

[Robert Titus]

W14985 Conn [1938-9?] Titus

Robert Titus, who conducts an automobile repair business in a small garage in Northfield Center is deeply interested in the history of the village, generously offers to provide transportation to the home of a lady who, he says, is an authority on Northfield.

“Business ain't so good anyway,” says Mr. Titus as we start out in his small car. “Sometimes I got too damn much to do; sometimes I ain't got nothin'. This is one of the times when I ain't got nothin'.”

He guides his car skilfully over the ruddy, rock ribbed roads north of the village, pulls up before a large white farmhouse. There is a muddy lane leading to the house, several hundred yards off the highway, and we traverse this on foot, treading on hard ground wherever possible, more often wading through ooze several inches deep.

An elderly woman, gray haired, ruddy cheeked, neatly dressed, opens the kitchen door in answer to our knock.

“This is Miss Turner, the lady I was telling you about,” says Mr. Titus. Miss Turner acknowledges the introduction, leads us into a comfortably furnished living room.

“I don't know's I'll be much of a help to you,” she says. “Bob was tellin' me the other day there was somebody around lookin' for ancient history about Northfield. My sister Bessie would be the one for you to talk to, but she ins't here. She went to Litchfield today. Bessie teaches school, she's a better talker than I am.”

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Mr. Titus: “This fella is lookin' for information on the Peck family.”

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Miss Turner: "Well—Of course I don't remember old Jeremiah so well. My father was one of the delegation that went from here to Watertown to ask him to move to Northfield and start his mill. They moved him here free, you see, they thought it would be a good thing for the town."

Mr. Titus: "He was an eccentric old fella, wasn't he?"

Miss Turner: "That's it, abolitionist."

Mr. Titus: Any truth to that story about him and the donation party?"

Miss Turner: "What story is that?"

Mr. Titus: "Why that story about him and the little nigger boy. < You know when they had a new minister come to the village they used to give what they called donation parties. Everybody was supposed to come and give somethin' something for the minister and his family. They say old Jeremiah refused to go. I don't know why, maybe the minister wasn't up to what he though thought he'd be, or something. Anyway after the party had started and everybody had given their presents in came old Peck leadin' a little nigger Negro boy. He says: "I present you with the image and likeness of God, carved in ebony. ">

Miss Turner chuckles: "Seems like I did hear a story of that kind. It's hard to believe, though I don't doubt the old man would have done it. But where would he get the nigger boy? I don't think there was any in Northfield."

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Mr. Titus: "Oh yes there was. There used to be a nigger family live in that big house of Gill's, years ago. I don't know what they were there for. They had 'em workin' around here somewhere. I've heard that."

Miss Turner: "Well, maybe—"

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Mr. Titus: "He was [,?] very much opposed to slavery, the old man was."

Miss Turner: "He was a strong temperance man, too. But I can't say I remember him as well as I do Howard and Henry, the sons. They were quite friendly with my folks, of course, that's why I remember them better. They used to come over to the house here, often. And late at night. They worked so late they couldn't come at the same hours other folks did.

"They used to get here twelve and one o'clock at night. And whenever they'd come, my sister and I were allowed to get out of bed and come down to see them. So we always looked forward to their visits. You know how anything out of the ordinary impresses you when you're very young.

"They were fine men, the Pecks. Howard was the peddler. Henry didn't do any peddling, though after Howard died, he'd go around putting up stoves for people. I tell you, people missed them. You could get anything you wanted from them in the line of household goods. If they didn't have it on hand they'd always get it for you."

Mr. Titus: "I can just remember Howard. He had a big wagon, and it was just filled and overflowin' with stuff. He had tinware hangin' all over it. How long has he been dead?"

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Miss Turner: "Oh, I don't know off hand. You could look at his gravestone down here in the cemetery. They're the only Pecks buried there. You wouldn't have any trouble findin' it."

Mr. Titus: "Well I can just remember him, and I'm over thirty. It must have been before the war, he died."

Miss Turner: "The Civil War?"

Mr. Titus: "No, no, the World War."

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Miss Turner: "Oh yes, of course."

Mr. Titus: "I remember old Henry very well myself. It can't be more than twelve or fifteen years he's been dead. He owned about half of Northfield, time he died. I remember one time I wanted to put up a soft drink stand on that lot he owns down across from Platt's store. He said he'd let me do it, but I'd have to draw up a lease. He charged me so much a week, I gfrget fgrget how much it was. I was just a kid out of high school and I didn't know anything about leases, but I drew up some kind of a thing and it satisfied him.

"First week I was there I kept open on Sunday. That was my best day, of course I never had any idea the old man would object to it. But he came down ravin'. He says, 'I never intended to have you keep this thing runnin' on the Lord's day.'

"I says, 'mr. Peck I got my lease.'

"He says, 'I never signed it.'

"I says, 'Oh yes, you did, Mr. Peck.' And I brought it out and showed it to him.

" 'Well,' he says, 'you put one over on me that time.' He just walked away and let me alone. Why I didn't even know if the paper was bindin' or not."

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Miss Turner: "They were eccentric, but they were fine men. Howard took to peddling because his health wasn't so good. He thought if he was out in the air it would improve. He had epileptic fits. Their brother Will entered the ministry. He was a fine preacher, too. I've heard him speak."

Mr. Titus: "Well, if you don't mind, I think we better be gettin' back."

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Miss Turner: "I'm afraid I haven't given you much information. Too bad Bessie wasn't home." She accompanies us to the door, bids us goodbys and we pick our way once more down the muddy lane to the road.

"She ain't the talker her sister is," says Mr. Titus as we drive back to the village center.

"You come up some day when her sister is home and you'll get more information."