She'd keep house, and you could about live here. We could do jest as we was a mind to."

"But Esther's sot."

"When it comes to what she thinks is her duty, Esther is more than sot. She's growed to it."

"Willard Comstock always liked her, and a minister ought to have a wife."

"Esther told him not to come here again. She said it would make talk, and he'd better marry some one else. She said, 'As long as father lives, my duty is right here.' It made me feel kind of queer." Old Billy's voice was pathetic. "Seems as if old folks hadn't ought to stand in the way of young ones, but how in Sam Hill be they goin' to git out till the Lord calls 'em?"

"Near as I can see, you ain't in the way."

"No, I ain't, but she thinks I'm her duty, and there's no use tryin' to reason her out of it."

"An' he ain't comin' any more?"

"He 'ain't been here for months, and I can see she's feelin' sort of miserable about it."

"Why don't he stick it out an' come? I guess when I was his age I'd have stepped right over her duty an' trompled it down."

"Ef he would only come!" reflected Billy. "He used to come to tea sometimes." Suddenly he sat up. His face assumed the expression of eager mischief that it had worn when he had made his expedition into the pantry for the flour and lard. His eyes snapped. He slapped his knee. "By hookey!" said he. "I'll git Willard Comstock here to tea this very night."

Sam eyed him, as excited as his friend. "How will you manage?" he demanded. For answer Billy rapped madly on the window.

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"What you doin' that for?"

"I'm goin' to send the little Abbott boy to invite him. Eddy Abbott is such a good little boy, nobody can suspicion anything ain't all right. Esther, she's got plenty of cake and a floating-island. She baked this mornin'. I'll do it." Billy beckoned frantically.

A little boy on the street outside, moving waveringly on roller-skates, turned a pretty face toward the window.

"Come in here a minute. Come in here a minute," said Billy.

The boy could not have heard him, but he saw the beckoning old hand. He navigated with difficulty up the front walk to the door, where Billy met him.

When Billy returned to the sitting-room he looked rather pale but triumphant. "Eddy Abbott is going to tell Willard Comstock that Miss Esther Thomas invites him to take tea with her and her pa at six o'clock to-night," he whispered.

"Guess I'd better light out," said Sam, rising.

"Guess you'd better. It's most time for her to come home."

"Ain't you goin' to shave or put on a clean collar; or nothin'?"

"Can't, unless I want her to suspicion somethin'."

"Well," said Sam. He lounged out, and presently Billy saw him seated in an arm-chair on the grocery piazza. He was smoking his pipe. He waved his hand imperceptibly. Then Esther appeared, walking rather hurriedly down the street with her little parcel from the drug-store.

"I guess I feel some better," Billy said when his daughter entered, bottle and spoon in hand.

"You had better take it, anyway, father. You are not breathing properly now."

Billy murmured something about "not spilin' his appetite for supper," but he took his dose. Esther went out in the kitchen. Billy rose and peeped out stealthily. Esther was mixing biscuits. Billy nodded approvingly and returned to his seat.

He had begun to smell the biscuits baking when he saw a young man coming hastily up the street. He gave a sigh of relief. Billy had realized the risk he had run of getting a message of refusal by little Eddy Abbott, and his daughter's discovery of the plot. Now that the young man was accepting, he knew that all would be well. However puzzled Esther Thomas might be, she would say nothing when a guest appeared at tea-time. She had a great sense of hospitality. She might have refused to see Willard in the evening, but at tea-time his welcome was assured, however bewildered she might be.

After Willard entered, Billy, gazing across at the grocery, saw Sam Ellis double up with laughter. He chuckled softly to himself. Esther had ushered the minister into the best parlor. She came hurrying out to her father.

"The minister has come to tea," she whispered. Her cheeks were softly blushing.

"Did you ask him?"

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Esther shook her head. "I don't understand it," she whispered, "but he has come. Go into the bedroom, father, and let me brush your hair and coat. You won't have time to shave. Are your hands clean? Of, father! come out in the kitchen and wash your hands."

When Billy was fairly tidy and back in his chair, he looked across at the grocery. Sam still sat smoking on the piazza. The minister was now in the sitting-room. Billy nodded solemnly, with warning finger raised. Sam nodded solemnly in response.

Willard Comstock, discoursing to Billy about a recent death in the village, with absent eyes upon Esther, a graceful vision moving about in the next room, saw neither signal. Billy, talking to the minister, saw presently his dear Sam lounge down the street. He pictured him getting his solitary meal in his littered corner of the old colonial house. He wished, with the pathetic wish of age and essential loneliness, to be with him there. What had he — old, with tastes reverting to those of childhood — to do with this fine young clergyman who loved his daughter? Poor old Billy wanted to be in his own tracks of life — those tracks which he and his wife Betsey had followed so easily.

