“For my part,” observed Mrs. Sterns stoutly, turning the seam of the flannel shirt she was making for some unknown soldier, “I don’t believe any one of the three was ever really engaged to Archie Lovell. He went round with all of them some, of course; but that was n’t anything—with him.”

A murmur from the group about her told at least of sympathy with her point of view, and assent showed itself in the remark with which Mrs. Small continued the conversation.

“It’s awful easy for a girl to put on mourning when a man’s dead, and say she’s been engaged to him; but if any one of ’em had been engaged to Archie Lovell while he was alive, she’d have bragged enough of it at the time.”

The murmur of assent was more pronounced now, and one or two of the members of the Soldiers’ Aid Society expressed in word their entire agreement of this opinion. The ladies who made up the society usually improved the opportunities afforded by their meetings to discuss all the gossip of Tuskamuck, and the matter which they were now talking over in the corner of Dr. Wentworth’s parlor was one which had caused much excitement in the little community. It was in the days of the Civil War, and anything connected with the soldiers aroused interest, but a combination of romance and gossip with a tragedy in the field contained all the elements of the deepest sensation. News had come after the battle of Chickamauga of the death of Archie Lovell, and although this was followed by a vague rumor that he might perhaps be among the missing rather than the killed, it had never been really disproved. As time had gone on without tidings of the missing man, his death had been accepted, and even his aunt, Old Lady Andrews, whose idol he had been, and who clung to hope as long as hope seemed possible, had given him up at last. She had ordered a memorial stone to be placed in the village graveyard, and the appearance of the marble tablet seemed in a way to give official sanction to the belief that Archie Lovell would never again carry his bright face and winning smile about the village streets, and that nevermore would he drive the gossips of Tuskamuck to the verge of desperation by flirting so markedly with a dozen girls that they could by no means keep track of him or decide what his real preference—if he had one—might be.

Whatever loss the gossips sustained by his death, however, was soon made up, for no sooner was the news of his loss known than three girls, one after the other, announced their engagement to the dead hero, and one after the other donned widow’s weeds in his memory. So many girls had been the recipients of Archie’s multifarious attentions

that it would have been easy for almost any one of Tuskamuck's maidens to bring forward such a claim with some show of probability; but unfortunately, by the end of 1863 too many damsels had done this sort of thing for the posthumous announcement of an engagement to be received with entire solemnity or assured credence. A sort of fashion of going into mourning for dead soldiers had set in, and undoubtedly many a forlorn damsel by a tender fiction thus gratified a blighted passion which had never before been allowed to come to light. Cynic wits declared that it added a new terror to a soldier's death that he could never tell who would, when he was unable to deny it, claim to have been betrothed to him; and when, as in the present case, three disconsolate maidens wore crape for the same man, the affair became too absurd even for the responsive sympathies of war-time.

"The way things are going on," observed Mrs. Drew, a stern woman with a hard eye, "the men are getting so killed off that the only satisfaction a girl can get anyway is to go into mourning for some of 'em; and I don't blame 'em if they do it."

The quality of the remark evidently did not please her hearers, who could hardly bear any slightest approach to light speaking concerning the tragedy in which the nation was involved.

"If it was any one of the three," Mrs. Cummings declared, after a brief silence, "it was Delia Burrage. He used to go round with her all the time."

"No more 'n he did with Mattie Seaton," another lady observed. "He used to see Mattie home from singing-school most of the time that winter before he enlisted."

"Well, anyway, when Delia presented the flag to the company the night before they went off, he was with her all the evening. Don't you remember how we had a supper in the Academy yard, and——"

"Of course I remember. I guess I was on the committee; but he used to go with Mattie lots."

"He sent Mary Foster that wooden chair he carved in camp," spoke up another lady, coming into the field as a champion of the third of the mourners who were so conspicuously advertising their grief to an unbelieving world.

"Well, that was a philopena; so that don't count. She told me so herself."

