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Stoker Wilde Christie Maupassant Haggard Chesterton Molière Eliot Grimm
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Baum Henry Kipling Doyle Willis
Leslie Dumas Flaubert Nietzsche Turgenev Balzac
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Burroughs Verne
Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Busch
Homer Tolstoy Whitman
Darwin Thoreau Twain
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An Alabaster Box

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Imprint

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.....There came a woman, having an alabaster box
of ointment, very precious; and she broke the
box.....

Chapter I

"We," said Mrs. Solomon Black with weighty emphasis, "are going to get up a church fair and raise that money, and we are going to pay your salary. We can't stand it another minute. We had better run in debt to the butcher and baker than to the Lord."

Wesley Elliot regarded her gloomily. "I never liked the idea of church fairs very well," he returned hesitatingly. "It has always seemed to me like sheer beggary."

"Then," said Mrs. Solomon Black, "we will beg."

Mrs. Solomon Black was a woman who had always had her way. There was not one line which denoted yielding in her large, still handsome face, set about with very elaborate water-waves which she had arranged so many years that her black hair needed scarcely any attention. It would almost seem as if Mrs. Solomon Black had been born with water waves.

She spoke firmly but she smiled, as his mother might have done, at the young man, who had preached his innocent best in Brookville for months without any emolument.

"Now don't you worry one mite about it," said she. "Church fairs may be begging, but they belong to the history of the United States of America, and I miss my guess if there would have been much preaching of the gospel in a good many places without them. I guess it ain't any worse to hold church fairs in this country than it is to have the outrageous goings on in the old country. I guess we can cheat a little with mats and cakes and things and not stand any more danger of hell-fire than all those men putting each other's eyes out and killing everybody they can hit, and spending the money for guns and awful exploding stuff that ought to go for the good of the world. I ain't worried one mite about church fairs when the world is where it is now. You just run right into your study, Mr. Elliot, and finish your sermon; and there's a pan of hot doughnuts on the kitchen table. You go through the kitchen and get some doughnuts. We had breakfast early and you hadn't ought to work too hard on an empty stomach. You run along. Don't you worry. All this is up to me and Maria Dodge and Abby Daggett and a few others. You

haven't got one blessed thing to do with it. All you've got to do is to preach as well as you can, and keep us from a free fight. Almost always there is a fuss when women get up a fair. If you can preach the gospel so we are all on speaking terms when it is finished, you will earn your money twice over. Run along."

Wesley Elliot obeyed. He always obeyed, at least in the literal sense, when Mrs. Solomon Black ordered him. There was about her a fairly masterly maternity. She loved the young minister as firmly for his own good as if he had been her son. She chuckled happily when she heard him open the kitchen door. "He'll light into those hot doughnuts," she thought. She loved to pet the boy in the man.

Wesley Elliot in his study upstairs—a makeshift of a study—sat munching hot doughnuts and reflecting. He had only about one-third of his sermon written and it was Saturday, but that did not disturb him. He had a quick-moving mind. He sometimes wondered whether it did not move too quickly. Wesley was not a conceited man in one sense. He never had doubt of his power, but he had grave doubts of the merits of his productions. However, today he was glad of the high rate of speed of which he was capable, and did not worry as much as he sometimes did about his landing at the exact goal. He knew very well that he could finish his sermon, easily, eat his doughnuts, and sit reflecting as long as he chose. He chose to do so for a long time, although his reflections were not particularly happy ones. When he had left the theological seminary a year ago, he had had his life planned out so exactly that it did not seem possible to him that the plans could fail. He had graduated at the head of his class. He had had no doubt of a city church. One of the professors, a rich man with much influence, had practically promised him one. Wesley went home to his doting mother, and told her the news. Wesley's mother believed in much more than the city church. She believed her son to be capable of anything. "I shall have a large salary, mother," boasted Wesley, "and you shall have the best clothes money can buy, and the parsonage is sure to be beautiful."

"How will your old mother look in fine feathers, in such a beautiful home?" asked Wesley's mother, but she asked as a lovely, much-petted woman asks such a question. She had her little conscious

smile all ready for the rejoinder which she knew her son would not fail to give. He was very proud of his mother.

