ABIGAIL STONE'S INDEPENDENCE; BY WAY OF THE GARDEN: BY BERTHA HELEN CRABBE

... that was mortal of Aunt Mary Shaw was in her grave. The funeral coaches went slowly down the hill from the cemetery. In the second coach with her niece, Mrs. Wells Martin, and her niece's husband, sat Abigail Stone. She was a great, gaunt, powerful-looking old woman with a square, rugged face, dark with tan. Her shabby best clothes set awkwardly upon her. The dingy black bonnet had slipped to one side, and her bony brown hands were bursting out of her gloves. There was a strange, hunted expression in her little blue eyes. The overhanging eyebrows twitched nervously. Her broad mouth was grim. She kept twisting uneasily in her corner.

Mrs. Martin pressed a damp, black-bordered handkerchief to her eyes. Her long, aquiline nose was reddened at the tip.

“For mercy's sake, Aunt Abigail, can't you set still?” she complained. “Wells,” to her husband, “can't you make her set still? Goodness knows it's enough to go through with Great-aunt Mary's fun'ral without havin' Aunt Abigail twistin' an' turnin' like a teetotem all the time.”

Wells Martin looked at Abigail nervously. He was a large, baby-faced man with a fierce black mustache. His thick, work-worn hands rested awkwardly upon his shiny black broadcloth knees.

“Can't you set still a while, Aunt Abigail?” he suggested weakly, “Louisa, she's sort of upset, you know.”

“I'm goin' to get out,” Abigail announced defiantly; “I'm goin' to get right out an' walk home.”

“Walk home!” Mrs. Martin gave a little shriek. “Now, Aunt Abigail, you ain't goin' to do anything of the kind! The idea! I never heard of such a thing! How t'would look for you to get out an' walk home from your own aunt's funeral.”

“I'm goin' to get out,” Abigail asserted stubbornly.

“Aunt Abigail Stone, don't you dare get out! Mercy sakes, haven't we had enough trouble with you today, tryin' to get you dressed decent, an' then havin' to fairly drag you to the fun'ral? The idea of not wantin' to come to the fun'ral of your own aunt that's supported an' kep' you all these years! Heathenish, I call it! An' you never bein' inside a church in land-knows-when, an' roamin' round the country lookin' like a scarecrow, in season an' out! Don't you dare get out o' this carriage!”

“I'm goin' to get out. I'll come home the back way through the woods. There won't nobody see me.”
ABIGAIL STONE’S INDEPENDENCE

“Aunt Abigail!”
Abigail opened the coach door. “Here, stop a minute; I want to get out,” she called to the driver.
“Aunt Abigail! Oh, she’ll be the death o’ me!”
Abigail stepped out of the coach. The Martins watched her walk down a lane toward the woods. She was splendidly strong and upright. She strode along rapidly, her full black skirts flapping about her heavy ankles.

Once in the shelter of the woods, Abigail Stone tore off her gloves and bonnet, and standing with her face lifted to the breeze, she breathed great deep breaths of the pine-scented air. The constraint of the world with its arbitrary conventions, which among other things decree that one must under pain of being judged a monster, attend upon the committing to earth of the out-grown mortality of a loved one, dropped from her. Here she was at home and at peace. Here she could bear the ache in her heart that had burdened her persistently ever since the night Aunt Mary died. Here she drew near to Aunt Mary, to an Aunt Mary, in all the familiar homeliness of every day, even down to the old brown shawl around her shoulders and the mole on her right eyelid, to Aunt Mary glorified to shining soul, to Aunt Mary deified, the understanding God, Himself.

The hunted expression left Abigail’s eyes. She walked along quietly, her head drooping slightly. She felt the warmth of the spring sunshine, she saw the tender new fronds of the ferns, she saw the trickle of water over a mossy rock. She came to a little cleared place where pale anemones trembled in the wind. Here she paused and put forth her arms in a wide gesture eloquent of her utter inability to cope with the miracle of beauty before her. For a long time she stood looking at the quivering anemones. Suddenly she raised her rugged old face to the sunlight. “You understand, God,” she said. And then she murmured, her voice soft and shaken, “Aunt Mary?”