The case was argued with all the zeal and minuteness inseparable from a discussion at the Tuskamuck Soldiers' Aid Society, and at last, when everybody else began to show signs of flagging, a word was put in by Aunt Naomi Dexter. She had throughout sat listening to the dispute, now and then throwing in a dry comment, wagging her foot and chewing her green barège veil after her fashion, and looking as if she could tell

much, if she were but so disposed. Aunt Naomi scorned sewing, and was the one woman who was privileged to sit idle while all the others were busy. She never removed her bonnet on these occasions, the fiction being that she had only dropped in, and did not really belong to the society; but gossip was to Aunt Naomi as the breath of her nostrils, and she would have died rather than to absent herself from a company where it might be current.

“I don’t know how many girls Archie Lovell was engaged to,” she now remarked dryly. “I dare say he did n’t himself; and for all I know, he was engaged to all three of those geese that are flying the black flag for him. But I can tell you the girl he really wanted to marry, and she is n’t in black, either.”

The ladies all regarded her with looks of lively curiosity and interrogation; but she rolled the sweet morsel of gossip under her tongue, and evidently had no intention of being hurried.

“Who is it?” Mrs. Cummings demanded at length, in a tone which indicated that no more trifling would be endurable.

Aunt Naomi moistened her lips with an air like that of a cat in contemplation of a plump young sparrow.

“I don’t see who there is that’s any more likely to have been engaged to him than Mattie,” the champion of that young lady asserted combatively.

“He’d no more have married her than he would me,” Aunt Naomi asserted contemptuously.

“Who was it, then?” Mrs. Smith demanded impatiently.

Aunt Naomi looked about on the eager faces, and seemed to feel that interest had been brought up to its culmination point so that it was time to speak.

“Nancy Turner,” she pronounced briefly.

The name was received with varying expressions of face, but few of the ladies had any especial comment to offer in word. Some scorned the idea, and the champions of the three mourners still stood by their guns; but the new theory plainly had in it some force, for the women were all evidently impressed that in this suggestion might lie the real solution to the vagaries of Archie Lovell’s multitudinous wooing. As Mrs. Cummings said, however, Nancy Turner was a girl who kept her own counsel, and if she had indeed been engaged to the missing soldier, nobody would ever be the wiser for it. It was discouraging to the gossips to be confronted with a mystery which they could have so little hope of ever solving, and the talk gradually turned to other topics,

this one remaining as available as ever to be taken up whenever conversation might languish.

The Sunday following this meeting of the Soldiers' Aid Society was a warm and beautiful spring day, which invited to the open air. Public morality in Tuskamuck was narrow in its interpretations, and among other restrictions it imposed was the impropriety of walking on Sunday except by strolling in the village graveyard. The theory, if carefully investigated, would have been found, in all probability, to have its roots in some Puritan notion that youth in its thoughtlessness would be sobered and religiously inclined by the sight of the grassy mounds, the solemnly clumsy mortuary inscriptions, and the general reminders of death. In practice the fact did not entirely justify such a theory, for the graceless young people instinctively sought for amusement rather than for spiritual enlightenment, chatted and laughed as loudly as they dared, examined the epitaphs for those that might by any distortion of their original intent be made ludicrous, and exchanged jokes in most unsabbatical fashion. They even indulged thoughtlessly, in the very midst of these grim reminders of a life wherein is neither marriage nor giving in marriage, in little rustic flirtations, and eagerly picked up morsels of gossip by sharp observation of young couples strolling oblivious of watching eyes among the graves.

To-day the desire to see the newly set stone which had been placed over the empty mound which was to preserve the memory of Archie Lovell attracted an unusually large number of village folk to turn into the graveyard after afternoon service, and an exciting whisper had gone about that the three disconsolate betrothed damsels had all come to church with flowers. The little groups drifted slowly through the weatherbeaten gate behind the church, but the very first of them were deterred by seeing a black-robed figure laying already her bunch of geraniums on the grave. Delia Burrage, who sang in the choir, had, as was afterward told from one end of the town to the other, slipped down the gallery stair without waiting for the benediction, and so had managed to be first in the field.

