

## [Odd Job Man]

Mari Tomasi Men Against Granite

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ODD JOB MAN

The small Kane house stood on one of those hilly, curving streets that turn off the north end of Barre's main thoroughfare. On the crest of the hill loomed the Washington County Sanatorium. From the lower street at night it was a sieve of pale lights, spilling down the dark hill. Mary and Henry Kane preferred to stay in evenings; they read, talked, and Mary sewed. When the children, grown and married now, or a neighbor visited, then they sat in the living room. But they liked the kitchen.

"The teapot's always handy on the stove," old Mary Said. "I can just reach out and have a cup any time the craving's in me. As for Henry, well, see for yourself, his feet in the oven even in [lay?]."

"It's the rheumatism," Henry [out?] in. "Try working for fifteen years with your feet planked on a damp floor, you'd hunt up an oven, too."

Mary said patiently, as if this had been a topic of discussion for years. "It isn't only the shed work, Henry. You can't blame it all on the sheds. He's had his feet in water most of his life," she explained. "He was born on a farm near Greensboro, the swampiest piece of land I've

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ever seen. He was the only one of four boys who had any interest in the farm, he'd be out in those mucky fields most of the time. That's where it all started.”

“Maybe,” Henry conceded half-heartedly. “The farm was pretty well run down, but I was making a living on it. Mary here is the one who wouldn't stay put. She'd come over from Ireland when she was nine or ten— she isn't sure herself— and they had the farm next to ours. We married and lived with my folks. She stood it 'til the kids were of high school age, then she kept talking about moving somewhere where they wouldn't have to travel a couple of miles to get to high school. In the fall I used to sell potatoes in Barre and Montpelier. Mary'd told me to keep my eyes open for a job in either place. Well, I was delivering potatoes to the [Delamico?] family, and we got to talking, and pretty soon I was offered a job in his shed. It was a small shed. The father and son worked, and they employed a half dozen other men. I'd never had any experience in granite but they said they needed a man to do odd jobs. I took it. The kids got their high school education. Two girls and a boy. They're married now. I was with the Delamico shed for three years. Business was kind of bad, they had to let me go. Since then I've been over Berlin Street in a larger shed, and I'm still just a handy man. I help some with the machines, clean stones, box them, pick up grout. Any of the odd work. I don't feel secure. And it doesn't seem a worth-while work. Now if it was carving I was doing, it'd be different, something that would last, something you've done with your own hands, like back on the farm making the crops grow. I can remember forty years back, there wasn't any such term as stonecutter or granite worker, not for that Barre crowd. The best of them were called statue cutters. A good name, [too?]. The others were called stone masons.

“They still tell stories of some of the tough old fellows who got to the top in granite. They were just beginning to be big shots then, it kinda went to their heads. They liked to show off. Horse-racing on the river ice was popular then. That was before machinery came in the sheds. Now the machine and stone sheds drip so much oil in the river that the ice isn't safe. Three fellows entered their horses in a race. An Englishman, a Spaniard, and a German[:?] Henry Lord, Jesus Santos, and Hans [Krist?]. A 3 tough old Irish stonecutter

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was yelling out the entries that day. He was feeling good, and instead of announcing the names of the horses he yelled[, ?] 'The next participants will be Lord, Jesus Krist!'

"You'll notice that the names that have gone down in granite history are mostly Italian and Scotch. We've them to thank for the finest art. They learned it in the old country, they were already skilled workers when they came here. Now with the Irish immigrant it's different. They didn't have the experience. Sure, there's granite in Ireland even though Mary here says no.

"I never heard the word granite the whole ten years I was there," Mary interrupted. "And I never saw a granite monument in our cemetery. It was wooden crosses for us." Her cheeks flushed with anger. "Wooden crosses are good enough for anybody. Here a stonecutter spends hours working on a memorial for the dead, and every one of these hours is shortening his own life. I can't see that anyone's gaining from it, except that it's honeying the pride of the folks who've bought the memorial."

Henry's eyes twinkled. "Well," I guess you lived in the Irish backwoods, Mary. There's a fellow in our shed from County [Mayo?], Ireland. He says there's plenty of granite there, but not of carving quality. It's too soft. It's for plain cemetery markers or for building. The workers don't have much experience in carving. That's why you don't see Irish names heading the list of our best carvers in the sheds over here. They do just plain work. Most of the first Irish who came to work in the sheds settled in Websterville. There were so many they used to call it New Ireland.

"They tell me the first granite around here came from Millstone Hill. The name's got a history. In colonial days saw mills and grist mills dotted New England. In order to run the grist mills they had to import stones from 4 France. Folks noticed an outcropping of granite on these hills. The granite was in thin slabs because thousands of [yeara?] ago it had been exposed to glaciers. They managed to crack off large slabs with wooden wedges. It didn't take much work to make mill stones from this thin granite. People from all over New

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England began to come here for mill stones. That's how the hill got its name. Soon they began to use the granite for steps, for underpinnings or foundations for homes. As they dug deeper in the hill they found a better grade of granite. The earliest use of this granite was for the State House in Montpelier, around 1840. There wasn't any railroad then. The granite had to be carried to Montpelier in ox teams.

"I never got to like Barre so much. I'd always liked the farm. But Mary here liked the town, and so did the children. There was more excitement for them. My oldest girl went in training after she left High School.

"She made a good nurse," Mary said. "Would you believe it, she used to tell us that Barre had the highest rate of social diseases of any town in Vermont. That was during the last years of prohibition. It certainly was a pretty wild town then. It's better now. You know. It was a real treat to find out I had to go just around the corner to get to church. That's [St?]. Monica's church."