THERE was a deep peace in her face when she strode down the hill toward home. It was a poor little unpainted house where she and Aunt Mary had lived. It had once been a toll-house; the shed over the road was still standing. Since the abolishment of toll-collecting the town had thought itself fortunate in being able to rent the place even at the small sum which Aunt Mary had paid. It was far from any other house, and in the making of a State road through the township, a more direct route had been chosen, cutting out the mile-long curve upon which the toll-house stood. There was now very little travel upon this loop of road; it had become grass-grown. The tiny old toll-house stood there alone among the flowers.
Abigail had a passion for flowers. In the height of blossom-time
the house was almost hidden by them. But more than the cultivated
garden flowers she loved the wild growing things of wood and high-
way and open field. On a piece of cleared land across the road from
the toll-house she had experimented for years in the transplanting
and grouping of wild shrubs and ferns and flowers. This “wild
garden” was a place of wonderful grace and beauty. Abigail tramped
for miles over the country in search of the best specimens for planting
there. When the weather was unfavorable either for working among
her flowers or roaming around the country, she made quaint rustic
baskets of woven twigs and filled them with woodsy things. The back
porch of the house was strung with them.

On this day of Aunt Mary’s funeral, the very spirit of spring-tide
happiness hovered over the little toll-house. The sun shone warm
upon the weather-blackened roof, the garden flashed with the color of
flowers and the gloss of new leaves. Birds sang, and a soft, sweet
breeze wandered lingeringly here and there.

Among the flowers back of the house stood Wells Martin with
Amos Howe, the husband of Abigail’s other niece, Anna. They had
come from a neighboring town to attend Aunt Mary’s funeral. Their
muddy old two-seated carriage, with its team of bony black horses,
stood under the toll shed. The two men looked stiff and uncomfort-
able in their Sunday suits. They stood with their hands behind them,
and with a hushed solemnity fitted to the occasion, discussed the
weather, Aunt Mary’s funeral sermon and the amount her household
goods ought to bring at auction. They stopped speaking when
Abigail appeared and with elaborate carelessness sauntered around a
corner of the house. They were a little afraid of Abigail.

Abigail went into the kitchen. She put her gloves and bonnet on
a shelf of the dresser beside the door. Aunt Mary’s little brown
shawl was on that shelf. It was spotted where she had spilled things
upon it in eating, and the brass safety pin was stuck in it with the
clasp unfastened. Abigail closed the dresser door softly.

She heard her nieces stepping about up-stairs. They were open-
ing and shutting bureau drawers and talking rapidly. They were in
Aunt Mary’s room. There was a sound as though a trunk were being
pulled across the floor. Abigail heard the cover creak as it was lifted.
She heard the voices of the two women. After a time the trunk was
closed and pushed back.

Abigail stood listening. The hunted expression came back to her
eyes. Her eyebrows twitched, her bony hands opened and closed
nervously, her breath came hard. She heard the women go into her
bedroom. She heard the bureau drawers pulled open and shut. The
wardrobe doors grated where they stuck at the bottom. She heard the businesslike voices of the women.

After a little while they came down the stairs. Abigail stood motionless against the wall in the far corner of the kitchen and watched them. They had their arms full of things. They started slightly when they saw Abigail.

“Oh, there you are,” Mrs. Martin said; “Anna and I have been lookin’ around some. We thought seein’ we was goin’ to take you to live with us the rest o’ your days, we was entitled to a little somethin’, so we took a few little things of Aunt Mary’s. I don’t suppose you’ll care. We’re goin’ to have an auction for you as soon as things is settled, an’ sell off the furniture. Then you can divide the money between me an’ Anna to help pay for your keep. But land knows there won’t be much. I had no idea Aunt Mary lived so poor. But then, o’ course, that pension money she got wa’n’t more’n enough to keep one an’ there you an’ her both lived on it. Goodness knows what’ll ever become of you now she’s dead if t’wa’n’t for me an’ Anna.” Mrs. Martin paused as one who has made an impressive point.

