

The Inglenook.

The Deacon "A-Meditatin'."

BY REV. EDWARD A. RAND.

"What are you a-doin', Zebulon?"

"Oh, a-meditatin'."

"Looks like a racin' for a prize."

Good old Deacon Zebulon Frye, a mild-mannered being, made no reply, but kept on walking up and down the entry outside the kitchen door.

He would grin, rub his hands, then flourish them in the air. His wife, Paulina Frye, was pie-making at an open window.

She watched him silently a while. Then she advanced courageously toward the racer, calling out:

"Thar, Zebulon! I know you git absent-minded, but do come out of it, for when you make your hands go so, you act as if you were in an insane asylum."

"Wall," said Zebulon coolly, "now you've given me your opinion gratis, and I'll give ye mine, and won't charge ye nothin' for it, and that is to say, my dear wife, if you don't keep away from that open winder when you ar' a-bakin' and ar' all heated, you'll ketch your death a cold."

"Oh!" exclaimed Paulina.

He resumed, "You say I'm a-forgittin' suthin, Porliny, that I'm absent-minded, and you forgit I was only a-meditatin'. You don't see how you're workin' in a draft, all heated, by that cold winder."

"Wall," said Paulina, recovering herself, "you say I was at the winder. You mean a cookin', not a bakin'. Stoves bake."

Zebulon laughed good naturedly. "You've got me, Porliny, ha, ha!"

"Wall," said Paulina promptly, following up the advantage she had gained: "I was a-cookin'. That's what I was doin'. Now what were you doin'?"

I was a paintin' the meetin' hus."

"A what? And makin' your hands go like a paint brush?"

"I spose so, but I was all the time in my mind figurin' up the cost, and I couldn't answer ye."

"Painter and math-mathertishion all in one," said Paulina sarcastically, struggling with the long word, while she sent a feathered and pointed little arrow at her husband. "Paintin' and fingerin' all at once."

He did not lose his good nature, but took the sarcasm as a compliment to the capacity of his powers.

"Wall, now, I'll explain. I came round hum by the meetin' hus, and I sez to myself, 'Tis awful shabby. No doubt about it, no doubt about it.' Then I sez, 'Now if I go round and see Square Tuck and Judge Peters and Doctor Gibbs, pickin' up here dollars and there five dollars, and so on, why, the thing is done.' Thar, Porliny, that's the long and that's the short of it. I was jest fingerin' up the expense and a-puttin' some paint on myself as I worked, ha, ha!"

"Wall, Zebulon, ain't ye a-goin' to let the wimmun folks help?"

"What?" he asked in some perplexity.

"Let the wimmun folks help? If you're really practisin' with a brush, I think I could lay on a coat as well as you."

Zebulon stared at Paulina. "Oh, what I saiz, Zebulon, was only a 'figger,'" said Paulina sending another little arrow at her husband. "I am only a-fingerin'. Now I

know our 'Wimmun's Mite Society.' Twenty-five dollars out of our treasury wouldn't go amiss, would it? We wimmun want to help. Wouldn't twenty-five out of the treasury help?—for we've got it—wouldn't it help as well as some of your fingers?"

"Oh sartin, sartin. Now I'll feed the critters." He just put on his barn hat and left the kitchen.

"Wall," said Paulina, watching him stalking down through the yard, his gray hair sticking out on either side of the old hat like wings, "that Zebulon is a good man, but he can turn a corner quick: one of his 'now corners.' A discussion will be a-gettin' interestin' and he'll say, 'Now, I must do this or do that.' I thought I would jest say we wimmun might help, but he's so full of what we men can do, that it didn't seem to make much impression."

Two wings of gray hair having disappeared behind a red barn door, Paulina turned away from the window. She began to cough. She sneezed again.

"Dear me, I do b'lieve I've got cold at that open winder. I spects I got awful heated."

She had indeed taken cold and a severe one. That night she woke up feeling an uneasy heat in her chest. She worried through the darkness, hearing with relief the sober striking of the tall eight-day clock in the front entry, the musical rumble of a distant railroad freight train at three, and then the energetic and cheery crowing of a "Plymouth Rock" out in the hen house.

