

*When the past and present meet
in a candlelit church, Christmas brings
a second chance.*

The OLD PEABODY PEW



KATE DOUGLAS WIGGIN



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The Old Peabody Pew

by

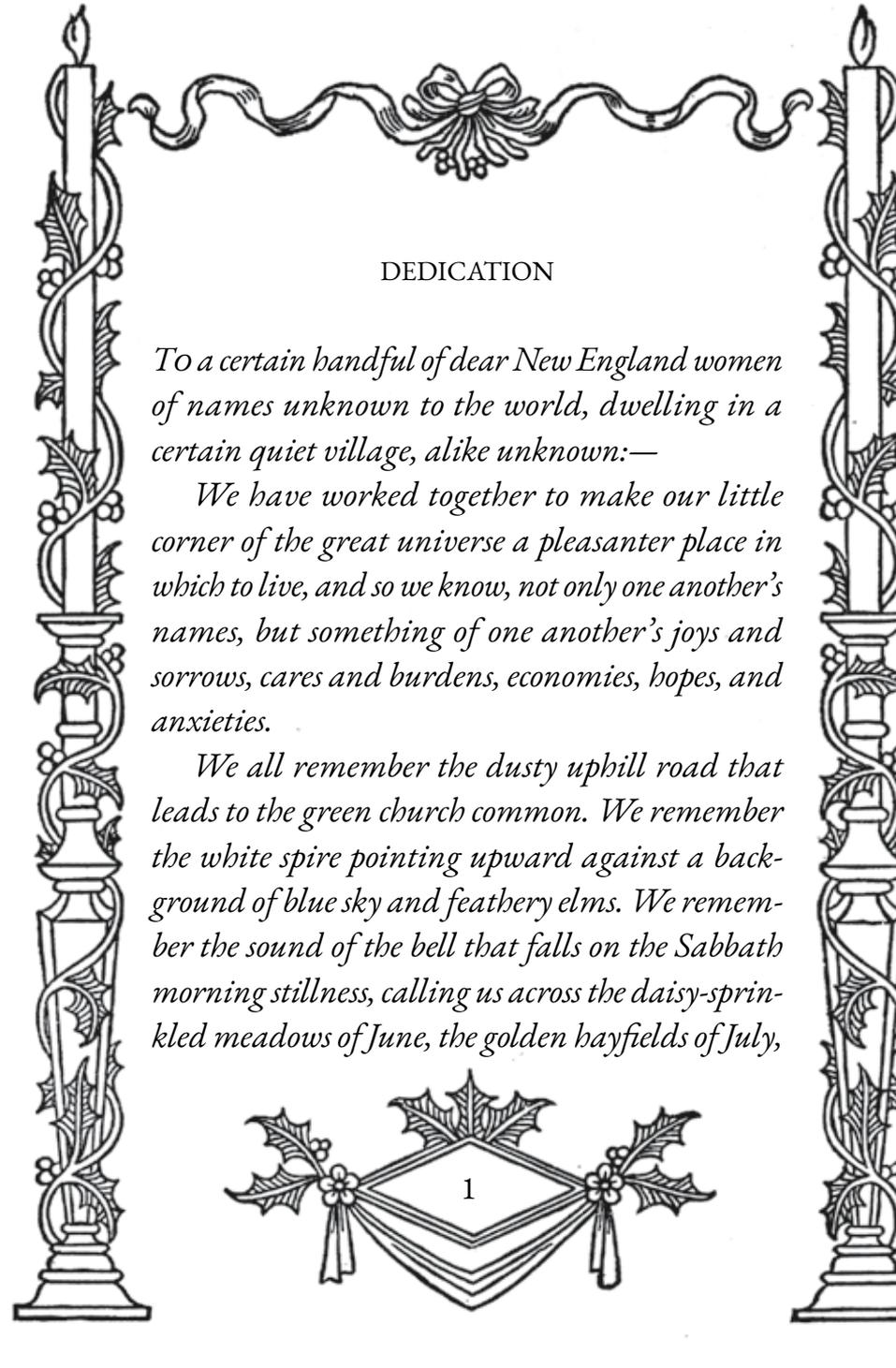
KATE DOUGLAS WIGGIN



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DEDICATION

To a certain handful of dear New England women of names unknown to the world, dwelling in a certain quiet village, alike unknown:—

We have worked together to make our little corner of the great universe a pleasanter place in which to live, and so we know, not only one another's names, but something of one another's joys and sorrows, cares and burdens, economies, hopes, and anxieties.

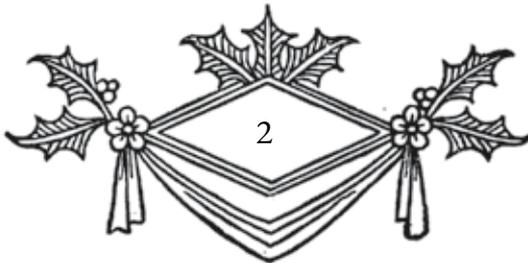
We all remember the dusty uphill road that leads to the green church common. We remember the white spire pointing upward against a background of blue sky and feathery elms. We remember the sound of the bell that falls on the Sabbath morning stillness, calling us across the daisy-sprinkled meadows of June, the golden hayfields of July,

