

CHAPTER IV

AUNT ROXY AND AUNT RUEY

The sea lay like an unbroken mirror all around the pine-girt, lonely shores of Orr's Island. Tall, kingly spruces wore their regal crowns of cones high in air, sparkling with diamonds of clear exuded gum; vast old hemlocks of primeval growth stood darkling in their forest shadows, their branches hung with long hoary moss; while feathery larches, turned to brilliant gold by autumn frosts, lighted up the darker shadows of the evergreens. It was one of those hazy, calm, dissolving days of Indian summer, when everything is so quiet that the faintest kiss of the wave on the beach can be heard, and white clouds seem to faint into the blue of the sky, and soft swathing bands of violet vapor make all earth look dreamy, and give to the sharp, clear-cut outlines of the northern landscape all those mysteries of light and shade which impart such tenderness to Italian scenery.

The funeral was over; the tread of many feet, bearing the heavy burden of two broken lives, had been to the lonely graveyard, and had come back again,--each footstep lighter and more unconstrained as each one went his way from the great old tragedy of Death to the common cheerful walks of Life.

The solemn black clock stood swaying with its eternal "tick-tock,

tick-tock," in the kitchen of the brown house on Orr's Island. There was there that sense of a stillness that can be felt,--such as settles down on a dwelling when any of its inmates have passed through its doors for the last time, to go whence they shall not return. The best room was shut up and darkened, with only so much light as could fall through a little heart-shaped hole in the window-shutter,--for except on solemn visits, or prayer meetings, or weddings, or funerals, that room formed no part of the daily family scenery.

The kitchen was clean and ample, with a great open fireplace and wide stone hearth, and oven on one side, and rows of old-fashioned splint-bottomed chairs against the wall. A table scoured to snowy whiteness, and a little work-stand whereon lay the Bible, the "Missionary Herald" and the "Weekly Christian Mirror," before named, formed the principal furniture. One feature, however, must not be forgotten,--a great sea-chest, which had been the companion of Zephaniah through all the countries of the earth. Old, and battered, and unsightly it looked, yet report said that there was good store within of that which men for the most part respect more than anything else; and, indeed, it proved often when a deed of grace was to be done,--when a woman was suddenly made a widow in a coast gale, or a fishing-smack was run down in the fogs off the banks, leaving in some neighboring cottage a family of orphans,--in all such cases, the opening of this sea-chest was an event of good omen to the bereaved; for Zephaniah had a large heart and a large hand, and was apt to take it out full of silver dollars when once it went in. So the ark of the covenant could not have

been looked on with more reverence than the neighbors usually showed to Captain Pennel's sea-chest.

The afternoon sun is shining in a square of light through the open kitchen-door, whence one dreamily disposed might look far out to sea, and behold ships coming and going in every variety of shape and size.

But Aunt Roxy and Aunt Ruey, who for the present were sole occupants of the premises, were not people of the dreamy kind, and consequently were not gazing off to sea, but attending to very terrestrial matters that in all cases somebody must attend to. The afternoon was warm and balmy, but a few smouldering sticks were kept in the great chimney, and thrust deep into the embers was a mongrel species of snub-nosed tea-pot, which fumed strongly of catnip-tea, a little of which gracious beverage Miss Roxy was preparing in an old-fashioned cracked India china tea-cup, tasting it as she did so with the air of a connoisseur.

Apparently this was for the benefit of a small something in long white clothes, that lay face downward under a little blanket of very blue new flannel, and which something Aunt Roxy, when not otherwise engaged, constantly patted with a gentle tattoo, in tune to the steady trot of her knee. All babies knew Miss Roxy's tattoo on their backs, and never thought of taking it in ill part. On the contrary, it had a vital and mesmeric effect of sovereign force against colic, and all other disturbers of the nursery; and never was infant known so pressed with those internal troubles which infants cry about, as not speedily to give

over and sink to slumber at this soothing appliance.

