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Only an Incident

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TO GRACE HILL AND EDWIN C. LITCHFIELD.

**TO HER FOR WHOSE DEAR SAKE THE STORY WAS PENNED,
ALTHOUGH HER EYES HAVE NEVER REST UPON ITS PAG-
ES, AND TO HIM WHOSE TENDER WATCH OVER ITS
GROWTH HAS BEEN ITS VITAL INSPIRATION – TO THE
TWO WHO ARE BUT ONE FOREVER IN THE HEART OF
THEIR DAUGHTER, THIS LITTLE FIRST BOOK IS MOST
LOVINGLY INSCRIBED.**

ONLY AN INCODENT

CHAPTER I.

JOPPA.

Joppa was the very centre of all things. That was the opening clause in the creed of every well-educated and right-thinking Joppite. Geographically, however, it was not the centre of any thing, being considerably off from the great lines of railway travel, but possessing two little independent branch roads of its own, that connected it with all the world, or rather that connected all the world with it. For though there were larger places than Joppa even in the county in which it condescended to find itself, and though New York, and Philadelphia, and even Boston, were undeniably larger, as its inhabitants reluctantly admitted when hard pressed, yet they were unanimous in agreeing, nevertheless, that the sun rose and set wholly and entirely for the benefit of their one little aristocratic community.

Yes; the world was created for Joppa, that the Joppites might live, move, and have their being with as much convenience and as little trouble as possible. Bethany, a considerable town near by, was built to be its shopping emporium; Galilee, a little farther off, to accommodate its art needs; Morocco, a more considerable town still farther off, to be the birthplace of those ancestors who were so unfortunate as to come into the world before there was any Joppa to be born in. Even New York was erected mainly to furnish it with a place of comfortable resort once a year, when it transplanted itself there bodily in a clan, consoling itself for its temporary aberration of body by visiting exclusively and diligently back and forth among its own people, and conforming life in all particulars as far as possible

to home rules, still doing when in New York, not as the New Yorkers but as the Joppites did, and never for a moment abandoning its proud position as the one only place in the world worth living in.

There certainly was much to say in favor of Joppa. In the first place, it was remarkably salubrious. Its inhabitants died only of old age,—seldom even of that,—or of diseases contracted wholly in other localities. Measles had indeed been known to break out there once in the sacred person of the President of the village, but had been promptly suppressed; besides, it was universally conceded that being in his second childhood he should be considered liable. The last epidemic of small-pox even had swept by them harmless. Only two old and extremely ugly women took it, whereas Bethany and Upper Jordan were decimated. So Joppa was decidedly healthy, for one thing. For another, it was moral. There had not been a murder heard of in ever so long, or a forgery, and the last midnight burglar was such a nice, simple fellow that he did not know real silver when he saw it, and ran off with the plated ware instead. And Joppa was not only moral, but religious; went to church no end of times on Sundays, and kept as many of the commandments as it conveniently could. It had four churches: one Methodist, frequented exclusively by the plebeians; one Baptist, of a mixed congregation; one Presbyterian, where three fourths of the best people went; and one Episcopal, which the best quarter of the best people attended, and which among the Presbyterians was popularly supposed to be, if not exactly the entrance to the infernal regions, yet certainly only one short step removed from it. And added to all these good traits, Joppa was a beautiful place. There were a few common, ugly little houses in it, of course, but they were all tucked away out of sight at one end, constituting what was known as "the village," while the real Joppa meant in the thoughts of the inhabitants only the West End so to speak, where was a series of pretty villas and commodious mansions running along a broad, handsome street, and stretching for quite a distance along the border of the lake. For, oh! best of all, Joppa had a lake. To speak of Joppa in the presence of a Joppite, and not in the same breath to mention the lake with an appreciative adjective, was to make as irrevocable a mistake as to be in conversation with a poet and forget to quote from his latest poem; for next to their wives, their dinners, and their ease, the Joppites loved their

