

WIGGIN KATE SMITH

NEW CHRONICLES OF
REBECCA

Kate Wiggin

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Kate Douglas Wiggin

New Chronicles of Rebecca

First Chronicle. JACK O'LANTERN

I

Miss Miranda Sawyer's old-fashioned garden was the pleasantest spot in Riverboro on a sunny July morning. The rich color of the brick house gleamed and glowed through the shade of the elms and maples. Luxuriant hop-vines clambered up the lightning rods and water spouts, hanging their delicate clusters here and there in graceful profusion. Woodbine transformed the old shed and tool house to things of beauty, and the flower beds themselves were the prettiest and most fragrant in all the countryside. A row of dahlias ran directly around the garden spot,—dahlias scarlet, gold, and variegated. In the very centre was a round plot where the upturned faces of a thousand pansies smiled amid their leaves, and in the four corners were triangular blocks of sweet phlox over which the butterflies fluttered unceasingly. In the spaces between ran a riot of portulaca and nasturtiums, while in the more regular, shell-bordered beds grew spirea and gillyflowers, mignonette, marigolds, and clove pinks.

Back of the barn and encroaching on the edge of the hay field was a grove of sweet clover whose white feathery tips fairly bent under the assaults of the bees, while banks of aromatic mint and thyme drank in the sunshine and sent it out again into the summer air, warm, and deliciously odorous.

The hollyhocks were Miss Sawyer's pride, and they grew in a stately line beneath the four kitchen windows, their tapering tips set thickly with gay satin circlets of pink or lavender or crimson.

"They grow something like steeples," thought little Rebecca Randall, who was weeding the bed, "and the flat, round flowers are like rosettes; but steeples wouldn't be studded with rosettes, so if you were writing about them in a composition you'd have to give up one or the other, and I think I'll give up the steeples:—

Gay little hollyhock
Lifting your head,
Sweetly rosetted
Out from your bed.

It's a pity the hollyhock isn't really little, instead of steeppling up to the window top, but I can't say, 'Gay TALL hollyhock.'... I might have it 'Lines to a Hollyhock in May,' for then it would be small; but oh, no! I forgot; in May it wouldn't be blooming, and it's so pretty to say that its head is 'sweetly rosetted'... I wish the teacher wasn't away; she would like 'sweetly rosetted,' and she would like to hear me recite 'Roll on, thou deep and dark blue ocean, roll!' that I learned out of Aunt Jane's Byron; the rolls come booming out of it just like the waves at the beach.... I could make nice compositions now, everything is blooming so, and it's so warm and sunny and happy outdoors. Miss Dearborn told me to write something in my thought book every single day, and I'll begin this very night when I go to bed."

Rebecca Rowena Randall, the little niece of the brick-house ladies, and at present sojourning there for purposes of board, lodging, education, and incidentally such discipline and chastening as might ultimately produce moral excellence,—Rebecca Randall had a passion for the rhyme and rhythm of poetry. From her earliest childhood words had always been to her what dolls and toys are to other children, and now at twelve she amused herself with phrases and sentences and images as

her schoolmates played with the pieces of their dissected puzzles. If the heroine of a story took a “cursory glance” about her “apartment,” Rebecca would shortly ask her Aunt Jane to take a “cursory glance” at her oversewing or hemming; if the villain “aided and abetted” someone in committing a crime, she would before long request the pleasure of “aiding and abetting” in dishwashing or bedmaking. Sometimes she used the borrowed phrases unconsciously; sometimes she brought them into the conversation with an intense sense of pleasure in their harmony or appropriateness; for a beautiful word or sentence had the same effect upon her imagination as a fragrant nosegay, a strain of music, or a brilliant sunset.

“How are you gettin’ on, Rebecca Rowena?” called a peremptory voice from within.

“Pretty good, Aunt Miranda; only I wish flowers would ever come up as thick as this pigweed and plantain and sorrel. What MAKES weeds be thick and flowers be thin?—I just happened to be stopping to think a minute when you looked out.”

“You think considerable more than you weed, I guess, by appearances. How many times have you peeked into that humming bird’s nest? Why don’t you work all to once and play all to once, like other folks?”

“I don’t know,” the child answered, confounded by the question, and still more by the apparent logic back of it. “I don’t know, Aunt Miranda, but when I’m working outdoors such a Saturday morning as this, the whole creation just screams to me to stop it and come and play.”

“Well, you needn’t go if it does!” responded her aunt sharply. “It don’t scream to me when I’m rollin’ out these doughnuts, and it wouldn’t to you if your mind was on your duty.”

Rebecca’s little brown hands flew in and out among the weeds as she thought rebelliously: “Creation WOULD’N’T scream to Aunt Miranda; it would know she wouldn’t come.”

Scream on, thou bright and gay creation, scream!
‘Tis not Miranda that will hear thy cry!

Oh, such funny, nice things come into my head out here by myself, I do wish I could run up and put them down in my thought book before I forget them, but Aunt Miranda wouldn’t like me to leave off weeding:—

Rebecca was weeding the hollyhock bed
When wonderful thoughts came into her head.
Her aunt was occupied with the rolling pin
And the thoughts of her mind were common and thin.

That wouldn’t do because it’s mean to Aunt Miranda, and anyway it isn’t good. I MUST crawl under the syringa shade a minute, it’s so hot, and anybody has to stop working once in a while, just to get their breath, even if they weren’t making poetry.

Rebecca was weeding the hollyhock bed When marvelous thoughts came into her head.
Miranda was wielding the rolling pin And thoughts at such times seemed to her as a sin.

How pretty the hollyhock rosettes look from down here on the sweet, smelly ground!

“Let me see what would go with rosetting. AIDING AND ABETTING, PETTING, HEN-SETTING, FRETTING,—there’s nothing very nice, but I can make fretting’ do.

Cheered by Rowena’s petting,
The flowers are rosetting,
But Aunt Miranda’s fretting

Doth somewhat cloud the day.”

Suddenly the sound of wagon wheels broke the silence and then a voice called out—a voice that could not wait until the feet that belonged to it reached the spot: “Miss Saw-YER! Father’s got to drive over to North Riverboro on an errand, and please can Rebecca go, too, as it’s Saturday morning and vacation besides?”

Rebecca sprang out from under the syringa bush, eyes flashing with delight as only Rebecca’s eyes COULD flash, her face one luminous circle of joyous anticipation. She clapped her grubby hands, and dancing up and down, cried: “May I, Aunt Miranda—can I, Aunt Jane—can I, Aunt Miranda-Jane? I’m more than half through the bed.”

“If you finish your weeding tonight before sundown I s’pose you can go, so long as Mr. Perkins has been good enough to ask you,” responded Miss Sawyer reluctantly. “Take off that gingham apron and wash your hands clean at the pump. You ain’t be’n out o’ bed but two hours an’ your head looks as rough as if you’d slep’ in it. That comes from layin’ on the ground same as a caterpillar. Smooth your hair down with your hands an’ p’r’aps Emma Jane can braid it as you go along the road. Run up and get your second-best hair ribbon out o’ your upper drawer and put on your shade hat. No, you can’t wear your coral chain—jewelry ain’t appropriate in the morning. How long do you cal’late to be gone, Emma Jane?”

“I don’t know. Father’s just been sent for to see about a sick woman over to North Riverboro. She’s got to go to the poor farm.”

This fragment of news speedily brought Miss Sawyer, and her sister Jane as well, to the door, which commanded a view of Mr. Perkins and his wagon. Mr. Perkins, the father of Rebecca’s bosom friend, was primarily a blacksmith, and secondarily a selectman and an overseer of the poor, a man therefore possessed of wide and varied information.

“Who is it that’s sick?” inquired Miranda.

“A woman over to North Riverboro.”

“What’s the trouble?”

“Can’t say.”

“Stranger?”

“Yes, and no; she’s that wild daughter of old Nate Perry that used to live up towards Moderation. You remember she ran away to work in the factory at Milltown and married a do—nothin’ fellow by the name o’ John Winslow?”

“Yes; well, where is he? Why don’t he take care of her?”

“They ain’t worked well in double harness. They’ve been rovin’ round the country, livin’ a month here and a month there wherever they could get work and house-room. They quarreled a couple o’ weeks ago and he left her. She and the little boy kind o’ camped out in an old loggin’ cabin back in the woods and she took in washin’ for a spell; then she got terrible sick and ain’t expected to live.”

“Who’s been nursing her?” inquired Miss Jane.

“Lizy Ann Dennett, that lives nearest neighbor to the cabin; but I guess she’s tired out bein’ good Samaritan. Anyways, she sent word this mornin’ that nobody can’t seem to find John Winslow; that there ain’t no relations, and the town’s got to be responsible, so I’m goin’ over to see how the land lays. Climb in, Rebecca. You an’ Emmy Jane crowd back on the cushion an’ I’ll set forrard. That’s the trick! Now we’re off!”

“Dear, dear!” sighed Jane Sawyer as the sisters walked back into the brick house. “I remember once seeing Sally Perry at meeting. She was a handsome girl, and I’m sorry she’s come to grief.”