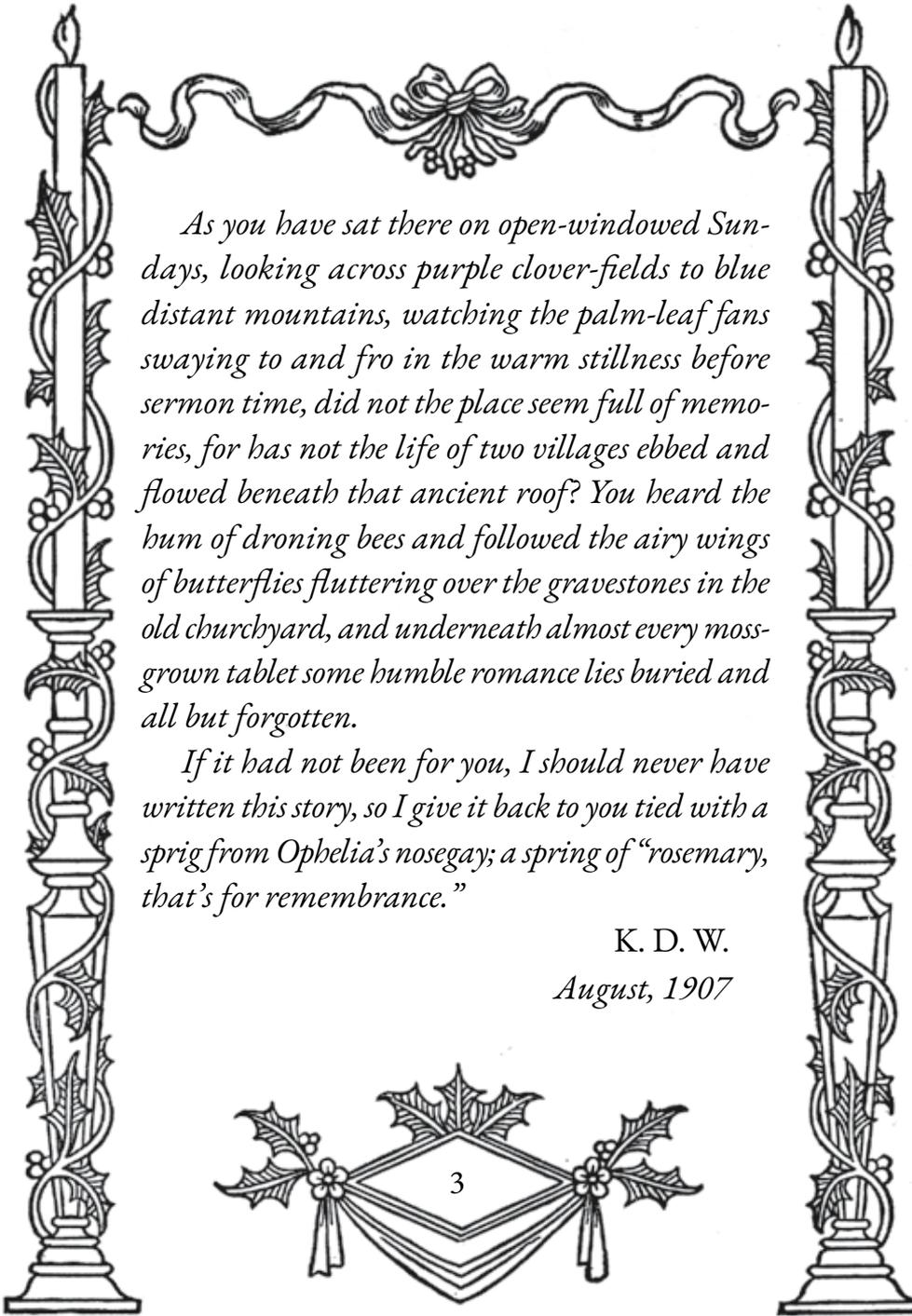


or the dazzling whiteness and deep snowdrifts of December days. The little cabinet-organ that plays the doxology, the hymn-books from which we sing "Praise God from whom all blessings flow," the sweet freshness of the old meeting-house, within and without—how we have toiled to secure and preserve these humble mercies for ourselves and our children!

There really is a Dorcas Society, as you and I well know, and one not unlike that in these pages; and you and I have lived through many discouraging, laughable, and beautiful experiences while we emulated the Bible Dorcas, that woman "full of good works and alms deeds."

There never was a Peabody Pew in the Tory Hill Meeting-House, and Nancy's love story and Justin's never happened within its century-old walls; but I have imagined only one of the many romances that have had their birth under the shadow of that steeple, did we but realize it.



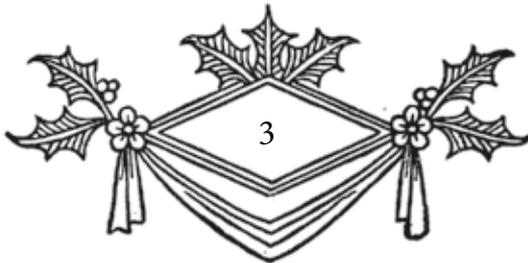


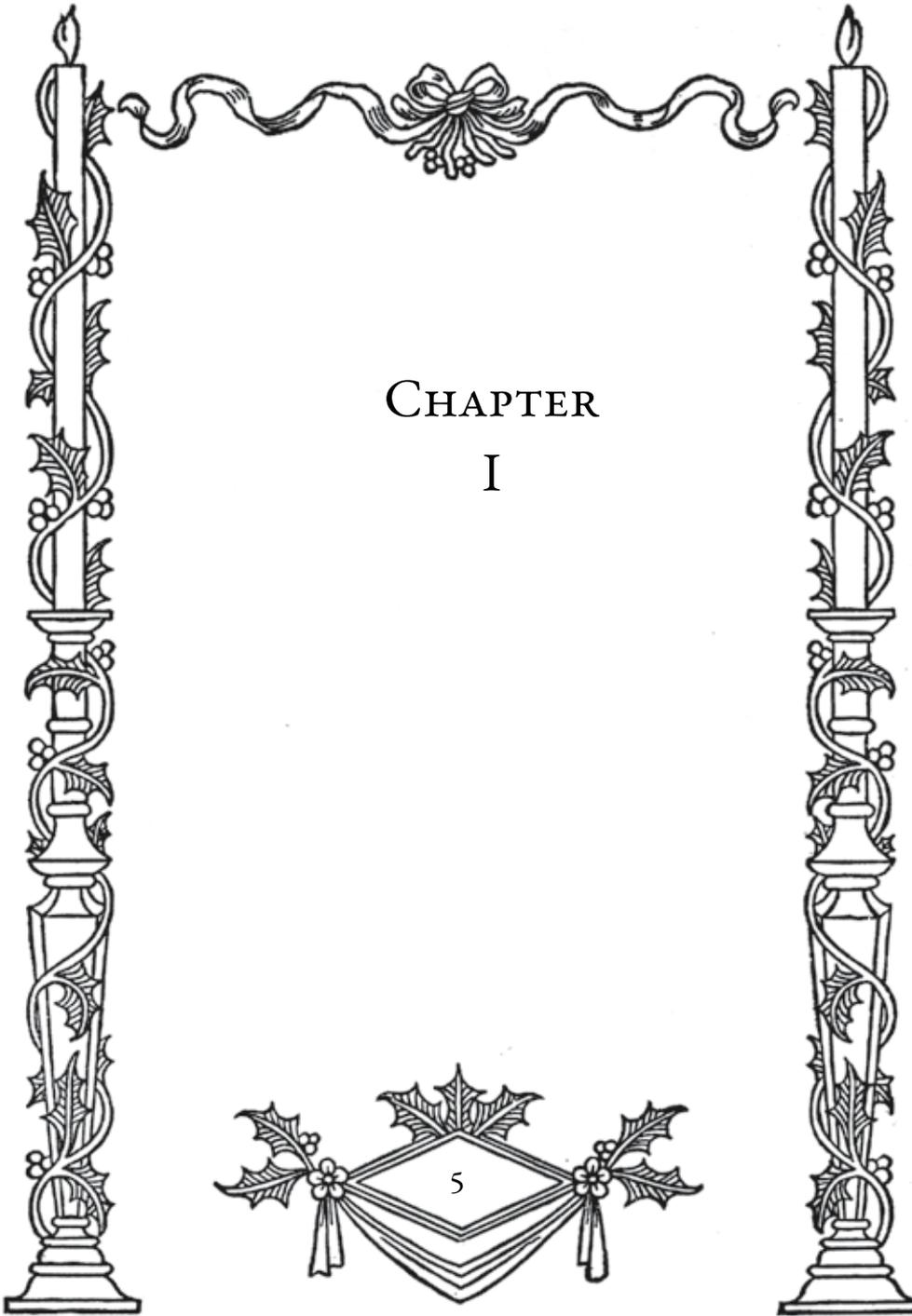
As you have sat there on open-windowed Sundays, looking across purple clover-fields to blue distant mountains, watching the palm-leaf fans swaying to and fro in the warm stillness before sermon time, did not the place seem full of memories, for has not the life of two villages ebbed and flowed beneath that ancient roof? You heard the hum of droning bees and followed the airy wings of butterflies fluttering over the gravestones in the old churchyard, and underneath almost every moss-grown tablet some humble romance lies buried and all but forgotten.

If it had not been for you, I should never have written this story, so I give it back to you tied with a sprig from Ophelia's nosegay; a spring of "rosemary, that's for remembrance."