"Why, mother," he said, "as far as that goes, I wouldn't balk at a throne for you as queen dowager."

"You are a silly boy," said Mrs. Elliot, but she stole a glance at herself in an opposite mirror, and smiled complacently. She did not look old enough to be the mother of her son. She was tall and slender, and fair-haired, and she knew how to dress well on her very small income. She was rosy, and carried herself with a sweet serenity. People said Wesley would not need a wife as long as he had such a mother. But he did not have her long. Only a month later she died, and while the boy was still striving to play the rtle of hero in that calamity, there came news of another. His professor friend had a son in the trenches. The son had been wounded, and the father had obeyed a hurried call, found his son dead, and himself died of the shock on the return voyage. Wesley, mourning the man who had been his stanch friend, was guiltily conscious of his thwarted ambition. "There goes my city church," he thought, and flung the thought back at himself in anger at his own self-seeking. He was forced into accepting the first opportunity which offered. His mother had an annuity, which he himself had insisted upon for her greater comfort. When she died, the son was nearly penniless, except for the house, which was old and in need of repair.

He rented that as soon as he received his call to Brookville, after preaching a humiliating number of trial sermons in other places. Wesley was of the lowly in mind, with no expectation of inheriting the earth, when he came to rest in the little village and began boarding at Mrs. Solomon Black's. But even then he did not know how bad the situation really was. He had rented his house, and the rent kept him in decent clothes, but not enough books. He had only a little shelf filled with the absolutely necessary volumes, most of them relics of his college course. He did not know that there was small chance of even his meager salary being paid until June, and he had been ordained in February. He had wondered why nobody said anything about his reimbursement. He had refrained from mentioning it, to even his deacons.

Mrs. Solomon Black had revealed the state of affairs, that morning. "You may as well know," said she. "There ain't a cent to pay you, and I said when you came that if we couldn't pay for gospel privileges we should all take to our closets and pray like Sam Hill, and no charge; but they wouldn't listen to me, though I spoke right out in conference meeting and it's seldom a woman does that, you know. Folks in this place have been hanging onto the ragged edge of nothing so long they don't seem to sense it. They thought the money for your salary was going to be brought down from heaven by a dove or something, when all the time, those wicked flying things are going round on the other side of the earth, and there don't seem as if there could be a dove left. Well, now that the time's come when you ought to be paid, if there's any decency left in the place, they comes to me and says, 'Oh, Mrs. Black, what shall we do?' I said, 'Why didn't you listen when I spoke out in meeting about our not being able to afford luxuries like gospel preaching?' and they said they thought matters would have improved by this time. Improved! How, I'd like to know? The whole world is sliding down hill faster and faster every minute, and folks in Brookville think matters are going to improve, when they are sliding right along with the Emperor of Germany and the King of England, and all the rest of the big bugs. I can't figure it out, but in some queer, outlandish way that war over there has made it so folks in Brookville can't pay their minister's salary. They didn't have much before, but such a one got a little for selling eggs and chickens that has had to eat them, and the street railway failed, and the chair factory, that was the only industry left here, failed, and folks that had a little to pay had to eat their payings. And here you are, and it's got to be the fair. Seems queer the war in Europe should be the means of getting up a fair in Brookville, but I guess it'll get up more'n that before they're through fighting."

All this had been the preliminary to the speech which sent Wesley forth for doughnuts, then to his study, ostensibly to finish his lovely sermon, but in reality to think thoughts which made his young forehead, of almost boyhood, frown, and his pleasant mouth droop, then inexplicably smooth and smile. It was a day which no man in the flush of youth could resist. That June day fairly rioted in through the open windows. Mrs. Black's muslin curtains danced in

the June breeze like filmy-skirted nymphs. Wesley, whose imagination was active, seemed to see forced upon his eager, yet reluctant, eyes, radiant maidens, flinging their white draperies about, dancing a dance of the innocence which preludes the knowledge of love. Sweet scents came in through the windows, almond scents, honey scents, rose scents, all mingled into an ineffable bouquet of youth and the quest of youth.