At a little distance sat Aunt Ruey, with a quantity of black crape strewed on two chairs about her, very busily employed in getting up a mourning-bonnet, at which she snipped, and clipped, and worked, zealously singing, in a high cracked voice, from time to time, certain verses of a funeral psalm.

Miss Roxy and Miss Ruey Toothacre were two brisk old bodies of the feminine gender and singular number, well known in all the region of Harpswell Neck and Middle Bay, and such was their fame that it had even reached the town of Brunswick, eighteen miles away.

They were of that class of females who might be denominated, in the Old Testament language, "cunning women,"--that is, gifted with an infinite diversity of practical "faculty," which made them an essential requisite in every family for miles and miles around. It was impossible to say what they could not do: they could make dresses, and make shirts and vests and pantaloons, and cut out boys' jackets, and braid straw, and bleach and trim bonnets, and cook and wash, and iron and mend, could upholster and quilt, could nurse all kinds of sicknesses, and in default of a doctor, who was often miles away, were supposed to be infallible medical oracles. Many a human being had been ushered into life under their auspices,--trotted, chirruped in babyhood on their knees, clothed by their handiwork in garments gradually enlarging from year to year, watched by them in the last sickness, and finally arrayed for the long

repose by their hands.

These universally useful persons receive among us the title of "aunt" by a sort of general consent, showing the strong ties of relationship which bind them to the whole human family. They are nobody's aunts in particular, but aunts to human nature generally. The idea of restricting their usefulness to any one family, would strike dismay through a whole community. Nobody would be so unprincipled as to think of such a thing as having their services more than a week or two at most. Your country factotum knows better than anybody else how absurd it would be

"To give to a part what was meant for mankind."

Nobody knew very well the ages of these useful sisters. In that cold, clear, severe climate of the North, the roots of human existence are hard to strike; but, if once people do take to living, they come in time to a place where they seem never to grow any older, but can always be found, like last year's mullein stalks, upright, dry, and seedy, warranted to last for any length of time.

Miss Roxy Toothacre, who sits trotting the baby, is a tall, thin, angular woman, with sharp black eyes, and hair once black, but now well streaked with gray. These ravages of time, however, were concealed by an ample mohair frisette of glossy blackness woven on each side into a heap of stiff little curls, which pushed up her cap border in rather a bristling and decisive way. In all her movements and personal habits,

even to her tone of voice and manner of speaking, Miss Roxy was vigorous, spicy, and decided. Her mind on all subjects was made up, and she spoke generally as one having authority; and who should, if she should not? Was she not a sort of priestess and sibyl in all the most awful straits and mysteries of life? How many births, and weddings, and deaths had come and gone under her jurisdiction! And amid weeping or rejoicing, was not Miss Roxy still the master-spirit,--consulted, referred to by all?--was not her word law and precedent? Her younger sister, Miss Ruey, a pliant, cozy, easy-to-be-entreated personage, plump and cushiony, revolved around her as a humble satellite. Miss Roxy looked on Miss Ruey as quite a frisky young thing, though under her ample frisette of carroty hair her head might be seen white with the same snow that had powdered that of her sister. Aunt Ruey had a face much resembling the kind of one you may see, reader, by looking at yourself in the convex side of a silver milk-pitcher. If you try the experiment, this description will need no further amplification.

The two almost always went together, for the variety of talent comprised in their stock could always find employment in the varying wants of a family. While one nursed the sick, the other made clothes for the well; and thus they were always chipping and chatting to each other, like a pair of antiquated house-sparrows, retailing over harmless gossips, and moralizing in that gentle jogtrot which befits serious old women. In fact, they had talked over everything in Nature, and said everything they could think of to each other so often, that the opinions of one were as like those of the other as two sides of a pea-pod. But as often

happens in cases of the sort, this was not because the two were in all respects exactly alike, but because the stronger one had mesmerized the weaker into consent.