He did not like the supper which Esther finally served. The dining-table glittered with the best china and silver, and a piece or two of cut-glass. Apple-blossoms in a green bowl decorated the center. Esther had prepared a salad, very pretty, but strange to Billy's old-fashioned taste. The minister praised it. Billy felt a slight scorn. Esther had thin slices of pink ham. Billy liked thick slices, but on account of the guest had to put up with the thin. Billy, silently eating, reflected how fortunate it was that Willard Comstock had a mother. Otherwise he would be obliged to live with Willard and Esther. It would be perfectly peaceful, but the restraint of those bonds of Christian grace would be insupportable.

The next afternoon Esther went to the sewing society, and Billy, as soon as the coast was clear, started to see Sam. He stole out of the house, locking the kitchen door and putting the key under the mat on the porch, and taking a back road. The main one led by the church in whose chapel the sewing-society was meeting.

Billy was slightly lame, but he moved quickly. He was afraid that Sam might not be at home, but the other old man met him at the door, his blue eyes gleaming with fond welcome out of his furze of white hair.

Billy entered, and was blest, to his conviction, with the utmost which earth had to bestow. It was seldom he got such a chance as this. When he entered the room in which Sam Ellis spent most of his time, he looked about him blissfully. It suited him. It was his ideal of perfect comfort. It was the large stately south room of the old mansion. There were paneled walls and a wonderful mantelpiece, and the doors were marvelous. There were pieces of fine old mahogany furniture, and everything had been made completely subservient to the use of the human creature who owned it, and was, to Billy's mind, fulfilling its ultimate destiny.

The tapestry carpet was fairly wonderful in its accumulation of colors over and above the original patterns. The paneled walls were brown with smoke and drab with dust, and spotted like leopards in bas-relief until they had taken on the aspect of deliberate, although bizarre, decoration. The chairs and the deep old sofa were worn into the exact comfortable needs of human forms. A stovepipe had been fitted into an iron fireboard covering the great fireplace, and there was a cooking-stove. Before it stood a kitchen table. That was covered by a very smooth, clean cloth of linen, and it glittered with an old solid-silver service. The cloth of linen and the bright silver at first seemed curiously at odds with the room, and yet they were not. They were made subservient, as all else there, to the human need.

Sam Ellis, sole remnant of his family, required perfect cleanliness with regard to his meals, and his bedroom was immaculate. Every week his laundry was carefully attended to. Much of Sam's slender income was spent for cleanliness, although the general aspect of his living-room went far to deny it.

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Dust was everywhere. Sam was philosophical about dust. "Folks are silly, fussin' so about dust," he was wont to remark. "Dust has to be somewhere. When it's layin' on the chairs and tables it's out of mischief. You ain't breathin' it in. What folks want to go round stirrin' up dust for when it's quiet and out of mischief, beats me."

That afternoon old Billy settled down in his favorite chair, a worn, leather-covered rocker which fitted his old bones with luxuriousness of comfort. He drew a long sigh of content. After a while he filled his pipe, and the two men smoked, and the room was afloat with curling wreaths and eddies of rank smoke. However, Billy's face wore an expression of anxiety. Sam watched him.

"Didn't pan out the way you wanted it to last night, I reckon," he said at length.

Billy sniffed disgustedly. "No, it didn't," he grunted. "Too much talk about duty. Nothin' but duty. Land! I wonder whether folks are really so much better than they was when you and I was young. Near as I can recollect, there wasn't anywhere near so much said about duty."

"Then Esther and Willard think it ain't their duty to get married?"

Billy shook his head. "I listened. Had to. Esther thinks it's her duty not to tell me things to worrit me. Drat her duty! An' there ain't any way left, if I feel as if I had ought to know things, except to listen. So I listened last night. They was settin' in the best parlor, and the door won't shut tight. I stole down, dreadful still, in my stockin' feet, after they thought I was abed, and I listened. Lord A'mighty, Sam, I ain't the only duty. They are stuck fast ag'in."

"What else?"

"Willard's ma."

