
DIVISION II

THE PLANTING

EPISODE ONE

THE GARDEN OF REV. WILLIAM BENTLEY

SALEM, MASS., 1814

[From lower stage right comes a middle aged man-servant, carrying a small colonial table and a chair. He places them carefully with due regard for the sun. As he finishes, a woman, middle-aged and of the stern New England type, enters with a salver of coffee and toast, each well covered up to keep it warm]

JUSTIN. There, you see, his coffee's ready time enough.

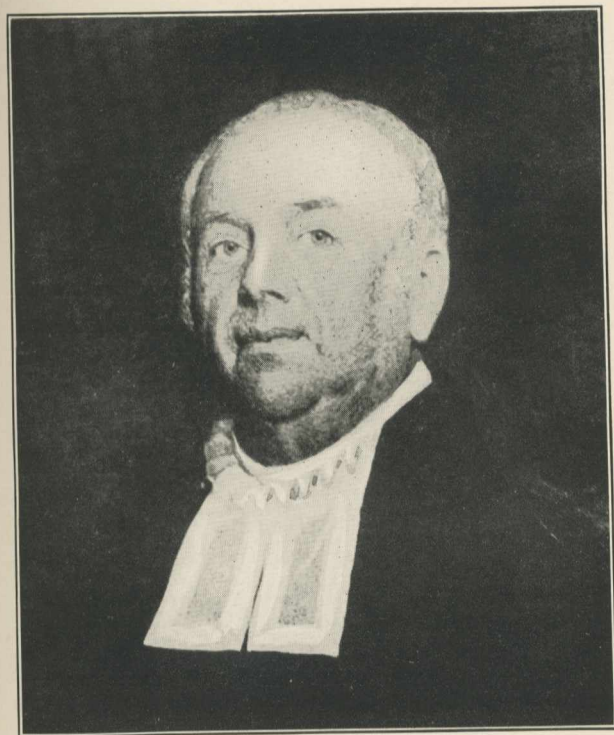
MEHITABEL. And lucky for you, Justin Sanders, with all your talk of the Boston stage being late, and so you wait-in' for the mail.

JUSTIN. 'Twas the stage coach made me late. It had heavy goin' I guess.

MEHITABEL. *[As she arranges the table]* Trust you for excuses for not doin' what you're paid to do. If Mr. Bentley hadn't stayed over the sermon he's writin', you'd have had what's for. It's more than an hour since he called down the stairs he'd have his coffee as soon as he finished his sermon.

JUSTIN. *[With a grin, imitating the parson's walk]* Has he been tramping up and down hard?

MEHITABEL. Up and down, up and down. 'Twas when he stopped just now I brought the coffee out.



*With every sentiment of respect & affection
your devoted friend.
William Bentley*

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JUSTIN. [*Gleefully*] It's what for he'll be givin' us on Sunday. I knows to expect it, when he tramps and writes, tramps and writes.

[*Off stage a man's voice is heard cheerily singing Newburgh*]

"Mortals, can you refrain your tongue
When Nature all around you sings
Oh, for a shout from old and young,
From humble swains and lofty kings."

[*A portly man of about 55, but quick of movement and bubbling over with cheerfulness, enters. His ministerial robe fairly floats behind him so brisk is his movement*]

BENTLEY. Good morning, Mehitabel. Good morning,
Justin. A beautiful, beautiful day.

[*The two answer his greeting*]

MEHITABEL. [*As she uncovers the coffee*] The sermon done, sir?

BENTLEY. Done and well done, thank you kindly, Mehitabel. I preached two old sermons last Sunday, so busy had been the week before, but I preached them with as great apprehension of guilt, my good friends, and as much confusion as though I had stolen from one of you. It is the fault that by a violation we get hardened, God forgive me, so I will no more of that but write afresh each week.

JUSTIN. Begging your pardon, sir, but Sunday, after the sermon, Mr. George Crowninshield said he thought it mightily uplifting, especially this second time when he began to understand it.