Wesley rose stealthily; he got his hat; he tiptoed across the room. Heavens! how thankful he was for access to the back stairs. Mrs. Black was sweeping the parlor, and the rear of the house was deserted. Down the precipitous back stairs crept the young minister, listening to the sound of the broom on Mrs. Black's parlor carpet. As long as that regular swish continued he was safe. Through the kitchen he passed, feeling guilty as he smelled new peas cooking for his delectation on Mrs. Black's stove. Out of the kitchen door, under the green hood of the back porch, and he was afield, and the day had him fast. He did not belong any more to his aspirations, to his high and noble ambitions, to his steadfast purpose in life. He belonged to the spring of the planet from which his animal life had sprung. Young Wesley Elliot became one with June, with eternal youth, with joy which escapes care, with the present which has nothing to do with the past or the future, with that day sufficient unto itself, that day dangerous for those whose feet are held fast by the toils of the years.

Wesley sped across a field which was like a field of green glory. He saw a hollow like a nest, blue with violets, and all his thoughts leaped with irresponsive joy. He crossed a brook on rocky stones, as if he were crossing a song. A bird sang in perfect tune with his mood. He was bound for a place which had a romantic interest for him: the unoccupied parsonage, which he could occupy were he supplied with a salary and had a wife. He loved to sit on the back veranda and dream. Sometimes he had company. Brookville was a hot little village, with a long line of hills cutting off the south wind, but on that back veranda of the old parsonage there was always a breeze. Sometimes it seemed mysterious to Wesley, that breeze. It never failed in the hottest days. Now that the parsonage was vacant, women often came there with their needlework of an afternoon, and sat and sewed and chatted. Wesley knew of the custom, and had

made them welcome. But sometimes of a morning a girl came. Wesley wondered if she would be there that morning. After he had left the field, he plunged knee-deep through the weedage of his predecessor's garden, and heart-deep into luxuriant ranks of dewy vegetables which he, in the intervals of his mental labors, should raise for his own table. Wesley had an inherent love of gardening which he had never been in a position to gratify. Wesley was, in fancy, eating his own green peas and squashes and things when he came in sight of the back veranda. It was vacant, and his fancy sank in his mind like a plummet of lead. However, he approached, and the breeze of blessing greeted him like a presence.

The parsonage was a gray old shadow of a building. Its walls were stained with past rains, the roof showed depressions, the veranda steps were unsteady, in fact one was gone. Wesley mounted and seated himself in one of the gnarled old rustic chairs which defied weather. From where he sat he could see a pink and white plumage of blossoms over an orchard; even the weedy garden showed lovely lights under the triumphant June sun. Butterflies skimmed over it, always in pairs, now and then a dew-light like a jewel gleamed out, and gave a delectable thrill of mystery. Wesley wished the girl were there. Then she came. He saw a flutter of blue in the garden, then a face like a rose overtopped the weeds. The sunlight glanced from a dark head, giving it high-lights of gold.

The girl approached. When she saw the minister, she started, but not as if with surprise; rather as if she had made ready to start. She stood at the foot of the steps, glowing with blushes, but still not confused. She smiled with friendly confidence. She was very pretty and she wore a delicious gown, if one were not a woman, to observe the lack of fashion and the faded streaks, and she carried a little silk work-bag.

Wesley rose. He also blushed, and looked more confused than the girl. "Good morning, Miss Dodge," he said. His hands twitched a little.

Fanny Dodge noted his confusion quite calmly. "Are you busy?" said she.

"You are laughing at me, Miss Dodge. What on earth am I busy about?"

"Oh," said the girl. "Of course I have eyes, and I can see that you are not writing; but I can't see your mind, or your thoughts. For all I know, they may be simply grinding out a sermon, and today is Saturday. I don't want to break up the meeting." She laughed.

"Come on up here," said Wesley with camaraderie. "You know I am not doing a blessed thing. I can finish my sermon in an hour after dinner. Come on up. The breeze is heavenly. What have you got in that bag?"

