

New Chronicles
Of
Rebecca

By

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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 steeping 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 WOULDN'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 Sawyer! 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?"

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