BENTLEY. [*With a chuckle*] So he caught me, did he? "Mightily uplifting"! I'll wager, then, he went to sleep the first time. [*He has taken a hot cup of coffee from*

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MEHITABEL *and is walking up and down as he talks, sipping it*]

BENTLEY. I noted another resolution in my diary this morning, my friends—for the future to have at least half of every sermon—[*With a slight chuckle*] and the last half—practical. [*Turning quickly to JUSTIN*] Justin, will you see Elder Whipple and tell him that on Sunday we shall sing Pleyel, Denmark, and Newburgh, but ask him to try them over very carefully this week with the singing school, for when last we sang them we had some melting notes and sublime strains, and a general care in the performers, but needed much an enunciation, as the words were often difficultly distinguished.

JUSTIN. Pleyel, Denmark and Newburgh. Yes, sir.

BENTLEY. Three of the finest hymns there are. Oh, and Mehitabel, will you make up a basket of—well of the good things you know so well how to gather, and send them to the Widow Prince. Saturday last I invited myself to take tea with her this afternoon at 4. As you know is my custom, I asked her to invite some new friends of mine who, being newly come here, are too much strangers to her and to one another. Some flour loaves, good Mehitabel, a pan of your ginger bread, butter and cheese, a little tea and sugar—and a little salt fish. And, Justin, pipes and tobacco, of course.

[*He starts sipping his coffee again, and then stops suddenly*]

Mehitabel, I fear the Widow Prince may not have any tea set she thinks worthy this event, so put in the set Captain Green brought me from China last year.

[MEHITABEL *starts to protest*]

No, Mehitabel, you are really very glad to send it. Justin see that everything reaches the Widow by noon, please.

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JUSTIN. Is that all, sir?

BENTLEY. Are there no letters this morning?

JUSTIN. [*As he draws them from one of his pockets*] Oh, yes sir, I forgot, sir.

BENTLEY. [*Stopping himself in eager opening of the letters. To JUSTIN, who is going*] Justin, as you go to Elder Whipple's, stop at T wharf and ask Thomas Parsons to send me, tomorrow morning, a mess of fresh cunners, some three dozen, for the church children who will come to spend the afternoon with me and look at my Eastern curiosities.

JUSTIN. But, you only asked fifteen children. That will be more than two fish apiece.

BENTLEY. Ah, but they've such splendid appetites, bless 'em—even the girls. Justin, make it three dozen and a half, and, Mehitabel, plenty of milk and some coffee.

MEHITABEL. [*Aghast*] Coffee for children, sir?

BENTLEY. Just "frightened," milk and a dash of coffee, Mehitabel, that's all. It makes us feel so old.

MEHITABEL. You completely spoil them, sir.

BENTLEY. Well, with neither wife nor child, I must spoil something my friend—spoil you or them. [MEHITABEL *tosses her head in disdain*] And somehow I think it safer to spoil them.

[MEHITABEL *takes out her contempt for this persiflage by giving a short nod of dismissal to JUSTIN, who has stood by grinning. As she finishes gathering up the tea things, BENTLEY is running over his letters quickly, and fingering one or two packages as a child fingers a Christmas bundle*]

MEHITABEL. Those two parcels came this morning, sir, by hand. The first is from Captain Owens who made the harbor yesterday afternoon, the second from Captain Phinney, who made port day before yesterday.

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BENTLEY. [*As he fingers one of the packages, half to himself*]

The other day I listed in my diary the ships' captains in my congregation. There are twenty-one.

MEHITABEL. Some times it seems to me there is nothing but ships' captains.

BENTLEY. [*Unwrapping the parcel*] Yesterday as I passed Mrs. Owen's house I noted that she has a new picket fence placed along the sea wall, I think just to greet the Captain on his return. And Captain Phinney's house has a new coat of paint. Both great improvements.

MEHITABEL. I do wonder sometimes, sir, how you have time to notice all these little things.

BENTLEY. It's just the little interests in life, Mehitabel, that keep our minds from rusting. Ah, Oh, now isn't that fine. [*He draws from the wrapping paper a beautiful Chinese bowl*]

MEHITABEL. That don't look any different to me than any other Canton ginger jar.

BENTLEY. Mehitabel, that is from the Ming dynasty. Priceless. Far too exquisite for me to keep to myself! It shall go to the East India Museum here, where all may share it. [*During the last, he has been unwrapping the second parcel. He holds up to view a Japanese bonze*]

Ah! Isn't that a strange figure?