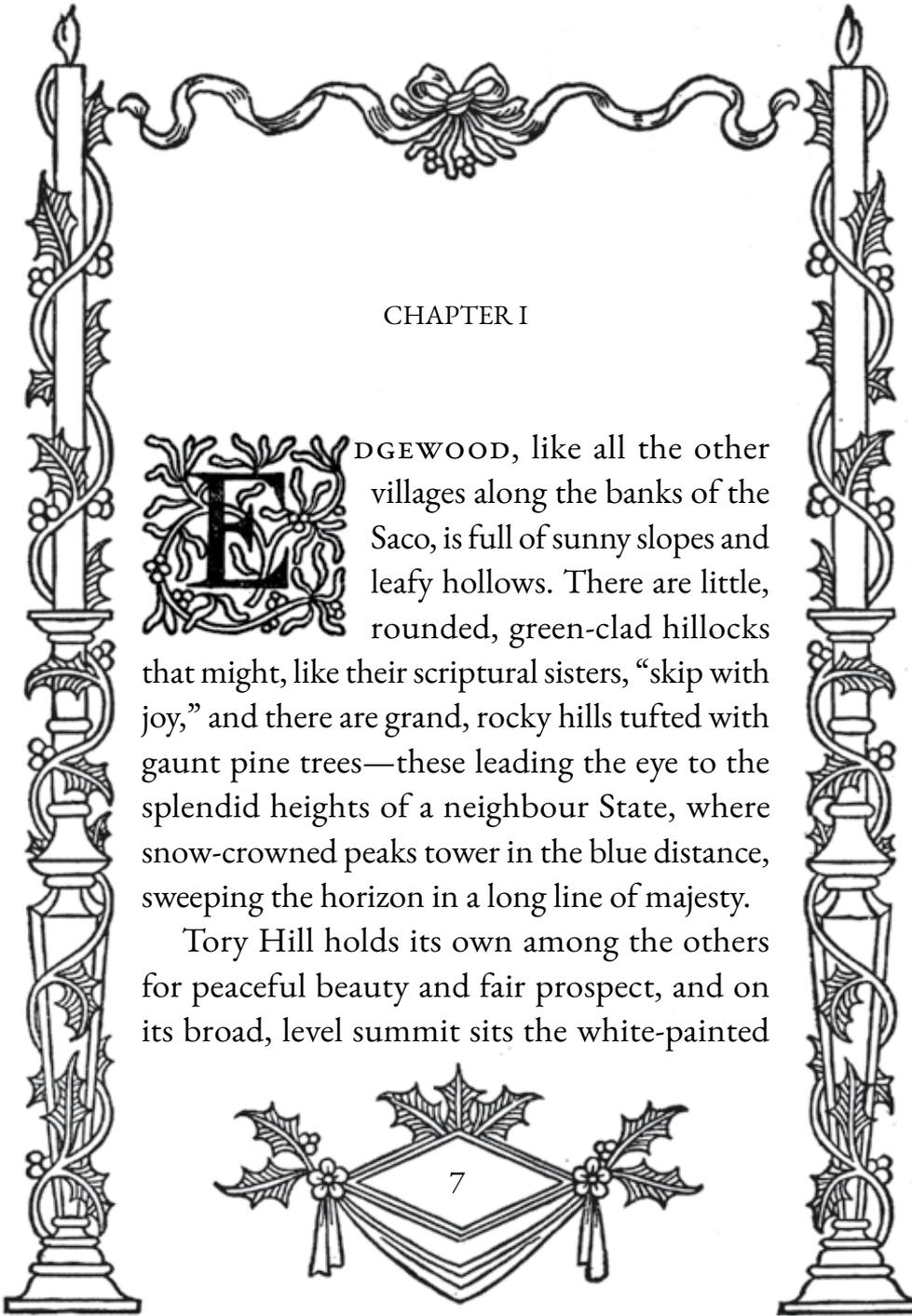
K. D. W.

August, 1907





CHAPTER
I



CHAPTER I

FDGEWOOD, like all the other villages along the banks of the Saco, is full of sunny slopes and leafy hollows. There are little, rounded, green-clad hillocks that might, like their scriptural sisters, “skip with joy,” and there are grand, rocky hills tufted with gaunt pine trees—these leading the eye to the splendid heights of a neighbour State, where snow-crowned peaks tower in the blue distance, sweeping the horizon in a long line of majesty.

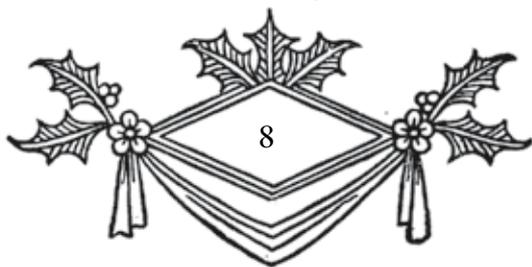
Tory Hill holds its own among the others for peaceful beauty and fair prospect, and on its broad, level summit sits the white-painted

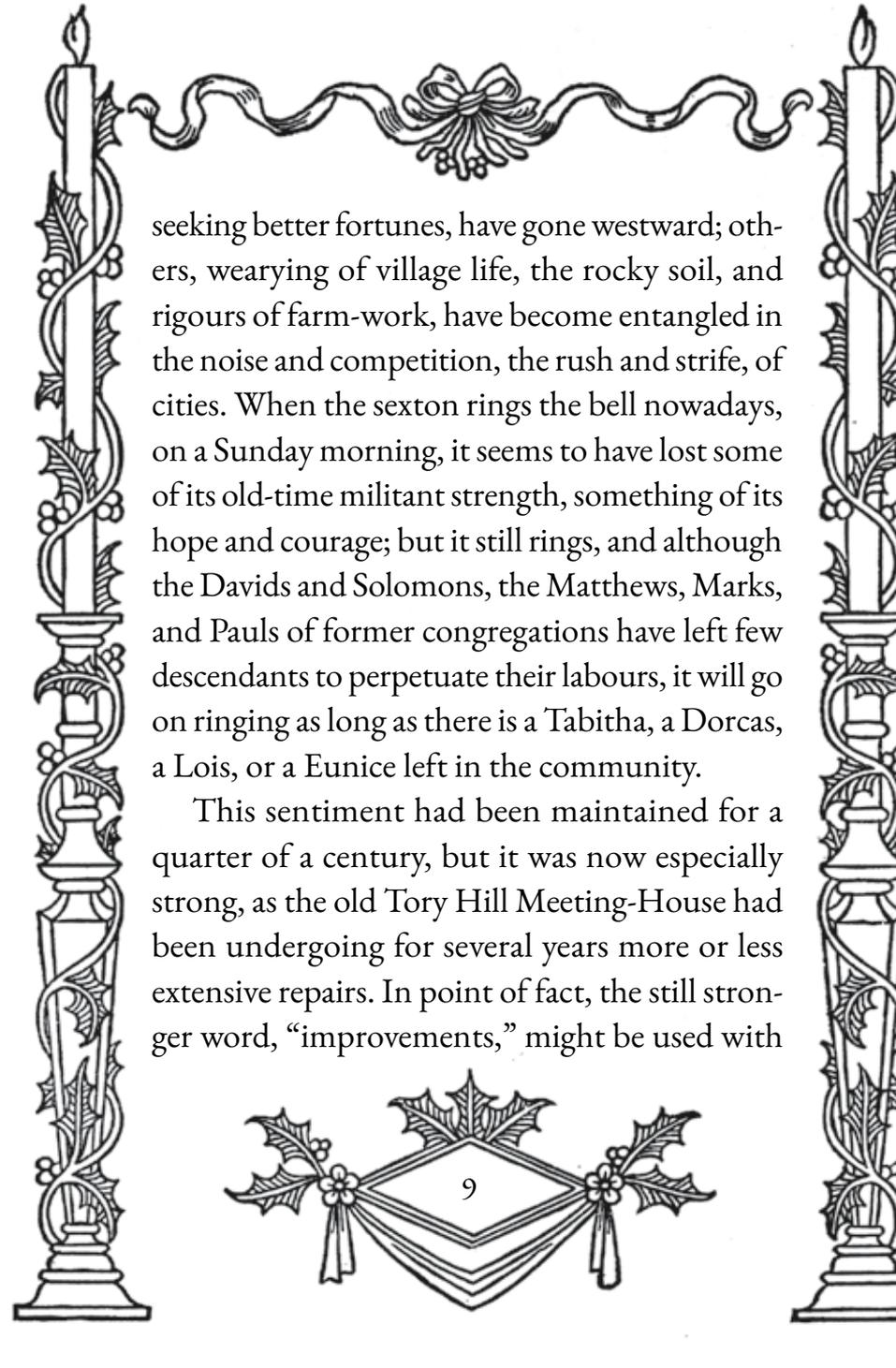


Orthodox Meeting-House. This faces a grassy common where six roads meet, as if the early settlers had determined that no one should lack salvation because of a difficulty in reaching its visible source.