Miss Roxy was the master-spirit of the two, and, like the great coining machine of a mint, came down with her own sharp, heavy stamp on every opinion her sister put out. She was matter-of-fact, positive, and declarative to the highest degree, while her sister was naturally inclined to the elegiac and the pathetic, indulging herself in sentimental poetry, and keeping a store thereof in her thread-case, which she had cut from the "Christian Mirror." Miss Roxy sometimes, in her brusque way, popped out observations on life and things, with a droll, hard quaintness that took one's breath a little, yet never failed to have a sharp crystallization of truth,--frosty though it were. She was one of those sensible, practical creatures who tear every veil, and lay their fingers on every spot in pure business-like good-will; and if we shiver at them at times, as at the first plunge of a cold bath, we confess to an invigorating power in them after all.

"Well, now," said Miss Roxy, giving a decisive push to the tea-pot, which buried it yet deeper in the embers, "ain't it all a strange kind o' providence that this 'ere little thing is left behind so; and then their callin' on her by such a strange, mournful kind of name,--Mara. I thought sure as could be 'twas Mary, till the minister read the passage from Scriptur'. Seems to me it's kind o' odd. I'd call it Maria, or I'd put an Ann on to it. Mara-ann, now, wouldn't sound so strange."

"It's a Scriptur' name, sister," said Aunt Ruey, "and that ought to be enough for us."

"Well, I don't know," said Aunt Roxy. "Now there was Miss Jones down on Mure P'int called her twins Tiglath-Pileser and Shalmaneser,--Scriptur' names both, but I never liked 'em. The boys used to call 'em, Tiggy and Shally, so no mortal could guess they was Scriptur'."

"Well," said Aunt Ruey, drawing a sigh which caused her plump proportions to be agitated in gentle waves, "'tain't much matter, after all, what they call the little thing, for 'tain't 'tall likely it's goin' to live,--cried and worried all night, and kep' a-suckin' my cheek and my night-gown, poor little thing! This 'ere's a baby that won't get along without its mother. What Mis' Pennel's a-goin' to do with it when we is gone, I'm sure I don't know. It comes kind o' hard on old people to be broke o' their rest. If it's goin' to be called home, it's a pity, as I said, it didn't go with its mother"--

"And save the expense of another funeral," said Aunt Roxy. "Now when Mis' Pennel's sister asked her what she was going to do with Naomi's clothes, I couldn't help wonderin' when she said she should keep 'em for the child."

"She had a sight of things, Naomi did," said Aunt Ruey. "Nothin' was never too much for her. I don't believe that Cap'n Pennel ever went to

Bath or Portland without havin' it in his mind to bring Naomi somethin'."

"Yes, and she had a faculty of puttin' of 'em on," said Miss Roxy, with a decisive shake of the head. "Naomi was a still girl, but her faculty was uncommon; and I tell you, Ruey, 'tain't everybody hes faculty as hes things."

"The poor Cap'n," said Miss Ruey, "he seemed greatly supported at the funeral, but he's dreadful broke down since. I went into Naomi's room this morning, and there the old man was a-sittin' by her bed, and he had a pair of her shoes in his hand,--you know what a leetle bit of a foot she had. I never saw nothin' look so kind o' solitary as that poor old man did!"

"Well," said Miss Roxy, "she was a master-hand for keepin' things, Naomi was; her drawers is just a sight; she's got all the little presents and things they ever give her since she was a baby, in one drawer. There's a little pair of red shoes there that she had when she wa'n't more'n five year old. You 'member, Ruey, the Cap'n brought 'em over from Portland when we was to the house a-makin' Mis' Pennel's figured black silk that he brought from Calcutty. You 'member they cost just five and sixpence; but, law! the Cap'n he never grudged the money when 'twas for Naomi. And so she's got all her husband's keepsakes and things just as nice as when he give 'em to her."