MEHITABEL. [*Tartly*] Heathenish. I don't believe there's any good in those as bow down to things like that.

BENTLEY. [*Musingly, as he examines the bonze*] When a man is found who does not profess much, nor despise all, pure from guile, peaceable in his life, gentle in his manners, with a heart to pity and relieve the miserable—and from my friends, the captains of the China trade, I know there be many such among these you call heathen—if he be an idol worshipper I sorrow that he knows not

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the beauty and consolation of our religion, but I know him, idol worshipper though he be, for a good man. After all, good Mehitabel you and I are not the only [*She looks at him, trying not to appear complacent, for she expects the word "Christians"*]*—heathen. [She is much shocked, as she has no idea he is quizzing her]*

BENTLEY. [*Beamingly*] Are we? [*Another slight pause*]
Are we, Mehitabel?

MEHITABEL. I never said I was a heathen.

BENTLEY. [*Quizzically*] No, No, I don't believe you did.

[*With a toss of the head MEHITABEL starts to go in. Just then a man with a roll of plans under his arm, appears at the entrance*]

ALDEN. May I come in, friend Bentley? I found the street door open and no one about. How do you do, Mehitabel.

[*She bobs sternly to him*]

BENTLEY. [*Coming forward with hands outstretched*] Well well, Timothy Alden, where from now and whither going?

ALDEN. From New York and my school for young ladies, on my way to the old friends of my former parish in Portsmouth.

[*MEHITABEL has lingered, watching with such increasing cheerfulness that it is evident ALDEN is a welcome visitor*]

BENTLEY. Well, Mehitabel?

MEHITABEL. Shall I bring a fresh cup of coffee, Mr. Alden? It won't be much trouble.

ALDEN. [*With an amused glance at BENTLEY*] No, no, I breakfasted before I left Boston. I stayed my journey only because I have a matter of importance to talk over with you.

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BENTLEY. Sit, sit, my friend.

[As ALDEN sits and is about to speak, BENTLEY breaks in]

BENTLEY. Your coming is an odd bit of good fortune. Only today I have hunted everywhere for information as to David Robinson, who was minister at Newcastle near by, and Seth Norton who graduated from our Harvard in 1751.

ALDEN. [Checking what he was about to say] I am the very man for you, for in preparing my Ecclesiastical History of Portsmouth, back in 1806, I looked up all these men. For Robinson, I will send you some notes when I return home. For Norton, write the Rev. Samuel Norton, of Weymouth.

BENTLEY. "My tables! Meet it is I set it down." [He makes a note in the diary which he takes from his pocket]

ALDEN. [With a smile] Still keeping your diary?

BENTLEY. [Tapping the book] The beginning of the eleventh volume. I have no thoughts apart from it. [As he finishes writing] Good, very good. You are always a marvel of curious information.

ALDEN. Ah, well I have always had a certain fondness for historical and literary enterprises, and if the greater part of them have met little financial return or even fame, they have brought me much curious knowledge. The Ecclesiastical History of Portsmouth gave me some. The New Jersey Register, even if it lasted but a few months, brought me more, and when I planned a history of New Jersey the requests for information I sent out gave me still more. And now, the scheme I have in mind—

BENTLEY. [Interrupting] Yes, tell me, what writing have you been doing in what you call your "interstitial moments"?

ALDEN. [Smiling a little wanly] It was not of writing I

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was thinking, but in the rare moments which my teaching has left free, not filled with planning for the scheme about which I am to tell you, I have arranged a biographical work in which I shall use the aforementioned material, and I have also just finished the catalogue of the New York Historical Society, very like my catalogue of the books of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

BENTLEY. If it be as good, 'tis truly well done.

ALDEN. [Holding out the book] This copy is for you. [He points to a line as he passes the book to BENTLEY.]

BENTLEY. [Greatly pleased as he reads] And so you have included your unworthy servant.

ALDEN. Worthy as man, as scholar, and most as friend.

[BENTLEY, as he continues reading, holds out his hand silently in thanks]

ALDEN. [As he takes it] Now, have you time to let me tell you about this my magnum opus?