Sam leaned back and laughed. "Maria Comstock is just plumb crazy to have Willard get married and leave her in peace with her sister, Mis' Plummer," said he. "She told me so only day before yesterday. She was gettin' along, as spry as you please, down to the store. She stepped out like a young girl, and her black-silk skirts was swishin', and her bunnit strings flyin', and her head up. I stopped and spoke to her. You know Maria and me used to sort of go together when we was children. I've always thought that if somebody else hadn't come up for her, Maria and me might have made a match of it. She was a real pretty girl, and as smart as they make 'em, and she ain't got over it yet. I thought I'd sort of hint about Willard, and she spoke her mind right out. 'Why on earth,' said she, 'Willard and Esther want to act the way they do is beyond me. Near as I can find out, Esther thinks it's her duty not to leave her pa, and she thinks her pa and me wouldn't get along if Willard took him here or she took me there. And we surely would not,' says Maria. 'We surely would not, because I don't want any such arrangement, and I wouldn't stand havin' that old man around a minute.' I'm tellin' you just what she said," stated Sam, apologetically, to Billy. "You know what Maria is."

"I don't mind," said Billy.

"'I want Willard to get married, the sooner the better, and leave me and sister Addie Plummer in peace,' says Maria. 'We are livin' in the old Comstock house, anyway, and folks are thinkin' it sort of hard because the minister don't go to live in that nice new parsonage they've built. Willard and Esther can get married, and Esther's pa can have somebody come and keep house for him, if he don't want to live with them and they don't want him.'"

Sam hesitated and then laughed.

"What did she say next?" asked Billy.

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"Well, Maria did say she thought you were sort of cranky, and maybe it would work out better for you not to live with them."

Billy laughed. "Maria and me have got just exactly the same opinions," said he.

Sam chuckled. "I near snorted right out in her face when she said that. Maria was always smart as a whip, and good-lookin', but, gee whiz! stand out of the way when you hear her petticoats swishin'. But I swan, now she's in the right of it. She says she and her sister can be a heap more comfortable if Willard gets married. She says their help is gittin' old, and it's nothin' but tend door, and answer the telephone, and entertain ministers exchangin'. She says it ain't any work for elderly women. Then she says they have to entertain a lot besides, and poor folks are always comin' for some charity just at meal-times. Lord! poor Maria Comstock don't want duty done by her any more than you do, Billy. And I've been thinkin' about Serrah Miles. What do you want to bother with her for? Here's this big house, and you and me could git along enough sight better together than either of us could with any woman housekeeper. I have Mis' Doty come in every week, and wash and iron, and that's all we need done. I can cook to beat any woman round here; and I don't want any arrangin' of my belongin's so I can't find a durned thing when I want it. You could rent your house, Billy, and that would give you and Esther a little extra. Of course, it wouldn't cost you nothin' to live here, but money is money."

"Yes, it is," assented Billy. He sighed. "Tell you what 'tis, Sam: livin' here with you, and both of us doin' jest as we are a mind to, would be too much for this world, I guess. I'd feel as I used to with Betsey. Betsey used to let me smoke all over the house. She said tobacco ashes was clean dirt, and good to keep out moths. I dunno but Betsey would have smoked herself if I'd tried to make her. And I could set anywhere I wanted to, and tip my chair back, and lean my head agin' any wall-paper in the house. And if I put a thing down anywhere, I'd find it right there six months from then. Betsey never picked up my things so I couldn't find 'em. And that 'Landin' of the Pilgrim Fathers' always used to hang with the left side 'way down, and every time I see it hangin' straight it makes me homesick. Esther's a good daughter, though."

"Lord, yes! she's good enough, but she's too everlastin' stuck on her duty to know when it's barkin' everybody else's shins!"

"I don't know what to do," said Billy, despondently. "She and Willard talked real decided last night."

Sam Ellis started up. "There's Eddy Abbott," he said. He rushed to the door and called: "Hullo, Eddy! Eddy, come here a minute."

Sam admitted the small boy, as pink-faced and gentle as a little girl. "You wait a minute, Eddy," said Sam.

Eddy stood immovable, waiting. He was an obedient child. He did not even shift his weight from one foot to the other. He did not even stare about the room while Sam wrote two notes at the old secretary.

"Here, Eddy," said Sam. "You give this one to the minister, and the other to Miss Esther Thomas. She's at the sewing-circle in the vestry. Here, you wait a minute, Eddy." Sam took the lid from an earthen jar which stood on a magnificent old mahogany table, and brought forth two very large brown doughnut twists. "Here, Eddy," said Sam.

"Thank you," said Eddy. He stowed away the notes carefully in his little coat pocket, took the doughnuts, and walked away eating them.

"I fried them doughnuts yesterday," said Sam. "I don't want none of your fancy cakes, but I do like good solid doughnuts and pies; and what's more, I can make 'em to suit me better than any woman I've known sence my own mother."

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"What did you say in them notes?"

"I said somethin' that's goin' to bring duty to a head, jest like a bile," said Sam, and roared at his own joke.