“If she’d kep’ on goin’ to meetin’ an’ hadn’t looked at the men folks she might a’ be’n earnin’ an honest livin’ this minute,” said Miranda. “Men folks are at the bottom of everything wrong in this world,” she continued, unconsciously reversing the verdict of history.

“Then we ought to be a happy and contented community here in Riverboro,” replied Jane, “as there’s six women to one man.”

“If ‘t was sixteen to one we’d be all the safer,” responded Miranda grimly, putting the doughnuts in a brown crock in the cellar-way and slamming the door.

II

The Perkins horse and wagon rumbled along over the dusty country road, and after a discreet silence, maintained as long as human flesh could endure, Rebecca remarked sedately:

“It’s a sad errand for such a shiny morning, isn’t it, Mr. Perkins?”

“Plenty o’ trouble in the world, Rebecky, shiny mornin’s an’ all,” that good man replied. “If you want a bed to lay on, a roof over your head, an’ food to eat, you’ve got to work for em. If I hadn’t a’ labored early an’ late, learned my trade, an’ denied myself when I was young, I might a’ be’n a pauper layin’ sick in a loggin’ cabin, stead o’ bein’ an overseer o’ the poor an’ selectman drivin’ along to take the pauper to the poor farm.”

“People that are mortgaged don’t have to go to the poor farm, do they, Mr. Perkins?” asked Rebecca, with a shiver of fear as she remembered her home farm at Sunnybrook and the debt upon it; a debt which had lain like a shadow over her childhood.

“Bless your soul, no; not unless they fail to pay up; but Sal Perry an’ her husband hadn’t got fur enough along in life to BE mortgaged. You have to own something before you can mortgage it.”

Rebecca’s heart bounded as she learned that a mortgage represented a certain stage in worldly prosperity.

“Well,” she said, sniffing in the fragrance of the new-mown hay and growing hopeful as she did so; “maybe the sick woman will be better such a beautiful day, and maybe the husband will come back to make it up and say he’s sorry, and sweet content will reign in the humble habitation that was once the scene of poverty, grief, and despair. That’s how it came out in a story I’m reading.”

“I hain’t noticed that life comes out like stories very much,” responded the pessimistic blacksmith, who, as Rebecca privately thought, had read less than half a dozen books in his long and prosperous career.

A drive of three or four miles brought the party to a patch of woodland where many of the tall pines had been hewn the previous winter. The roof of a ramshackle hut was outlined against a background of young birches, and a rough path made in hauling the logs to the main road led directly to its door.

As they drew near the figure of a woman approached—Mrs. Lizy Ann Dennett, in a gingham dress, with a calico apron over her head.

“Good morning, Mr. Perkins,” said the woman, who looked tired and irritable. “I’m real glad you come right over, for she took worse after I sent you word, and she’s dead.”

Dead! The word struck heavily and mysteriously on the children’s ears. Dead! And their young lives, just begun, stretched on and on, all decked, like hope, in living green. Dead! And all the rest of the world reveling in strength. Dead! With all the daisies and buttercups waving in the fields and the men heaping the mown grass into fragrant cocks or tossing it into heavily laden carts. Dead! With the brooks tinkling after the summer showers, with the potatoes and corn blossoming, the birds singing for joy, and every little insect humming and chirping, adding its note to the blithe chorus of warm, throbbing life.

“I was all alone with her. She passed away suddenly jest about break o’ day,” said Lizy Ann Dennett.

“Her soul passed upward to its God Just at the break of day.”

These words came suddenly into Rebecca’s mind from a tiny chamber where such things were wont to lie quietly until something brought them to the surface. She could not remember whether she had heard them at a funeral or read them in the hymn book or made them up “out of her own head,” but she was so thrilled with the idea of dying just as the dawn was breaking that she scarcely heard Mrs. Dennett’s conversation.

"I sent for Aunt Beulah Day, an' she's be'n here an' laid her out," continued the long suffering Lizy Ann. "She ain't got any folks, an' John Winslow ain't never had any as far back as I can remember. She belongs to your town and you'll have to bury her and take care of Jacky—that's the boy. He's seventeen months old, a bright little feller, the image o' John, but I can't keep him another day. I'm all wore out; my own baby's sick, mother's rheumatiz is extry bad, and my husband's comin' home tonight from his week's work. If he finds a child o' John Winslow's under his roof I can't say what would happen; you'll have to take him back with you to the poor farm."

"I can't take him up there this afternoon," objected Mr. Perkins.

"Well, then, keep him over Sunday yourself; he's good as a kitten. John Winslow'll hear o' Sal's death sooner or later, unless he's gone out of the state altogether, an' when he knows the boy's at the poor farm, I kind o' think he'll come and claim him. Could you drive me over to the village to see about the coffin, and would you children be afraid to stay here alone for a spell?" she asked, turning to the girls.

"Afraid?" they both echoed uncomprehendingly.

Lizy Ann and Mr. Perkins, perceiving that the fear of a dead presence had not entered the minds of Rebecca or Emma Jane, said nothing, but drove off together, counseling them not to stray far away from the cabin and promising to be back in an hour.

There was not a house within sight, either looking up or down the shady road, and the two girls stood hand in hand, watching the wagon out of sight; then they sat down quietly under a tree, feeling all at once a nameless depression hanging over their gay summer-morning spirits.

It was very still in the woods; just the chirp of a grasshopper now and then, or the note of a bird, or the click of a far-distant mowing machine.

"We're WATCHING!" whispered Emma Jane. "They watched with Gran'pa Perkins, and there was a great funeral and two ministers. He left two thousand dollars in the bank and a store full of goods, and a paper thing you could cut tickets off of twice a year, and they were just like money."

"They watched with my little sister Mira, too," said Rebecca. "You remember when she died, and I went home to Sunnybrook Farm? It was winter time, but she was covered with evergreen and white pinks, and there was singing."

"There won't be any funeral or ministers or singing here, will there? Isn't that awful?"

"I s'pose not; and oh, Emma Jane, no flowers either. We might get those for her if there's nobody else to do it."

"Would you dare put them on to her?" asked Emma Jane, in a hushed voice.

"I don't know; I can't tell; it makes me shiver, but, of course, we COULD do it if we were the only friends she had. Let's look into the cabin first and be perfectly sure that there aren't any. Are you afraid?"

"N-no; I guess not. I looked at Gran'pa Perkins, and he was just the same as ever."

At the door of the hut Emma Jane's courage suddenly departed. She held back shuddering and refused either to enter or look in. Rebecca shuddered too, but kept on, drawn by an insatiable curiosity about life and death, an overmastering desire to know and feel and understand the mysteries of existence, a hunger for knowledge and experience at all hazards and at any cost.

Emma Jane hurried softly away from the felt terrors of the cabin, and after two or three minutes of utter silence Rebecca issued from the open door, her sensitive face pale and woe-begone, the ever-ready tears raining down her cheeks. She ran toward the edge of the wood, sinking down by Emma Jane's side, and covering her eyes, sobbed with excitement:

"Oh, Emma Jane, she hasn't got a flower, and she's so tired and sad-looking, as if she'd been hurt and hurt and never had any good times, and there's a weeny, weeny baby side of her. Oh, I wish I hadn't gone in!"

Emma Jane blanched for an instant. "Mrs. Dennett never said THERE WAS TWO DEAD ONES! ISN'T THAT DREADFUL? But," she continued, her practical common sense coming to the

rescue, “you’ve been in once and it’s all over; it won’t be so bad when you take in the flowers because you’ll be used to it. The goldenrod hasn’t begun to bud, so there’s nothing to pick but daisies. Shall I make a long rope of them, as I did for the schoolroom?”

“Yes,” said Rebecca, wiping her eyes and still sobbing. “Yes, that’s the prettiest, and if we put it all round her like a frame, the undertaker couldn’t be so cruel as to throw it away, even if she is a pauper, because it will look so beautiful. From what the Sunday school lessons say, she’s only asleep now, and when she wakes up she’ll be in heaven.”

“THERE’S ANOTHER PLACE,” said Emma Jane, in an orthodox and sepulchral whisper, as she took her ever-present ball of crochet cotton from her pocket and began to twine the whiteweed blossoms into a rope.

“Oh, well!” Rebecca replied with the easy theology that belonged to her temperament. “They simply couldn’t send her DOWN THERE with that little weeny baby. Who’d take care of it? You know page six of the catechism says the only companions of the wicked after death are their father the devil and all the other evil angels; it wouldn’t be any place to bring up a baby.”

“Whenever and wherever she wakes up, I hope she won’t know that the big baby is going to the poor farm. I wonder where he is?”

“Perhaps over to Mrs. Dennett’s house. She didn’t seem sorry a bit, did she?”

“No, but I suppose she’s tired sitting up and nursing a stranger. Mother wasn’t sorry when Gran’pa Perkins died; she couldn’t be, for he was cross all the time and had to be fed like a child. Why ARE you crying again, Rebecca?”

“Oh, I don’t know, I can’t tell, Emma Jane! Only I don’t want to die and have no funeral or singing and nobody sorry for me! I just couldn’t bear it!”

