

## CHAPTER III

### THE BAPTISM AND THE BURIAL

Now, I cannot think of anything more unlikely and uninteresting to make a story of than that old brown "linter" house of Captain Zephaniah Pennel, down on the south end of Orr's Island.

Zephaniah and Mary Pennel, like Zacharias and Elizabeth, are a pair of worthy, God-fearing people, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless; but that is no great recommendation to a world gaping for sensation and calling for something stimulating. This worthy couple never read anything but the Bible, the "Missionary Herald," and the "Christian Mirror,"--never went anywhere except in the round of daily business. He owned a fishing-smack, in which he labored after the apostolic fashion; and she washed, and ironed, and scrubbed, and brewed, and baked, in her contented round, week in and out. The only recreation they ever enjoyed was the going once a week, in good weather, to a prayer-meeting in a little old brown school-house, about a mile from their dwelling; and making a weekly excursion every Sunday, in their fishing craft, to the church opposite, on Harpswell Neck.

To be sure, Zephaniah had read many wide leaves of God's great book of Nature, for, like most Maine sea-captains, he had been wherever ship can go,--to all usual and unusual ports. His hard, shrewd, weather-beaten

visage had been seen looking over the railings of his brig in the port of Genoa, swept round by its splendid crescent of palaces and its snow-crested Apennines. It had looked out in the Lagoons of Venice at that wavy floor which in evening seems a sea of glass mingled with fire, and out of which rise temples, and palaces, and churches, and distant silvery Alps, like so many fabrics of dreamland. He had been through the Skagerrack and Cattegat,--into the Baltic, and away round to Archangel, and there chewed a bit of chip, and considered and calculated what bargains it was best to make. He had walked the streets of Calcutta in his shirt-sleeves, with his best Sunday vest, backed with black glazed cambric, which six months before came from the hands of Miss Roxy, and was pronounced by her to be as good as any tailor could make; and in all these places he was just Zephaniah Pennel,--a chip of old Maine,--thrifty, careful, shrewd, honest, God-fearing, and carrying an instinctive knowledge of men and things under a face of rustic simplicity.

It was once, returning from one of his voyages, that he found his wife with a black-eyed, curly-headed little creature, who called him papa, and climbed on his knee, nestled under his coat, rifled his pockets, and woke him every morning by pulling open his eyes with little fingers, and jabbering unintelligible dialects in his ears.

"We will call this child Naomi, wife," he said, after consulting his old Bible; "for that means pleasant, and I'm sure I never see anything beat her for pleasantness. I never knew as children was so engagin'!"

It was to be remarked that Zephaniah after this made shorter and shorter voyages, being somehow conscious of a string around his heart which pulled him harder and harder, till one Sunday, when the little Naomi was five years old, he said to his wife,--

"I hope I ain't a-pervertin' Scriptur' nor nuthin', but I can't help thinkin' of one passage, 'The kingdom of heaven is like a merchantman seeking goodly pearls, and when he hath found one pearl of great price, for joy thereof he goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that pearl.' Well, Mary, I've been and sold my brig last week," he said, folding his daughter's little quiet head under his coat, "'cause it seems to me the Lord's given us this pearl of great price, and it's enough for us. I don't want to be rambling round the world after riches. We'll have a little farm down on Orr's Island, and I'll have a little fishing-smack, and we'll live and be happy together."

And so Mary, who in those days was a pretty young married woman, felt herself rich and happy,--no duchess richer or happier. The two contentedly delved and toiled, and the little Naomi was their princess. The wise men of the East at the feet of an infant, offering gifts, gold, frankincense, and myrrh, is just a parable of what goes on in every house where there is a young child. All the hard and the harsh, and the common and the disagreeable, is for the parents,--all the bright and beautiful for their child.

When the fishing-smack went to Portland to sell mackerel, there came home in Zephaniah's fishy coat pocket strings of coral beads, tiny gaiter boots, brilliant silks and ribbons for the little fairy princess,--his Pearl of the Island; and sometimes, when a stray party from the neighboring town of Brunswick came down to explore the romantic scenery of the solitary island, they would be startled by the apparition of this still, graceful, dark-eyed child exquisitely dressed in the best and brightest that the shops of a neighboring city could afford,--sitting like some tropical bird on a lonely rock, where the sea came dashing up into the edges of arbor vitæ, or tripping along the wet sands for shells and seaweed.