Billy looked a little alarmed, then he also laughed.

"Now we'll set back an' wait," said Sam.

Esther was the first to arrive. She came hurrying down the street. Sam met her at the door.

"Is father here? What is the matter?" she asked. She was a little out of breath. Sam, looking over her heaving shoulder, draped with soft gray cloth, could see Willard Comstock approaching. He was walking rapidly. Sam's notes had been peremptory.

"Now don't you be one mite scared, Esther," said Sam. "There ain't anything to be scared about. Your father's in here, and we are goin' to settle things. Why, here's Willard. Hullo, Willard. Walk right in."

Willard Comstock, tall and pale, and gentle of expression, with a square chin which seemed to denote that gentleness might have to win, at times, in hard battle, did walk in. He and Esther exchanged glances of bewilderment.

"Nothing is the matter with father, is there?" Esther asked. Her serene voice was a little tremulous.

"Land, no! He's as right as a cricket. No, don't go in there. That's the room where I live, mostly. I lived there all winter, and I've got my cookin'—stove in there. The spring's so late I ain't moved it out into the kitchen. I'm goin' to next week. Here, you come in this room. There's dust, but we are all made of dust and we hadn't ought to mind if we do see it layin' round loose."

Sam ushered them into a fairly stately apartment. It was very large, the ceiling high, and the woodwork was a masterpiece of domestic architecture, patiently wrought by hands long since folded in the grave. The furniture was covered with red damask. Long curtains of red damask, caught back by gilt scroll-work, hung at the windows. There was a Turkey carpet, and old portraits and engravings. The room was dark and damp.

Sam opened a window, and a great sighing breath of blooming lilacs from a rank growth outside entered the room. He opened another, and a shaft of sunlight marked by floating dust-motes crossed the room. They all sat down. Sam began to speak.

"I know all about it," said he. "I know you two young folks, that ain't gittin' any younger whilst you're waitin', want to get married and set up your own home. And I know Esther thinks it's her duty to stay single and take care of her pa. And Willard thinks it's his to stay single and take care of his ma.

"Now I'm goin' to preach to the minister and the minister's wife. Who be you, either one of you, to set up for knowin' what your duty is before other folks that's older? Esther's father wants her to get married. He thinks the world of her, and he knows she's always devoted her life to him, but — he don't want her to! And Willard's ma; she knows Willard has devoted his life to her, and — she don't want him to!

"Billy, here, and Maria, both just want their son and daughter to get married and look out for their own interests, and let them alone to look out for theirs. Billy knows he'd be a lot happier livin' here with me, and havin' his harmless little way that ain't goin' to hurt his immortal soul one mite. And Maria knows she's goin' to be a lot happier livin' with her sister than she is with a man messin' 'round, no matter if he is her own son and the salt of the earth. Maria is all worn out playin' the second religious fiddle. She's too old.

Emancipation

"So both of you, Willard and Esther, have been thinkin' you were doin' your duty and feelin' real miserable over it when you wasn't neither one of you doin' your duty at all. What you haven't neither one of you sensed is that enough sight oftener than folks realize doin' their duty is havin' their own way and lettin' other folks have theirs."

Willard and Esther looked at each other.

"It is so," said Sam Ellis, with a magnificent gesture of authority.

After Willard and Esther had gone, Sam began to make preparations for supper. It was a cold day for May. Sam was to have a hot supper.

Billy watched him, fairly grinning with delight. "Say, Sam," said he, "s'pose it's settled?"

"Sure," said Sam. "They'll get married right off and then you and me will bunk together. Here, you peel these onions and slice 'em thin."

"Fried onions!" gasped Billy.

"As prime a beefsteak as ever you laid your eyes on and fried onions," proclaimed Sam, "and hot baked potatoes and coffee and doughnuts."

"I 'ain't had any fried onions since Betsey died," said Billy. "She and I used to have 'em twice a week, regular. Esther would have had 'em if I'd asked her, but I never asked her. It would have been a real trial to her."

"I ain't sayin' anything against your daughter," said Sam, "but sometimes I've really wondered if many folks spoke the truth when they said they didn't like onions."

"I guess Esther don't really like 'em," said Billy.

"Well, I dare say she don't. We do, and we can have 'em every day in the week if we want to. Slice 'em thin, Billy."

"Beefsteak and fried onions," said Billy, thoughtfully.

Sam, on his way to the stove with the beefsteak, looked at Billy, and Billy looked at him. In both faces was the expression of men who have regained freedom and found her dearer than they remembered.

"I guess now we'll all be happy, and do our duty, and have our own way," said Sam.