Abigail kept silence. Mrs. Martin went on a trifle hurriedly, “I’ve took Aunt Mary’s black satin an’ her lace shawl an’ a few other little things. I didn’t s’pose you’d want ’em. You’re so big you never could wear ’em anyhow. An’ I’m goin’ to send over for the parlor rocker an’ the round table before the auction. Anna, she’s took Aunt Mary’s cameo breast-pin an’ the carved handkerchief box an’ that gray alpaca dress, an’ she’s goin’ to send for the four-post bed.”

Abigail said nothing. She stood motionless, her gaunt figure seeming of heroic size in the low-ceiled kitchen.

Anna Howe looked at her fearfully and slid around back of her sister. Anna was a nervous, worn little woman with wispy, untidy hair and a short childish figure.

“Come on, Louisa,” she whispered, plucking at Mrs. Martin’s sleeve; “let’s go into the front room again. You said you’d look an’ see if Grandma Stone’s picture ain’t in that chimney cupboard. I want it if it is.”

The women went into the front room.

Abigail still stood against the wall. She heard the cupboard door being opened. She heard the voices of the women. Presently they began to talk angrily. Their voices rose heedlessly.

“I tell you, you’ve got to take her first, Anna!” Abigail heard; “I can’t have an old woman ‘round under foot when I’m gettin’ ready for Susie’s weddin’!”

Mrs. Howe made an indignant rejoinder. She spoke lower than her sister. Abigail heard only a word here and there.
ABIGAIL STONE'S INDEPENDENCE

Then came Mrs. Martin's sharp voice again, "Well, havin' Amos' folks on from the West ain't a weddin' by any means. You can just as well put her into that little north chamber as not. She can help with the housework. Land knows she'd ought to be willin' to if we're goin' to keep her body an' soul for six months turn an' turn about every year! I, for one—""

Mrs. Howe's voice interrupted. Then Abigail heard, "What are we goin' to do then, I'd like to know? Send her to the poor-house? How folk would talk! Now, there ain't no use disputin' it, Anna, you've got to take her first. Then when your six months is up, I'll take her. Come on, we'll tell her to get her things packed. It's gettin' late."

Mrs. Martin walked firmly into the kitchen. Mrs. Howe followed. She looked weakly resentful.

"Now, Aunt Abigail," Mrs. Martin directed in her efficient voice, "you go right an' pack up. Anna's goin' to take you to live with her for six months an', then I'm goin' to take you. We'll have you turn an' turn about an' you'll never lack for a good home as long as you live. Hurry now."

"I'm not a-goin'," Abigail said.

"What!" Mrs. Martin gasped. Mrs. Howe looked quickly at Abigail.

"I'm not a-goin'. I'm goin' to stay right here."

"But you can't! Don't you see you can't!" Mrs. Martin cried in exasperation; "Why, there ain't a cent o' money for you to live on! I hope you know Aunt Mary's pension money won't be paid no more now she's dead. An' after payin' for the fun'ral there's nothin' left but her furniture. Of course, she wanted you should have that; but, land, it won't put bread an' butter in your mouth nor clothes on your back nor fire in the stove. It won't even bring a pittance at auction. There ain't a cent for you to live on, I tell you. Now, hurry an' get ready."

"I ain't a-goin' with you nor Anna neither," Abigail repeated. Suddenly she ceased to lean against the wall. She stood upright. She seemed in the waning afternoon light to loom up to sinister, gigantic size. Her little eyes flashed, her strong face worked. The two women stepped back in alarm.

"AIN'T a-goin' to be a burden on nobody," Abigail declared; "Here I've lived an' here I'll die! I may be an old woman, but I guess I ain't sunk so low that I'll eat the bread of charity, an' charity that's begrudged me! I'm a-goin' to stay here! I know there ain't a penny left as well as you do! I'd be a fool if I didn't. I ain't
goin’ to sell Aunt Mary’s furniture to strangers neither. I should laugh if I couldn’t keep a roof over my head an’ bread an’ butter in my mouth! I should laugh if I couldn’t!”

The women stared at her. Even Mrs. Martin was at a loss. She ran to the door and called, “Wells, Wells, you come here! I don’t know what’s the matter with Aunt Abigail.”

The men moved reluctantly toward the house.

“Oh, Wells, here’s Aunt Abigail says she won’t come to live with neither me nor Anna. I don’t know what to make of her.”