The gathering groups of villagers had hardly time to note with what tender care the bereft Delia arranged her bunch of scarlet blossoms at the foot of the still snowy marble slab than they were set aquiver with delicious excitement by the sight of a second crape-enshrouded figure that came to the spot, also bearing flowers. Mary Foster carried in her black-gloved hands a cluster of white pyrethrums, a favorite house-plant in Tuskamuck. Miss Foster came up on the side of the mound opposite to the first comer, and humbly laid her offering below the red geraniums; but although she was thus forced to place her flowers farther from the stone than the other, she was evidently determined not to be outdone in devotion. She fell on her knees, and bowed her face in her handkerchief in a grief so dramatic that Miss Burrage was left far behind, and had no resource but to come to her knees in turn, in a weak imitation of her rival.

The spectators were by this time in a sort of twitter of gratified excitement, and exchanged many significant looks and subdued comments. Those boldest pressed nearer to the scene of action, keenly curious to hear if word passed between the bereaved ladies. Excitement rose to its highest when slowly down the long path came Martha Seaton, more voluminously draped in sable weeds than either of the others. She carried a wreath of English ivy, and a sort of admiring shudder ran through the neighbors as they saw that to this funeral wreath Miss Seaton had sacrificed the growth of years of careful window gardening.

“My! She ’s cut her ivy!” one of them gasped.

“Why, so she has! Well, for the land’s sake!” responded another, too much overwhelmed to speak coherently.

“Trust Mattie Seaton for not letting anybody get ahead of her!” a third commented, in accents of admiration.

Human curiosity could not keep aloof at a moment such as this, and as Mattie advanced toward the Lovell lot, the neighbors followed as if irresistibly impelled. They closed in a ring around the spot when she reached it, and they looked and listened with an eagerness so frank as almost to be excusable. They could see that the earlier comers were watching from behind the handkerchiefs pressed to their eyes, and with the approbation which belongs to a successful dramatic performance the audience noted also the entire coolness with which Miss Seaton ignored them until she stood close to the drooping pair. Then she flung back her long veil of crape with a sweeping gesture, and with a regal glance of her gypsyish black eyes looked first at them and then at the flowers.

“Oh, thank you so much for bringing flowers,” she said, in a voice evidently so raised that her words should be distinctly heard by the ring of spectators. “Archie was so fond of them!”

The words gave no chance of reply, and an audible chuckle arose from the listening throng, so obviously had her tone and manner made the other mourners outsiders. When Mattie slowly and deliberately moved around the headstone until she stood behind it, hung her wreath on its rounded top, and bowed her head upon it with her handkerchief covering her eyes, she had completely taken possession of the whole situation. As one of the young men of the town inelegantly observed, she was “boss of that grave and the others did n’t count.” As if in a carefully planned tableau vivant, she stood, a drooping figure of anguish, while the other two had become merely kneeling ministrants upon her woe.

“Well, if that ain’t the beatin’est!” chuckled old Ichabod Munson, puckering his leathery face into an ecstasy of wrinkles. “Gosh, I wish Archie Lovell could see that.

He’d be ’most willin’ to get kilt for a sight o’ his three widders, an’ that Seaton girl comin’ it so over t’ others.”

“He’d think he was a Mormon or a Turk,” observed Miss Charlotte Kendall, with her deep, throaty chuckle that not even the solemnity of the graveyard could subdue. “He’d see the fun of it. Poor Archie! He did love a joke.”

The situation over the tombstone was one from which retreat to be effective must be speedy. Mattie Seaton was apparently the only one to appreciate this. But for a few moments did she remain with her forehead bent to the slab; then she kissed the cold marble feverishly; and in a voice broken, but still in tones easily audible to the listening neighbors, she said to the kneeling girls:—

“Thank you so much for your sympathy;” and before they could reply she had dropped again the cloud of crape over her face, and was moving swiftly away up the path to the gate.

