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# A Sprig of Rosemary

By H. WARNER MUNN

*A tender story about a skinflint whose heart had turned to ice, and how it was softened after his death*

**W**HEN I was a boy in the little village of Pequoig, which is hidden away in a fold of northwestern Massachusetts' hilly country, I remember distinctly an old man with a long white beard seen often on the streets and side lanes, always alone.

Stump, stump, stump, would go his peg-leg on the plank sidewalks as he strode along, with occasionally a sharp rattle of his cane along the pickets of the bordering fences.

We boys would cry to each other, "Watch out, here comes old Uncle Moses!" as he came in sight; then it was "Good day to you, Mr. Crockett!" to his face.

"Humph!" was his invariable reply, while his beard twitched as though about to throw off sparks and the gnarled hand clenched on his stout stick. Crack! Down it would come on the boards and off he would march, as though mightily insulted by our greeting. Stump, stump, stump, down the street; the hollow sound from the boarding coming back long after he was out of sight.

There was a tale in the village, that old Uncle Moses had not always been so morose, but his leg and his temper left him together, shot away by a cannon ball during the War of 1812.

He came home, hurt body and soul, eager for sympathy, limping straight to the door of the girl who had promised to be his bride when the war was over. For would he not be covered with glory and resplendent with glittering buttons and braid?

She took one long horrified look at him, standing there on her stoop, haggard, worn and crippled, leaning on his crutches, and she threw up her hands in dismay.

"Oh, Moses!" she cried, "I'd rather see you dead than coming home this way!" and slammed the door in his face.

Hurt and bewildered, his heart became like ice. From that day on, he had a kind word for no one; scowling, friendless, solitary, he stumped the streets of Pequoig and grew old alone.

The avuncular appellation came not from any kin of his, for he had no relatives. People called him Uncle because of his pawnbroker habits, and the name stuck. He loaned money at exorbitant interest and only upon excellent security. No tale of hard times could induce him to part with a penny due him, and many a curse was heaped upon his head from some poor soul thrust out into the wide world, sans house, property or hope.

Little by little, his fingers poked into every pie in Pequoig. Hardly an individ-

ual but was somehow in his debt, and one in debt to Uncle Moses rarely threw off his bonds.

The Civil War came and found many that took advantage of his pocketbook. Was the man with a family drafted? To old Uncle Moses then, for the hundred dollars to pay some single man to take his place.

Long after the war was over, some found their paid interest had totalled many times the principal, but the original sum loaned had not been abated a penny and they still owed old Uncle Moses one hundred dollars.

Mortgages, civic funds, rents, all came eventually to his eager clutching hands and there was a specter behind every man's bed as he tossed sleepless at night; for there was no pity in old Uncle Moses' stony heart for any living being.

By some he was looked upon with disgust and repulsion, by others with scorn, but underneath there was fear and hatred. And so time wore on.

As he grew older, the familiar stumping was heard less frequently, but the village dogs avoided him still, for there was power in his arm and a bite in his stick even in these late days when I came to know him.

At that time the pleasant custom of decorating graves on Memorial Day had recently come into fashion and was received with great enthusiasm and interest in Pequoig.

How well I remember seeing old Uncle Moses, standing with his weight on his peg-leg, looking on at the exercises in Highland Cemetery, mentally reckoning up the cost in good hard cash of all the flowers and wreaths laid out for the rains to destroy!

"Humph!" he grunted loudly. "Pagan superstition! Criminal waste of money!" and stumped away home.

This spread through the village on indignant tongues, and feeling ran high, so that there was talk of hooded men and tar and feathers. Nothing probably would have come of it in the end, for the fear of his power was too great, but there was no time given to decide the question.

**T**HE very next morning, a debtor calling to pay money due, found old Uncle Moses dead in his chair, with his jaw dropped down and with his stick clutched firmly in his hand.

All over town there was silent rejoicing and if ever there was talk of a judgment sent straight from heaven, it was then, with Moses Crockett as a horrible example.

He had made no will, so even before his burial, a special town meeting was called to settle the question of his money. Almost unanimously it was voted to cancel all debts owing to his estate, bring back and settle again all townspeople who had been evicted through him, and use the remainder of his wealth in civic improvements.

It might be thought that this would have caused old Uncle Moses to turn over in his coffin, but calm and peaceful he lay, and was lowered into the grave. The ground leveled, a simple headstone placed and the sexton went away and left him alone as he would have chosen to be.

And while the town was glad, in a furtive shamefaced way, to see the last of him, a family living near the river were made happy for another reason.

Almost at the very instant that the spades patted down the last heap of loose earth in the Crockett lot, a girl baby was born to the Keltons.

She did not cry at first, like most babies, quickly afterward to fall asleep, but the beginning of her life was one of smiles.

"What shall we call her, Patience?"

said Abner, stroking his wife's hair with a horny, work-gnarled hand.

"We will call her Rosemary, dear," she answered weakly. "Rosemary. Rosemary Kelton. Isn't it lovely, Abner? She likes it, see how she smiles! Rosemary—that's for remembrance."