The two men looked sheepishly at Abigail.

“Well, why don’t you say something?” Mrs. Martin prompted irritably.

“You better come along, Aunt Abigail,” Mr. Martin ventured after some thought.

“I ain’t a-goin’,” Abigail repeated, and her thin lips closed with a final firmness.

The Howes and Martins stared at her helplessly. After a little while they stepped out on the back porch. There they stood and discussed the situation in guarded tones.

Abigail did not move from her position in the kitchen. She caught little snatches of Mrs. Martin’s share in the discussion.

“You know how folks’ll talk.” “Well, no, t’aint as if she was feeble or nothin’. Goodness knows, she’s strong as an ox.” “... what she could do at her time o’ life.” “Mercy, no, I’m not Hankerin’ to have her around—” “Well, maybe.”

In a few minutes Mrs. Martin, as spokesman, returned to the kitchen.

“Well, Aunt Abigail, I’ll tell you what we’ve decided. Seein’ you’re so set on livin’ here an’ the rent’s been paid for this month any- how, we’ve decided to let you try it a month an’ then if you can’t earn enough to keep you, why, you can come to Anna or me. One of us’ll come over in a month’s time to see how you’re gettin’ on. An’ now we got to hurry home.”

Abigail never moved from her post in the kitchen until the Howes and Martins had driven off down the road. Then she stepped from her place and flung wide every window in the little house.

It was sunset time. In the meadow the frogs were shrilling. A soft cool breeze drew through the house, clearing it of the funeral odors of crape and dying flowers.

Abigail took the broom from behind the kitchen door and with strong vigorous strokes she swept every one of the five tiny rooms. On the stairs she found a damp black-bordered handkerchief. After staring at it for an instant, she picked it up with the tips of her fingers,
and throwing it into the stove, poked it vengefully down among the coals. Then she dusted and set the house in order.

Aunt Mary’s room was flooded with the tender pink after-glow. Abigail stood at the window looking out for a time. Then she gently smoothed the white counterpane on the bed, and going out closed the door softly behind her.

In her own room she took off her dress and put on her everyday costume of short skirt, man’s shirt and coat and a man’s felt hat. Then she closed the house and went tramping down the road in the twilight. She was bound for the shelter of the woods, impelled by the same appeal which a child feels in its mother’s outstretched pitiful arms.

Women in the houses she passed called to one another to look. There was Abigail Stone looking like a tramp, traipsing over the country just as usual, and her poor old aunt hardly cold in her grave. Abigail had long ago broken away from all the small-town conventions. She never went to church, she did not associate with the village people, she roamed over the country at all times of the day, dressed in clothes that no self-respecting village woman would wear. But this was the worst thing she had ever done. People discussed it in pleased, shocked tones.

It was not so easy for Abigail to find a means of earning a living as she had thought. No one wanted to employ an old woman, no matter how strong and willing she might be. Besides, she was “odd” and people were prejudiced against her. She tramped about the town for days in succession looking for work of some sort. She even went to the next village, where there was a knitting-mill. But the days passed and still she could find nothing to do.

At last Abigail almost forced her services upon the invalid wife of a farmer. The first day of her work was filled with the joy of her triumph, the second day in the close, hot kitchen was almost unbearable. She kept going to the windows and breathing great breaths of fresh air, and looking out to the woods. She was clumsy and awkward. She broke dishes and spoiled the cooking. The tramp of her feet jarred upon the nerves of the farmer’s wife. She screamed if Abigail appeared suddenly before her. She came to have an unreasoning fear of her. Abigail was conscious of this fear and retaliated with contempt. The whole situation tried her patience sorely; it became intolerable. One day after forfeiting nearly all her pay for broken dishes she fled back to the toll-house in despair.

She was broken now and beaten. For days she lived upon dandelion greens and roots and herbs from the woods. She grew thin and haggard. She no longer roamed over the countryside. She even
neglected her flowers. For hours at a time she sat motionless in the little kitchen with her eyes fixed before her, keeping vigil over the slow, painful dying of the strong, independent spirit within her. And out-of-doors the birds sang and spring advanced, every day bringing new miracles of life and beauty.