The old church has had a dignified and fruitful past, dating from that day in 1761 when young Paul Coffin received his call to preach at a stipend of fifty pounds sterling a year; answering "that never having heard of any uneasiness among the people about his doctrine or manner of life, he declared himself pleased to settle as soon as might be judged convenient."

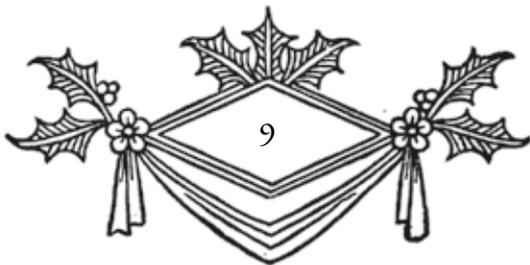
But that was a hundred and fifty years ago, and much has happened since those simple, strenuous old days. The chastening hand of time has been laid somewhat heavily on the town as well as on the church. Some of her sons have marched to the wars and died on the field of honour; some,

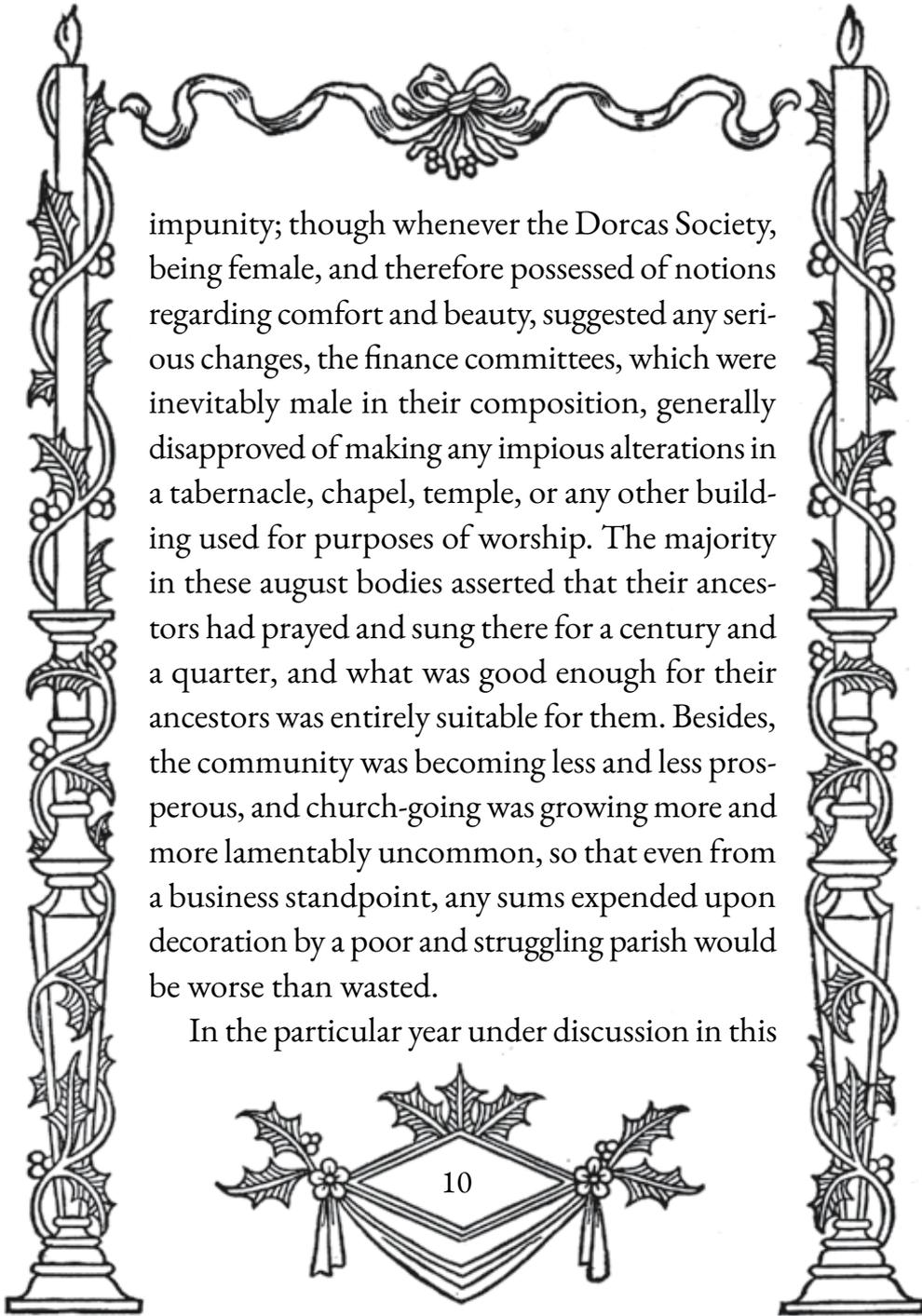




seeking better fortunes, have gone westward; others, wearying of village life, the rocky soil, and rigours of farm-work, have become entangled in the noise and competition, the rush and strife, of cities. When the sexton rings the bell nowadays, on a Sunday morning, it seems to have lost some of its old-time militant strength, something of its hope and courage; but it still rings, and although the Davids and Solomons, the Matthews, Marks, and Pauls of former congregations have left few descendants to perpetuate their labours, it will go on ringing as long as there is a Tabitha, a Dorcas, a Lois, or a Eunice left in the community.

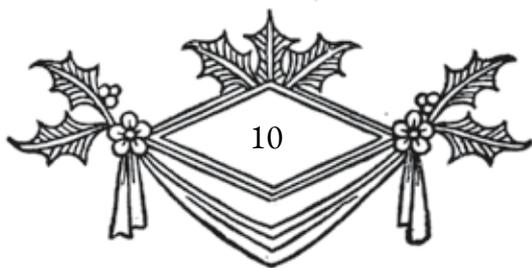
This sentiment had been maintained for a quarter of a century, but it was now especially strong, as the old Tory Hill Meeting-House had been undergoing for several years more or less extensive repairs. In point of fact, the still stronger word, "improvements," might be used with