Then mother and daughter fell fast asleep and the great day was over.

The Keltons were one of the expatriated families brought back to better times by the death of old Uncle Moses. Soon they left the little shack by the river and returned into the village again to their old home.

One day Abner, his wife, and Rosemary, still in arms, went through the cemetery. They paused beside the grave of Moses Crockett for a moment. There were none of the usual eulogies of the dead upon his stone, merely a record of the dates of birth and death and his name; that was all.

"Poor old man!" said Mrs. Kelton. "I'm sorry for him. Nobody ever had a good word for him."

"Why should they?" flared up Abner. "He never did anything decent for anybody while he lived. In fact, the only good thing he ever did was die and get out of the way. Why, in a few more years, nobody in Pequig would have been able to breathe unless they asked old Crockett's permission! Why, what's the matter with the child?"

For little Rosemary, whether frightened by her father's violent and angry tone, or for another reason, had commenced to cry bitterly and would not be comforted. Nor did she ever after that show such a liking for her father as had been her wont.

Another year crept by. Little Rosemary became "free, goin' on four," as she would proudly announce to all who begged to be informed.

Again on Memorial Day, the family went to Highland Cemetery to lay tributes upon ancestral resting-places.

Here in Pequig, it has always been a custom that a thing worth doing at all is worth doing well, and the graves were loaded with flowers. This made it all the more noticeable, when they passed, as they were obliged to do, old Moses Crockett's grave.

It was bare and untended. The grass grew upon it uncut and in stiff clumps. The headstone had tipped drunkenly askew. The whole effect was that of desolation and neglect.

Rosemary looked at this depressing sight and hung back on her mother's hand.

"Mama! Why hasn't he got some flowers, too? Everybody else has got lots. Couldn't they give him a few?"

Mrs. Kelton looked at the grave and at her earnest-faced little girl. It did seem petty and spiteful to neglect this hard, unloved man, now that he was dead and gone.

"Give him this if you like, little daughter," she smiled, and broke off a little sweet-smelling sprig of blue flowers from the bouquet she carried. "It's rosemary, the pretty little shrub that we named you after. Put it there, dear. Now come, we will be late for the exercises."

"Why didn't he have any flowers, Mama?"

"Nobody loved him, darling. He didn't have any little girl like you to think about him and bring him flowers. He was all alone, you see."

"Poor old man! I'll be his little girl, Mama. I'll love him too and bring him flowers. Can't I be your little girl and his too, Mama?"

Tears sprang to her mother's eyes. She knelt and hugged her baby.

"Mother's thoughtful little daughter!

Of course you can. We will come here together, whenever you wish."

And there the matter ended for a while.

On Sundays Mrs. Kelton and Rosemary came to be regular visitors to the grave. It took on a different aspect.

The headstone was straightened, the grass neatly clipped, with seed sown to fill in the bare spots. Flowers were brought, fresh every week, whatever was in season at the time. A little bush had sprung up of itself upon the grave and one day Mrs. Kelton noticed that the spot it occupied must be directly over the old man's heart. It was rosemary.

**T**HE year wore away to early fall. Goldenrod and fringed gentians appeared upon the grave and the little girl had formed the habit of going to the cemetery alone.

At first, she had wandered off and had been sought anxiously and with much concern, only to be found coming home with the calm explanation that having nothing else to do she had gone to the cemetery with flowers for old Uncle Moses.

Entering into the spirit of the play, Abner asked teasingly, "How did he like 'em? Did he thank ye for 'em, now?"

"'Deed he did, Papa. He walked all the way here with me, too, but when he saw you he went back."

Abner's eyes almost popped from his head. He looked at his wife. She paled.

"Are you sure it was him, dear? How was he dressed?"

"Course 'twas him. He wore the same clothes he always wears. A black suit, big wide floppy hat, and his shoes are square at the toe.

"Poor man," she interrupted herself. "I mean 'shoe,' of course, because he's only got one foot. But he gets along real

good with his peg-leg and his cane with the silver on the handle."

Over the child's head, the parents exchanged an awed look. She had described his garb to the life, and there was not a picture of Moses Crockett in the entire village of Pequoig!

"You have seen him before, then?" queried Abner.

"Course. Lots of times. We talk together every time I go up there."

"What about?"

"Oh, things," she replied, evasively. "He talks like he's glad to have me for a little girl."

Home again, the parents held a long colloquy, and arrived at the opinion that for the sake of her future sanity she must be kept away from the grave.

So, for a month, Highland Cemetery went unvisited by any Kelton, and grass grew up in clumps upon the grave and turned brown and sere in the chill nights of autumn.

Rosemary wept, but parental orders were stern. Then one day she was missing again and was found this time in the cemetery itself, radiant and happy. She was sitting by the headstone, talking rapidly, and appeared to be enjoying herself so much that Mrs. Kelton had not the heart to drag her away, but withdrew unobserved.

