

A Lesson in Hope

A Novel



PHILIP GULLEY



CENTER
STREET

New York Boston Nashville

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Sam Gardner had been the pastor of Hope Friends Meeting a scant four months when Olive Charles, aged ninety-eight, drew her last ragged breath and, in the general consensus of Hope Friends, went to be with Jesus. Sam had no opinion on her destiny, having met her on only four occasions at the nursing home where she resided. She hadn't said a word and had appeared dead then, truth be told. So when the funeral home had phoned Sam at 6 a.m. on a Monday, his day off, to report her demise, he hadn't been at all surprised.

Her funeral was held at the meetinghouse that Saturday. She had never married, but did have one niece in Chicago whom she hadn't seen in twenty years, who showed up at the funeral bawling her eyes out at the sight of Olive lying stiff in her casket. She recovered quickly, pulled Sam aside, and asked him if the will had been read. She reeked of alcohol and her speech was slurred.

"I have no idea," he told her.

"Do you know if Aunt Olive had any other relatives? I've

kind of lost touch with the family. Did anyone ever come visit her at the nursing home?"

"Just me and folks from the meeting," Sam said.

"Did she say anything about money?"

"Not to me, but then she'd stopped talking about a year ago."

"We were very close," the niece said. Sam hadn't caught her name—Ramona, Regina, Rowena, he wasn't sure—and after only five minutes with her had no interest in learning it.

Ruby Hopper, the clerk of Hope Friends Meeting and its resident saint, phoned Sam later that same afternoon to ask if she could bring the message the next morning.

"You certainly may, if you feel led."

"Thank you. Olive and I went on vacation together for many years. I'd like to show slides from our trips."

"Oh, I see."

"Do you think that would be all right?"

"It sounds like a wonderful tribute to a well-deserving member," Sam said, more than happy to have Ruby man the pulpit since it meant he wouldn't have to write a new sermon for the next Sunday.

There was a sizable crowd at meeting the next morning—the usual modest crowd plus a half dozen guests, a few of them on the verge of membership who hadn't yet been tricked into joining. They sang several songs, and Sam prayed, then turned the pulpit over to Ruby.

"I wanted to take this opportunity to share about Olive Charles, whom we lost this past week. Olive was one of our founding members. Very kind. Very dedicated to the meeting. We vacationed together until three years ago, when her health turned. She was an absolute joy."

“Smart, too,” Hank Withers added, when Ruby paused to breathe. “She was on the Building Committee when they hired me to design the meetinghouse. She would have made an excellent architect.”

Hank was a retired architect and thought it high praise indeed that Olive could have been similarly employed.

They watched slides, projected on the wall behind the pulpit. Ruby and Olive at Niagara Falls, Mount Rushmore, the Lincoln Memorial, and the Alamo. Halfway through, Ruby began to weep, so Sam finished the narration while Ruby sobbed beside him. She eventually recovered, and Sam prayed, thanking God for Olive, then Ruby hurried to the kitchen and began serving pie, a custom Sam had come to appreciate. The morning ended on a high note, with everyone admitting Olive had lived long enough, that it had been her time to go, and that it had probably been a blessing. Homemade pie could cast a positive light upon the most tragic event.

Sam took Monday off, and was in the office early Tuesday morning when the phone rang. It was Olive’s attorney, serving as the executor of her estate, phoning to inform Sam that Olive had left her beloved Quaker meeting her entire estate, consisting of one house and its contents, a 1979 Ford Granada with four snow tires, barely used, and a bank account a dab north of eight hundred thousand dollars. Sam had never cared for lawyers, but in that moment felt a general warmth toward the profession and probably would have hugged the man, had they been in the same room.

Ramona, or Regina, or whatever her name was, phoned a few minutes later, screeching about suing the church and everyone in it and coming down there and getting what was rightfully hers, since she’d been the only one who’d ever loved

Olive. Sam let her rant a little while, excused himself, and hung up the phone.

Sam Gardner loved nothing more than to be in possession of a juicy morsel of news no one else knew, so he savored the situation for several minutes, sitting in the quiet of his office, then phoned the members of the church, summoning them to an emergency meeting that evening. He couldn't tell them over the phone. He had to tell them in person, all at once, so they would hear the same thing. He would see them at seven.

"Should I bring a pie?" Ruby Hopper asked.

"Several," Sam said. "Can you make one of those apple pies with the crumbly things on top?"

"A Dutch apple pie? I certainly can."

It was shaping up to be the finest day Sam Gardner had ever had in all his years of ministry.

His wife, Barbara, was at work, at Hope Elementary, where she served as the librarian. Sam walked the five blocks there, caught her in between classes, and told her what had happened.

"That's two hundred thousand dollars a visit," he pointed out. "Not bad for an hour's work."

"Sure beats library pay," Barbara said.

"Her niece is madder than a wet hen. She called to tell me she's going to sue the meeting and everyone in it."

"This is the niece who hadn't seen her in twenty years?" Barbara asked.

"That's the one."

"They come out of the woodwork when they sniff a little money, don't they?"

Sam was too distracted to work, and spent the rest of the day fending off curious church members who'd happened to be in the neighborhood and so dropped in to visit.

Wilson Roberts waddled into Sam's office and plopped down on the couch. "Is the yearly meeting going to throw us out?" he asked. "They better not, that's all I can say. Not five years ago, I donated a brand-new toilet and sink for the superintendent's office. They throw us out and I'm going over there and taking them back."

"No, the yearly meeting isn't throwing us out," Sam said.

"Then why did you call a meeting?"

"You'll find out tonight, along with everyone else. I don't want to have to tell the story a dozen different times. You'll have to be patient, Wilson."

When Wilson realized he couldn't wear Sam down, he took his leave. No sooner had he gone than Wanda and Leonard Fink stopped by. Sam's phone call had wakened them, they had been speculating ever since, and had concluded Sam had become an atheist and was announcing his resignation, which didn't trouble them in the least. Indeed they were relieved, and not at all surprised, because they had seen a book on his office shelves entitled *The Pastor's Secret: The Rise of Doubt among Clergy*.

"We know what the meeting is about," Wanda Fink said, cutting to the chase.

They probably do, the big snoops, Sam thought.

"I would prefer not to discuss it right now," Sam said. "I only want to tell it once."

"I never thought I would live to see the day when something like this would happen," Leonard said. "Have you given any thought to what this will do to our church?"

"I've been thinking of nothing else," Sam said. "It will be a test for us, that's for sure. But I prefer not to say anything more until tonight, when everyone is present."

“How can you sit there and be so calm?” Wanda said. “It’s like you don’t even care.”

“I care a great deal. I just don’t think it’s anything to get all worked up about. It’s happened to other churches and they dealt with it. So will we.”

“We? What do you mean *we*? You’re not planning on staying, are you?”

“I most certainly am,” Sam said. “The meeting needs steady leadership at a time like this.”

Wanda and Leonard stormed from the office. As long as he lived, Sam would never be able to figure out some people.