KEZIAH COFFIN

by

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Cy Whittaker's Place

Capt. Eri, Etc.

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SYNOPSIS.

Mrs. Keziah Coffin, supposed widow, is left by her husband, Captain Elkanah Coffin, fifty years his junior, with a baby daughter whom she had kept secret. Ryan Peppet, the village gossip, and Captain Zeb Dingley are refused a visit. Keziah offers Captain Elkanah's old friend, Captain Obadiah Nickerson, and she decides to remain in the village. Captain Nickerson and Captain John Eldredge are indignant and grieved. John advises us to his comfort toward Keziah's property. Keziah's daughter, Thankful, is born. Keziah's grief is lightened by the baby's presence. Ryan Peppet is married to Hannah Higgins, a widow. Keziah's housekeeper, Mrs. Prince, quarrels with Ryan's mother-in-law, Mrs. Higgins, and she leaves the house. Keziah is startled when informed of the arrival of Captain Elkanah's nephew, Captain Titus Coffin, whom she has not seen since his youth. Titus's remonstrance with Keziah for her extravagance in the matter of the funeral is met by the cold shoulder by her. They become friends. Elkany Snow's daughter Nancy is walking with Titus and learns that she walks there every day. Titus, Keziah, Nancy and Thankful attend Mrs. Hannah Bassett's funeral. Captain's daughter, Annabel Bassett, is there. Titus is much interested in Nancy. He was with her at a party every Sunday at a certain time. Titus goes out of the cemetery and Captain Ephraim Ingerson Kenlet is standing with Nancy. Titus is much surprised to find his brother, whom he has not seen since Elkany sent Cyrus to marry him. He learns that Cyrus has married Nancy. Titus and Keziah become fast friends. Keziah and Hannah Daniels talk them about the match. Ingerson Kenlet is a widower. Keziah declares he will make Grace choose Ryan Peppet. Titus and Keziah visit Captain Nickerson and Captain Eldredge, the executors of Elkanah's will. Just before he dies Captain Nickerson tells Keziah that Grace Snow is her child. Keziah's heart breaks because the news to Elkany and later he tells Keziah that he is marrying Nancy so as to marry Nat, and asking him not to try to see her again.

CHAPTER XII.—(Continued.)

"Never mind about the other man. He was handsome then, in a way, and he had money to spend, and he liked her, he wanted me to marry him. I did it for whom she had ever known. Ryan Peppet, the village gossip, and Captain Zeb Dingley are refused a visit. Keziah offers Captain Elkanah's old friend, Captain Obadiah Nickerson, and she decides to remain in the village. Captain Nickerson and Captain John Eldredge are indignant and grieved. John advises us to his comfort toward Keziah's property. Keziah's daughter, Thankful, is born. Keziah's grief is lightened by the baby's presence. Ryan Peppet is married to Hannah Higgins, a widow. Keziah's housekeeper, Mrs. Prince, quarrels with Ryan's mother-in-law, Mrs. Higgins, and she leaves the house. Keziah is startled when informed of the arrival of Captain Elkanah's nephew, Captain Titus Coffin, whom she has not seen since his youth. Titus's remonstrance with Keziah for her extravagance in the matter of the funeral is met by the cold shoulder by her. They become friends. Elkany Snow's daughter Nancy is walking with Titus and learns that she walks there every day. Titus, Keziah, Nancy and Thankful attend Mrs. Hannah Bassett's funeral. Captain's daughter, Annabel Bassett, is there. Titus is much interested in Nancy. He was with her at a party every Sunday at a certain time. Titus goes out of the cemetery and Captain Ephraim Ingerson Kenlet is standing with Nancy. Titus is much surprised to find his brother, whom he has not seen since Elkany sent Cyrus to marry him. He learns that Cyrus has married Nancy. Titus and Keziah become fast friends. Keziah and Hannah Daniels talk them about the match. Ingerson Kenlet is a widower. Keziah declares he will make Grace choose Ryan Peppet. Titus and Keziah visit Captain Nickerson and Captain Eldredge, the executors of Elkanah's will. Just before he dies Captain Nickerson tells Keziah that Grace Snow is her child. Keziah's heart breaks because the news to Elkany and later he tells Keziah that he is marrying Nancy so as to marry Nat, and asking him not to try to see her again.

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"Oh, Nat!"

"Sssh! here comes Nat. He kind to him. He's sufferin', too; maybe more than we are. Sssh! here he is, Nat. Take her back home and I'll be 'long pretty soon."

"I tell you," broke in the voice of Captain Zeb Mayo, "Keziah, I've been waitin' for you. Get in my shay and I'll take you back to the parsonage."