There came a day when there was not a morsel of food in the house to eat. Abigail sat huddled weakly in the kitchen. She had lost all reckoning of the time. She only knew that any moment might bring the Howes and Martins. She kept listening for the sound of approaching wheels. Several times she started to her feet, thinking that she heard them. Once she fancied that Mrs. Martin and Mrs. Howe had already come. She seemed to see them moving about the kitchen, opening and shutting drawers, peering into the cupboard and whispering to one another. After that, she had to keep vigilant watch of the shadows in the room so that they might not again deceive her into thinking her nieces actually present.

And on that day it happened that the men who were repairing the state road, put up at the cross-roads a sign on which there was printed in large black letters, “Detour,” and below that word was an arrow pointing toward the road that led past the toll-house. Automobiles came by that way, churning through the sandy road and sending clouds of dust toward the house and over Abigail’s flowers. Abigail saw the dust settle upon her garden. She watched passively until all the colors were dimmed and every plant drooped beneath the drab covering. She told herself she did not care.

The wind shifted. The next automobile which went by sent its cloud of dust over the “wild-garden.” A stab of pain caught at Abigail’s throat. She sprang to her feet. And suddenly out of the despair which had claimed her for days, out of the bitterness of her defeat there swept over her that elemental burst of fury which is the last resort of the trapped and helpless; a fury which spends itself blindly upon the nearest object, which even turns against its possessor in pitiless intent to inflict a wound that shall at least supersede the intolerable state of mere endurance.

Abigail swayed for an instant where she stood. Then the weakness of fasting fell from her. She strode swiftly out of the house and across the yard. Her face was dark with passion, her eyes burned, her strong, bony hands trembled. She was terrible, she was glorious, she was magnificent.

She crossed the road to her “wild-garden.” She seized the nearest bush and with one strong jerk pulled it up by the roots. She went to the next bush and the next and the next. Her hands were torn and bleeding, the perspiration dripped from her face, her breath came in
gaspers. Shrubs and herbs, thorny vines, wavering ferns and rare, trembling blooms from the almost inaccessible places of swamp and boulder and densest woods, things which had taken years of love and patience and labor to grow, fell before her merciless hands.

At last the "wild-garden" was nothing but a waste of withered, dying green things. Abigail drew herself up to her full height and stood among the ruins, gaunt and panting, her bleeding hands upon her hips, her white face with its pain-bright eyes turned toward the road.

An automobile came up the hill, its motor laboring under the strain of the heavy sand. Abigail stood motionless, watching it. It reached the big hemlock, the pine tree, the gray boulder. There was a snort, a puff, a feeble whirring, and it came to an abrupt stop. A man swore. He looked up and saw Abigail. A flicker of fear answering to something in her eyes which he could not understand, went over his heavy face. He looked wonderingly at the ruined "wild-garden." Then he grinned stupidly.

"Say," he said, "I guess my motor went dead in the right spot, all right; you're just the one I want to see. I come by here this mornin' an' see your flowers. I want to buy some. I'm the florist to Wing- ham. I'll take all you've got here and I can use about all you can raise this summer. I want them rustic baskets you got there on the porch, too. I'll take all you can make; they're somethin' new."

Abigail stood motionless, staring at the man. Her face was an absolute blank. He waited for a few minutes for her reply. Then he repeated what he had said, shouting the words slowly and distinctly. He thought she must be deaf. Abigail stood there until he had finished. Then out of the maze of her bewilderment she stumbled drunkenly across the road and began to gather her flowers as the man directed. Once she glanced back at the desolated "wild-garden" and her hand went to her eyes in a gesture of pain. She paused so long in her flower-gathering that the man grew restive. She did not look back again.

It was not until the man had gone down the road, his car loaded with color, that the dazed expression left Abigail's face. Then she looked at the money in her hands, and those shabby pieces of paper, those dingy bits of silver and copper seemed to grow radiant with their message of power and independence.

A great hope, a glorious certainty swept over Abigail. Her eyes were blinded, her heart shaken. Before her lay the opportunity to prove herself. She felt strong and sure and joyous, ready to face the world with her head held high, ready to go her way again without a

(Continued on page 184.)