beautiful little lake. And they had cause thus to love it, for apart from its exquisite charm as the main feature of their landscape, it gave them a substantial reason for existence. What could they have done with their *dolce far niente* lives, but for the fishing and rowing and sailing and bathing and sliding and skating which it afforded them in turn? It was all they had to keep them from settling down into a Rip Van Winkle sleep, this dear little restless lake, that coaxed them out of their land-torpor, and forced them occasionally to lend a manly hand to a manly pursuit. For there was this distinguishing peculiarity about Joppa, that no one in it seemed to need to work, or to have any manner of business whatever. Its society, outside of the village, was formed wholly of cultivated, refined, wealthy people, who had nothing in the world to do, but idly to eat and drink up the riches of the previous generation. It is a widely admitted truth, that one generation always gathers for another, never for itself, and that the generation which is thus generously gathered for, is invariably found willing to sacrifice without a murmur any latent duty to harvest on its own account, consenting to live out its life softly upon the hard-earned savings of its predecessors, without regard to posterity, and calling itself "gentlemen" where its fathers were content to be known as "men."

So this was Joppa, a place mighty in its own conceit, and high too in the estimate of others, to whom it was becoming known as the gayest and the prettiest of all dear little summer resorts; and thither strangers were beginning to flock in considerable numbers each year, made warmly welcome by the Joppites as an occasion for breaking out into an unending round of parties and picnics and dinners and lunches and teas, and even breakfasts when there was not room to crowd in any thing else. The summer was one continual whirl from beginning to end. There were visitors and visits; there was giving and receiving; there were flirtations and rumors of flirtations; there was everything the human heart could desire in the way of friendly hospitality and liveliest entertainment. Saratoga might be well enough, and Newport would do in its way; but for solid perfection, said the Joppites, there was no place in the world quite like Joppa.

But unknown to itself, Joppa nursed one apostate in its midst, one unavowed but benighted little heretic, who so far from sharing

these sentiments and offering up nightly thanksgiving that despite her great unworthiness she had been suffered to be born in Joppa, made it one of her most fervent and reiterated petitions that she might not always have to live there; that some time, if she were very good and very patient, it might be granted her to go. She was so weary of it all: of the busy idleness and the idle business, of the unthinking gayety and the gay thoughtlessness, and of the nothingness that made up its all. She wanted, she did not exactly know what, only something different; and to go, she did not quite know where, only somewhere else. But she had been born in Joppa, (quite without her permission,) and in Joppa she had lived for all of twenty-four healthful, tranquil, uneventful years, spending semi-occasional winters in New York, and, unlike all other Joppites, returning always more and more discontented with her native place. Who could ever have expected such treason in the heart of dear little Phebe Lane? Of course it would not have mattered much had it been suspected, since it was only Phebe Lane after all who entertained it,—little Phebe Lane, whose ancestors, though good and well-born enough, did not hail from Morocco, and who lived, not in the West End proper, but only on the borders of it, in a street where one could not get so much as a side peep at the lake. It was not a pretty house either where she lived. It was square and clumsy and without any originality, and, moreover, faced plump on the street, so that one could look right into its parlor and sitting-room windows as one strolled along the wooden sidewalks. And people were in the habit of looking in that way a good deal. Nothing was ever going on in there that could not bear this sudden outside inspection, and it was the shortest way to call Phebe when she was wanted for any thing of a sudden,—to bear a fourth hand at whist, or to stone raisins for Mrs. Adams the day before her luncheon, or to run on an errand down town for some lazy body who preferred other people's legs to her own for locomotion, or to relieve some wearied host in the entertainment of his dull guest, or to help in some way or other, here, there, and yonder. She was just the one to be called upon, of course, for she was just the one who was always on hand, and always ready to go. She never had any thing to keep her at home. Her father had long been dead, and she lived alone with her step-mother and step-aunt in the house which was left her by her mother, but in which the present Mrs. Lane still ruled absolute, as she did

when she first came into it in Phebe's childish days. Mrs. Lane was strong and energetic and commonplace; and she ran the little house from garret to cellar with a thoroughness that left Phebe no part whatever to take in it, while the remainder of her energy she devoted to nursing her invalid sister, Miss Lydia, a little weak, complaining creature, who had had not only every ill that flesh is heir to, but a great many ills besides that she was firmly persuaded no other flesh had ever inherited, and who stood in an awe of her sister Sophia only equalled by her intense admiration of her.

