

V. THE DREAM-CHILD

A man's heart--aye, and a woman's, too--should be light in the spring. The spirit of resurrection is abroad, calling the life of the world out of its wintry grave, knocking with radiant fingers at the gates of its tomb. It stirs in human hearts, and makes them glad with the old primal gladness they felt in childhood. It quickens human souls, and brings them, if so they will, so close to God that they may clasp hands with Him. It is a time of wonder and renewed life, and a great outward and inward rapture, as of a young angel softly clapping his hands for creation's joy. At least, so it should be; and so it always had been with me until the spring when the dream-child first came into our lives.

That year I hated the spring--I, who had always loved it so. As boy I had loved it, and as man. All the happiness that had ever been mine, and it was much, had come to blossom in the springtime. It was in the spring that Josephine and I had first loved each other, or, at least, had first come into the full knowledge that we loved. I think that we must have loved each other all our lives, and that each succeeding spring was a word in the revelation of that love, not to be understood until, in the fullness of time, the whole sentence was written out in that most beautiful of all beautiful springs.

How beautiful it was! And how beautiful she was! I suppose every lover thinks that of his lass; otherwise he is a poor sort of lover. But it was not only my eyes of love that made my dear lovely. She was slim and lithe as a young, white-stemmed birch tree; her hair was like a soft, dusky cloud; and her eyes were as blue as Avonlea harbor on a fair twilight, when all the sky is ablaze over it. She had dark lashes, and a little red mouth that quivered when she was very sad or very happy, or when she loved very much--quivered like a crimson rose too rudely shaken by the wind. At such times what was a man to do save kiss it?

The next spring we were married, and I brought her home to my gray old homestead on the gray old harbor shore. A lonely place for a young bride, said Avonlea people. Nay, it was not so. She was happy here, even in my absences. She loved the great, restless harbor and the vast, misty sea beyond; she loved the tides, keeping their world-old tryst with the shore, and the gulls, and the croon of the waves, and the call of the winds in the fir woods at noon and even; she loved the moonrises and the sunsets, and the clear, calm nights when the stars seemed to have fallen into the water and to be a little dizzy from such a fall. She loved these things, even as I did. No, she was never lonely here then.

The third spring came, and our boy was born. We thought we had been happy before; now we knew that we had only dreamed a

pleasant dream of happiness, and had awakened to this exquisite reality. We thought we had loved each other before; now, as I looked into my wife's pale face, blanched with its baptism of pain, and met the uplifted gaze of her blue eyes, aglow with the holy passion of motherhood, I knew we had only imagined what love might be. The imagination had been sweet, as the thought of the rose is sweet before the bud is open; but as the rose to the thought, so was love to the imagination of it.

"All my thoughts are poetry since baby came," my wife said once, rapturously.

Our boy lived for twenty months. He was a sturdy, toddling rogue, so full of life and laughter and mischief that, when he died, one day, after the illness of an hour, it seemed a most absurd thing that he should be dead--a thing I could have laughed at, until belief forced itself into my soul like a burning, searing iron.

I think I grieved over my little son's death as deeply and sincerely as ever man did, or could. But the heart of the father is not as the heart of the mother. Time brought no healing to Josephine; she fretted and pined; her cheeks lost their pretty oval, and her red mouth grew pale and drooping.

I hoped that spring might work its miracle upon her. When the

buds swelled, and the old earth grew green in the sun, and the gulls came back to the gray harbor, whose very grayness grew golden and mellow, I thought I should see her smile again. But, when the spring came, came the dream-child, and the fear that was to be my companion, at bed and board, from sunsetting to sunsetting.

One night I awakened from sleep, realizing in the moment of awakening that I was alone. I listened to hear whether my wife were moving about the house. I heard nothing but the little splash of waves on the shore below and the low moan of the distant ocean.

I rose and searched the house. She was not in it. I did not know where to seek her; but, at a venture, I started along the shore.

It was pale, fainting moonlight. The harbor looked like a phantom harbor, and the night was as still and cold and calm as the face of a dead man. At last I saw my wife coming to me along the shore. When I saw her, I knew what I had feared and how great my fear had been.

As she drew near, I saw that she had been crying; her face was stained with tears, and her dark hair hung loose over her shoulders in little, glossy ringlets like a child's. She seemed

to be very tired, and at intervals she wrung her small hands together.

She showed no surprise when she met me, but only held out her hands to me as if glad to see me.

"I followed him--but I could not overtake him," she said with a sob. "I did my best--I hurried so; but he was always a little way ahead. And then I lost him--and so I came back. But I did my best--indeed I did. And oh, I am so tired!"