"I," stated Fanny Dodge, mounting the steps, "have my work in my bag. I am embroidering a center-piece which is to be sold for at least twice its value—for I can't embroider worth a cent—at the fair." She sat down beside him, and fished out of the bag a square of white linen and some colored silks.

"Mrs. Black has just told me about that fair," said Wesley. "Say, do you know, I loathe the idea of it?"

"Why? A fair is no end of fun. We always have them."

"Beggary."

"Nonsense!"

"Yes, it is. I might just as well put on some black glasses, get a little dog with a string, and a basket, and done with it."

The girl giggled. "I know what you mean," said she, "but your salary has to be paid, and folks have to be cajoled into handing out the money." Suddenly she looked troubled. "If there is any to hand," she added.

"I want you to tell me something and be quite frank about it."

Fanny shot a glance at him. Her lashes were long, and she could look through them with liquid fire of dark eyes.

"Well?" said she. She threaded a needle with pink silk.

"Is Brookville a very poor village?"

Fanny inserted her pink-threaded needle into the square of linen.

"What," she inquired with gravity, "is the past tense of bust?"

"I am in earnest."

"So am I. But I know a minister is never supposed to know about such a word as bust, even if he is bust two-thirds of his life. I'll tell you. First Brookville was bust, now it's busted."

Wesley stared at her.

"Fact," said Fanny, calmly, starting a rose on the linen in a career of bloom. "First, years ago, when I was nothing but a kid, Andrew Bolton—you have heard of Andrew Bolton?"

"I have heard him mentioned. I have never understood why everybody was so down on him, though he is serving a term in prison, I believe. Nobody seems to like to explain."

"The reason for that is plain enough," stated Fanny. "Nobody likes to admit he's been made a fool of. The man who takes the gold brick always tries to hide it if he can't blame it off on his wife or sister or aunt. Andrew Bolton must have made perfectly awful fools of everybody in Brookville. They must have thought of him as a little tin god on wheels till he wrecked the bank and the silk factory, and ran off with a lot of money belonging to his disciples, and got caught by the hand of the law, and landed in State's Prison. That's why they don't tell. Reckon my poor father, if he were alive, wouldn't tell. I didn't have anything to do with it, so I am telling. When Andrew Bolton embezzled the town went bust. Now the war in Europe, through the grinding of wheels which I can't comprehend, has bankrupted the street railway and the chair factory, and the town is busted."

"But, as you say, if there is no money, why a fair?" Wesley had paled a little.

"Oh," replied the girl, "there is always the hoarding instinct to be taken into account. There are still a lot of stockings and feather beds and teapots in Brookville. We still have faith that a fair can mine a little gold out of them for you. Of course we don't know, but this is a Yankee village, and Yankees never do spend the last cent. I admit you may get somebody's funeral expenses out of the teapot."

"Good Lord!" groaned Wesley.

"That," remarked the girl, "is almost swearing. I am surprised, and you a minister."

"But it is an awful state of things."

"Well," said Fanny, "Mrs. B. H. Slocum may come over from Grenoble. She used to live here, and has never lost her interest in Brookville. She is rich. She can buy a lot, and she is very good-natured about being cheated for the gospel's sake. Then, too, Brookville has never lost its guardian angels."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"What I say. The faith of the people here in guardian angels is a wonderful thing. Sometimes it seems to me as if all Brookville considered itself under special guardianship, sort of a hen-and-chicken arrangement, you know. Anyhow, they do go ahead and undertake the craziest things, and come out somehow."

"I think," said Wesley Elliot soberly, "that I ought to resign."

Then the girl paled, and bent closer over her work. "Resign!" she gasped.

"Yes, resign. I admit I haven't enough money to live without a salary, though I would like to stay here forever." Wesley spoke with fervor, his eyes on the girl.

"Oh, no, you wouldn't."

"I most certainly would, but I can't run in debt, and—I want to marry some day—like other young men—and I must earn."

The girl bent her head lower. "Why don't you resign and go away, and get—married, if you want to?"

"Fanny!"