So what was there for Phebe to do? She was fond of music, and whistled like a bird, but she had no piano and did not know one note from another; and she did not care for books, which was fortunate, as their wee library, all told, did not count a hundred volumes, most of which, too, were Miss Lydia's, and were as weak and wishy-washy as that poor little woman herself. And she did not care for sewing, though she made nearly all her own clothes, besides attending at any number of impromptu Dorcas meetings, where the needy were the unskilled rich instead of the helpless poor, so that of course her labor did not count at all as a virtue, since it was not doing good, but only obliging a friend. And she did not care for parties, though she generally went and was always asked, being such a help as regarded wall-flowers, while none of the young girls dreaded her as a rival, it being a well known fact that Phebe Lane, general favorite though she was, somehow or other never "took" with the men, or at least not sufficiently to damage any other enterprising girl's prospects. Why this was so, was hard to say. Phebe was pretty, and lovable, and sweet tempered. If she was not sparkling or witty, neither was she sarcastic; and bright enough she was certainly, though not intellectual, and though she talked little save with a few. It was strange. True as steel, possessed of that keen sense of justice and honor so strangely lacking in many women, with a passionate capability for love and devotion and self-sacrifice beyond power of fathoming, and above all with a clinging womanly nature that yearned for affection as a flower longs for light, she was yet the only girl out of all her set who had never had any especial attention. Perhaps it was because she was no flirt. Bell Masters said no girl could get along who did not flirt. Perhaps because in her excessive truthfulness she was sometimes blunt and almost

brusque; it is dreadfully out of place not to be able to lie a little at times. Even Mrs. Upjohn, the female lay-head of the Presbyterians, who was a walking Decalogue, her every sentence being a law beginning with Thou shalt not, admitted practically, if not theoretically, that without risk of damnation it was possible to swerve occasionally from a too rigid Yea and Nay. Perhaps,—ah, well, there is no use in exhausting the perhapses. The fact remained. Of girl-friends she had plenty, and of men-friends she had plenty; but of lovers she had none.

And this was why when the Rev. Mr. Denham Halloway was called to the vacant parish of St. Joseph's and fell down in its maidenly midst like a meteor from an unexplored heaven,—a young, handsome divine, in every way marriageable, though still unmarried, and in every way attractive, though still to the best of hope and belief unattracted,—this was why no girl of them all thought her own chances lessened in the least when he and Phebe became such friends. No one gossiped. No one ah-ah'd, or oh-oh'd. No one thought twice about it. What difference could it make? If it had been anybody else now! But it was only Phebe Lane.

CHAPTER II.

PHEBE.

"Miss Phebe!"

"Oh, Mr. Holloway!"

"Hush. Don't let them know I'm here. I couldn't help peeping in as I went by. You look done up."

"I am."

"What's going on?"

"Come in and see."

"Heaven forbid! Gracious! Mrs. Upjohn will think that's a swear. Don't look this way, Miss Phebe. They'll discover me. What's Mr. Hardcastle saying?"

"The world is very evil."

"The times are waxing late. Why doesn't he add that and go?"

"He never goes. He only comes."

"What is Mrs. Upjohn so wrought up about?"

"She caught one of her Sunday-school boys breaking Sunday."

"How?"

"Eating apples."

"Horrible! Where?"

"Up in a tree."

"Whose tree?"

"That's where the unpardonable comes in. Her tree."

"Poor boy; what a mistake! What are you doing with that hideous silk stocking?"

"Picking up dropped stitches."

"Whose stitches? Yours?"

"Mrs. Hardcastle's."

"Don't aid and abet her in creating that monstrosity. It's participation in crime. It's worse than eating apples up a tree. Do you always have such a crowd here in the morning?"

