

*The Hartford Family's Greatest Critic*

Some said the Hartford sisters would never marry, but not for reasons the general populace might suppose. They were not ugly, by any means. In actuality, they were quite handsome. They were not dull. To be sure, they were widely known for their vitality and jolly dispositions. What then, you may wonder, is the reason behind this presumed fate of spinsterhood that the Hartford sisters were altogether doomed to?

An unmarried woman was considered a blight on society, though it was not uncommon for one, or even two daughters for that matter, to not be given in matrimony. Nevertheless, it would make the Hartford sisters' case unusual, if none of them ever married. For there were five of them: Samantha, Rose, Allison, Elizabeth, and Victoria. All close in age, all close in relationship. But we will address their individualities later. For now, we are discussing the reason behind the assumption they would never marry.

Men are not driven away by good looks or appealing personalities. If they were, perhaps these unchangeables might make the Hartfords' destiny a little easier to bear (as these traits are not acquired by choice). The answer to the question is deliberate unconventionality.

The world of Tree Town—and the world at large—was a conventional, well-regulated ship that sliced through the waters of progress with orderliness and decorum. There were rules for the upper class and rules for the lower class and rules for men and rules for women.

The Hartfords followed none of these rules.

By virtue of their financial situation, they might have been considered upper-class, as the father was a successful and respected merchant and estate owner. They did not acquire their wealth in the usual way (through inheritance), but in the age of progress, that was becoming less important. They were quite wealthy, yet the daughters did not behave as other wealthy daughters. They did not merely sit around at the pianoforte or learn the latest dances or sew dresses for fine parties at the coast.

Rather, they worked alongside the working men of the field. They attended business negotiations with their father.

And they read books.

Ghastly, it was considered. It was rumored once at a gathering in Port Town that Allison, the third-born, crossed the drawing room to join a group of men in their discussion of farming stocks.

The men were quite uncomfortable with a young woman knowing so much about money and exchange. With such feminine duties neglected and such masculine duties performed, it is no wonder their behavior would make them less attractive in the eyes of

potential suitors.

For what man wishes a wife to be his equal in form and intellect?

You see their sorrow. You might have heard it whispered in town, *but they are such pretty girls*, as the waste of female suppleness disappeared before the eyes of the neighborhood. The future stretched out before the Hartford sisters in one long and solitary road of censure.

With this in mind, let us begin the story.

Along the cobble-stoned main street of Tree Town, a certain young gentleman named Daniel Copeland strolled. He was on his way to see with his own eyes the spectacle causing the greatest uproar since—well—he couldn't remember when. The rumor of this spectacle had reached his mother just the day before. She'd heard from a servant (who'd heard from Alma Burros) that the eldest Hartford sister had gotten married.

At first he was shocked (as everyone was) but he hid his shock behind a sardonic smile, saying to himself, "Well, some people do have an occasional stroke of luck."

He'd waited an entire day before tromping into town to see what everyone was talking about, allowing himself just a bit of curiosity.

What sort of man would marry a *Hartford*?

He forced himself to lag as he whistled absently. He was sure he would find the couple exactly as he'd been told: happy, in love, and extremely married.

He was nearly to the address of the newlyweds when he sucked in his breath and dodged into a shadow as two people came out the front door of his destination.

Alma Burros and Loretta Humphrey.

Alma Burros was a short plump woman with a plethora of gray hair piled on top of her head. She talked so fast sometimes, Daniel often wondered if she ever actually took a breath (or just had an extra store of it hidden somewhere). She had an uncanny ability of never letting you leave if she caught you long enough to begin a conversation.

He was in town to see the married Hartford. Not Alma Burros.

He did not like Alma Burros.

Loretta Humphrey was not so bad. She was moderately sensible (for a middle-aged woman) and didn't smile too much and mostly kept her opinion to herself. Her only flaw was her proximity to the Hartfords, as she was their neighbor.

And Daniel did not like the Hartfords.

A great deal could be said here about Daniel Copeland: He was the only son of a wealthy landowner (a member of the old aristocracy and patron of Tree Town). His widowed mother, Agnes Copeland, raised him. Though the woman did the best she could, raising a son without the aid of a husband was not a subject they had taught her in finishing school.

Tree Town had few children who were not of "the working class" and therefore very few children were suitable playmates for Daniel. Due to the business success of the Hartfords, Agnes Copeland deemed the sisters acceptable companions—for a time.

Then they grew older, and she began to see them as independent, outspoken, and headstrong.

This was around the time Daniel began to adopt the characteristics of snobbery and selfishness not uncommon to members of the dwindling aristocracy. Alas, he was left to his own devices and kept mostly to himself.

Daniel hugged the wall of the building next to Samantha (formerly Hartford's) residence, waiting until Alma Burros and Loretta Humphrey had disappeared down Main Street. Once it was safe, he approached the townhome and rapped soundly on the front door. The queen of the household, Samantha, that is, opened it, and her blue eyes widened in surprise. "Daniel Copeland, you are the last person I expected to visit us during our first week in town." She smiled charmingly, and Daniel recollected he had always carried a small admiration for the eldest Hartford sister. She may now be a wife, but that admiration was untainted—though it remained just as small.