“Neither could I,” Emma Jane responded sympathetically; “but p’r’aps if we’re real good and die young before we have to be fed, they will be sorry. I do wish you could write some poetry for her as you did for Alice Robinson’s canary bird, only still better, of course, like that you read me out of your thought book.”

“I could, easy enough,” exclaimed Rebecca, somewhat consoled by the idea that her rhyming faculty could be of any use in such an emergency. “Though I don’t know but it would be kind of bold to do it. I’m all puzzled about how people get to heaven after they’re buried. I can’t understand it a bit; but if the poetry is on her, what if that should go, too? And how could I write anything good enough to be read out loud in heaven?”

“A little piece of paper couldn’t get to heaven; it just couldn’t,” asserted Emma Jane decisively. “It would be all blown to pieces and dried up. And nobody knows that the angels can read writing, anyway.”

“They must be as educated as we are, and more so, too,” agreed Rebecca. “They must be more than just dead people, or else why should they have wings? But I’ll go off and write something while you finish the rope; it’s lucky you brought your crochet cotton and I my lead pencil.”

In fifteen or twenty minutes she returned with some lines written on a scrap of brown wrapping paper. Standing soberly by Emma Jane, she said, preparing to read them aloud: “They’re not good; I was afraid your father’d come back before I finished, and the first verse sounds exactly like the funeral hymns in the church book. I couldn’t call her Sally Winslow; it didn’t seem nice when I didn’t know her and she is dead, so I thought if I said friend’ it would show she had somebody to be sorry.

“This friend of ours has died and gone
From us to heaven to live.
If she has sinned against Thee, Lord,
We pray Thee, Lord, forgive.

“Her husband runneth far away

And knoweth not she's dead.
Oh, bring him back—ere tis too late—
To mourn beside her bed.

“And if perchance it can't be so,
Be to the children kind;
The weeny one that goes with her,
The other left behind.”

“I think that's perfectly elegant!” exclaimed Emma Jane, kissing Rebecca fervently. “You are the smartest girl in the whole State of Maine, and it sounds like a minister's prayer. I wish we could save up and buy a printing machine. Then I could learn to print what you write and we'd be partners like father and Bill Moses. Shall you sign it with your name like we do our school compositions?”

“No,” said Rebecca soberly. “I certainly shan't sign it, not knowing where it's going or who'll read it. I shall just hide it in the flowers, and whoever finds it will guess that there wasn't any minister or singing, or gravestone, or anything, so somebody just did the best they could.”

III

The tired mother with the “weeny baby” on her arm lay on a long carpenter’s bench, her earthly journey over, and when Rebecca stole in and placed the flowery garland all along the edge of the rude bier, death suddenly took on a more gracious and benign aspect. It was only a child’s sympathy and intuition that softened the rigors of the sad moment, but poor, wild Sal Winslow, in her frame of daisies, looked as if she were missed a little by an unfriendly world; while the weeny baby, whose heart had fallen asleep almost as soon as it had learned to beat, the weeny baby, with Emma Jane’s nosegay of buttercups in its tiny wrinkled hand, smiled as if it might have been loved and longed for and mourned.

“We’ve done all we can now without a minister,” whispered Rebecca. “We could sing, God is ever good’ out of the Sunday school song book, but I’m afraid somebody would hear us and think we were gay and happy. What’s that?”

A strange sound broke the stillness; a gurgle, a yawn, a merry little call. The two girls ran in the direction from which it came, and there, on an old coat, in a clump of goldenrod bushes, lay a child just waking from a refreshing nap.

“It’s the other baby that Lizy Ann Dennett told about!” cried Emma Jane.

“Isn’t he beautiful!” exclaimed Rebecca. “Come straight to me!” and she stretched out her arms.

The child struggled to its feet, and tottered, wavering, toward the warm welcome of the voice and eyes. Rebecca was all mother, and her maternal instincts had been well developed in the large family in which she was next to the eldest. She had always confessed that there were perhaps a trifle too many babies at Sunnybrook Farm, but, nevertheless, had she ever heard it, she would have stood loyally by the Japanese proverb: “Whether brought forth upon the mountain or in the field, it matters nothing; more than a treasure of one thousand ryo a baby precious is.”

“You darling thing!” she crooned, as she caught and lifted the child. “You look just like a Jack-o’-lantern.”

The boy was clad in a yellow cotton dress, very full and stiff. His hair was of such a bright gold, and so sleek and shiny, that he looked like a fair, smooth little pumpkin. He had wide blue eyes full of laughter, a neat little vertical nose, a neat little horizontal mouth with his few neat little teeth showing very plainly, and on the whole Rebecca’s figure of speech was not so wide of the mark.

“Oh, Emma Jane! Isn’t he too lovely to go to the poor farm? If only we were married we could keep him and say nothing and nobody would know the difference! Now that the Simpsons have gone away there isn’t a single baby in Riverboro, and only one in Edgewood. It’s a perfect shame, but I can’t do anything; you remember Aunt Miranda wouldn’t let me have the Simpson baby when I wanted to borrow her just for one rainy Sunday.”

“My mother won’t keep him, so it’s no use to ask her; she says most every day she’s glad we’re grown up, and she thanks the Lord there wasn’t but two of us.”

“And Mrs. Peter Meserve is too nervous,” Rebecca went on, taking the village houses in turn; “and Mrs. Robinson is too neat.”

“People don’t seem to like any but their own babies,” observed Emma Jane.

“Well, I can’t understand it,” Rebecca answered. “A baby’s a baby, I should think, whose ever it is! Miss Dearborn is coming back Monday; I wonder if she’d like it? She has nothing to do out of school, and we could borrow it all the time!”

“I don’t think it would seem very genteel for a young lady like Miss Dearborn, who ‘boards round,’ to take a baby from place to place,” objected Emma Jane.

“Perhaps not,” agreed Rebecca despondently, “but I think if we haven’t got any—any—PRIVATE babies in Riverboro we ought to have one for the town, and all have a share in it. We’ve got a town hall and a town lamp post and a town watering trough. Things are so uneven! One house

like mine at Sunnybrook, brimful of children, and the very next one empty! The only way to fix them right would be to let all the babies that ever are belong to all the grown-up people that ever are,—just divide them up, you know, if they'd go round. Oh, I have a thought! Don't you believe Aunt Sarah Cobb would keep him? She carries flowers to the graveyard every little while, and once she took me with her. There's a marble cross, and it says: SACRED TO THE MEMORY OF SARAH ELLEN, BELOVED CHILD OF SARAH AND JEREMIAH COBB, AGED 17 MONTHS. Why, that's another reason; Mrs. Dennett says this one is seventeen months. There's five of us left at the farm without me, but if we were only nearer to Riverboro, how quick mother would let in one more!"

"We might see what father thinks, and that would settle it," said Emma Jane. "Father doesn't think very sudden, but he thinks awful strong. If we don't bother him, and find a place ourselves for the baby, perhaps he'll be willing. He's coming now; I hear the wheels."

Lizy Ann Dennett volunteered to stay and perform the last rites with the undertaker, and Jack-o'-lantern, with his slender wardrobe tied in a bandanna handkerchief, was lifted into the wagon by the reluctant Mr. Perkins, and jubilantly held by Rebecca in her lap. Mr. Perkins drove off as speedily as possible, being heartily sick of the whole affair, and thinking wisely that the little girls had already seen and heard more than enough of the seamy side of life that morning.

Discussion concerning Jack-o'-lantern's future was prudently deferred for a quarter of an hour, and then Mr. Perkins was mercilessly pelted with arguments against the choice of the poor farm as a place of residence for a baby.

"His father is sure to come back some time, Mr. Perkins," urged Rebecca. "He couldn't leave this beautiful thing forever; and if Emma Jane and I can persuade Mrs. Cobb to keep him a little while, would you care?"

No; on reflection Mr. Perkins did not care. He merely wanted a quiet life and enough time left over from the public service to attend to his blacksmith's shop; so instead of going home over the same road by which they came he crossed the bridge into Edgewood and dropped the children at the long lane which led to the Cobb house.

Mrs. Cobb, "Aunt Sarah" to the whole village, sat by the window looking for Uncle Jerry, who would soon be seen driving the noon stage to the post office over the hill. She always had an eye out for Rebecca, too, for ever since the child had been a passenger on Mr. Cobb's stagecoach, making the eventful trip from her home farm to the brick house in Riverboro in his company, she had been a constant visitor and the joy of the quiet household. Emma Jane, too, was a well-known figure in the lane, but the strange baby was in the nature of a surprise—a surprise somewhat modified by the fact that Rebecca was a dramatic personage and more liable to appear in conjunction with curious outriders, comrades, and retainers than the ordinary Riverboro child. She had run away from the too stern discipline of the brick house on one occasion, and had been persuaded to return by Uncle Jerry. She had escorted a wandering organ grinder to their door and begged a lodging for him on a rainy night; so on the whole there was nothing amazing about the coming procession.

The little party toiled up to the hospitable door, and Mrs. Cobb came out to meet them.