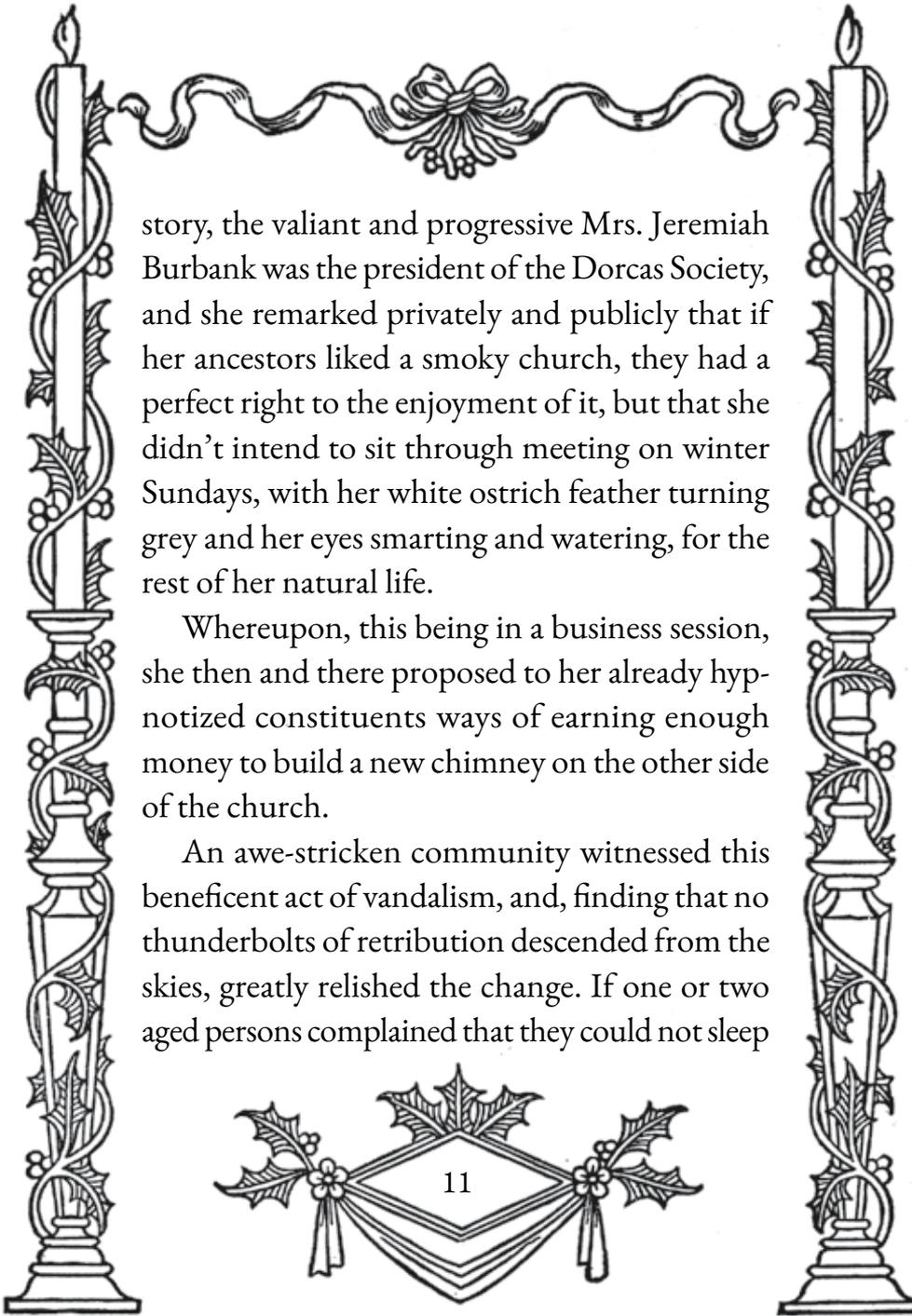




impunity; though whenever the Dorcas Society, being female, and therefore possessed of notions regarding comfort and beauty, suggested any serious changes, the finance committees, which were inevitably male in their composition, generally disapproved of making any impious alterations in a tabernacle, chapel, temple, or any other building used for purposes of worship. The majority in these august bodies asserted that their ancestors had prayed and sung there for a century and a quarter, and what was good enough for their ancestors was entirely suitable for them. Besides, the community was becoming less and less prosperous, and church-going was growing more and more lamentably uncommon, so that even from a business standpoint, any sums expended upon decoration by a poor and struggling parish would be worse than wasted.

In the particular year under discussion in this





story, the valiant and progressive Mrs. Jeremiah Burbank was the president of the Dorcas Society, and she remarked privately and publicly that if her ancestors liked a smoky church, they had a perfect right to the enjoyment of it, but that she didn't intend to sit through meeting on winter Sundays, with her white ostrich feather turning grey and her eyes smarting and watering, for the rest of her natural life.

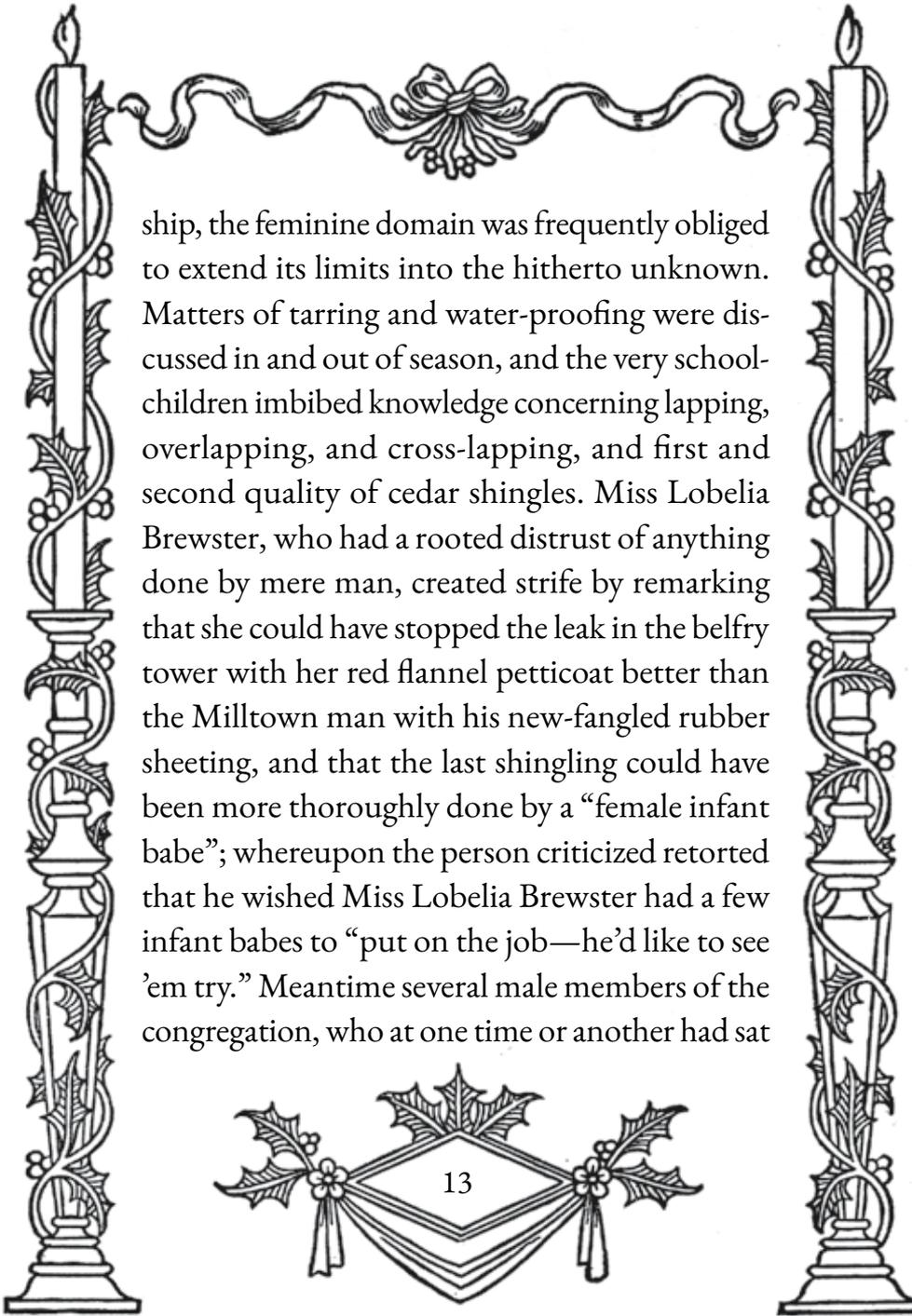
Whereupon, this being in a business session, she then and there proposed to her already hypnotized constituents ways of earning enough money to build a new chimney on the other side of the church.