Daniel stepped into the foyer (noticing instantly how tight the entryway was) and with a bow and a wave of his hand said, "I have come to gawk, as everyone else has come to gawk. I am entitled to my share. Would you not agree?"

Samantha only laughed with fond pleasure and invited him into the parlor (which was also half the dining room). Daniel noted the size of the place was quite a step down from the accommodations Samantha had been accustomed to and wondered if this new husband was not quite as wealthy as everyone presumed.

He found himself in the company of three other persons. Mr. Sommers, the landlord, had come to inquire how the couple found the house. He brought along his wife, Mrs. Sommers. The third was a ruggedly handsome young man with light brown hair and a bit of a shadow of whiskers. He rose when Daniel entered, and Samantha moved to his side.

"This is William Temple," she said. (Was there a hint of pride in her voice?) The young man extended his hand to Daniel and gave him a well-bred "How do you do?"

Daniel was invited to take tea along with the other guests (though they were having tea for the third time that day). Mr. Sommers was in the middle of relating the details of an ocean voyage he had once endured, thus giving Daniel time to observe Tree Town's newest installment. He eyed William with censure, recognizing the man as someone he had seen around town once or twice in the recent months. He had heard from his mother (who had heard it from a servant who had heard it from Alma Burros) that William Temple was on business and was merely passing through. Daniel told himself later that he'd have to pay more attention from now on.

After Mr. Sommers had finished his story, they took their leave. Daniel found himself alone with William and Samantha.

The new lovers asked politely after the news of Tree Town. Daniel was an astute student of Tree Town gossip, but assumed they had already heard the news ten times over. He preferred to steer the conversation in a different direction.

"I am curious to know," said Daniel. "How it came about that any Hartford daughter, or Hartford father, could shed their defenses long enough for a scalawag to actually marry you."

William turned to Samantha. "Did he just call me a scalawag?" he asked.

"Don't let his comments trouble you, love," said Samantha. "You see, Daniel is the Hartford family's greatest critic." She turned back to Daniel. "It's a rather short story, with the most interesting part being the elopement—that is to say—it was an elopement from the town, but not from my family. My family was present, as was William's. Both parents gave their blessing to the marriage. Our parents had become friends and introduced us in Port Town about six months ago. It was rather witty. Even they didn't think we would actually fall in love."

Daniel remembered a time when the Hartfords had gone to the coast during a particularly brutal New England October. He would never have guessed they were going to find a husband. He would have to watch their comings and goings more closely from now on.

"We had been corresponding for a few months," Samantha continued her tale. "When William came to our home and asked for my hand. We planned the wedding that same week. And now we are married." Samantha sighed and leaned back against her husband in a way that suggested she was pleased to finally be settled.

Daniel Copeland stroked his whiskers and surveyed the couple in their daze of contentment. Although he desired to bestow his blessing upon Samantha and her new husband, his habitual character prohibited it. As everyone in the town was displaying happiness for the couple, he felt it his duty to bring Samantha's joy to a steady, harsh reality. He did so by saying: "Quite a work of fate, you might say. 'Tis a pity, really, though I am happy for you both. I never could have imagined a Hartford stooping to the common pursuit of marriage. But as it is so, I am glad you were lucky enough to find happiness."

William's pleasant face suddenly became cold. He stiffened. Had it not been for Samantha's presence, he might have pounced on this one rain cloud that had dared to impinge upon his sunny world.

Samantha, however, was accustomed to Daniel and had never allowed his sour disposition to cause her grief. She often sought ways to lift him from his sullen moods and encourage him toward a more contented manner. But sometimes, she met him where he stood. Proving him wrong was a more beneficial course of action. So she challenged him: "Daniel, do you mean to say that I only married because I was lucky?"

"That I do," he replied.

"And that choice and desire had nothing to do with my happiness or my marriage?"

The question stumped Daniel. Though he believed Samantha to be a level-headed girl, he wanted to believe (along with the rest of the town) that their strange ways would not lead to success. He was also unhappy and, as previously mentioned, he was selfish.

Unhappy, selfish people find it quite difficult when surrounded by the happiness of others.

Despite his unhappiness and his selfishness, Daniel would never wish to truly offend Samantha, and for a moment regretted ever saying a word to the contrary. That regret was fleeting, and his cynicism once again was his loyal friend.

"Samantha, you must have noticed your situation was long in coming." (She was twenty-four years old, after all.) "Considering this, your sisters will have a hard time of it. You may have procured a man worthy of your—devotion—" (What he wanted to say, was "a man strange enough to be interested in such an intelligent and outspoken woman.") "But such a man is rare." He leaned forward and with a flare of his hands said, "These rare men must reside in the remotest parts of the world. One of them may exist, but the chance that others exist—four to be precise—is unlikely. I mean only to say that I congratulate you, and I sincerely hope that I will someday be able to congratulate your sisters in the same way. But even you must admit that is highly unlikely."