Rebecca was spokesman. Emma Jane's talent did not lie in eloquent speech, but it would have been a valiant and a fluent child indeed who could have usurped Rebecca's privileges and tendencies in this direction, language being her native element, and words of assorted sizes springing spontaneously to her lips.

"Aunt Sarah, dear," she said, plumping Jack-o'-lantern down on the grass as she pulled his dress over his feet and smoothed his hair becomingly, "will you please not say a word till I get through—as it's very important you should know everything before you answer yes or no? This is a baby named Jacky Winslow, and I think he looks like a Jack-o'-lantern. His mother has just died over to North Riverboro, all alone, excepting for Mrs. Lizy Ann Dennett, and there was another little weeny baby that died with her, and Emma Jane and I put flowers around them and did the best we could. The father—that's John Winslow—quarreled with the mother—that was Sal Perry on the Moderation

Road—and ran away and left her. So he doesn't know his wife and the weeny baby are dead. And the town has got to bury them because they can't find the father right off quick, and Jacky has got to go to the poor farm this afternoon. And it seems an awful shame to take him up to that lonesome place with those old people that can't amuse him, and if Emma Jane and Alice Robinson and I take most all the care of him we thought perhaps you and Uncle Jerry would keep him just for a little while. You've got a cow and a turn-up bedstead, you know," she hurried on insinuatingly, "and there's hardly any pleasure as cheap as more babies where there's ever been any before, for baby carriages and trundle beds and cradles don't wear out, and there's always clothes left over from the old baby to begin the new one on. Of course, we can collect enough things to start Jacky, so he won't be much trouble or expense; and anyway, he's past the most troublesome age and you won't have to be up nights with him, and he isn't afraid of anybody or anything, as you can see by his just sitting there laughing and sucking his thumb, though he doesn't know what's going to become of him. And he's just seventeen months old like dear little Sarah Ellen in the graveyard, and we thought we ought to give you the refusal of him before he goes to the poor farm, and what do you think about it? Because it's near my dinner time and Aunt Miranda will keep me in the whole afternoon if I'm late, and I've got to finish weeding the hollyhock bed before sundown."

IV

Mrs. Cobb had enjoyed a considerable period of reflection during this monologue, and Jacky had not used the time unwisely, offering several unconscious arguments and suggestions to the matter under discussion; lurching over on the greensward and righting himself with a chuckle, kicking his bare feet about in delight at the sunshine and groping for his toes with arms too short to reach them, the movement involving an entire upsetting of equilibrium followed by more chuckles.

Coming down the last of the stone steps, Sarah Ellen's mother regarded the baby with interest and sympathy.

"Poor little mite!" she said; "that doesn't know what he's lost and what's going to happen to him. Seems to me we might keep him a spell till we're sure his father's deserted him for good. Want to come to Aunt Sarah, baby?"

Jack-o'-lantern turned from Rebecca and Emma Jane and regarded the kind face gravely; then he held out both his hands and Mrs. Cobb, stooping, gathered him like a harvest. Being lifted into her arms, he at once tore her spectacles from her nose and laughed aloud. Taking them from him gently, she put them on again, and set him in the cushioned rocking chair under the lilac bushes beside the steps. Then she took one of his soft hands in hers and patted it, and fluttered her fingers like birds before his eyes, and snapped them like castanets, remembering all the arts she had lavished upon "Sarah Ellen, aged seventeen months," years and years ago.

Motherless baby and babyless mother,
Bring them together to love one another.

Rebecca knew nothing of this couplet, but she saw clearly enough that her case was won.

"The boy must be hungry; when was he fed last?" asked Mrs. Cobb. "Just stay a second longer while I get him some morning's milk; then you run home to your dinners and I'll speak to Mr. Cobb this afternoon. Of course, we can keep the baby for a week or two till we see what happens. Land! He ain't goin' to be any more trouble than a wax doll! I guess he ain't been used to much attention, and that kind's always the easiest to take care of."

At six o'clock that evening Rebecca and Emma Jane flew up the hill and down the lane again, waving their hands to the dear old couple who were waiting for them in the usual place, the back piazza where they had sat so many summers in a blessed companionship never marred by an unloving word.

"Where's Jacky?" called Rebecca breathlessly, her voice always outrunning her feet.

"Go up to my chamber, both of you, if you want to see," smiled Mrs. Cobb, "only don't wake him up."

The girls went softly up the stairs into Aunt Sarah's room. There, in the turn-up bedstead that had been so long empty, slept Jack-o'-lantern, in blissful unconsciousness of the doom he had so lately escaped. His nightgown and pillow case were clean and fragrant with lavender, but they were both as yellow as saffron, for they had belonged to Sarah Ellen.

"I wish his mother could see him!" whispered Emma Jane.

"You can't tell; it's all puzzly about heaven, and perhaps she does," said Rebecca, as they turned reluctantly from the fascinating scene and stole down to the piazza.

It was a beautiful and a happy summer that year, and every day it was filled with blissful plays and still more blissful duties. On the Monday after Jack-o'-lantern's arrival in Edgewood Rebecca founded the Riverboro Aunts Association. The Aunts were Rebecca, Emma Jane, Alice Robinson, and Minnie Smellie, and each of the first three promised to labor for and amuse the visiting baby for two days a week, Minnie Smellie, who lived at some distance from the Cobbs, making herself responsible for Saturday afternoons.

Minnie Smellie was not a general favorite among the Riverboro girls, and it was only in an unprecedented burst of magnanimity that they admitted her into the rites of fellowship, Rebecca hugging herself secretly at the thought, that as Minnie gave only the leisure time of one day a week, she could not be called a “full” Aunt. There had been long and bitter feuds between the two children during Rebecca’s first summer in Riverboro, but since Mrs. Smellie had told her daughter that one more quarrel would invite a punishment so terrible that it could only be hinted at vaguely, and Miss Miranda Sawyer had remarked that any niece of hers who couldn’t get along peaceable with the neighbors had better go back to the seclusion of a farm where there weren’t any, hostilities had been veiled, and a suave and diplomatic relationship had replaced the former one, which had been wholly primitive, direct, and barbaric. Still, whenever Minnie Smellie, flaxen-haired, pink-nosed, and ferret-eyed, indulged in fluent conversation, Rebecca, remembering the old fairy story, could always see toads hopping out of her mouth. It was really very unpleasant, because Minnie could never see them herself; and what was more amazing, Emma Jane perceived nothing of the sort, being almost as blind, too, to the diamonds that fell continually from Rebecca’s lips; but Emma Jane’s strong point was not her imagination.

A shaky perambulator was found in Mrs. Perkins’s wonderful attic; shoes and stockings were furnished by Mrs. Robinson; Miss Jane Sawyer knitted a blanket and some shirts; Thirza Meserve, though too young for an aunt, coaxed from her mother some dresses and nightgowns, and was presented with a green paper certificate allowing her to wheel Jacky up and down the road for an hour under the superintendence of a full Aunt. Each girl, under the constitution of the association, could call Jacky “hers” for two days in the week, and great, though friendly, was the rivalry between them, as they washed, ironed, and sewed for their adored nephew.

If Mrs. Cobb had not been the most amiable woman in the world she might have had difficulty in managing the aunts, but she always had Jacky to herself the earlier part of the day and after dusk at night.

Meanwhile Jack-o’-lantern grew healthier and heartier and jollier as the weeks slipped away. Uncle Jerry joined the little company of worshipers and slaves, and one fear alone stirred in all their hearts; not, as a sensible and practical person might imagine, the fear that the recreant father might never return to claim his child, but, on the contrary, that he MIGHT do so!

October came at length with its cheery days and frosty nights, its glory of crimson leaves and its golden harvest of pumpkins and ripened corn. Rebecca had been down by the Edgewood side of the river and had come up across the pastures for a good-night play with Jacky. Her literary labors had been somewhat interrupted by the joys and responsibilities of vice-motherhood, and the thought book was less frequently drawn from its hiding place under the old haymow in the barn chamber.

Mrs. Cobb stood behind the screen door with her face pressed against the wire netting, and Rebecca could see that she was wiping her eyes.

All at once the child’s heart gave one prophetic throb and then stood still. She was like a harp that vibrated with every wind of emotion, whether from another’s grief or her own.

She looked down the lane, around the curve of the stone wall, red with woodbine, the lane that would meet the stage road to the station. There, just mounting the crown of the hill and about to disappear on the other side, strode a stranger man, big and tall, with a crop of reddish curly hair showing from under his straw hat. A woman walked by his side, and perched on his shoulder, wearing his most radiant and triumphant mien, as joyous in leaving Edgewood as he had been during every hour of his sojourn there—rode Jack-o’-lantern!

Rebecca gave a cry in which maternal longing and helpless, hopeless jealousy strove for supremacy. Then, with an impetuous movement she started to run after the disappearing trio.

Mrs. Cobb opened the door hastily, calling after her, “Rebecca, Rebecca, come back here! You mustn’t follow where you haven’t any right to go. If there’d been anything to say or do, I’d a’ done it.”

“He’s mine! He’s mine!” stormed Rebecca. “At least he’s yours and mine!”