"Josie, dearest, what do you mean, and where have you been?" I said, drawing her close to me. "Why did you go out so--alone in the night?"

She looked at me wonderingly.

"How could I help it, David? He called me. I had to go."

"WHO called you?"

"The child," she answered in a whisper. "Our child, David--our pretty boy. I awakened in the darkness and heard him calling to me down on the shore. Such a sad, little wailing cry, David, as if he were cold and lonely and wanted his mother. I hurried out to him, but I could not find him. I could only hear the call,

and I followed it on and on, far down the shore. Oh, I tried so hard to overtake it, but I could not. Once I saw a little white hand beckoning to me far ahead in the moonlight. But still I could not go fast enough. And then the cry ceased, and I was there all alone on that terrible, cold, gray shore. I was so tired and I came home. But I wish I could have found him. Perhaps he does not know that I tried to. Perhaps he thinks his mother never listened to his call. Oh, I would not have him think that."

"You have had a bad dream, dear," I said. I tried to say it naturally; but it is hard for a man to speak naturally when he feels a mortal dread striking into his very vitals with its deadly chill.

"It was no dream," she answered reproachfully. "I tell you I heard him calling me--me, his mother. What could I do but go to him? You cannot understand--you are only his father. It was not you who gave him birth. It was not you who paid the price of his dear life in pain. He would not call to you--he wanted his mother."

I got her back to the house and to her bed, whither she went obediently enough, and soon fell into the sleep of exhaustion. But there was no more sleep for me that night. I kept a grim vigil with dread.

When I had married Josephine, one of those officious relatives that are apt to buzz about a man's marriage told me that her grandmother had been insane all the latter part of her life. She had grieved over the death of a favorite child until she lost her mind, and, as the first indication of it, she had sought by nights a white dream-child which always called her, so she said, and led her afar with a little, pale, beckoning hand.

I had smiled at the story then. What had that grim old bygone to do with springtime and love and Josephine? But it came back to me now, hand in hand with my fear. Was this fate coming on my dear wife? It was too horrible for belief. She was so young, so fair, so sweet, this girl-wife of mine. It had been only a bad dream, with a frightened, bewildered waking. So I tried to comfort myself.

When she awakened in the morning she did not speak of what had happened and I did not dare to. She seemed more cheerful that day than she had been, and went about her household duties briskly and skillfully. My fear lifted. I was sure now that she had only dreamed. And I was confirmed in my hopeful belief when two nights had passed away uneventfully.

Then, on the third night, the dream-child called to her again. I wakened from a troubled doze to find her dressing herself with

feverish haste.

"He is calling me," she cried. "Oh, don't you hear him? Can't you hear him? Listen--listen--the little, lonely cry! Yes, yes, my precious, mother is coming. Wait for me. Mother is coming to her pretty boy!"

I caught her hand and let her lead me where she would. Hand in hand we followed the dream-child down the harbor shore in that ghostly, clouded moonlight. Ever, she said, the little cry sounded before her. She entreated the dream-child to wait for her; she cried and implored and uttered tender mother-talk. But, at last, she ceased to hear the cry; and then, weeping, wearied, she let me lead her home again.

What a horror brooded over that spring--that so beautiful spring! It was a time of wonder and marvel; of the soft touch of silver rain on greening fields; of the incredible delicacy of young leaves; of blossom on the land and blossom in the sunset. The whole world bloomed in a flush and tremor of maiden loveliness, instinct with all the evasive, fleeting charm of spring and girlhood and young morning. And almost every night of this wonderful time the dream-child called his mother, and we roved the gray shore in quest of him.

In the day she was herself; but, when the night fell, she was

restless and uneasy until she heard the call. Then follow it she would, even through storm and darkness. It was then, she said, that the cry sounded loudest and nearest, as if her pretty boy were frightened by the tempest. What wild, terrible roivings we had, she straining forward, eager to overtake the dream-child; I, sick at heart, following, guiding, protecting, as best I could; then afterwards leading her gently home, heart-broken because she could not reach the child.

I bore my burden in secret, determining that gossip should not busy itself with my wife's condition so long as I could keep it from becoming known. We had no near relatives--none with any right to share any trouble--and whoso accepteth human love must bind it to his soul with pain.

I thought, however, that I should have medical advice, and I took our old doctor into my confidence. He looked grave when he heard my story. I did not like his expression nor his few guarded remarks. He said he thought human aid would avail little; she might come all right in time; humor her, as far as possible, watch over her, protect her. He needed not to tell me THAT.

The spring went out and summer came in--and the horror deepened and darkened. I knew that suspicions were being whispered from lip to lip. We had been seen on our nightly quests. Men and women began to look at us pityingly when we went abroad.