Mrs. Coffin accepted the invitation and went in the chaise beside Captain Zeb. Nat walked behind with Grace. Then I was right about it, after all. I did stand for it. I took in sewin' and kept up an appearance, somehow. Then I got the notion that folks come parcenlain' around and offered me money, and I needn't tell you grace then. I went ran rightaboot in a hurry. Then I began to drink and carry on and lost his place. Prett' soon he began to neglect me and at last wait off to see afore the most. He was poor as poverty, but I didn't have stood that; I did stand it. I took in sewin' and kept up an appearance, somehow. Then the one thing I've been thankful for.

"You can't keep such things quiet always. People are bound to find out. They come to me and said: 'Why don't you leave him?' but I wouldn't. I could have divorced him easy enough, there was reasons plenty, but I wouldn't do that. Then word came that he was dead, drowned off in the East Indies somewheres. I come back here to keep house for Sol, my brother, and I kept house for him till he died and they offered me this place here at the parsonage. There! that's the story, short and plain. I never told it to a livin' soul afore, except Sol."

She paused sighing. The minister, who had sat silent by the window, apathetically tearing or trying to tear, turned his head.

"I understand, Mrs. Coffin," he said softly, "you have had trials, hard ones, but—"

"But they ain't as hard as yours, you think? Well, I haven't quite finished yet. Wait. Grace and I lived Nat's brother's death, the other man knew and wanted me to marry him. I wouldn't wanted to—oh, how I wanted to! I saved up money for him, and I saved more, I guess. But I wouldn't—I wouldn't though it wrung my heart out to say no. I told him I couldn't, because I thought I had a duty laid on me.

Kenlet smiled. "I can see her now," he said. "She's a duty, all right, and given us by God, to marry the one we love."

Keziah's expression, which had grown as she told her story, suddenly softened into fondness.

"Is that as far as you can see?" she asked. "That's as it should be, I s'pose, then—or looks easy now. I've got a brother-in-law that's been dead for years and years and I'm glad I married."

He looked at her as if he thought she had lost her wits.

"The man you married, he replied. "Why, that's different, of course. I—I—"

"No, he ain't. You remember the letter you sent me awhile? that night when you came back from Come-Out-Ears meetin'? I've got it yet. I took it from him. He's alive. Yes, he's alive, Alive and kickin' 'round the world somewhere. Every little while he writes me for money and, if I have it to spare, I send it to him. Why? Why 'cause I'm a coward, after all, I guess, and I'm scared to do what he says he will and come back. Perhaps you think I'm glad to get rid of him, that's why what none feller would say if they knew it, and they'd tell me I ought to divorce him. Well, I can't, I can't, I walked into the mess blindfolded. I married him in spite of warnin's and everything. I took him for better and for worse, and now that he's turned out worse, I must take his medicine. I can't live with him—that I can't do—but while he lives I'll stay his wife and give him what money I can spare. That's the duty I told you was laid on me, and it's a hard one, but I don't run away from it."

He met the captain at the corner of the "Turnoff" one day late in August. He tried to make his bow seem cordial, but was painfully aware that it was not. Nat, however, seemed not to notice, but crossed the road and held out his hand.

"Well, Mr. Ellery," said Captain Nat, "I won't keep you. I see you're in a hurry. Just thought I'd run 'cross side a minute and say goodby. Don't know's I'll see you again before I sail."

"Before you sail? You—you are going away?"

"Yup. My owners have been after me for a good while, but I wouldn't leave home on account of dad's health. Now he's gone, I've got to be gettin' back to salt water again. My ship's been dry-docked and overhauled and she's fine. Just now I can't run her myself, but I'm a long voyage, even if I come back direct, which ain't likely. So I may not see the old town again for a couple of years. Take care of yourself, won't you? Good men, especially mariners, are scurse, and from what I hear about you I can't afford Trumet needs you."

"When are you going?"

"Last of next week, most likely."

"Will you—will you go in here? Are you to be—to be—"

"Married? Grace and I have talked it over and we've agreed it's best to wait till I come back. She'll stay in the old house with Hannah."

"Good-by, captain."

"Good-by. Now I say, Mr. Ellery, how's things at the parsonage? Elkanah—Mrs. Coffin, your housekeeper, er, is she smart?"

"Yes. She's well."

"That's good. Say, you might tell her I'm good by for me, if you want to. Tell her I wished her well and hoped there was. And—and—just say that I'm sorry she ain't down to see me afore—say just that, will you?—her friend Nat's sorry she didn't come down. It's a—a sort of joke between us."

"Very good, captain. I'll tell her."

They shook hands and parted.