“He’s his father’s first of all,” faltered Mrs. Cobb; “don’t let’s forget that; and we’d ought to be glad and grateful that John Winslow’s come to his senses an’ remembers he’s brought a child into the world and ought to take care of it. Our loss is his gain and it may make a man of him. Come in, and we’ll put things away all neat before your Uncle Jerry gets home.”

Rebecca sank in a pitiful little heap on Mrs. Cobb’s bedroom floor and sobbed her heart out. “Oh, Aunt Sarah, where shall we get another Jack-o’-lantern, and how shall I break it to Emma Jane? What if his father doesn’t love him, and what if he forgets to strain the milk or lets him go without his nap? That’s the worst of babies that aren’t private—you have to part with them sooner or later!”

“Sometimes you have to part with your own, too,” said Mrs. Cobb sadly; and though there were lines of sadness in her face there was neither rebellion nor repining, as she folded up the sides of the turn-up bedstead preparatory to banishing it a second time to the attic. “I shall miss Sarah Ellen now more’n ever. Still, Rebecca, we mustn’t feel to complain. It’s the Lord that giveth and the Lord that taketh away: Blessed be the name of the Lord.”

Second Chronicle. DAUGHTERS OF ZION

I

Abijah Flagg was driving over to Wareham on an errand for old Squire Winship, whose general chore-boy and farmer's assistant he had been for some years.

He passed Emma Jane Perkins's house slowly, as he always did. She was only a little girl of thirteen and he a boy of fifteen or sixteen, but somehow, for no particular reason, he liked to see the sun shine on her thick braids of reddish-brown hair. He admired her china-blue eyes too, and her amiable, friendly expression. He was quite alone in the world, and he always thought that if he had anybody belonging to him he would rather have a sister like Emma Jane Perkins than anything else within the power of Providence to bestow. When she herself suggested this relationship a few years later he cast it aside with scorn, having changed his mind in the interval—but that story belongs to another time and place.

Emma Jane was not to be seen in garden, field, or at the window, and Abijah turned his gaze to the large brick house that came next on the other side of the quiet village street. It might have been closed for a funeral. Neither Miss Miranda nor Miss Jane Sawyer sat at their respective windows knitting, nor was Rebecca Randall's gypsy face to be discerned. Ordinarily that will-o'-the-wispish little person could be seen, heard, or felt wherever she was.

"The village must be abed, I guess," mused Abijah, as he neared the Robinsons' yellow cottage, where all the blinds were closed and no sign of life showed on porch or in shed. "No, 't aint, neither," he thought again, as his horse crept cautiously down the hill, for from the direction of the Robinsons' barn chamber there floated out into the air certain burning sentiments set to the tune of "Antioch." The words, to a lad brought up in the orthodox faith, were quite distinguishable:

"Daughter of Zion, from the dust, Exalt thy fallen head!"

Even the most religious youth is stronger on first lines than others, but Abijah pulled up his horse and waited till he caught another familiar verse, beginning:

"Rebuild thy walls, thy bounds enlarge, And send thy heralds forth."

"That's Rebecca carrying the air, and I can hear Emma Jane's alto."

"Say to the North,
Give up thy charge,
And hold not back, O South,
And hold not back, O South," etc.

"Land! ain't they smart, seesawin' up and down in that part they learnt in singin' school! I wonder what they're actin' out, singin' hymn-tunes up in the barn chamber? Some o' Rebecca's doins, I'll be bound! Git dap, Aleck!"

Aleck pursued his serene and steady trot up the hills on the Edgewood side of the river, till at length he approached the green Common where the old Tory Hill meeting-house stood, its white paint and green blinds showing fair and pleasant in the afternoon sun. Both doors were open, and as Abijah turned into the Wareham road the church melodeon pealed out the opening bars of the Missionary Hymn, and presently a score of voices sent the good old tune from the choir-loft out to the dusty road:

"Shall we whose souls are lighted
With Wisdom from on high,
Shall we to men benighted

The lamp of life deny?"

"Land!" exclaimed Abijah under his breath. "They're at it up here, too! That explains it all. There's a missionary meeting at the church, and the girls wa'n't allowed to come so they held one of their own, and I bate ye it's the liveliest of the two."

Abijah Flagg's shrewd Yankee guesses were not far from the truth, though he was not in possession of all the facts. It will be remembered by those who have been in the way of hearing Rebecca's experiences in Riverboro, that the Rev. and Mrs. Burch, returned missionaries from the Far East, together with some of their children, "all born under Syrian skies," as they always explained to interested inquirers, spent a day or two at the brick house, and gave parlor meetings in native costume.

These visitors, coming straight from foreign lands to the little Maine village, brought with them a nameless enchantment to the children, and especially to Rebecca, whose imagination always kindled easily. The romance of that visit had never died in her heart, and among the many careers that dazzled her youthful vision was that of converting such Syrian heathen as might continue in idol worship after the Burches' efforts in their behalf had ceased. She thought at the age of eighteen she might be suitably equipped for storming some minor citadel of Mohammedanism; and Mrs. Burch had encouraged her in the idea, not, it is to be feared, because Rebecca showed any surplus of virtue or Christian grace, but because her gift of language, her tact and sympathy, and her musical talent seemed to fit her for the work.

It chanced that the quarterly meeting of the Maine Missionary Society had been appointed just at the time when a letter from Mrs. Burch to Miss Jane Sawyer suggested that Rebecca should form a children's branch in Riverboro. Mrs. Burch's real idea was that the young people should save their pennies and divert a gentle stream of financial aid into the parent fund, thus learning early in life to be useful in such work, either at home or abroad.

The girls themselves, however, read into her letter no such modest participation in the conversion of the world, and wishing to effect an organization without delay, they chose an afternoon when every house in the village was vacant, and seized upon the Robinsons' barn chamber as the place of meeting.

Rebecca, Alice Robinson, Emma Jane Perkins, Candace Milliken, and Persis Watson, each with her hymn book, had climbed the ladder leading to the haymow a half hour before Abijah Flagg had heard the strains of "Daughters of Zion" floating out to the road. Rebecca, being an executive person, had carried, besides her hymn book, a silver call-bell and pencil and paper. An animated discussion regarding one of two names for the society, The Junior Heralds or The Daughters of Zion, had resulted in a unanimous vote for the latter, and Rebecca had been elected president at an early stage of the meeting. She had modestly suggested that Alice Robinson, as the granddaughter of a missionary to China, would be much more eligible.

"No," said Alice, with entire good nature, "whoever is ELECTED president, you WILL be, Rebecca—you're that kind—so you might as well have the honor; I'd just as lieves be secretary, anyway."

"If you should want me to be treasurer, I could be, as well as not," said Persis Watson suggestively; "for you know my father keeps china banks at his store—ones that will hold as much as two dollars if you will let them. I think he'd give us one if I happen to be treasurer."

The three principal officers were thus elected at one fell swoop and with an entire absence of that red tape which commonly renders organization so tiresome, Candace Milliken suggesting that perhaps she'd better be vice-president, as Emma Jane Perkins was always so bashful.

"We ought to have more members," she reminded the other girls, "but if we had invited them the first day they'd have all wanted to be officers, especially Minnie Smellie, so it's just as well not to ask them till another time. Is Thirza Meserve too little to join?"

“I can’t think why anybody named Meserve should have called a baby Thirza,” said Rebecca, somewhat out of order, though the meeting was carried on with small recognition of parliamentary laws. “It always makes me want to say:

Thirza Meserver
Heaven preserve her!
Thirza Meserver
Do we deserve her?

She’s little, but she’s sweet, and absolutely without guile. I think we ought to have her.”

“Is ‘guile’ the same as ‘guilt?’” inquired Emma Jane Perkins.

“Yes,” the president answered; “exactly the same, except one is written and the other spoken language.” (Rebecca was rather good at imbibing information, and a master hand at imparting it!) “Written language is for poems and graduations and occasions like this—kind of like a best Sunday-go-to-meeting dress that you wouldn’t like to go blueberrying in for fear of getting it spotted.”

“I’d just as ‘lieves get ‘guile’ spotted as not,” affirmed the unimaginative Emma Jane. “I think it’s an awful foolish word; but now we’re all named and our officers elected, what do we do first? It’s easy enough for Mary and Martha Burch; they just play at missionarying because their folks work at it, same as Living and I used to make believe be blacksmiths when we were little.”

“It must be nicer missionarying in those foreign places,” said Persis, “because on ‘Afric’s shores and India’s plains and other spots where Satan reigns’ (that’s father’s favorite hymn) there’s always a heathen bowing down to wood and stone. You can take away his idols if he’ll let you and give him a bible and the beginning’s all made. But who’ll we begin on? Jethro Small?”

“Oh, he’s entirely too dirty, and foolish besides!” exclaimed Candace. “Why not Ethan Hunt? He swears dreadfully.”

“He lives on nuts and is a hermit, and it’s a mile to his camp through the thick woods; my mother’ll never let me go there,” objected Alice. “There’s Uncle Tut Judson.”