One day, on a dull, drowsy afternoon, the dream-child called. I knew then that the end was near; the end had been near in the old grandmother's case sixty years before when the dream-child called in the day. The doctor looked graver than ever when I told him, and said that the time had come when I must have help in my task. I could not watch by day and night. Unless I had assistance I would break down.

I did not think that I should. Love is stronger than that. And on one thing I was determined--they should never take my wife from me. No restraint sterner than a husband's loving hand should ever be put upon her, my pretty, piteous darling.

I never spoke of the dream-child to her. The doctor advised against it. It would, he said, only serve to deepen the delusion. When he hinted at an asylum I gave him a look that would have been a fierce word for another man. He never spoke of it again.

One night in August there was a dull, murky sunset after a dead, breathless day of heat, with not a wind stirring. The sea was not blue as a sea should be, but pink--all pink--a ghastly, staring, painted pink. I lingered on the harbor shore below the house until dark. The evening bells were ringing faintly and mournfully in a church across the harbor. Behind me, in the

kitchen, I heard my wife singing. Sometimes now her spirits were fitfully high, and then she would sing the old songs of her girlhood. But even in her singing was something strange, as if a wailing, unearthly cry rang through it. Nothing about her was sadder than that strange singing.

When I went back to the house the rain was beginning to fall; but there was no wind or sound in the air--only that dismal stillness, as if the world were holding its breath in expectation of a calamity.

Josie was standing by the window, looking out and listening. I tried to induce her to go to bed, but she only shook her head.

"I might fall asleep and not hear him when he called," she said. "I am always afraid to sleep now, for fear he should call and his mother fail to hear him."

Knowing it was of no use to entreat, I sat down by the table and tried to read. Three hours passed on. When the clock struck midnight she started up, with the wild light in her sunken blue eyes.

"He is calling," she cried, "calling out there in the storm. Yes, yes, sweet, I am coming!"

She opened the door and fled down the path to the shore. I snatched a lantern from the wall, lighted it, and followed. It was the blackest night I was ever out in, dark with the very darkness of death. The rain fell thickly and heavily. I overtook Josie, caught her hand, and stumbled along in her wake, for she went with the speed and recklessness of a distraught woman. We moved in the little flitting circle of light shed by the lantern. All around us and above us was a horrible, voiceless darkness, held, as it were, at bay by the friendly light.

"If I could only overtake him once," moaned Josie. "If I could just kiss him once, and hold him close against my aching heart. This pain, that never leaves me, would leave me than. Oh, my pretty boy, wait for mother! I am coming to you. Listen, David; he cries--he cries so pitifully; listen! Can't you hear it?"

I DID hear it! Clear and distinct, out of the deadly still darkness before us, came a faint, wailing cry. What was it? Was I, too, going mad, or WAS there something out there--something that cried and moaned--longing for human love, yet ever retreating from human footsteps? I am not a superstitious man; but my nerve had been shaken by my long trial, and I was weaker than I thought. Terror took possession of me--terror unnameable. I trembled in every limb; clammy perspiration oozed from my forehead; I was possessed by a wild impulse to turn and flee--

anywhere, away from that unearthly cry. But Josephine's cold hand gripped mine firmly, and led me on. That strange cry still rang in my ears. But it did not recede; it sounded clearer and stronger; it was a wail; but a loud, insistent wail; it was nearer--nearer; it was in the darkness just beyond us.

Then we came to it; a little dory had been beached on the pebbles and left there by the receding tide. There was a child in it--a boy, of perhaps two years old, who crouched in the bottom of the dory in water to his waist, his big, blue eyes wild and wide with terror, his face white and tear-stained. He wailed again when he saw us, and held out his little hands.

My horror fell away from me like a discarded garment. THIS child was living. How he had come there, whence and why, I did not know and, in my state of mind, did not question. It was no cry of parted spirit I had heard--that was enough for me.

"Oh, the poor darling!" cried my wife.

She stooped over the dory and lifted the baby in her arms. His long, fair curls fell on her shoulder; she laid her face against his and wrapped her shawl around him.

"Let me carry him, dear," I said. "He is very wet, and too heavy for you."

"No, no, I must carry him. My arms have been so empty--they are full now. Oh, David, the pain at my heart has gone. He has come to me to take the place of my own. God has sent him to me out of the sea. He is wet and cold and tired. Hush, sweet one, we will go home."

Silently I followed her home. The wind was rising, coming in sudden, angry gusts; the storm was at hand, but we reached shelter before it broke. Just as I shut our door behind us it smote the house with the roar of a baffled beast. I thanked God that we were not out in it, following the dream-child.