Samantha merely smiled indulgently. "I don't know that it's unlikely at all."

"If you're so confident luck had nothing to do with it, then I wonder your other sisters are not more active in the marriage market."

"Whatever do you mean?"

It only took half a second, but something very wicked and entertaining burst into Daniel's mind. He grinned and sat up a bit straighter in his chair. "What do you say to a bit of wager?"

Samantha blinked. "Wort sort of wager?"

Daniel rubbed his hands together. "If your sisters are married by the end of the year, I promise to never say another word about 'luck' again."

"That's hardly fair."

"Fine then. Engaged. They have to be engaged by New Year's Eve."

Samantha's eyes narrowed, but her lips were relaxed in a smile. "And what might we get out of this? What happens if we win?"

Daniel chuckled. This was going to be very entertaining. It was impossible for any four sisters to secure proposals in one year and that would mean any ordinary sisters. The Hartfords were not like other girls and he knew for a fact they had received very few proposals.

The third born, Allison, had received exactly none.

No, they were all going to be spinsters and this bet was already won.

But, if Samantha excepted, her reward must be worth the price she had to pay (for her work was certainly cut out for her). "I'll never say an ill word about your family again—a gag for myself and all my decedents." Daniel gestured magnanimously.

Samantha tilted her head to the side, shaking it slightly.

"Fine, I'll apologize for all the ill words I've said in the past."

Samantha clasped her hands, waiting.

Daniel fumbled around in his brain. He could offer to pay for the weddings, but the Lord knew the Hartfords didn't need the money. His horse? No, that wasn't suitable.

Samantha's eyes lit up. "I know," she said. "You must give a toast. A toast at each of their weddings, praising them and blessing their marriage. And each toast must be approved by us." She reached for William's hand.

William's eyes were wide with bewilderment and Daniel thought smugly that the new husband was just beginning to understand what sort of woman he'd married.

"You have a deal," said Daniel. "But what do I get if I win?" (He almost emphasized how likely this was, but decided better of it. Best not to scare the mouse in the trap.)

"It's hardly fair you'd win anything for doing nothing."

"True, true. But there's got to be stakes. Otherwise, you'll just give up if it becomes too difficult."

"I never back down from a challenge."

"No, I don't believe you would. But I want my winnings just the same."

"Very well, what is it you want?" Samantha pressed her lips together and waited patiently.

Daniel was elated. This was the most fun he'd had all day. All week for that matter. It might even be the most fun he'd had all year. "Something along the same lines," he decided. "An article in the The Post, singing my praises. And it must be approved by me." He flashed a mischievous grin. The townspeople would think the end of the world had arrived when they saw that article in the town paper with Samantha's byline.

There was a moment of deliberate silence, where the only sound was the ticking clock on the mantel. Samantha stared at Daniel, and he stared back, daring her to renege.

Samantha stood. She extended her hand. "Daniel Copeland, you have yourself a wager."

After briefly outlining the rules for the wager, Daniel left the couple and went in search of his next amusement.



After William had seen Daniel to the door, he returned to the parlor. He raised his eyebrows at his pretty wife and asked the question we are all asking at this moment: "What on earth were you thinking, Samantha?"

Samantha looked at him in bewilderment. "I have absolutely no idea."

William sank into the armchair as he said, "What have you gotten us into?" He folded his hands and for a while, both he and Samantha sat a moment staring wide-eyed at the tea table.

Samantha's face was downcast when she said, "I am going to take back the challenge. I will do it first thing in the morning. Though Daniel's darts and barbs will be worse afterward."

"No," said William. He was pensive and serious. "Something Daniel said gave me an idea. He said 'the remotest parts of the world.' When he said that, I thought of something. Men worthy of your sisters are rare. Perhaps they do lie in the remotest parts of the earth. If this is so, we must bring those men to your sisters." William's eyes were alight with a plan.

It was Samantha's turn to be perplexed. "How do you propose we do that?" she asked.

"I have a friend. His name is Reuben Dudley. He was my best chum from university and I had plans of hiring him to do some book-keeping for the shipping yard as soon as I am established. Perhaps we could extend him an invitation to visit and see how he likes Tree Town and the coast. Perhaps, just perhaps, he might form an attachment with one of your sisters. I am sure your family will love him."

Samantha's eyes glistened. William could have laughed or been angry at her agreement with Daniel, but instead he found it interesting and was now attempting to help her.

William looked at her earnestly. "I would never tamper with your sisters' hearts. We will bring Reuben here, but he must fall in love with one of them without any aid from us. Only, Daniel will know we are up to something if a stranger suddenly shows up in town—invited by us."

Samantha smiled. "Let him know. He's so confident we will lose, I doubt he'd try and sabotage." She reached for her husband's hand and pulled him over to the sofa beside her. She took his face in her hands and planted a kiss on his lips, her happiness enhanced by the thought one of her sisters might find themselves equally so in just a few short weeks.