

LONGCOVE DOINGS

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Longcove Doings by Joseph Kennard Wilson

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JOSEPH KENNARD WILSON

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DOINGS**

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By
JOSEPH KENNARD WILSON



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Longcove Doings

I

THE WINNING OF THE MEN OF LONGCOVE

WHEN George Doane, fresh from the seminary, with the ink on his ordination papers hardly dry, and with his heart full of those high hopes and aspirations which are among God's best gifts to His young ministers, accepted the call to Longcove, everybody was sorry; everybody, that is, who knew anything about it.

Longcove was technically "a hard field." Not that the Longcove sinners were worse than other sinners, or Longcove saints less saintly than those elsewhere; but that a combination of circumstances increased the difficulties of work in this seaside parish, and at the same time lessened the possibilities of its success.

The field was small, to begin with; the entire population of the village and its vicinage would not greatly overrun two hundred, and to make up even that count you would have to reckon in men, women,

boys, and girls, old Daddy Simmons, the centenarian, and Mrs. Loder's last baby,—yes, and the dozen or so "Eyetalians" down at the quarry, who in the sturdy Americanism of the region were scarcely considered as "humans" at all. And the church was small even in comparison with the village, numbering only some twoscore members, mostly women.

But in those last two words lay the nub of the peculiar difficulties of the situation. The gospel in Longcove was a noun in the feminine gender; "goin' t' meetin'" was almost exclusively women's work; and the moment of the donning of the toga of manhood for the young "Cove-er" was the first time he dared answer his mother's Sunday morning exhortation to "hurry up 'n' git ready f'r meetin'" with the bold assertion, "Naw; I ain't goin' no more; Pop don't."

And yet the time was when the aisles of the little white meeting-house echoed the tread of many masculine feet. In Elder Patten's day it was "the thing" for everybody to go to church, especially the men. Clergymen from the city, on occasional exchange with the old man, loved and honored as far as he was known, were accustomed to comment upon the large number of men in the Longcove congregation, and to sigh almost enviously as they thought of their own bonneted audiences.

Not that there is anything the matter with the bonnets; there isn't; bless 'em, and the sweet faces and the kind hearts beneath 'em! At the same time, every true minister longs with an inexpressible desire to bring the gospel of the young Man of Nazareth into

the lives and hearts of his fellow *men*, and is sick and sore with sense of failure when he cannot do it.

But after Elder Patten died and other men succeeded to the pastorate, "a change came o'er the spirit of the dreams" of at least the masculine part of Longcove. Churchgoing began to decline, or to be given over to the women and children.

The current of tendency in this regard, deepening and widening with its flow, came to fullest tide in the time of Elder Varley, George Doane's immediate predecessor. For some reason Elder Varley was not a favorite with the men of the village from the beginning.

The general opinion of him might perhaps be summed up in the words of Eph Stiles, in one of the numerous discussions of the subject by the cracker-box club at the store.

"'Tain't thet we're so awful pertic'lar," said he. "Land o' love! We can't afford t' be, th' sal'ry we pay. We don't expect everythin' 'f our minister, but we've got a right t' expect *suthin'*, I guess. Now, ef th' Elder'd go about visitin' th' sick 'n' gittin' 'quainted weth th' children, we c'd put up weth considerable light fodder in th' pulpit. Or ef he'd give us good strong sarmons, thet'd snatch th' hair right off'n sinners' heads, 'n' open th' gates 'f glory t' th' saints, we wouldn't lay it up ag'in him ef he stayed t' hum week-days, 'n' didn't do much gaddin' 'bout. But, shucks! this feller don't do nuther. He won't nuther fish n'r cut bait. He's lazy; thet's what he is, bone-lazy, 'n' thet kin' 'f lazy can't be cured. 'N' I say we've got a right t' kick."

And "kick" they did to such purpose that soon there were scarcely a half-dozen men in the usual Sunday congregation in the little meeting-house. In vain Mr. Varley stormed and thumped the unoffending pulpit cushion ; in vain mothers and wives and sisters coaxed and entreated. Churchgoing, so far as the masculine portion of its inhabitants was concerned, became well-nigh a lost art in Longcove.

But Mr. Varley's final testing and utter rejection came when old Aleck Mason was sick.

Now Aleck was not what would be called an ornament to society, nor was he held in high respect by the village, particularly by those whose possessions were easily portable. At the same time, he was a human being. And when, in abject fear of death, he insisted upon having the minister sent for in the dead of night, with a full gale blowing, and when the drenched and breathless messenger brought back word that " th' Elder said he wouldn't turn out in no sich storm f'r th' best man livin', let alone ol' Aleck Mason, but that he'd be over in th' mornin'," then it was that the vials of the village wrath were full ; and, being full, were emptied upon the head of the recreant and hapless parson to such effect that he was glad to beat a hasty retreat, and to quit the field for good and all.

To him and the problems he left succeeded young George Doane, at the first a palpable misfit. It seemed as if between him and the people of his charge there was almost nothing in common. He was a city boy, to begin with ; used to the refinements and comforts and customs of a highly organized society, things

as remote from Longcove and Longcove-ers as the civilization of ancient Egypt.

The matter of dress furnished an illustration of this difference. To the collarless man a clean collar and a neatly tied necktie worn every day are the outward signs of an inward depravity, and unblackened brogans never yet looked except with suspicion and contempt upon well-polished boots. There are few sins upon which the average Yankee farmer or fisherman does not look with more tolerance than that of being a "dood." And by all outward signs the new Elder came perilously near being a dude.

Not that he dressed extravagantly or showily; but there was a certain intimate relation between his figure and his clothes which made him appear to be "dressed up," no matter what he wore. His *négligée* shirt was never a neglected shirt in point of cleanliness. He even wore gloves at times, openly and as if he took no shame in the matter. All Longcove was filled with an amused disgust the first time he went clamming with his gloves on; and, although the disgust was dissipated by Bob Lunt's sturdy declaration that, "gloves or no gloves, he'd like t' see th' man who c'd beat th' Elder snakin' out th' clams," the amusement lingered, and the story was told for many a day.

But in spite of these merely superficial peculiarities the lad won his way into favor and respect. He was unquestionably genuine, and that counted for much among a sham-hating people. He was a hard worker, sparing no toil or pains to do a favor or to render a service.

The children adored him, and brought him their