Never was exit more dramatically effective. The pair left behind exchanged angry glances, then with a simultaneous impulse started to their feet, and as quickly as possible got away from the sight of their fellow townsfolk. They might be silly, but they were not so foolish as not to know how ridiculous they had been made to look that afternoon.

It was only a few days after this that the village was stirred by the news that Old Lady Andrews, who so mourned for Archie, who had adored the handsome, good-natured, selfish, flirtatious dog all his life, had gone South in the hope of recovering his remains, and of bringing them home to rest beneath the stone she had erected. The village pretty generally sympathized with the desire, but thought the chance of success in such a quest made the undertaking a piece of hopeless sentiment. The time since the news of Archie’s death was already considerable, his fate from the first had been uncertain, and the chances of the identification of his grave seemed exceedingly small.

“I figure Ol’ Lady Andrews would ’a’ done better to stay to hum,” ’Siah Appleby expressed the sentiment of the town in saying. “Like’s not ’f she finds out anythin’ certain,—which ’t ain’t all likely she will,—she’ll find Archie was just hove into a trench ’long with a lot more poor fellers, an’ no way o’ sortin’ out their bones short o’ the Day o’ Judgment. She’d sot up a stone to him, ’n’ she’d a nawful sight better let it go at that.”

The sentiment of the matter touched some, but the years of war had brought so much of grief and suffering that most had settled into a sort of dull acquiescence unless the woe were personal and immediate. The neighbors sympathized with the feeling of grief-stricken Old Lady Andrews, but so many husbands and fathers, brothers and sons

and lovers, had vanished in unidentified graves that the nerves of feeling were benumbed. It would in the early years of the war have been unbearable to think of a friend as lying in an unnamed grave in the South; now it seemed simply a part of the inevitable misery of war.

The “three widows,” as the village folk unkindly dubbed them, were less in evidence after the episode in the graveyard. They avoided each other as far as possible, and were evidently not unaware that they were not taken very seriously by their neighbors. They perhaps knew that jests at their expense were in circulation, like the grim remark of Deacon Daniel Richards, that he did not see how any one of them could claim more than a “widow’s third” of Archie’s memory. They kept rather quiet, at least; and the weeks went by uneventfully until the departure of Old Lady Andrews again drew attention to the story.

The old lady went alone, and once gone she sent no word back to tell how she fared on her quest. Now that her nephew was missing, she had no immediate family; and she wrote to none of her townsfolk. The spring opened into summer as a bud into a flower, and life at Tuskamuck went on with its various interests, but no one was able to do more than to speculate upon her movements or her success.

One afternoon in June the Soldiers’ Aid Society came together for its weekly gathering in the vestry. The meeting had been appointed at the house of the Widow Turner, but Nancy Turner had been suddenly called out of town, and her mother, somewhat of an invalid, had not felt equal to the task of entertaining without her. The bare room, with its red pulpit and yellow settees, had a forlorn look, despite the groups of busy women and girls scattered over it; but its chilling influence could not check the flow of conversation.

“Did you hear where Nancy Turner’s gone?” one woman asked of the group in which she sat. “She must have gone very suddenly.”

“I understood there was sickness somewhere,” another responded vaguely.

“Maybe it’s her aunt over at Whitneyville,” a third suggested. “Mis’ Turner told me in the spring she was real feeble.”

“Mis’ Turner herself ’s real frail. She did n’t feel well enough to come this afternoon.”

“Where ’s Aunt Naomi?” inquired Mrs. Cummings. “It’s ’most five o’clock, and she almost always comes about three.”

“Oh,” responded Mrs. Wright, with a laugh and her quick, bright glance, “you may depend upon it she’s getting news somewhere. She’ll come in before we go home, with something wonderful to tell.”

As if in intentional confirmation of the words, Aunt Naomi at that moment appeared in the doorway. Her shrewd old face showed satisfaction in every wrinkle, and from beneath the unfailing veil of green barège draped from her bonnet over the upper left-hand corner of her face her eyes positively twinkled. She took a deliberate survey of the room, and then with her peculiar rocking gait moved to the group which had been discussing her absence.