BENTLEY. Surely, surely, Reverend Timothy, your magnum opus was that commencement part of yours in Syriac.

ALDEN. [Diverted for the moment] You will always have your joke at that graduation oration of mine—Syriac illustrated with the names of American Indians! When in my boyish conceit I handed it to President Willard of Harvard, I missed his irony when he said, in his kindly way, "Syriac I cannot read, Alden. Come sit down, and, giving me the benefit of your knowledge, construe it for me." [ALDEN is already restlessly fingering his plans again]

BENTLEY. You should have had that Professorship of Oriental languages at Harvard seven years ago, but the place was then sore ridden by politics. When the choice was on, I asked a fellow alumnus what men had been proposed for the chair, and he said, "Every Minister, and

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every man's friend in the whole world besides." I marvel the Fellows can be so little mindful of their responsibilities as to let personal feeling count in what affects the future of many young minds. They knew perfectly your eminent fitness for the work you desired, yet they chose another I believe far less worthy. At times I find my patience sorely tried by their perverseness.

[ALDEN has been fingering his plans during the preceding, waiting for a chance to break in]

ALDEN. My good friend, I covet nothing now that Harvard has to offer, for I believe that what I have here [Pointing to plans] is of the greatest moment to a considerable part of our country, and to it, I wish to give the rest of my life.

BENTLEY. To promoting the Holland Land Company! To a plan for attracting settlers to western Pennsylvania!

ALDEN. Far from it. My good Bentley, I am tired of living in the little anxieties and responsibilities of life. A man must have a vision if he is not to grow slothful in this course of life we run. At Portsmouth as you know, the parish starved me out with its slight salary. The school in the same town never satisfied me, nor did that in New Jersey, nor does this in New York. I want to start and foster education in new places, among youths so eager for it that they will do anything to win it.

BENTLEY. Well, intellectual promoter, the vision.

ALDEN. [Eagerly as he spreads out his plans] This region of the Holland Land Company in northwestern Pennsylvania is of great beauty. Its extensive meadow land is very fertile. Nowhere is health more prevalent; one finds abundance and variety of forest trees and wild fruits of many kinds. It is well watered. No part of the United States is better adapted to provide for the

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large population that must come to it in the future. Why, even now the town of Meadville, first settled in 1788, has four hundred and fifty people of the best sort.

BENTLEY. [In amazement] But, my friend, it is in the very heart of the wilderness.

ALDEN. The beast and the barbarian have fled before the sons of Europe as the dew before the sun.

BENTLEY. But, my good man, why should these dear New Englanders of mine forsake their pleasant homes? You are asking them to leave all they have worked and fought for—settled communities, good roads, schools for their children. Why should you ask them to give up all this?

ALDEN. Already, as you must know, it is hard in the general competition here in New England to find good opportunities. I for one have tried many activities with enthusiasm and I may say no unwillingness to labor, yet where am I today? Ill-paid and unsettled.

BENTLEY. If you have not won all you wish, Alden, it is not because you are not a man of high purpose, laborious, and I think, in spite of your words, undiscouraged.

ALDEN. [With a nod of recognition for the kindly words, but pushing on with his case] I am sure that this new region is rich in needed opportunities. I believe it will soon have a rapidly growing population. Have we not often agreed that, as the Arabic saying is, "A man without learning is like a body without a soul"?

BENTLEY. Surely. Only in education lies our individual safety. Superstition has its cause in ignorance of natural laws, bigotry in ignorance of mankind. Education may lessen or extirpate both.

ALDEN. Exactly, and it is just because I believe that science must be to this land of America as the dew of heaven to a thirsty earth, that this plan, growing out of

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my agency for the Holland Land Company, has come to fill all my thoughts and dreams.

BENTLEY. And it is—?

ALDEN. [*Pointing to the map*] This is the growing town of Meadville, rich in prospective wealth, well placed by the great waterways of the old Indian trail George Washington followed when he visited Forts Venango, LeBoeuf, and Duquesne.

BENTLEY. [*Closely examining the map*] What is this here?

[BENTLEY *points to the map*]

ALDEN. The very pivot of my hopes.

[BENTLEY *looks at him puzzled*]

ALDEN. A College. And the site of all others I would choose for it, high on a beautiful hillside, if I may have my way.

