



Captain Gardiner's Scrimshaw Cane

Joan O'Sullivan

Help you, Ma'am? Aych, we got some real nice Macs. Got some good Delicious, too, Ma'am. Just the MacIntosh? Yes, Ma'am. Aych, I can tell you. You mean the big stone house down there by the road, don't you, Ma'am? Eulivia Gardiner McGowan owns it, Ma'am. Lives there by herself now, since Cat'n Gardiner—that's her father—passed away about eight, maybe ten years ago at the age of ninety-six. You want to know about that house, Ma'am, I can sure tell you about it. Cup of tea? It's been slow in the store—always is after the summer people go away, you know. I'd be happy to have you, Ma'am. Mary Irons is my name—husband's family has had this store almost as long as the Gardiners have had that house. That wasn't the first Gardiner homestead, though, you know. No, old Tom Gardiner was the very first white man to settle in these parts—left the colony over at Saybrook shortly after it started in the 1640's, I've heard. Wanted to make it on his own, so to speak. He came over here when there was nothing here but trees, the bay, and the Indians. He made friends with the Pequods, then built a cabin up there on the other side of that hill over the bay. Started building boats, and pretty soon other people came and settled around. They made the Post Road through here, which was a stroke of luck, and after that the Gardiners were pretty well set. Tom's grandson, Samuel, took over the shipping business when his grandfather died and refitted the whole fleet for whalers. Anchored them over at New London, when it was just starting as a whaling port, then he built that house in the Post Road with the money he made. It's a grand house, too. Big orchard in the back you can't see from the road; Mrs. McGowan still keeps the garden up, too; does it all herself. Course, most of the rooms inside are closed now, since she lives alone and hardly ever gets company. She still keeps the Capt'n's study open, though, and that's a beautiful room. I was in it only once, when I was a child. All around the

Capt'n were still here. Does almost as well as he did, too; guess that's because she was alone so much when she was young. Had to take the man's part, you know. Not that she's not a lady, though; don't get the wrong idea. All of us in the village look up to the Gardiners—always have been the best family in the area—refined and all, you know. That Baptist Church over there—that was built mostly with Gardiner money about a hundred years ago. Eulivia still tithes the same as the Gardiners always did—the church will be sorry when she's gone, though I daresay they'll get a sizeable chunk of the will. No one else to leave it to, God knows.

Look like? Well, Eulivia's no beauty—never was. You respect her as soon as you see her, though—she's got the Gardiner build. Kind of lanky and smooth—like there's a lot of strength there you'd never suspect if you didn't know better. She's got a staunch air about her—like she can take whatever she has to. Perhaps you'll see her—comes by here every day at the same time. "Regular as clockwork," Mr. Irons always says. More tea, Ma'am?

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Livy McGowan settled her big black cape around her gaunt shoulders, picked up her father's cane from its corner by the fireplace, and pushed open her back door with a determined shove. Stepping out onto the flagstone porch, she peered up at the hard, bright October sky and sniffed the air appraisingly. Not much time left, she figured. Scalloping season would open next weekend, and with the scallopers came the heavy frosts. It was just as well, for she was almost finished anyway. Just a few more days and she could settle down for the winter. A trace of a self-satisfied smile flitted across her face and disappeared as she once more arranged her cloak and set off down the walk to the road. She turned right at the gate and headed for the village, if one could call it a village. It was really nothing more than a few old houses and a green-shuttered, white-columned church. Most of the congregation lived closer to New London, back the other way on the Post Road, but the site was a pretty one for the church—set back from the road, trees all around, the bay just barely showing around the corner of the hill. Reverend Conant was raking leaves under the big oak tree that stood in front of the building as Eulivia approached. She saluted him smartly with her cane before she strode past, and he waved his arm eagerly and called good morning to her. She chuckled softly. Poor old man. His admiration for the Gardiners

was absolutely boundless. Whenever he spoke to her of them, his watery blue eyes shone and his oily bald pate fairly glistened with solicitude. He was always so glad to see her—and glad to get my tithe, too," she added grimly. But she chuckled again. Why, if he knew, if he even suspected—well, it didn't really matter what he would do, for he never would know—none of them would—not until it was too late, until she was dead and there were no more Gardiners left to worry about their good name.

Abruptly she turned to the left and crossed the road, entering the dense woods through a barely visible break in the trees. The path she took was the roadbed that her ancestors had made a century and a half ago when they lived on the hill. The road was overgrown with weeds and brambles now, but the wagon ruts were still discernible in places where it was wider. Her father's cane thumped the old path softly as she began climbing the slope. It was odd about Papa's cane, she reflected. From the time he made it until the time he died, he had seldom been without it. He had polished and etched the tooth of a sperm whale to make the head, and he'd gotten the mahogany for the shaft from the West Indies. He'd made the whole thing, from the metal tip to the scrimshaw ships sailing around the knob, on the last voyage of the *Desdemona*. After that, the cane had become such a part of him that she never would have thought of using it while he was alive; now, though, it seemed to fit her as well as it had Papa. The ivory head felt smooth and warm in her long, bony fingers, and it never got too heavy to carry. Sometimes, she thought that if it hadn't been for Papa's cane, she wouldn't have even tried to go on after they were all dead. But she had gone on, after all. Livy stopped her climb and turned to look at the village below. All she could see above the heavy trees were the second floor of her big grey house and the roof and steeple of the Baptist Church. For a moment she gazed intently at the steeple, then gave a disparaging snort and turned back to climb the last few steps to the crest of the hill.