“Good afternoon, Aunt Naomi,” Mrs. Cummings greeted her. “We were just wondering what had become of you.”

“And I said,” put in Mrs. Wright audaciously, “that you must be getting some wonderful piece of news.”

Aunt Naomi hitched up her shawl behind with a grasshopper-like motion of her elbows, and sat down with a wide grin.

“Well, this time you were right,” she said. “I was hearing Old Lady Andrews tell about her trip.”

“Old Lady Andrews?” echoed the ladies. “Has she got home?”

“Yes; she got here this noon.”

“And nobody but you knew it!” ejaculated Mrs. Cummings.

They all regarded Aunt Naomi with undisguised admiration, in every look acknowledging her cleverness in discovering what had been hid from the rest of the village. She smiled broadly, and seemed to drink in the sweet odor of this surprise and their homage as an idol might snuff up grateful fumes of incense.

“Did she bring home the body?” Mrs. Cummings asked after a moment, in a voice becomingly lowered.

“Yes, she did,” Aunt Naomi answered, with a chuckle of levity which seemed almost indecent. “She had a dreadful time finding out anything; but she had friends at Washington—her husband had cousins there, you know—and at last she got on the track.”

“Where was he buried?”

Aunt Naomi paused to wag her foot and to nibble at the corner of her green veil in a way common to her in moments of excitement. She looked around in evident enjoyment of the situation.

“He was n’t buried anywhere,” she said, with a grin.

“Why not?” demanded Mrs. Wright excitedly.

“Because he was n’t dead.”

“Was n’t dead?”

“No; only taken prisoner. He was wounded, and he’s been in Libby.”

“How is he now?”

“Oh, he’s all right now. He’s coming over here to show himself, and see his friends.”

The words were hardly spoken when in the doorway appeared the well-known figure of Archie Lovell. He wore the uniform of a lieutenant, he was pale and worn, but handsomer than ever. On his arm was a blushing damsel in a hat with a white feather, her face all smiles and dimples. An exclamation went up from all over the room.

“Why, it’s Archie Lovell!”

It was followed almost immediately by another:—

“And Nancy Turner’s with him!”

“No; it’s Nancy Lovell,” announced Aunt Naomi, in a voice audible all over the vestry. “They were married in Boston.”

The bridal couple advanced. All about the room the ladies rose, but instead of greeting the newcomers, they looked at the “three widows,” and waited as if to give them first an opportunity of accosting their mate, thus returned as if from the very grave, and so inopportunely bringing another mate with him. Miss Burrage and Miss Foster shrank from sight behind the backs of those nearest to them; but Mattie Seaton swept impulsively forward with her hand extended cordially. Her crisp black hair curled about her temples, her eyes shone, and her teeth flashed between her red lips.

“Why, Archie, dear,” she said, in her clear, resonant voice, “we thought we had lost you forever. We all supposed you were dead, and here you are only married. Let me congratulate you, though after being engaged to so many girls, it must seem queer to be married to only one!—and you, Nancy,” she went on, before Archie could make other reply than to shake hands; “to think you got him after all, just because you went ahead and caught him! I congratulate you with all my heart; only look out for him. He’ll make love to every woman he sees.”

She bent forward and kissed the bride before Mrs. Lovell could have known her intention, and turned quickly.

“Come, Delia,” she called across the vestry; “come, Mary! There’s nothing for us to do but to go home and take off our black. We may have better luck next time!”

With this ambiguous observation, which might have been construed to cast rather a sinister reflection upon the return to life of the young lieutenant, she swept out of the vestry, complete mistress of the situation; and although Archie Lovell always strenuously denied that he had ever been engaged to any woman besides the one he married, a general feeling prevailed in Tuskamuck that no girl could have carried it off with a high hand as Mattie did, if she had not had some sort of an understanding to serve her as a support.

But never again while the Civil War lasted did a girl in Tuskamuck put on black for a lover unless the engagement had been publicly recognized before his death.