"Always."

"How long have they been here?"

"Nearly two hours."

"What do they come for?"

"Habit."

"Miss Lydia's asleep."

"Habit too."

"What shall you do when you are done with that odious stocking?"

"Sort crewels for Mrs. Upjohn."

"And then?"

"Iron out my dress for the party."

"Oh, at Mrs. Anthony's? Who'll be there?"

"Everybody who has dropped in here this morning."

"Who else?"

"Those who dropped in yesterday."

"But what will you do to make it party-like?"

"Simper. Aren't you coming too?"

"Not if you think it would do for me to say that I held party-going wrong for a clergyman. Could I? I might win over Mrs. Upjohn to the Church by so holy a statement."

"You had better take to round-dancing instead, then, to keep her out of it."

"Miss Phebe, is it possible you are severe on poor Mrs. Upjohn?"

"Very possible."

"As your pastor I must admonish you. Don't be. Besides, it's safer to keep on her blind side."

"She hasn't any."

"Unhappy woman! What a blaze of moral light she must live in! But I ought to have been in my study an hour ago. I must tear myself away. I wish you all ill-luck possible with those stitches."

"Ah, is that you, Mr. Hallaway? I was wondering what kept Phebe so long in the window. Good-morning, sir. Good-morning, sir. Pray, come in." And having, by a turn of his slow old head, discovered the young man standing just outside the window, Mr. Hardcastle came pompously forward, waving his hand in a grand way he had, that seemed to bespeak him always the proprietor, no matter in whose house he chanced to be.

"Thank you, Mr. Hardcastle, not this morning. I was just telling Miss Phebe I ought to be at work. Good-morning, Mrs. Lane. Good-morning, Mrs. Upjohn—Mrs. Hardcastle—Miss Delano—Miss Brooks."

And with a cheery bow to each individual head, craning itself forward to have a look at the unusual young man who had work to do, the Rev. Mr. Hallaway walked off to his rectory, which was directly opposite, giving a merry glance back at Phebe from the other side of the street. Phebe was still smiling as she went with the stocking to its owner.

"Thank you, my dear," said Mrs. Hardcastle, taking it from her without looking. "Oh, my child, how could you be so careless! You have let me pull out one of the needles. Well—well."

Phebe took the work silently back, and sat herself down on a stool to remedy the mischief.

"A nice young fellow enough," remarked Mr. Hardcastle, condescendingly, returning to the group of ladies. "But he'll never set the river on fire."

"No need he should, is there?" said Mrs. Upjohn, looking up sharply from her embroidery. She always contradicted, if only for argument's sake, so that even her assents usually took a negative form. "It's enough if he's able to put out a fire in *that* Church. It doesn't take much of a man, I understand, to fill an Episcopalian pulpit." (Nobody had ever yet been able to teach the good dame the difference between Episcopal and Episcopalian, and she preferred the undivided use of the latter word.) "Any thing will go down with them."

"Yes, my dear Mrs. Upjohn. It's undeniably a poor Church, a poor Church, and I hope we may all live to witness its downfall. It must have been a hard day for you, Mrs. Lane, when Phebe went over to it. I never forgave old Mr. White for receiving her into it; I never did, indeed."

Phebe only smiled.

"Humph!" said Mrs. Lane, biting off a thread. "Phebe may go where she likes, for all me, so long as only she goes. Baptist I was bred, and Baptist I'll be buried; but it's with churches as with teas, I say. One's as good as another, but people may take green, or black, or mixed, as best agrees with their stomachs."

"That's a very dangerous doctrine," said Mrs. Upjohn. "Push it a little further, and you'll have babes and sucklings living on beef, and their elders dining on pap."

"Humph!" ejaculated Mrs. Lane again. "If they like it, what's the odds?"

"He-he!" snickered Miss Brooks.