He bent over her. His lips touched her hair. "You know," he began—then came a voice like the legendary sword which divides lovers for their best temporal and spiritual good.

"Dinner is ready and the peas are getting cold," said Mrs. Solomon Black.

Then it happened that Wesley Elliot, although a man and a clergyman, followed like a little boy the large woman with the water-waves through the weedage of the pastoral garden, and the girl sat weeping awhile from mixed emotions of anger and grief. Then she

took a little puff from her bag, powdered her nose, straightened her hair and, also, went home, bag in hand, to her own noon dinner.

Chapter II

A church fair is one of the purely feminine functions which will be the last to disappear when the balance between the sexes is more evenly adjusted. It is almost a pity to assume that it will finally, in the nature of things, disappear, for it is charming; it is innocent with the innocence of very good, simple women; it is at the same time subtle with that inimitable subtlety which only such women can achieve. It is petty finance on such a moral height that even the sufferers by its code must look up to it. Before even woman, showing anything except a timid face of discovery at the sights of New York under male escort, invaded Wall Street, the church fair was in full tide, and the managers thereof might have put financiers to shame by the cunning, if not magnitude, of their operations. Good Christian women, mothers of families, would sell a tidy of no use except to wear to a frayed edge the masculine nerves, and hand-painted plates of such bad art that it verged on immorality, for prices so above all reason, that a broker would have been taken aback. And it was all for worthy objects, these pretty functions graced by girls and matrons in their best attire, with the products of their little hands offered, or even forced, upon the outsider who was held up for the ticket. They gambled shamelessly to buy a new carpet for the church. There was plain and brazen raffling for dreadful lamps and patent rockers and dolls which did not look fit to be owned by nice little girl-mothers, and all for the church organ, the minister's salary and such like. Of this description was the church fair held in Brookville to raise money to pay the Reverend Wesley Elliot. He came early, and haunted the place like a morbid spirit. He was both angry and shamed that such means must be employed to pay his just dues, but since it had to be he could not absent himself.

There was no parlor in the church, and not long after the infamous exit of Andrew Bolton the town hall had been destroyed by fire. Therefore all such functions were held in a place which otherwise was a source of sad humiliation to its owner: Mrs. Amos Whittle, the deacon's wife's unfurnished best parlor. It was a very large room, and poor Mrs. Whittle had always dreamed of a fine tapestry carpet, furniture upholstered with plush, a piano, and lace curtains.

Her dreams had never been realized. The old tragedy of the little village had cropped dreams, like a species of celestial foliage, close to their roots. Poor Mrs. Whittle, although she did not realize it, missed her dreams more than she would have missed the furniture of that best parlor, had she ever possessed and lost it. She had come to think of it as a room in one of the "many mansions," although she would have been horrified had she known that she did so. She was one who kept her religion and her daily life chemically differentiated. She endeavored to maintain her soul on a high level of orthodoxy, while her large, flat feet trod her round of household tasks. It was only when her best parlor, great empty room, was in demand for some social function like the church fair, that she felt her old dreams return and stimulate her as with some wine of youth.

The room was very prettily decorated with blossoming boughs, and Japanese lanterns, and set about with long tables covered with white, which contained the articles for sale. In the center of the room was the flower-booth, and that was lovely. It was a circle of green, with oval openings to frame young girl-faces, and on the circular shelf were heaped flowers in brilliant masses. At seven o'clock the fair was in full swing, as far as the wares and saleswomen were concerned. At the flower-booth were four pretty girls: Fanny Dodge, Ellen Dix, Joyce Fulsom and Ethel Mixter. Each stood looking out of her frame of green, and beamed with happiness in her own youth and beauty. They did not, could not share the anxiety of the older women. The more anxious gathered about the cake table. Four pathetically bedizened middle-aged creatures, three too stout, one too thin, put their heads together in conference. One woman was Mrs. Maria Dodge, Fanny's mother, one was Mrs. Amos Dix, one was Mrs. Deacon Whittle, and one was unmarried.