“He’s too old; he’s most a hundred and deaf as a post,” complained Emma Jane. “Besides, his married daughter is a Sabbath-school teacher—why doesn’t she teach him to behave? I can’t think of anybody just right to start on!”

“Don’t talk like that, Emma Jane,” and Rebecca’s tone had a tinge of reproof in it. “We are a copperated body named the Daughters of Zion, and, of course, we’ve got to find something to do. Foreigners are the easiest; there’s a Scotch family at North Riverboro, an English one in Edgewood, and one Cuban man at Millkin’s Mills.”

“Haven’t foreigners got any religion of their own?” inquired Persis curiously.

“Ye-es, I s’pose so; kind of a one; but foreigners’ religions are never right—ours is the only good one.” This was from Candace, the deacon’s daughter.

“I do think it must be dreadful, being born with a religion and growing up with it, and then finding out it’s no use and all your time wasted!” Here Rebecca sighed, chewed a straw, and looked troubled.

“Well, that’s your punishment for being a heathen,” retorted Candace, who had been brought up strictly.

“But I can’t for the life of me see how you can help being a heathen if you’re born in Africa,” persisted Persis, who was well named.

“You can’t.” Rebecca was clear on this point. “I had that all out with Mrs. Burch when she was visiting Aunt Miranda. She says they can’t help being heathen, but if there’s a single mission station in the whole of Africa, they’re accountable if they don’t go there and get saved.”

“Are there plenty of stages and railroads?” asked Alice; “because there must be dreadfully long distances, and what if they couldn’t pay the fare?”

“That part of it is so dreadfully puzzly we mustn’t talk about it, please,” said Rebecca, her sensitive face quivering with the force of the problem. Poor little soul! She did not realize that her superiors in age and intellect had spent many a sleepless night over that same “accountability of the heathen.”

“It’s too bad the Simpsons have moved away,” said Candace. “It’s so seldom you can find a real big wicked family like that to save, with only Clara Belle and Susan good in it.”

“And numbers count for so much,” continued Alice. “My grandmother says if missionaries can’t convert about so many in a year the Board advises them to come back to America and take up some other work.”

“I know,” Rebecca corroborated; “and it’s the same with revivalists. At the Centennial picnic at North Riverboro, a revivalist sat opposite to Mr. Ladd and Aunt Jane and me, and he was telling about his wonderful success in Bangor last winter. He’d converted a hundred and thirty in a month, he said, or about four and a third a day. I had just finished fractions, so I asked Mr. Ladd how the third of a man could be converted. He laughed and said it was just the other way; that the man was a third converted. Then he explained that if you were trying to convince a person of his sin on a Monday, and couldn’t quite finish by sundown, perhaps you wouldn’t want to sit up all night with him, and perhaps he wouldn’t want you to; so you’d begin again on Tuesday, and you couldn’t say just which day he was converted, because it would be two thirds on Monday and one third on Tuesday.”

“Mr. Ladd is always making fun, and the Board couldn’t expect any great things of us girls, new beginners,” suggested Emma Jane, who was being constantly warned against tautology by her teacher. “I think it’s awful rude, anyway, to go right out and try to convert your neighbors; but if you borrow a horse and go to Edgewood Lower Corner, or Milliken’s Mills, I s’pose that makes it Foreign Missions.”

“Would we each go alone or wait upon them with a committee, as they did when they asked Deacon Tuttle for a contribution for the new hearse?” asked Persis.

“Oh! We must go alone,” decided Rebecca; “it would be much more refined and delicate. Aunt Miranda says that one man alone could never get a subscription from Deacon Tuttle, and that’s the reason they sent a committee. But it seems to me Mrs. Burch couldn’t mean for us to try and convert people when we’re none of us even church members, except Candace. I think all we can do is to persuade them to go to meeting and Sabbath school, or give money for the hearse, or the new horse sheds. Now let’s all think quietly for a minute or two who’s the very most heathenish and reperrehensiblest person in Riverboro.”

After a very brief period of silence the words “Jacob Moody” fell from all lips with entire accord.

“You are right,” said the president tersely; “and after singing hymn number two hundred seventy four, to be found on the sixty-sixth page, we will take up the question of persuading Mr. Moody to attend divine service or the minister’s Bible class, he not having been in the meeting-house for lo! these many years.

‘Daughter of Zion, the power that hath saved thee
Extolled with the harp and the timbrel should be.’

“Sing without reading, if you please, omitting the second stanza. Hymn two seventy four, to be found on the sixty-sixth page of the new hymn book or on page thirty two of Emma Jane Perkins’s old one.”

II

It is doubtful if the Rev. Mr. Burch had ever found in Syria a person more difficult to persuade than the already “gospel-hardened” Jacob Moody of Riverboro.

Tall, gaunt, swarthy, black-bearded—his masses of grizzled, uncombed hair and the red scar across his nose and cheek added to his sinister appearance. His tumble-down house stood on a rocky bit of land back of the Sawyer pasture, and the acres of his farm stretched out on all sides of it. He lived alone, ate alone, plowed, planted, sowed, harvested alone, and was more than willing to die alone, “unwept, unhonored, and unsung.” The road that bordered upon his fields was comparatively little used by any one, and notwithstanding the fact that it was thickly set with chokecherry trees and blackberry bushes it had been for years practically deserted by the children. Jacob’s Red Astrakhan and Granny Garland trees hung thick with apples, but no Riverboro or Edgewood boy stole them; for terrifying accounts of the fate that had overtaken one urchin in times ago had been handed along from boy to boy, protecting the Moody fruit far better than any police patrol.

Perhaps no circumstances could have extenuated the old man’s surly manners or his lack of all citizenly graces and virtues; but his neighbors commonly rebuked his present way of living and forgot the troubled past that had brought it about: the sharp-tongued wife, the unloving and disloyal sons, the daughter’s hapless fate, and all the other sorry tricks that fortune had played upon him—at least that was the way in which he had always regarded his disappointments and griefs.

This, then, was the personage whose moral rehabilitation was to be accomplished by the Daughters of Zion. But how?

“Who will volunteer to visit Mr. Moody?” blandly asked the president.

VISIT MR. MOODY! It was a wonder the roof of the barn chamber did not fall; it did, indeed echo the words and in some way make them sound more grim and satirical.

“Nobody’ll volunteer, Rebecca Rowena Randall, and you know it,” said Emma Jane.

“Why don’t we draw lots, when none of us wants to speak to him and yet one of us must?”

This suggestion fell from Persis Watson, who had been pale and thoughtful ever since the first mention of Jacob Moody. (She was fond of Granny Garlands; she had once met Jacob; and, as to what befell, well, we all have our secret tragedies!)

“Wouldn’t it be wicked to settle it that way?”

“It’s gamblers that draw lots.”

“People did it in the Bible ever so often.”

“It doesn’t seem nice for a missionary meeting.”

These remarks fell all together upon the president’s bewildered ear the while (as she always said in compositions)—“the while” she was trying to adjust the ethics of this unexpected and difficult dilemma.

“It is a very puzzly question,” she said thoughtfully. “I could ask Aunt Jane if we had time, but I suppose we haven’t. It doesn’t seem nice to draw lots, and yet how can we settle it without? We know we mean right, and perhaps it will be. Alice, take this paper and tear off five narrow pieces, all different lengths.”

At this moment a voice from a distance floated up to the haymow—a voice saying plaintively: “Will you let me play with you, girls? Huldah has gone to ride, and I’m all alone.”

It was the voice of the absolutely-without-guile Thirza Meserve, and it came at an opportune moment.

“If she is going to be a member,” said Persis, “why not let her come up and hold the lots? She’d be real honest and not favor anybody.”

It seemed an excellent idea, and was followed up so quickly that scarcely three minutes ensued before the guileless one was holding the five scraps in her hot little palm, laboriously changing their places again and again until they looked exactly alike and all rather soiled and wilted.

“Come, girls, draw!” commanded the president. “Thirza, you mustn’t chew gum at a missionary meeting, it isn’t polite nor holy. Take it out and stick it somewhere till the exercises are over.”

The five Daughters of Zion approached the spot so charged with fate, and extended their trembling hands one by one. Then after a moment’s silent clutch of their papers they drew nearer to one another and compared them.

Emma Jane Perkins had drawn the short one, becoming thus the destined instrument for Jacob Moody’s conversion to a more seemly manner of life!

She looked about her despairingly, as if to seek some painless and respectable method of self-destruction.

“Do let’s draw over again,” she pleaded. “I’m the worst of all of us. I’m sure to make a mess of it till I kind o’ get trained in.”

Rebecca’s heart sank at this frank confession, which only corroborated her own fears.

“I’m sorry, Emmy, dear,” she said, “but our only excuse for drawing lots at all would be to have it sacred. We must think of it as a kind of a sign, almost like God speaking to Moses in the burning bush.”

“Oh, I WISH there was a burning bush right here!” cried the distracted and recalcitrant missionary. “How quick I’d step into it without even stopping to take off my garnet ring!”