"Well, now," resumed Mr. Hardcastle, "it stands to reason children should learn to like what their elders have liked before them. That's the only decent and Christian way of living. And as I said to my son,—to my Dick, you know" (Mr. Hardcastle had a son of whom he always spoke as if sole owner of him, and indeed solely responsible for his being),—"Dick," I said, when he spoke disre-

spectfully of Mr. Webb's prayers,—and Mr. Webb is a powerful prayer-maker, to be sure,—'Dick,' I said, 'church is like physic, and the more you don't like it, the more good it does you. And if you think Mr. Webb's prayers are too long, it's a sign that for your soul's salvation they ought to be longer.' And I said—"

Mrs. Lane knew by long experience that now or never was the time to stop Mr. Hardcastle. Once fairly started on the subject of his supposed advice to Dick on any given occasion, there was no arresting his eloquence. She started up abruptly from her sewing-machine with her mouth full of pins, emptying them into her hand as she went. "Those ginger-cookies—" she mumbled as she passed Mr. Hardcastle. "They ought to be done by this."

A promissory fragrance caught the old gentleman's nostrils as she opened the door, dispelling sterner thoughts. "Ah," he said, sniffing the air with evident approbation, "I was about going, but I don't mind if I stay and try a few. Your make, Phebe?"

"No," answered Phebe, shortly, moving just out of reach of the bland old hand, which stretched itself out to chuck her under the chin, and was left patting the air with infinite benevolence "mother made them."

"All wrong," commented Mrs. Upjohn. "All wrong. You should not leave your mother any work that you could spare her. One of the first things I taught our Maria" (Mrs. Upjohn in Mr. Hardcastle's presence always said *our* Maria with great distinctness),—"one of the first things I taught her was, that it was her privilege to save me in every thing. I don't believe in idleness for girls. Aren't you ready yet to attend to these crewels, Phebe? Miss Brooks is snarling them terribly."

"Phebe's really a very good girl in her way though," remarked Mrs. Hardcastle, indulgently, from her easy chair. "I will testify that she can make quite eatable cake at a pinch."

Phebe secretly thought Mrs. Hardcastle ought to know. She remembered her once spoiling a new-made company loaf by slashing into it without so much as a by-your-leave.

"That was very nice cake Miss Lynch gave us last night," piped in Miss Delano.

"Too much citron," pronounced Mrs. Upjohn, decisively. "You should never overload your cake with citron. It turns it out heavy, as sure as there's a sun in the heavens."

"There isn't any to-day; it's cloudy," Phebe could not help putting in, demurely, but no one paid any attention, except that Mrs. Upjohn turned on her an unworded expression of: "If I say so, it is so whether or no."

An animated debate on cake followed, in the middle of which Mrs. Lane reappeared with a trayful of cookies hot from the oven; and two more callers came in, Bell Masters and Dick Hardcastle, which last first woke up Miss Lydia with a boisterous kiss, frightening the poor soul half to death by assuring her she had been snoring so that he heard her way down street, and then devoted himself to the cookies with a good-will and large capacity that filled one with compassionate feelings toward his mother's larder. With these new and younger elements the talk varied a little. They discussed last night's party, the supper, the dresses, the people, and then the probabilities of to-night's party, the people, the dresses, the supper. And then Dick made a sensation by saying right out, that he had just met Mr. Upjohn on Main Street with Mrs. Bruce, holding a parasol gallantly over her head. And everybody looked at once at Mrs. Upjohn, and then back at the graceless Dick, and an awful silence succeeded, broken by Mrs. Upjohn's reaching out her hand and saying in the tone of a Miss Cushman on the stage: "Dick, dear, I'll take another cookie." If Mr. Upjohn chose to walk down town shielding women's complexions for them, why in the world should she trouble herself about it, beyond making sure that he did not by mistake take her parasol for the kindly office? And so the talk went on, people coming and people going, and Mrs. Lane did up a whole basketful of work undisturbed, and Phebe inwardly chafed and fumed and longed for dinner-time, that at last the ceaseless, aimless chatter might come to an end.

She went to the party that night, because in Joppa everybody had to go when asked. To refuse was considered tantamount to an open