An awe-stricken community witnessed this beneficent act of vandalism, and, finding that no thunderbolts of retribution descended from the skies, greatly relished the change. If one or two aged persons complained that they could not sleep

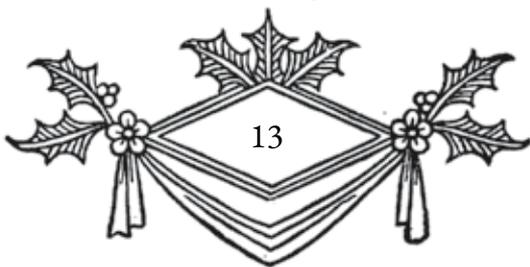


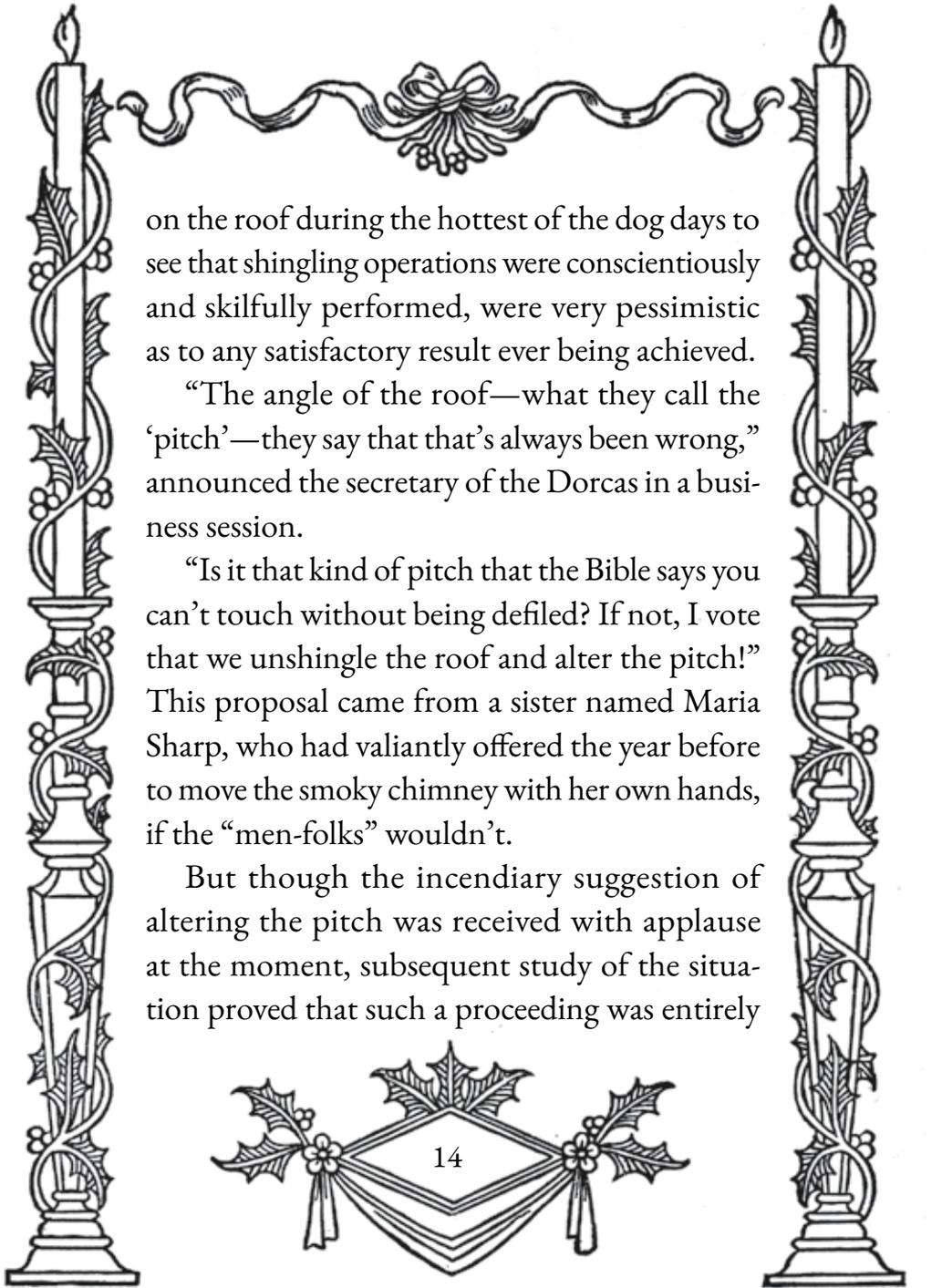
as sweetly during sermon-time in the now clear atmosphere of the church, and that the parson's eye was keener than before, why, that was a mere detail, and could not be avoided; what was the loss of a little sleep compared with the discoloration of Mrs. Jere Burbank's white ostrich feather and the smarting of Mrs. Jere Burbank's eyes?

A new furnace followed the new chimney, in due course, and as a sense of comfort grew, there was opportunity to notice the lack of beauty. Twice in sixty years had some well-to-do summer parishioner painted the interior of the church at his own expense; but although the roof had been many times reshingled, it had always persisted in leaking, so that the ceiling and walls were disfigured by unsightly spots and stains and streaks. The question of shingling was tacitly felt to be outside the feminine domain, but as there were five women to one man in the church member-



ship, the feminine domain was frequently obliged to extend its limits into the hitherto unknown. Matters of tarring and water-proofing were discussed in and out of season, and the very school-children imbibed knowledge concerning lapping, overlapping, and cross-lapping, and first and second quality of cedar shingles. Miss Lobelia Brewster, who had a rooted distrust of anything done by mere man, created strife by remarking that she could have stopped the leak in the belfry tower with her red flannel petticoat better than the Milltown man with his new-fangled rubber sheeting, and that the last shingling could have been more thoroughly done by a “female infant babe”; whereupon the person criticized retorted that he wished Miss Lobelia Brewster had a few infant babes to “put on the job—he’d like to see ’em try.” Meantime several male members of the congregation, who at one time or another had sat