[*As BENTLEY looks a little startled, ALDEN rushes on*]

ALDEN. Already there are elementary schools in Meadville. Very shortly, as the children grow to youths, there will be strong need of higher education, not merely for those of the immediate region but from all around. And in most cases, the means of these children of the frontiers will be too slight to undergo the expense of a journey to a New England College, or the high cost of living at them. Yet I believe that the welfare of the nation is served by schools, academies and colleges, not by a phalanx of armed men.

BENTLEY. Truly, when the voice of the people is the law of the land, general dissemination of knowledge is indispensable, but where in this sparsely settled region is money for your plan to be found?

ALDEN. My cousin, Major Roger Alden, known to you, I

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think, as one of the heroes of the fight at Lexington, is heartily with me in this enterprise, as are other worthy men and women of Meadville. I have planned to canvass New England, where I know there must be sympathizers. I do not believe people can refuse me, for this College will stand not only for the education which makes sound government, but for religious instruction equally sound. With all my soul I believe that religion should be the wheel within the wheel of government.

BENTLEY. [*Musingly, as he takes in the scheme*] Without a doubt there can be no sound government without morality. [*After a slight pause*] It is a great, a very great vision. Now what may I do for you to help it come true?

ALDEN. Give me names of persons in this and neighboring towns likely to be interested in becoming settlers, but remember we want no drones or weaklings.

[BENTLEY *nods as if thinking*]

ALDEN. And later I shall want the names of those who can give books or money to this college of mine.

BENTLEY. I cannot with my eight hundred a year and all the many calls upon me, give you money, but books you certainly shall have.

ALDEN. Are you still adding to that fine library of yours?

BENTLEY. As my slender means permit.

ALDEN. Only the other day someone asked me if you still keep up your custom of reading each day in foreign tongues.

BENTLEY. The habit but grows with the years. 'Tis French today, tomorrow Latin, on Thursday Spanish or Italian, and so on through the week. It is the books for this reading which feed my library.

ALDEN. [*Admiringly*] I told my inquirer that you read twenty-five languages.

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BENTLEY. Wrong, wrong, friend Timothy, only twenty—and no Syriac!

ALDEN. And you have something over three thousand volumes, have you not?

BENTLEY. Yes, and why?

ALDEN. Because as I came thither I was wondering—I was wondering whether, if this college of mine is ever founded, you would consider leaving it your theological books.

BENTLEY. [*Looking a little startled, walks a step or two away and back*] You have been thinking forward, friend Timothy. Well, why not? Why not? My manuscripts and German books are to go to the Antiquarian Society of Worcester. I have always thought of leaving the remainder of my library to our Alma Mater, Harvard, but since she has ever turned me the cold shoulder, ignoring my recommendations for appointments, and leaving my labors unrecognized, I feel in the matter no keen enthusiasm. Perhaps. We will see.

ALDEN. [*Rising, with outstretched hand*] The mere hope is the greatest aid I have yet had given me.

BENTLEY. [*As he takes his hand*] My friend, one sordid question, for I have ever found you little thinking of yourself. What will all this planning mean for you—what employment, what financial reward for your labors?

ALDEN. If this new college is founded, I shall in all probability be its President. Surely that is reward enough.

BENTLEY. And the salary?

ALDEN. Oh, that will take care of itself.

BENTLEY. [*Nodding his head, half amused and half sad*] Knowing you my good friend, I'm afraid it will. Well, may it all come true and as you wish, or as Divine Providence deems it wiser. It will take all the foresight, courage and endurance you have ever shown and vastly more.

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ALDEN. You have just proved that I have staunch friends. Remember I have a strong faith and a strong hope. And when depression comes to me, as come it must at times, I often think of a hymn some of the people of this new home of mine are wont to sing.

“When in the stillness I have prayed,
His hand was near to be my guide;
Asleep, awake, I'm not afraid,
He stands protecting at my side.
And in my dreams He plays His part,
As when He cheers my waking heart.”

[ALDEN picks up his plans as if to depart]

BENTLEY. [*Placing his hand on ALDEN's arm*] May all the dreams in which He has played His part come true, even as you wish. I'll go with you to the street.

[*Exeunt*]