"It's real affectin'," said Miss Ruey, "I can't all the while help a-thinkin' of the Psalm,--

"So fades the lovely blooming flower,--
Frail, smiling solace of an hour;
So quick our transient comforts fly,
And pleasure only blooms to die."

"Yes," said Miss Roxy; "and, Ruey, I was a-thinkin' whether or no it wa'n't best to pack away them things, 'cause Naomi hadn't fixed no baby drawers, and we seem to want some."

"I was kind o' hintin' that to Mis' Pennel this morning," said Ruey, "but she can't seem to want to have 'em touched."

"Well, we may just as well come to such things first as last," said Aunt Roxy; "'cause if the Lord takes our friends, he does take 'em; and we can't lose 'em and have 'em too, and we may as well give right up at first, and done with it, that they are gone, and we've got to do without 'em, and not to be hangin' on to keep things just as they was."

"So I was a-tellin' Mis' Pennel," said Miss Ruey, "but she'll come to it by and by. I wish the baby might live, and kind o' grow up into her mother's place."

"Well," said Miss Roxy, "I wish it might, but there'd be a sight o'

trouble fetchin' on it up. Folks can do pretty well with children when they're young and spry, if they do get 'em up nights; but come to grandchildren, it's pretty tough."

"I'm a-thinkin', sister," said Miss Ruey, taking off her spectacles and rubbing her nose thoughtfully, "whether or no cow's milk ain't goin' to be too hearty for it, it's such a pindlin' little thing. Now, Mis' Badger she brought up a seven-months' child, and she told me she gave it nothin' but these 'ere little seed cookies, wet in water, and it throve nicely,--and the seed is good for wind."

"Oh, don't tell me none of Mis' Badger's stories," said Miss Roxy, "I don't believe in 'em. Cows is the Lord's ordinances for bringing up babies that's lost their mothers; it stands to reason they should be,--and babies that can't eat milk, why they can't be fetched up; but babies can eat milk, and this un will if it lives, and if it can't it won't live." So saying, Miss Roxy drummed away on the little back of the party in question, authoritatively, as if to pound in a wholesome conviction at the outset.

"I hope," said Miss Ruey, holding up a strip of black crape, and looking through it from end to end so as to test its capabilities, "I hope the Cap'n and Mis' Pennel'll get some support at the prayer-meetin' this afternoon."

"It's the right place to go to," said Miss Roxy, with decision.

"Mis' Pennel said this mornin' that she was just beat out tryin' to submit; and the more she said, 'Thy will be done,' the more she didn't seem to feel it."

"Them's common feelin's among mourners, Ruey. These 'ere forty years that I've been round nussin', and layin'-out, and tendin' funerals, I've watched people's exercises. People's sometimes supported wonderfully just at the time, and maybe at the funeral; but the three or four weeks after, most everybody, if they's to say what they feel, is unreconciled."

"The Cap'n, he don't say nothin'," said Miss Ruey.

"No, he don't, but he looks it in his eyes," said Miss Roxy; "he's one of the kind o' mourners as takes it deep; that kind don't cry; it's a kind o' dry, deep pain; them's the worst to get over it,--sometimes they just says nothin', and in about six months they send for you to nuss 'em in consumption or somethin'. Now, Mis' Pennel, she can cry and she can talk,--well, she'll get over it; but he won't get no support unless the Lord reaches right down and lifts him up over the world. I've seen that happen sometimes, and I tell you, Ruey, that sort makes powerful Christians."

At that moment the old pair entered the door. Zephaniah Pennel came and stood quietly by the pillow where the little form was laid, and lifted a

corner of the blanket. The tiny head was turned to one side, showing the soft, warm cheek, and the little hand was holding tightly a morsel of the flannel blanket. He stood swallowing hard for a few moments. At last he said, with deep humility, to the wise and mighty woman who held her, "I'll tell you what it is, Miss Roxy, I'll give all there is in my old chest yonder if you'll only make her--live."