

**THE MAN WHO STOLE A
MEETING-HOUSE
AND PREACHING FOR
SELWYN, PP. 1-75**

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The Man who Stole a Meeting-house And Preaching for Selwyn, pp. 1-75 by J. T. Trowbridge

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MEETING-HOUSE

AND

PREACHING FOR SELWYN



BY

J. T. TROWBRIDGE

AUTHOR OF "CUDJO'S CAVE" "THREE SCOUTS"
"NEIGHBOR JACKWOOD" ETC. ETC.

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THE MAN WHO STOLE A MEETING-HOUSE

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THE MAN WHO STOLE A MEETING-HOUSE.

4-19-18. W.C.

ON a recent journey to the Pennsylvania oil regions, I stopped one evening with a fellow-traveller at a village which had just been thrown into a turmoil of excitement by the exploits of a horse-thief. As we sat around the tavern hearth, after supper, we heard the particulars of the rogue's capture and escape fully discussed; then followed many another tale of theft and robbery, told amid curling puffs of tobacco-smoke; until, at the close of an exciting story, one of the natives turned to my travelling acquaintance, and, with a broad laugh, said, "Kin ye beat that, stranger?"

"Well, I don't know, — maybe I could if I should try. I never happened to fall in with any such tall horse-stealing as you tell of, but I knew a man who stole a meeting-house once."

"Stole a meetin' house! That goes a little beyant anything yit," remarked another of the honest villagers. "Ye don't mean he stole it and carried it away?"

"Stole it and carried it away," repeated my travelling companion, seriously, crossing his legs, and resting his arm on the back of his chair. "And, more than all that, I helped him."

"How happened that? — for you don't look much like a thief, yourself."

All eyes were now turned upon my friend, a plain New

England farmer, whose honest homespun appearance and candid speech commanded respect.

"I was his hired man, and I acted under orders. His name was Jedwort, — Old Jedwort, the boys called him, although he was n't above fifty when the crooked little circumstance happened which I'll make as straight a story of as I can, if the company would like to hear it."

"Sartin, stranger! sartin! about stealin' the meetin'-house!" chimed in two or three voices.

My friend cleared his throat, put his hair behind his ears, and with a grave, smooth face, but with a merry twinkle in his shrewd gray eye, began as follows:—

"Jedwort, I said his name was; and I shall never forget how he looked one particular morning. He stood leaning on the front gate, — or rather on the post, for the gate itself was such a shackling concern a child could n't have leaned on 't without breaking it down. And Jedwort was no child. Think of a stoutish, stooping, duck-legged man, with a mountainous back, strongly suggestive of a bag of grist under his shirt, and you have him. That imaginary grist had been growing heavier and heavier, and he more and more bent under it, for the last fifteen years and more, until his head and neck just came forward out from between his shoulders like a turtle's from its shell. His arms hung, as he walked, almost to the ground. Being curved with the elbows outward, he looked for all the world, in a front view, like a waddling interrogation-point enclosed in a parenthesis. If man was ever a quadruped, as I've heard some folks tell, and rose gradually from four legs to two, there must have been a time, very early in his history, when he went about like Old Jedwort.

"The gate had been a very good gate in its day. It had even been a genteel gate when Jedwort came into possession of the place by marrying his wife, who inherited it

from her uncle. That was some twenty years before, and everything had been going to rack and ruin ever since.

“Jedwort himself had been going to rack and ruin, morally speaking. He was a middling decent sort of man when I first knew him ; and I judge there must have been something about him more than common, or he never could have got such a wife. But then women do marry, sometimes, unaccountably. I’ve known downright ugly and disagreeable fellows to work around, till by and by they would get a pretty girl fascinated by something in them which nobody else could see, and then marry her in spite of everything ; — just as you may have seen a magnetizer on the stage make his subjects do just what he pleased, or a black snake charm a bird. Talk about women marrying with their eyes open, under such circumstances ! They don’t marry with their eyes open : they are put to sleep, in one sense, and a’n’t more than half responsible for what they do, if they are that. Then rises the question that has puzzled wiser heads than any of ours here, and will puzzle more yet, till society is different from what it is now, — how much a refined and sensitive woman is bound to suffer from a coarse and disgusting master, legally called her husband, before she is entitled to break off a bad bargain she scarce had a hand in making. I’ve sat here to-night, and heard about men getting goods under false pretences ; you’ve told some astonishing big stories, gentlemen, about rogues stealing horses and sleighs ; and I’m going to tell you about the man who stole a meeting-house ; but, when all is said, I guess it will be found that more extraordinary thieving than all that often goes on under our own eyes, and nobody takes any notice of it. There’s such a thing, gentlemen, as getting hearts under false pretences. There’s such a thing as a man’s stealing a wife.

"I speak with feeling on this subject, for I had an opportunity of seeing what Mrs. Jedwort had to put up with from a man no woman of her stamp could do anything but detest. She was the patientest creature you ever saw. She was even too patient. If I had been tied to such a cub, I think I should have cultivated the beautiful and benignant qualities of a wild-cat; there would have been one good fight, and one of us would have been living, and the other would have been dead, and that would have been the end of it. But Mrs. Jedwort bore and bore untold miseries, and a large number of children. She had had nine of these, and three were under the sod and six above it when Jedwort ran off with the meeting-house in the way I am going on to tell you. There was Maria, the oldest girl, a perfect picture of what her mother had been at nineteen. Then there were the two boys, Dave and Dan, fine young fellows, spite of their father. Then came Lottio, and Susie, and then Willie, a little four-year-old.

"It was amazing to see what the mother would do to keep her family looking decent with the little means she had. For Jedwort was the tightest screw ever you saw. It was avarice that had spoilt him, and came so near turning him into a beast. The boys used to say he grew so bent, looking in the dirt for pennies. That was true of his mind, if not of his body. He was a poor man, and a pretty respectable man, when he married his wife; but he had no sooner come into possession of a little property than he grew crazy for more. There are a good many men in the world, that nobody looks upon as monomaniacs, who are crazy in just that sort of way. They are all for laying up money, depriving themselves of comforts, and their families of the advantages of society and education, just to add a few dollars to their hoard every year; and