She was the stoutest of the four, tightly laced in an ancient silk, with frizzed hair standing erect from bulging temples. She was Lois Daggett, and a tragedy. She loved the young minister, Wesley Elliot, with all her heart and soul and strength. She had fastened, to attract his admiration, a little bunch of rose geranium leaves and heliotrope in her tightly frizzed hair. That little posy had, all unrecognized, a touching pathos. It was as the aigrette, the splendid curves of waving plumage which birds adopt in the desire for love. Lois had never had a lover. She had never been pretty, or attractive, but always

in her heart had been the hunger for love. The young minister seemed the ideal of all the dreams of her life. He was as a god to her. She trembled under his occasional glances, his casual address caused vibrations in every nerve. She cherished no illusions. She knew he was not for her, but she loved and worshipped, and she tucked on an absurd little bow of ribbon, and she frizzed tightly her thin hair, and she wore little posies, following out the primitive instinct of her sex, even while her reason lagged behind. If once Wesley should look at that pitiful little floral ornament, should think it pretty, it would have meant as much to that starved virgin soul as a kiss—to do her justice, as a spiritual kiss. There was in reality only pathos and tragedy in her adoration. It was not in the least earthy, or ridiculous, but it needed a saint to understand that. Even while she conferred with her friends, she never lost sight of the young man, always hoped for that one fleeting glance of approbation.

When her sister-in-law, Mrs. Daggett, appeared, she restrained her wandering eyes. All four women conferred anxiously. They, with Mrs. Solomon Black, had engineered the fair. Mrs. Black had not yet appeared and they all wondered why. Abby Daggett, who had the expression of a saint—a fleshy saint, in old purple muslin—gazed about her with admiration.

“Don't it look perfectly lovely!” she exclaimed.

Mrs. Whittle fairly snapped at her, like an angry old dog. “Lovely!” said she with a fine edge of sarcasm in her tone, “perfectly lovely! Yes it does. But I think we are a set of fools, the whole of us. Here we've got a fair all ready, and worked our fingers to the bone (I don't know but I'll have a felon on account of that drawn-in rug there) and we've used up all our butter and eggs, and I don't see, for one, who is going to buy anything. I ain't got any money t' spend. I don't believe Mrs. Slocum will come over from Grenoble, and if she does, she can't buy everything.”

“Well, what made us get up the fair?” asked Mrs. Dodge.

“I suppose we all thought somebody might have some money,” ventured Abby Daggett.

"I'd like to know who? Not one of us four has, and I don't believe Mrs. Solomon Black has, unless she turns in her egg-money, and if she does I don't see how she is going to feed the minister. Where is Phoebe Black?"

"She is awfully late," said Lois. She looked at the door, and, so doing, got a chance to observe the minister, who was standing beside the flower-table talking to Ellen Dix. Fanny Dodge was busily arranging some flowers, with her face averted. Ellen Dix was very pretty, with an odd prettiness for a New England girl. Her pale olive skin was flawless and fine of texture. Her mouth was intensely red, and her eyes very dark and heavily shaded by long lashes. She wore at the throat of her white dress a beautiful coral brooch. It had been one of her mother's girlhood treasures. The Dix family had been really almost opulent once, before the Andrew Bolton cataclysm had involved the village, and there were still left in the family little reminiscences of former splendor. Mrs. Dix wore a superb old lace scarf over her ancient black silk, and a diamond sparkled at her throat. The other women considered the lace much too old and yellow to be worn, but Mrs. Dix was proud both of the lace and her own superior sense of values. If the lace had been admired she would not have cared so much for it.

Suddenly a little woman came hurrying up, her face sharp with news. "What do you think?" she said to the others. "What do you think?"

They stared at her. "What do you mean, Mrs. Fulsom?" asked Mrs. Whittle acidly.

The little woman tossed her head importantly. "Oh, nothing much," said she, "only I thought the rest of you might not know. Mrs. Solomon Black has got another boarder. That's what's making her late. She had to get something for her to eat."

"Another boarder!" said Mrs. Whittle.

"Yes," said the little woman, "a young lady, and Mrs. Solomon Black is on her way here now."

"With *her*?" gasped the others.