She came home in wild excitement. Old Uncle Moses, it appeared, had hit a big dog with his cane, when it jumped out at her as she was passing by Asa Higgins' house.

**A**BNER KELTON put on his hat and coat and went out without saying a word. In front of the Higgins house lay a dog. He did not remember ever having seen it about the village. Its back had been broken by a heavy blow and it was dead.

He went to Highland Cemetery in the

gathering dark. Standing before the grave he took off his hat.

"I'm much obliged, Mr. Crockett," he said, in a steady voice. "We think the world of that little girl."

Off in the depths of the wooded cemetery a whippoorwill sounded its plaintive, half-human cry. It came like a distant, sardonic laugh.

Abner started and put on his hat. "You poor, dumb fool!" he said to himself and strode home.

There is little more to tell.

Scarlet fever came to Pequig before the first snow fell, and among the early victims was Rosemary Kelton. Parched and hot, she threw herself about upon her little bed in the agonies of delirium and nothing the anguished parents could do would bring her ease.

"I want Uncle Moses. Why don't Uncle Moses come to me?" she kept continually calling, and in desperation Abner Kelton went to Highland Cemetery with grief in his heart.

He knelt beside the grave.

"God," he said, very simply, "I ain't much on praying, but if you can let Moses Crockett come home with me for a spell, I'll be much obliged."

He paused; he felt there should be something more, but nothing would come to his mind. There was no sound to be heard but the wind dolefully whining through the leafless branches of the weeping willows, and sighing in the pines.

"Amen," he said, and stood up.

He walked out of the cemetery on the gravel path. He stopped and looked back; there was nothing to be seen, but he thought that he heard an irregular step on the gravel behind him.

He went on, down into the village. Far behind came a hollow stump, stump, stump, on the board walk, and faint but clear, a long rattle such as might be made

by a stick dragged along the white-painted pickets of a fence.

Abner Kelton hurried home.

Stump, stump, stump, on the other side of the street.

Abner Kelton raised the latch of his gate and went into his house.

Lying on her bed, Rosemary smiled at him. "You sent him, didn't you, Papa? He loves you too now, Papa, because you came for him. He said he came before, but your hearts were against him and he couldn't get in. How good his cool hands feel on my forehead!"

She fell off into easy slumber, and that night the fever broke.

The parents spoke little of what had happened, but lying awake, they heard in the nights of sickness that followed, little noises that sounded like the slight tapping of a wooden leg set softly as might be in the taking of steps. And there was talking from below stairs. Sometimes they could swear they heard another voice besides that of their daughter, but so often as they went down to see, the other voice stopped and they found Rosemary muttering in her sleep.

So they gave up and left her with her unseen companion, for that she was in loving care could not be doubted.

But, although the fever was gone, Rosemary did not get well. Day by day she became more thin and pale, daily more feeble, until in spite of all their efforts she whispered one evening with a tired little sigh: "I love my Mama and Papa, and my Uncle Moses," and closed her eyes for ever, with the setting of the sun.

**T**HAT was a night of sleepless sorrow. The grief-stricken mother sat by the bedside of her first-born and mourned, dry-eyed and heartbroken.

Along toward morning, outraged nature had her way, and she dropped off to

sleep in her rocker. People afterward thought she dreamed what followed, but she always swore that a sudden noise brought her eyes open.

Rosemary was sitting up in the bed, holding out her arms to some one behind her mother. She was unable to turn, but she heard a deep, hearty, happy laugh, no more like the surly tones that she remembered from Moses Crockett than anything in the world.

"I knew you would come back for me, Uncle Moses," crowed the little girl, with a lovely smile. "I waited for you. I just couldn't go by myself. It was so far and so dark."

The person behind Mrs. Kelton laughed again.

"Come," said the hearty, good-humored tones. "Come, darling, we will go together. Did you think I would let the only one in the whole wide world who ever loved old Uncle Moses go alone?"

Then she saw that there were two Rosemarys, for one jumped out of bed and left the other lying there. The first Rosemary ran past the rocker.

"Here," said the happy voice, "put on your shoes. We are going to have a long

journey, you know. So! There we are. Now, put this on the bed, then when your mother wakes up, she will know that everything is all right, and you will be waiting for her to follow us by and by."

The first Rosemary ran back to the bed and tucked something into the clasped fingers of the second.

"Now then, here we go. Come on. Up! You shall have a ride."

The door opened and closed again. At once Mrs. Kelton sprang up. She darted to the bed and took a tiny twig from between the fingers of the little girl who lay smiling there.

At last, tears blinded her eyes, but she heard a sound in the room and dashed them away. Abner stood at the foot of the stairs, looking sadly at her. She walked toward him.

"Oh, Abner," she began and paused, listening.

Stump, stump, stump, far away on the board sidewalk, and faint but clear, the sharp rattle of a stick on a picket fence.

She held up the sweet-smelling sprig before his face.

"Rosemary," she said unsteadily. "Rosemary. That's for remembrance."