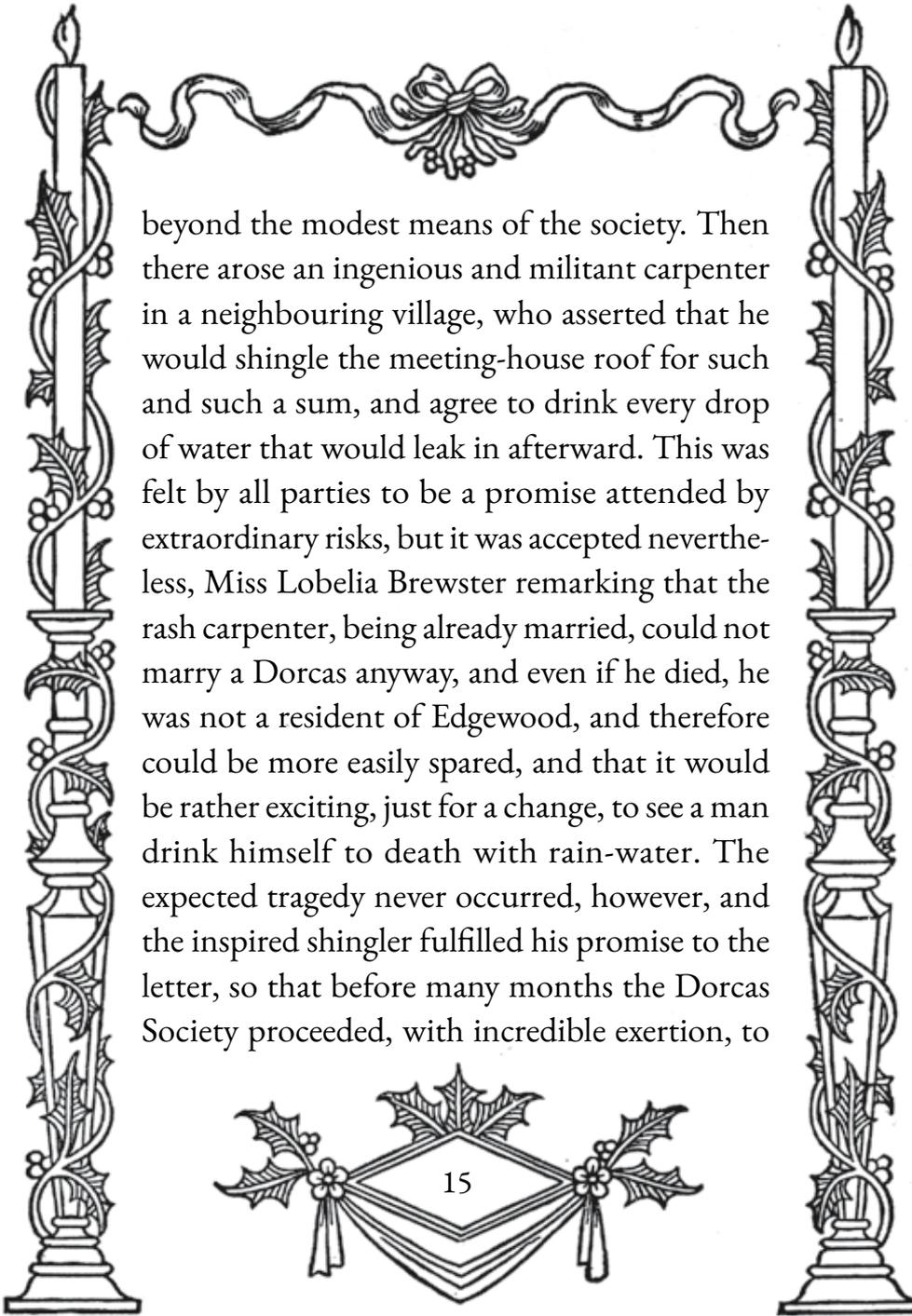


on the roof during the hottest of the dog days to see that shingling operations were conscientiously and skilfully performed, were very pessimistic as to any satisfactory result ever being achieved.

“The angle of the roof—what they call the ‘pitch’—they say that that’s always been wrong,” announced the secretary of the Dorcas in a business session.

“Is it that kind of pitch that the Bible says you can’t touch without being defiled? If not, I vote that we unshingle the roof and alter the pitch!” This proposal came from a sister named Maria Sharp, who had valiantly offered the year before to move the smoky chimney with her own hands, if the “men-folks” wouldn’t.

But though the incendiary suggestion of altering the pitch was received with applause at the moment, subsequent study of the situation proved that such a proceeding was entirely



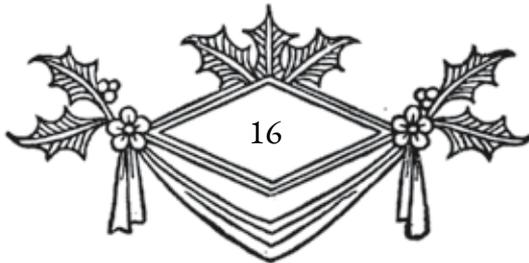
beyond the modest means of the society. Then there arose an ingenious and militant carpenter in a neighbouring village, who asserted that he would shingle the meeting-house roof for such and such a sum, and agree to drink every drop of water that would leak in afterward. This was felt by all parties to be a promise attended by extraordinary risks, but it was accepted nevertheless, Miss Lobelia Brewster remarking that the rash carpenter, being already married, could not marry a Dorcas anyway, and even if he died, he was not a resident of Edgewood, and therefore could be more easily spared, and that it would be rather exciting, just for a change, to see a man drink himself to death with rain-water. The expected tragedy never occurred, however, and the inspired shingler fulfilled his promise to the letter, so that before many months the Dorcas Society proceeded, with incredible exertion, to

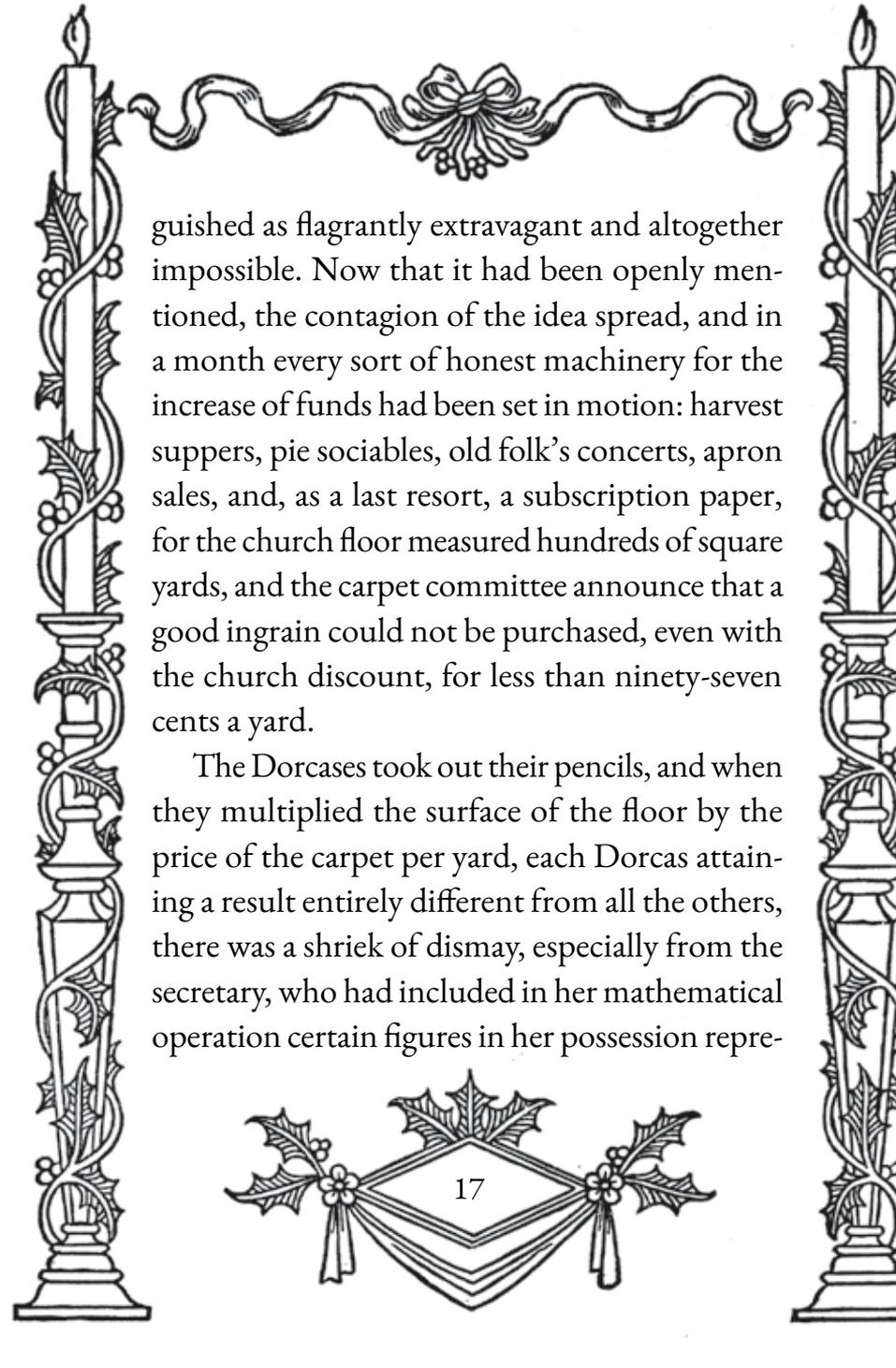


earn more money, and the interior of the church was neatly painted and made as fresh as a rose. With no smoke, no rain, no snow nor melting ice to defile it, the good old landmark that had been pointing its finger Heavenward for over a century would now be clean and fragrant for years to come, and the weary sisters leaned back in their respective rocking-chairs and drew deep breaths of satisfaction.