Many children would have been spoiled by such unlimited indulgence; but there are natures sent down into this harsh world so timorous, and sensitive, and helpless in themselves, that the utmost stretch of indulgence and kindness is needed for their development,--like plants which the warmest shelf of the green-house and the most careful watch of the gardener alone can bring into flower. The pale child, with her large, lustrous, dark eyes, and sensitive organization, was nursed and brooded into a beautiful womanhood, and then found a protector in a high-spirited, manly young ship-master, and she became his wife.

And now we see in the best room--the walls lined with serious faces--men, women, and children, that have come to pay the last tribute of sympathy to the living and the dead. The house looked so utterly alone and solitary in that wild, sea-girt island, that one would have as

soon expected the sea-waves to rise and walk in, as so many neighbors; but they had come from neighboring points, crossing the glassy sea in their little crafts, whose white sails looked like millers' wings, or walking miles from distant parts of the island.

Some writer calls a funeral one of the amusements of a New England population. Must we call it an amusement to go and see the acted despair of Medea? or the dying agonies of poor Adrienne Lecouvreur? It is something of the same awful interest in life's tragedy, which makes an untaught and primitive people gather to a funeral,--a tragedy where there is no acting,--and one which each one feels must come at some time to his own dwelling.

Be that as it may, here was a roomful. Not only Aunt Roxy and Aunt Ruey, who by a prescriptive right presided over all the births, deaths, and marriages of the neighborhood, but there was Captain Kittridge, a long, dry, weather-beaten old sea-captain, who sat as if tied in a double bow-knot, with his little fussy old wife, with a great Leghorn bonnet, and eyes like black glass beads shining through in the bows of her horn spectacles, and her hymn-book in her hand ready to lead the psalm. There were aunts, uncles, cousins, and brethren of the deceased; and in the midst stood two coffins, where the two united in death lay sleeping tenderly, as those to whom rest is good. All was still as death, except a chance whisper from some busy neighbor, or a creak of an old lady's great black fan, or the fizz of a fly down the window-pane, and then a stifled sound of deep-drawn breath and weeping from under a cloud of

heavy black crape veils, that were together in the group which country-people call the mourners.

A gleam of autumn sunlight streamed through the white curtains, and fell on a silver baptismal vase that stood on the mother's coffin, as the minister rose and said, "The ordinance of baptism will now be administered." A few moments more, and on a baby brow had fallen a few drops of water, and the little pilgrim of a new life had been called Mara in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,--the minister slowly repeating thereafter those beautiful words of Holy Writ, "A father of the fatherless is God in his holy habitation,"--as if the baptism of that bereaved one had been a solemn adoption into the infinite heart of the Lord.

With something of the quaint pathos which distinguishes the primitive and Biblical people of that lonely shore, the minister read the passage in Ruth from which the name of the little stranger was drawn, and which describes the return of the bereaved Naomi to her native land. His voice trembled, and there were tears in many eyes as he read, "And it came to pass as she came to Bethlehem, all the city was moved about them; and they said, Is this Naomi? And she said unto them, Call me not Naomi; call me Mara; for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, and the Lord hath brought me home again empty: why then call ye me Naomi, seeing the Lord hath testified against me, and the Almighty hath afflicted me?"

Deep, heavy sobs from the mourners were for a few moments the only answer to these sad words, till the minister raised the old funeral psalm of New England,--

"Why do we mourn departing friends,  
Or shake at Death's alarms?  
'Tis but the voice that Jesus sends  
To call them to his arms.

"Are we not tending upward too,  
As fast as time can move?  
And should we wish the hours more slow  
That bear us to our love?"

The words rose in old "China,"--that strange, wild warble, whose quaintly blended harmonies might have been learned of moaning seas or wailing winds, so strange and grand they rose, full of that intense pathos which rises over every defect of execution; and as they sung, Zephaniah Pennel straightened his tall form, before bowed on his hands, and looked heavenward, his cheeks wet with tears, but something sublime and immortal shining upward through his blue eyes; and at the last verse he came forward involuntarily, and stood by his dead, and his voice rose over all the others as he sung,--

"Then let the last loud trumpet sound,  
And bid the dead arise!

Awake, ye nations under ground!

Ye saints, ascend the skies!"

The sunbeam through the window-curtain fell on his silver hair, and they that looked beheld his face as it were the face of an angel; he had gotten a sight of the city whose foundation is jasper, and whose every gate is a separate pearl.