“Don’t be such a scare-cat, Emma Jane!” exclaimed Candace bracingly. “Jacob Moody can’t kill you, even if he has an awful temper. Trot right along now before you get more frightened. Shall we go cross lots with her, Rebecca, and wait at the pasture gate? Then whatever happens Alice can put it down in the minutes of the meeting.”

In these terrible crises of life time gallops with such incredible velocity that it seemed to Emma Jane only a breath before she was being dragged through the fields by the other Daughters of Zion, the guileless little Thirza panting in the rear.

At the entrance to the pasture Rebecca gave her an impassioned embrace, and whispering, “WHATEVER YOU DO, BE CAREFUL HOW YOU LEAD UP,” lifted off the top rail and pushed her through the bars. Then the girls turned their backs reluctantly on the pathetic figure, and each sought a tree under whose friendly shade she could watch, and perhaps pray, until the missionary should return from her field of labor.

Alice Robinson, whose compositions were always marked 96 or 97,—100 symbolizing such perfection as could be attained in the mortal world of Riverboro,—Alice, not only Daughter, but Scribe of Zion, sharpened her pencil and wrote a few well-chosen words of introduction, to be used when the records of the afternoon had been made by Emma Jane Perkins and Jacob Moody.

Rebecca’s heart beat tumultuously under her gingham dress. She felt that a drama was being enacted, and though unfortunately she was not the central figure, she had at least a modest part in it. The short lot had not fallen to the properest Daughter, that she quite realized; yet would any one of them succeed in winning Jacob Moody’s attention, in engaging him in pleasant conversation, and finally in bringing him to a realization of his mistaken way of life? She doubted, but at the same moment her spirits rose at the thought of the difficulties involved in the undertaking.

Difficulties always spurred Rebecca on, but they daunted poor Emma Jane, who had no little thrills of excitement and wonder and fear and longing to sustain her lagging soul. That her interview was to be entered as “minutes” by a secretary seemed to her the last straw. Her blue eyes looked lighter than usual and had the glaze of china saucers; her usually pink cheeks were pale, but she pressed on, determined to be a faithful Daughter of Zion, and above all to be worthy of Rebecca’s admiration and respect.

“Rebecca can do anything,” she thought, with enthusiastic loyalty, “and I mustn’t be any stupider than I can help, or she’ll choose one of the other girls for her most intimate friend.” So, mustering all her courage, she turned into Jacob Moody’s dooryard, where he was chopping wood.

“It’s a pleasant afternoon, Mr. Moody,” she said in a polite but hoarse whisper, Rebecca’s words, “LEAD UP! LEAD UP!” ringing in clarion tones through her brain.

Jacob Moody looked at her curiously. “Good enough, I guess,” he growled; “but I don’t never have time to look at afternoons.”

Emma Jane seated herself timorously on the end of a large log near the chopping block, supposing that Jacob, like other hosts, would pause in his tasks and chat.

“The block is kind of like an idol,” she thought; “I wish I could take it away from him, and then perhaps he’d talk.”

At this moment Jacob raised his axe and came down on the block with such a stunning blow that Emma Jane fairly leaped into the air.

“You’d better look out, Sissy, or you’ll git chips in the eye!” said Moody, grimly going on with his work.

The Daughter of Zion sent up a silent prayer for inspiration, but none came, and she sat silent, giving nervous jumps in spite of herself whenever the axe fell upon the log Jacob was cutting.

Finally, the host became tired of his dumb visitor, and leaning on his axe he said, “Look here, Sis, what have you come for? What’s your errant? Do you want apples? Or cider? Or what? Speak out, or GIT out, one or t’other.”

Emma Jane, who had wrung her handkerchief into a clammy ball, gave it a last despairing wrench, and faltered: “Wouldn’t you like—hadn’t you better—don’t you think you’d ought to be more constant at meeting and Sabbath school?”

Jacob’s axe almost dropped from his nerveless hand, and he regarded the Daughter of Zion with unspeakable rage and disdain. Then, the blood mounting in his face, he gathered himself together, and shouted: “You take yourself off that log and out o’ this dooryard double-quick, you imperdent sanct’omus young one! You just let me ketch Bill Perkins’ child trying to teach me where I shall go, at my age! Scuttle, I tell ye! And if I see your pious cantin’ little mug inside my fence ag’in on sech a business I’ll chase ye down the hill or set the dog on ye! SCOOT, I TELL YE!”

Emma Jane obeyed orders summarily, taking herself off the log, out the dooryard, and otherwise scuttling and scooting down the hill at a pace never contemplated even by Jacob Moody, who stood regarding her flying heels with a sardonic grin.

Down she stumbled, the tears coursing over her cheeks and mingling with the dust of her flight; blighted hope, shame, fear, rage, all tearing her bosom in turn, till with a hysterical shriek she fell over the bars and into Rebecca’s arms outstretched to receive her. The other Daughters wiped her eyes and supported her almost fainting form, while Thirza, thoroughly frightened, burst into sympathetic tears, and refused to be comforted.

No questions were asked, for it was felt by all parties that Emma Jane’s demeanor was answering them before they could be framed.

“He threatened to set the dog on me!” she wailed presently, when, as they neared the Sawyer pasture, she was able to control her voice. “He called me a pious, cantin’ young one, and said he’d chase me out o’ the dooryard if I ever came again! And he’ll tell my father—I know he will, for he hates him like poison.”

All at once the adult point of view dawned upon Rebecca. She never saw it until it was too obvious to be ignored. Had they done wrong in interviewing Jacob Moody? Would Aunt Miranda be angry, as well as Mr. Perkins?

“Why was he so dreadful, Emmy?” she questioned tenderly. “What did you say first? How did you lead up to it?”

Emma Jane sobbed more convulsively, and wiped her nose and eyes impartially as she tried to think.

“I guess I never led up at all; not a mite. I didn’t know what you meant. I was sent on an errand, and I went and done it the best I could! (Emma Jane’s grammar always lapsed in moments of excitement.) And then Jake roared at me like Squire Winship’s bull.... And he called my face a mug.... You shut up that secretary book, Alice Robinson! If you write down a single word I’ll never speak to you again.... And I don’t want to be a member’ another minute for fear of drawing another short lot. I’ve got enough of the Daughters or Zion to last me the rest o’ my life! I don’t care who goes to meetin’ and who don’t.”

The girls were at the Perkins’s gate by this time, and Emma Jane went sadly into the empty house to remove all traces of the tragedy from her person before her mother should come home from the church.

The others wended their way slowly down the street, feeling that their promising missionary branch had died almost as soon as it had budded.

“Goodby,” said Rebecca, swallowing lumps of disappointment and chagrin as she saw the whole inspiring plan break and vanish into thin air like an iridescent bubble. “It’s all over and we won’t ever try it again. I’m going in to do overcasting as hard as I can, because I hate that the worst. Aunt Jane must write to Mrs. Burch that we don’t want to be home missionaries. Perhaps we’re not big enough, anyway. I’m perfectly certain it’s nicer to convert people when they’re yellow or brown or any color but white; and I believe it must be easier to save their souls than it is to make them go to meeting.”

Third Chronicle. REBECCA'S THOUGHT BOOK

I

The “Sawyer girls” barn still had its haymow in Rebecca’s time, although the hay was a dozen years old or more, and, in the opinion of the occasional visiting horse, sadly juiceless and wanting in flavor. It still sheltered, too, old Deacon Israel Sawyer’s carryall and mowing-machine, with his pung, his sleigh, and a dozen other survivals of an earlier era, when the broad acres of the brick house went to make one of the finest farms in Riverboro.

There were no horses or cows in the stalls nowadays; no pig grunting comfortably of future spare ribs in the sty; no hens to peck the plants in the cherished garden patch. The Sawyer girls were getting on in years, and, mindful that care once killed a cat, they ordered their lives with the view of escaping that particular doom, at least, and succeeded fairly well until Rebecca’s advent made existence a trifle more sensational.

Once a month for years upon years, Miss Miranda and Miss Jane had put towels over their heads and made a solemn visit to the barn, taking off the enameled cloth coverings (occasionally called “emmanuel covers” in Riverboro), dusting the ancient implements, and sometimes sweeping the heaviest of the cobwebs from the corners, or giving a brush to the floor.

Deacon Israel’s tottering ladder still stood in its accustomed place, propped against the haymow, and the heavenly stairway leading to eternal glory scarcely looked fairer to Jacob of old than this to Rebecca. By means of its dusty rounds she mounted, mounted, mounted far away from time and care and maiden aunts, far away from childish tasks and childish troubles, to the barn chamber, a place so full of golden dreams, happy reveries, and vague longings, that, as her little brown hands clung to the sides of the ladder and her feet trod the rounds cautiously in her ascent, her heart almost stopped beating in the sheer joy of anticipation.

Once having gained the heights, the next thing was to unlatch the heavy doors and give them a gentle swing outward. Then, oh, ever new Paradise! Then, oh, ever lovely green and growing world! For Rebecca had that something in her soul that

“Gives to seas and sunset skies The unspent beauty of surprise.”