"You are very wet, Josie," I said. "Go and put on dry clothes at once."

"The child must be looked to first," she said firmly. "See how chilled and exhausted he is, the pretty dear. Light a fire quickly, David, while I get dry things for him."

I let her have her way. She brought out the clothes our own child had worn and dressed the waif in them, rubbing his chilled limbs, brushing his wet hair, laughing over him, mothering him. She seemed like her old self.

For my own part, I was bewildered. All the questions I had not

asked before came crowding to my mind how. Whose child was this? Whence had he come? What was the meaning of it all?

He was a pretty baby, fair and plump and rosy. When he was dried and fed, he fell asleep in Josie's arms. She hung over him in a passion of delight. It was with difficulty I persuaded her to leave him long enough to change her wet clothes. She never asked whose he might be or from where he might have come. He had been sent to her from the sea; the dream-child had led her to him; that was what she believed, and I dared not throw any doubt on that belief. She slept that night with the baby on her arm, and in her sleep her face was the face of a girl in her youth, untroubled and unworn.

I expected that the morrow would bring some one seeking the baby. I had come to the conclusion that he must belong to the "Cove" across the harbor, where the fishing hamlet was; and all day, while Josie laughed and played with him, I waited and listened for the footsteps of those who would come seeking him. But they did not come. Day after day passed, and still they did not come.

I was in a maze of perplexity. What should I do? I shrank from the thought of the boy being taken away from us. Since we had found him the dream-child had never called. My wife seemed to have turned back from the dark borderland, where her feet had strayed to walk again with me in our own homely paths. Day and

night she was her old, bright self, happy and serene in the new motherhood that had come to her. The only thing strange in her was her calm acceptance of the event. She never wondered who or whose the child might be--never seemed to fear that he would be taken from her; and she gave him our dream-child's name.

At last, when a full week had passed, I went, in my bewilderment, to our old doctor.

"A most extraordinary thing," he said thoughtfully. "The child, as you say, must belong to the Spruce Cove people. Yet it is an almost unbelievable thing that there has been no search or inquiry after him. Probably there is some simple explanation of the mystery, however. I advise you to go over to the Cove and inquire. When you find the parents or guardians of the child, ask them to allow you to keep it for a time. It may prove your wife's salvation. I have known such cases. Evidently on that night the crisis of her mental disorder was reached. A little thing might have sufficed to turn her feet either way--back to reason and sanity, or into deeper darkness. It is my belief that the former has occurred, and that, if she is left in undisturbed possession of this child for a time, she will recover completely."

I drove around the harbor that day with a lighter heart than I had hoped ever to possess again. When I reached Spruce Cove the

first person I met was old Abel Blair. I asked him if any child were missing from the Cove or along shore. He looked at me in surprise, shook his head, and said he had not heard of any. I told him as much of the tale as was necessary, leaving him to think that my wife and I had found the dory and its small passenger during an ordinary walk along the shore.

"A green dory!" he exclaimed. "Ben Forbes' old green dory has been missing for a week, but it was so rotten and leaky he didn't bother looking for it. But this child, sir--it beats me. What might he be like?"

I described the child as closely as possible.

"That fits little Harry Martin to a hair," said old Abel, perplexedly, "but, sir, it can't be. Or, if it is, there's been foul work somewhere. James Martin's wife died last winter, sir, and he died the next month. They left a baby and not much else. There weren't nobody to take the child but Jim's half-sister, Maggie Fleming. She lived here at the Cove, and, I'm sorry to say, sir, she hadn't too good a name. She didn't want to be bothered with the baby, and folks say she neglected him scandalous. Well, last spring she begun talking of going away to the States. She said a friend of hers had got her a good place in Boston, and she was going to go and take little Harry. We supposed it was all right. Last Saturday she went, sir. She was

going to walk to the station, and the last seen of her she was trudging along the road, carrying the baby. It hasn't been thought of since. But, sir, d'ye suppose she set that innocent child adrift in that old leaky dory to send him to his death? I knew Maggie was no better than she should be, but I can't believe she was as bad as that."

"You must come over with me and see if you can identify the child," I said. "If he is Harry Martin I shall keep him. My wife has been very lonely since our baby died, and she has taken a fancy to this little chap."

When we reached my home old Abel recognized the child as Harry Martin.

He is with us still. His baby hands led my dear wife back to health and happiness. Other children have come to us, she loves them all dearly; but the boy who bears her dead son's name is to her--aye, and to me--as dear as if she had given him birth. He came from the sea, and at his coming the ghostly dream-child fled, nevermore to lure my wife away from me with its exciting cry. Therefore I look upon him and love him as my first-born.