Indians and the fellow never—enders distributed the tale of the captain's sailing broadcast during the next few days. There was much speculation at the delayed marriage, but the general verdict was that Grace Snow had recent death and the proper respect due to it furnished the sufficient excuse. Hannah Pumpernickel, delighted at being so close to the parsonage interest, talked and talked, and thus Grace was spared the interviews which would have been a trouble to her. As for the town via the packet, on the following Wednesday, the captain's namesake came the news that his ship, the Sea Mist, had sailed from New York bound for Manila.

CHAPTER XIV.

In Which Trumet Talks of Captain Nat.

Summer was over, autumn came passed, and it was winter—John Ellery's first winter in Trumet. Fall, parties were taken up, the lay fishing with ice, the packet ceased to run, and the village settled down to hibernate until spring. The stage coach through on its regular trips, except when snow or an unusually rendered the roads impassable, but passengers were few. Twice there were wrecks, one of a fishing schooner, the crew of which were fortunate enough to escape and take to the dories, and another, a British bark, which struck on the farthest bar and was beaten to pieces by the great waves, while the townspeople stood helplessly ashore from the shore, for launching a boat was impossible. Mr. Pepper made no more calls on Mrs. Coffin that and, when the minister met him, at church or elsewhere, seemed anxious to avoid an interview.

"Well, Mr. Ahithel," Ellery, on one of these occasions, "how are you getting on at home? Has your sister looked you up again?"

"No, sir, she ain't," replied Kyan Lavitty, shyly aware of Keziah's eye. She ain't aigh, so—so down on a fellow as she used to be. She was over in a while by myself nowadays when she wanted to write a letter or something. Writes one about every month now in a week. I don't know why they're so, nother. She's talkin' of goin' up to Boston pretty soon."

"She is? Alone?"

"No she stays."

"Ah! I see. Mrs. Peppet will, I am surprised."

"Surprises might! so be I. But she says she blieves she needs a change.

They Shook Hands and Parted.

and there's church conference up there, you know, and she figures that she ain't been to conference she don't know when. I s'pose you'll go, won't you, Mr. Ellery?"

"Probably."

Having got herself elected a delegate and went, in company with Captain Eleazar, Mrs. Mayo, and others, to the conference, and was a regular attendant at the meetings and seemed to enjoy them as a change. Keziah introduced the minister to one Calvin Pratt, a resident of Sandwich, whom she said she had known ever since she was a girl.

"Mr. Pratt's a cousin of Thankful Farne over to home," volunteered Lavitty. "You know Thankful, Mr. Ellery."

Lavitin confided to her pastor that Mr. Pratt—code—the best shoes in Ostable county. He could fit any kind of feet, she declared, and the minister ought ur try him sometime. He added that he had money in the bank.

Spring once more; then summer. And now people were again speaking of Captain Nat Hammond. His ship was overdue, long overdue. Even in those days, when there were no cables and the telegraph was still something of a novelty, word of his arrival should have reached Trumet months before this. But it had not come, and did not. The old mariner was the owner of the white beads of the settled shipyard were shaking dubiously. Something had happened to the Sea Mist, something serious.

As the weeks and months went by without news of the missing vessel, this belief became a conviction. At the Come-Outer chapel, where Keziah still worshiped, Mrs. Grimes was sure offered for the son of their former leader.

One afternoon Keziah came into Ellery's study, where he was laboring with his next Sunday sermon, and sat down in the rocking-chair. She had been out and called to see her honest and staid.

"John," she said, "I ask your pardon for disturbin' you. I wanted is sick."

"John" is she? I'm awfully sorry. Nothing serious, I hope?"

"No, I guess not. Only she's got a cold and kind of her buried in the wool. I thought I'd pass you'd like to run up and see her, and I'm goin' myself, and all of you, 'cause you was so good when we was sick and Thankful was so sick. Poor old thing! she's had a hard time of it. I just heard that she was sillin' from Débama Rogers. In Débama said she was all but dyin', so I thought I'd better go and see if she was somethin'. If she was really very bad, I'd send word and have Nancy come over there. She's a master hand to nurse sick folks, and she's fond of her, I know that. I can say anything more? I'm awfully busy."

"Nothing, thank you. I'll call on Mrs. Prince. She'd come down to see Grace."

"Didums."

"No; Mrs. Prince. She'd come down to see Grace."

"Oh! The old lady's been awful kind and sympathizin' slice—since the loss of her own boy, I presume you call it. I'm feelin' for you, John, what do they say around town about the—the loss?"

"Captain Hammond? Why, if you mean that they've all given up hope, I suppose they have. Captain Mayo and Captain Daniels were speakin' of it the other day. Captain Mayo said Captain Daniels were speakin' of it the other day. Captain Mayo said Captain Daniels were speakin' of it the other day. Captain Mayo said