At the top of Guide Board hill she could see Alice Robinson’s barn with its shining weather vane, a huge burnished fish that swam with the wind and foretold the day to all Riverboro. The meadow, with its sunny slopes stretching up to the pine woods, was sometimes a flowing sheet of shimmering grass, sometimes—when daisies and buttercups were blooming—a vision of white and gold. Sometimes the shorn stubble would be dotted with “the happy hills of hay,” and a little later the rock maple on the edge of the pines would stand out like a golden ball against the green; its neighbor, the sugar maple, glowing beside it, brave in scarlet.

It was on one of these autumn days with a wintry nip in the air that Adam Ladd (Rebecca’s favorite “Mr. Aladdin”), after searching for her in field and garden, suddenly noticed the open doors of the barn chamber, and called to her. At the sound of his voice she dropped her precious diary, and flew to the edge of the haymow. He never forgot the vision of the startled little poetess, book in one mittened hand, pencil in the other, dark hair all ruffled, with the picturesque addition of an occasional glade of straw, her cheeks crimson, her eyes shining.

“A Sappho in mittens!” he cried laughingly, and at her eager question told her to look up the unknown lady in the school encyclopedia, when she was admitted to the Female Seminary at Wareham.

Now, all being ready, Rebecca went to a corner of the haymow, and withdrew a thick blank-book with mottled covers. Out of her gingham apron pocket came a pencil, a bit of rubber, and some

pieces of brown paper; then she seated herself gravely on the floor, and drew an inverted soapbox nearer to her for a table.

The book was reverently opened, and there was a serious reading of the extracts already carefully copied therein. Most of them were apparently to the writer's liking, for dimples of pleasure showed themselves now and then, and smiles of obvious delight played about her face; but once in a while there was a knitting of the brows and a sigh of discouragement, showing that the artist in the child was not wholly satisfied.

Then came the crucial moment when the budding author was supposedly to be racked with the throes of composition; but seemingly there were no throes. Other girls could wield the darning or crochet or knitting needle, and send the tatting shuttle through loops of the finest cotton; hemstitch, oversew, braid hair in thirteen strands, but the pencil was never obedient in their fingers, and the pen and ink-pot were a horror from early childhood to the end of time.

Not so with Rebecca; her pencil moved as easily as her tongue, and no more striking simile could possibly be used. Her handwriting was not Spencerian; she had neither time, nor patience, it is to be feared, for copybook methods, and her unformed characters were frequently the despair of her teachers; but write she could, write she would, write she must and did, in season and out; from the time she made pothooks at six, till now, writing was the easiest of all possible tasks; to be indulged in as solace and balm when the terrors of examples in least common multiple threatened to dethrone the reason, or the rules of grammar loomed huge and unconquerable in the near horizon.

As to spelling, it came to her in the main by free grace, and not by training, and though she slipped at times from the beaten path, her extraordinary ear and good visual memory kept her from many or flagrant mistakes. It was her intention, especially when saying her prayers at night, to look up all doubtful words in her small dictionary, before copying her Thoughts into the sacred book for the inspiration of posterity; but when genius burned with a brilliant flame, and particularly when she was in the barn and the dictionary in the house, impulse as usual carried the day.

There sits Rebecca, then, in the open door of the Sawyers barn chamber—the sunset door. How many a time had her grandfather, the good deacon, sat just underneath in his tipped-back chair, when Mrs. Israel's temper was uncertain, and the serenity of the barn was in comforting contrast to his own fireside!

The open doors swinging out to the peaceful landscape, the solace of the pipe, not allowed in the "settin'-room"—how beautifully these simple agents have ministered to the family peace in days ago! "If I hadn't had my barn and my store BOTH, I couldn't never have lived in holy matrimony with Maryliza!" once said Mr. Watson feelingly.

But the deacon, looking on his waving grass fields, his tasseling corn and his timber lands, bright and honest as were his eyes, never saw such visions as Rebecca. The child, transplanted from her home farm at Sunnybrook, from the care of the overworked but easy-going mother, and the companionship of the scantily fed, scantily clothed, happy-go-lucky brothers and sisters—she had indeed fallen on shady days in Riverboro. The blinds were closed in every room of the house but two, and the same might have been said of Miss Miranda's mind and heart, though Miss Jane had a few windows opening to the sun, and Rebecca already had her unconscious hand on several others. Brickhouse rules were rigid and many for a little creature so full of life, but Rebecca's gay spirit could not be pinioned in a strait jacket for long at a time; it escaped somehow and winged its merry way into the sunshine and free air; if she were not allowed to sing in the orchard, like the wild bird she was, she could still sing in the cage, like the canary.

II

If you had opened the carefully guarded volume with the mottled covers, you would first have seen a wonderful title page, constructed apparently on the same lines as an obituary, or the inscription on a tombstone, save for the quantity and variety of information contained in it. Much of the matter would seem to the captious critic better adapted to the body of the book than to the title page, but Rebecca was apparently anxious that the principal personages in her chronicle should be well described at the outset.

She seems to have had a conviction that heredity plays its part in the evolution of genius, and her belief that the world will be inspired by the possession of her Thoughts is too artless to be offensive. She evidently has respect for rich material confided to her teacher, and one can imagine Miss Dearborn's woe had she been confronted by Rebecca's chosen literary executor and bidden to deliver certain "Valuable Poetry and Thoughts," the property of posterity "unless carelessly destroyed."

THOUGHT BOOK of Rebecca Rowena Randall Really of Sunnybrook Farm But temporarily of The Brick House Riverboro. Own niece of Miss Miranda and Jane Sawyer Second of seven children of her father, Mr. L. D. M. Randall (Now at rest in Temperance cemetary and there will be a monument as soon as we pay off the mortgage on the farm) Also of her mother Mrs. Aurelia Randall

In case of Death the best of these Thoughts
May be printed in my Remerniscences
For the Sunday School Library at Temperance, Maine
Which needs more books fearfully
And I hereby
Will and Testament them to Mr. Adam Ladd
Who bought 300 cakes of soap from me
And thus secured a premium
A Greatly Needed Banquet Lamp
For my friends the Simpsons.
He is the only one that encourages
My writing Remerniscences and
My teacher Miss Dearborn will
Have much valuable Poetry and Thoughts
To give him unless carelessly destroyed.

The pictures are by the same hand that
Wrote the Thoughts.

IT IS NOT NOW DECIDED WHETHER REBECCA ROWENA RANDALL WILL BE A PAINTER OR AN AUTHOR, BUT AFTER HER DEATH IT WILL BE KNOWN WHICH SHE HAS BEEN, IF ANY.

FINIS

From the title page, with its wealth of detail, and its unnecessary and irrelevant information, the book ripples on like a brook, and to the weary reader of problem novels it may have something of the brook's refreshing quality.

OUR DIARIES May, 187—

All the girls are keeping a diary because Miss Dearborn was very much ashamed when the school trustees told her that most of the girls' and all of the boys' compositions were disgraceful, and must be improved upon next term. She asked the boys to write letters to her once a week instead

of keeping a diary, which they thought was girlish like playing with dolls. The boys thought it was dreadful to have to write letters every seven days, but she told them it was not half as bad for them as it was for her who had to read them.

To make my diary a little different I am going to call it a THOUGHT Book (written just like that, with capitals). I have thoughts that I never can use unless I write them down, for Aunt Miranda always says, Keep your thoughts to yourself. Aunt Jane lets me tell her some, but does not like my queer ones and my true thoughts are mostly queer. Emma Jane does not mind hearing them now and then, and that is my only chance.

If Miss Dearborn does not like the name Thought Book I will call it Remerniscences (written just like that with a capital R). Remerniscences are things you remember about yourself and write down in case you should die. Aunt Jane doesn't like to read any other kind of books but just lives of interesting dead people and she says that is what Longfellow (who was born in the state of Maine and we should be very proud of it and try to write like him) meant in his poem:

“Lives of great men all remind us
We should make our lives sublime,
And departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time.”

I know what this means because when Emma Jane and I went to the beach with Uncle Jerry Cobb we ran along the wet sand and looked at the shapes our boots made, just as if they were stamped in wax. Emma Jane turns in her left foot (splayfoot the boys call it, which is not polite) and Seth Strout had just patched one of my shoes and it all came out in the sand pictures. When I learned The Psalm of Life for Friday afternoon speaking I thought I shouldn't like to leave a patched footprint, nor have Emma Jane's look crooked on the sands of time, and right away I thought Oh! What a splendid thought for my Thought Book when Aunt Jane buys me a fifteen-cent one over to Watson's store.

REMERNISCENCES

June, 187—

I told Aunt Jane I was going to begin my Remerniscences, and she says I am full young, but I reminded her that Candace Milliken's sister died when she was ten, leaving no footprints whatever, and if I should die suddenly who would write down my Remerniscences? Aunt Miranda says the sun and moon would rise and set just the same, and it was no matter if they didn't get written down, and to go up attic and find her piece-bag; but I said it would, as there was only one of everybody in the world, and nobody else could do their remerniscensing for them. If I should die tonight I know now who would describe me right. Miss Dearborn would say one thing and brother John another. Emma Jane would try to do me justice, but has no words; and I am glad Aunt Miranda never takes the pen in hand.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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