All the next day she was "aillin'," pretending to do vigorous housework but never going over ten feet from the kitchen stove, Zebulon watching her, and keeping her back in that circle with a ten-foot radius. At times he eyed her with a serious look and each time would stuff the stove full of wood till she thought her face, like the stove, must have "a red hot look." Toward night, Zebulon thought he would get Doctor Gibbs to come in and "run an eye" over her.

The doctor came, fingered her pulse, took her temperature, asked a few questions, and out in the entry, what was he saying to Zebulon? How Paulina listened! "Thar! Did I ever see sich a man! Zeb, let the doctor say suthin' I couldn't hear, and then Zeb said suthin', and then wanted to know if he could rely on the doctor to give five dollars toward paintin' the meetin' hus. That's what I call followin' a thing up. Why won't he let us wimmun folks do suthin'? Why don't he say, 'Porliny, can I rely on you—? Oh, here he comes.'"

Zebulon seriously looked at her.

"Now, Zeb, now tell me, did the doctor say it was pneumony?"

"Ahem," replied Zebulon, speaking very deliberately. "He said—you must—be keeful, and had better go to bed, now."

She made no answer, but went to her bed in a little room off the kitchen promptly and tried to sleep. What a night! Sometimes it seemed as if Zebulon's red hot stove were inside her lungs. She groaned not. She could stand pain as stoically as a first century martyr, or a Rocky Mountain Indian.

From that night she grew steadily worse. At last the doctor said, "It's just about an even chance, and I would be ready for what comes."

Poor Z-bulon. He began to think of her virtues and his shortcomings. What a pretty girl she was once. He used to say her pink and white cheeks were like apple-blossoms, and her blue eyes when the light danced and laughed were like "meader brooks runnin' in the sun." The more he thought it over, the more she seemed like an angel, and he, Zebulon, oh, how sorry he was that he had not at the very first told her about paintin' the meeting house!

She woke out of a sleep one morning, and there sat Zebulon by the bedside, looking sad and hopeless as a man on his way to the gallows. He watched her narrowly. Was she really awake? No doubt about it. He felt that he must be timely in breaking bad news to her.

She turned her eyes toward him, eyes now like the "meader brooks" in the storm, the "sunshine" forever gone.

"Porliny," he said slowly and solemnly, "do you think you'll pull through?"

"I dunno."

It was hard to say the next words, but preparation must be made.

"You—you'd be—willin' to—to—die?" An awful pause then.

"Wall," said Paulina at last, staring at the ceiling, "if I had to—but I don't want to die."

He must get her ready, and he bared his own neck to the block that she might not fear the executioner. "If it were me, Porliny, I don't think it would be hard, for when you think it over, what is there for us two folks a gettin' old, to live for and"—"Oh, fudge, there's lots of things to live for."

She took her eyes off the ceiling and focused them on Zebulon. Was the sun coming back to the "meader brooks?"

"Zebulon," she said deliberately, "there's a verse from a Psalm a-goin' thro' my head; 'I shall not die, but live,' and—yes—I'm goin' to paint the meetin' hus."

Zebulon had a side that was sensitive to the ludicrous. There were tears filling his eyes, but a smile was stealing out of the corner of his mouth. He wanted to say:

"There's nothin' in that Scripture verse 'bout paintin' the meetin' hus," but "I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the Lord."

He kindly stopped his thinking, flattened out the corners of his mouth, and said in a hushing tone: "Thar, thar, you go to sleep now. I hear the doctor and I'll let him in."

He met the doctor at the door.

"How is your wife?"

"Wall, seems as if she was a-wanderin'!"—

"A bad sign, Deacon Frye; I am afraid she's slipping through our hands in spite of all our trying to hold her back. I can't seem to stop her, and she is slipping past me. If I could arouse in her some measure of resistance, it would make ground on which to build a little hope. Wandering, was she? Well, what did she say?"

"She sez, 'I'm goin' to paint the meetin' hus.'"

Zebulon's mouth corners were again twitching in spite of that sense of the gravity of the situation that gave a crimson moisture to his eyes.

"Paint the meeting house? She does not think she is going out, brush in hand, to daub that building? I should say she was indeed wandering. What did she say it for? I remember you dropped a word with me about painting the meeting house."

Zebulon then made a clean breast of the matter, and told all that had passed between him and his wife on the subject.

"Humph! Let me see her."