These breaths continued to be drawn throughout an unusually arduous haying season; until, in fact, a visitor from a neighbouring city was heard to remark that the Tory Hill Meeting-House would be one of the best preserved and pleasantest churches in the whole State of Maine, if only it were suitably carpeted.

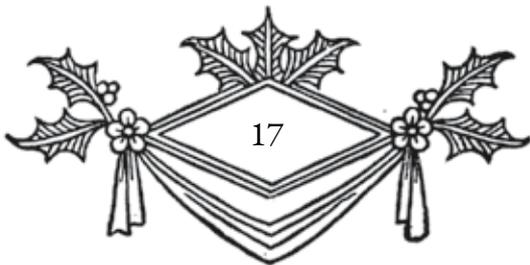
This thought had secretly occurred to many a Dorcas in her hours of pie-making, preserving, or cradle-rocking, but had been promptly extin-

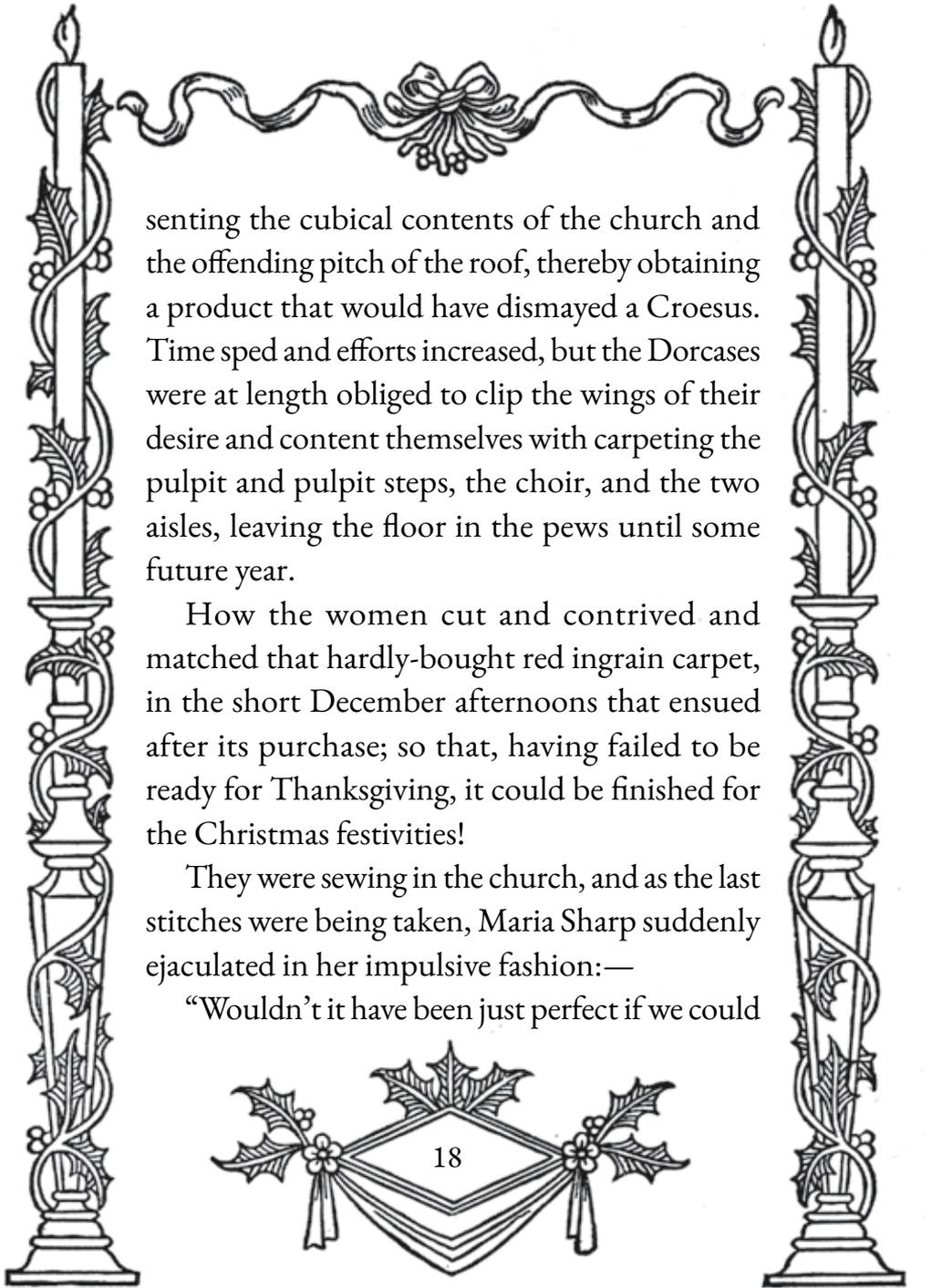




guished as flagrantly extravagant and altogether impossible. Now that it had been openly mentioned, the contagion of the idea spread, and in a month every sort of honest machinery for the increase of funds had been set in motion: harvest suppers, pie sociables, old folk's concerts, apron sales, and, as a last resort, a subscription paper, for the church floor measured hundreds of square yards, and the carpet committee announce that a good ingrain could not be purchased, even with the church discount, for less than ninety-seven cents a yard.

The Dorcasses took out their pencils, and when they multiplied the surface of the floor by the price of the carpet per yard, each Dorcas attaining a result entirely different from all the others, there was a shriek of dismay, especially from the secretary, who had included in her mathematical operation certain figures in her possession repre-



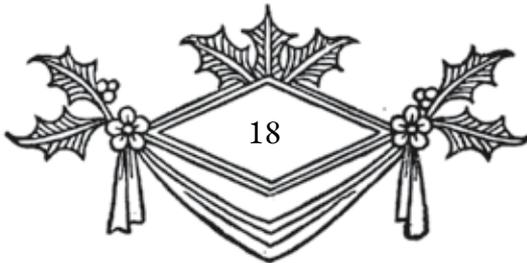


sending the cubical contents of the church and the offending pitch of the roof, thereby obtaining a product that would have dismayed a Croesus. Time sped and efforts increased, but the Dorcases were at length obliged to clip the wings of their desire and content themselves with carpeting the pulpit and pulpit steps, the choir, and the two aisles, leaving the floor in the pews until some future year.

How the women cut and contrived and matched that hardly-bought red ingrain carpet, in the short December afternoons that ensued after its purchase; so that, having failed to be ready for Thanksgiving, it could be finished for the Christmas festivities!

They were sewing in the church, and as the last stitches were being taken, Maria Sharp suddenly ejaculated in her impulsive fashion:—

“Wouldn’t it have been just perfect if we could





THEY WERE SEWING IN CHURCH - THE LAST STITCHES WERE BEING TAKEN