Under the shade of a tall maple tree she stopped again, this time looking down the opposite slope to the bay stretched out in the sunlight before her. A few small fishing boats freckled its cobalt-blue, diamond sparkling surface, and out past the point the Ledge Light stood like a stoical, impassive sentinel guarding the treasures of the bay. The beaches along the shore below were deserted except for a few strutting seagulls picking at the refuse left by the

summer people. Livy McGowan, who professed to hate the sea, stood for a long time with squinting, far-away eyes, staring past the boats, past the lighthouse, out to the hard blue line of the horizon. Finally she sighed, shook herself, and resolutely descended to the ruins of a cabin which lay just on the other side of the hill.

The roof of the Gardiners' first home had long ago fallen in, and large gaping holes had appeared in the floor boards inside. Livy barely noticed the cabin, however, and headed instead for a trap door that lay in the ground near the back steps. She heaved it up, and slid it off by its rusty iron ring, and then slowly descended a step ladder into the cabin's former fruit cellar. It was a small, earth-walled room that Thomas Gardiner had dug for several purposes, from the storage of his fishing nets to escape from Indian attack. The room into which Livy climbed now, however, was much changed from the days of Tom Gardiner. Piled in one corner was a neat mound of fire wood, and in another a big wooden crate stood ready for waste. Against one long wall was a set of plank shelves nearly filled with rows of neatly labelled gallon jugs, and in the very center of the damp earthen floor, glowing dully in the faint light from the trap door, stood the conglomeration of copper tubing and kettles which made up the Gardiner still, a relatively recent invention of Captain Elia Gardiner, Livy's father. Livy stood for a moment at the bottom of the ladder and breathed in the warm, fragrant odor of her favorite pumpkin gin.

Carefully she scrutinized the whole room, automatically counting the jugs on the shelf and noting with satisfaction that Homer had gotten enough wood to last until they closed up for the winter. She bustled around the still, emptying old mash into the wooden crate, filling the tubs with the mash she'd brought in the hot water bottles hooked under her cloak, adding a few well placed sticks on the smoldering fire. Papa had taught her how to lay the fire so they'd use the least wood and have to attend to it only twice a day. Papa had taught her everything about the operation—the recipes, the aging processes, the best woods to use. He'd arranged the whole thing himself and then had brought Homer and her up and showed them. Homer, the local egg man and life-long friend of the captain, had loyally pledged secrecy and had arranged for distribution of their products. What with nearly half the state dry now, there was no problem selling it, for although there were plenty of home brews available, theirs was the only brand around that didn't rot one's

stomach. The recipes were ones Papa had collected in his travels and the fruit they used was mostly grown in their own orchard. They had the summer trade all wrapped up; some people even said it was better than the legal stuff they got in Hartford. So every year she made enough fruit wine to pay her church tithe, and to pay Homer, and to have a little left to tide her over through the winter. Papa had said that it was the only way. When he'd sold out the fleet he was already in debt, for the motorized ships had dealt a death-blow to the sail-powered whalers. He'd managed to keep Royal in Yale by selling the Gardiner furniture, piece by beloved piece, room by room until finally Royal graduated. Of course, Royal never knew, nor did anyone else except Homer, and Homer was the only one who would understand anyway.

Livy looked around her. Her work in the cellar was almost finished. After peering at the labels, she took a few of the jugs off a shelf, poured their contents into the hot water bottles and hooked them back under her cloak. Then she carefully unscrewed the knob of Captain Gardiner's cane and taking a small jug from a special section of the top shelf, she filled the shaft of the cane with pumpkin gin. Casting one final look around the cellar, Livy climbed up into the bright October day and dropped the trap door back into place.

The sun was warm on the front steps of the old cabin, and Livy, sitting on a half-rotted board and sipping gin from the inverted knob of her cane, wished that winter wouldn't come at all. It always made her sad to close down the still, for she felt as if she were losing a part of Papa when she did. Cupping the smooth, round head of his cane in both her hands, she ran her thumbs caressingly over the blue schooners and barks sailing forever in a circle on the ivory sea. Raising her eyes to the brilliant bay before her, she squinted again at the space beyond the Ledge Light. She took a sip of gin, a small ironic smile playing around her lips, and slowly shook her head at the sea.

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There she is now, Ma'am, coming back from her morning walk. See how straight and tall she moves? Does lean a bit on that cane, though, doesn't she? Mr. Irons says the only thing the Baptist Church is waiting on before it gets its new organ is its share of the last Gardiner will, and I wouldn't be a bit surprised if it wasn't too long in coming, the poor old soul.