

CHAPTER V

THE KITTRIDGES

It did live. The little life, so frail, so unprofitable in every mere material view, so precious in the eyes of love, expanded and flowered at last into fair childhood. Not without much watching and weariness. Many a night the old fisherman walked the floor with the little thing in his arms, talking to it that jargon of tender nonsense which fairies bring as love-gifts to all who tend a cradle. Many a day the good little old grandmother called the aid of gossips about her, trying various experiments of catnip, and sweet fern, and bayberry, and other teas of rustic reputation for baby frailties.

At the end of three years, the two graves in the lonely graveyard were sodded and cemented down by smooth velvet turf, and playing round the door of the brown houses was a slender child, with ways and manners so still and singular as often to remind the neighbors that she was not like other children,--a bud of hope and joy,--but the outcome of a great sorrow,--a pearl washed ashore by a mighty, uprooting tempest. They that looked at her remembered that her father's eye had never beheld her, and her baptismal cup had rested on her mother's coffin.

She was small of stature, beyond the wont of children of her age, and moulded with a fine waxen delicacy that won admiration from all eyes.

Her hair was curly and golden, but her eyes were dark like her mother's, and the lids drooped over them in that manner which gives a peculiar expression of dreamy wistfulness. Every one of us must remember eyes that have a strange, peculiar expression of pathos and desire, as if the spirit that looked out of them were pressed with vague remembrances of a past, or but dimly comprehended the mystery of its present life. Even when the baby lay in its cradle, and its dark, inquiring eyes would follow now one object and now another, the gossips would say the child was longing for something, and Miss Roxy would still further venture to predict that that child always would long and never would know exactly what she was after.

That dignitary sits at this minute enthroned in the kitchen corner, looking majestically over the press-board on her knee, where she is pressing the next year's Sunday vest of Zephaniah Pennel. As she makes her heavy tailor's goose squeak on the work, her eyes follow the little delicate fairy form which trips about the kitchen, busily and silently arranging a little grotto of gold and silver shells and seaweed. The child sings to herself as she works in a low chant, like the prattle of a brook, but ever and anon she rests her little arms on a chair and looks through the open kitchen-door far, far off where the horizon line of the blue sea dissolves in the blue sky.

"See that child now, Roxy," said Miss Ruey, who sat stitching beside her; "do look at her eyes. She's as handsome as a pictur', but 't ain't an ordinary look she has neither; she seems a contented little thing;

but what makes her eyes always look so kind o' wishful?"

"Wa'n't her mother always a-longin' and a-lookin' to sea, and watchin' the ships, afore she was born?" said Miss Roxy; "and didn't her heart break afore she was born? Babies like that is marked always. They don't know what ails 'em, nor nobody."

"It's her mother she's after," said Miss Ruey.

"The Lord only knows," said Miss Roxy; "but them kind o' children always seem homesick to go back where they come from. They're mostly grave and old-fashioned like this 'un. If they gets past seven years, why they live; but it's always in 'em to long; they don't seem to be really unhappy neither, but if anything's ever the matter with 'em, it seems a great deal easier for 'em to die than to live. Some say it's the mothers longin' after 'em makes 'em feel so, and some say it's them longin' after their mothers; but dear knows, Ruey, what anything is or what makes anything. Children's mysterious, that's my mind."

"Mara, dear," said Miss Ruey, interrupting the child's steady lookout, "what you thinking of?"

"Me want somefin'," said the little one.

"That's what she's always sayin'," said Miss Roxy.

"Me want somebody to pay wis'," continued the little one.

"Want somebody to play with," said old Dame Pennel, as she came in from the back-room with her hands yet floury with kneading bread; "sure enough, she does. Our house stands in such a lonesome place, and there ain't any children. But I never saw such a quiet little thing--always still and always busy."

"I'll take her down with me to Cap'n Kittridge's," said Miss Roxy, "and let her play with their little girl; she'll chirk her up, I'll warrant. She's a regular little witch, Sally is, but she'll chirk her up. It ain't good for children to be so still and old-fashioned; children ought to be children. Sally takes to Mara just 'cause she's so different."

"Well, now, you may," said Dame Pennel; "to be sure he can't bear her out of his sight a minute after he comes in; but after all, old folks can't be company for children."

Accordingly, that afternoon, the little Mara was arrayed in a little blue flounced dress, which stood out like a balloon, made by Miss Roxy in first-rate style, from a French fashion-plate; her golden hair was twined in manifold curls by Dame Pennel, who, restricted in her ideas of ornamentation, spared, nevertheless, neither time nor money to enhance the charms of this single ornament to her dwelling. Mara was her picture-gallery, who gave her in the twenty-four hours as many Murillos or Greuzes as a lover of art could desire; and as she tied over the

child's golden curls a little flat hat, and saw her go dancing off along the sea-sands, holding to Miss Roxy's bony finger, she felt she had in her what galleries of pictures could not buy.

It was a good mile to the one story, gambrel-roofed cottage where lived Captain Kittridge,--the long, lean, brown man, with his good wife of the great Leghorn bonnet, round, black bead eyes, and psalm-book, whom we told you of at the funeral. The Captain, too, had followed the sea in his early life, but being not, as he expressed it, "very rugged," in time changed his ship for a tight little cottage on the seashore, and devoted himself to boat-building, which he found sufficiently lucrative to furnish his brown cottage with all that his wife's heart desired, besides extra money for knick-knacks when she chose to go up to Brunswick or over to Portland to shop.

The Captain himself was a welcome guest at all the firesides round, being a chatty body, and disposed to make the most of his foreign experiences, in which he took the usual advantages of a traveler. In fact, it was said, whether slanderously or not, that the Captain's yarns were spun to order; and as, when pressed to relate his foreign adventures, he always responded with, "What would you like to hear?" it was thought that he fabricated his article to suit his market. In short, there was no species of experience, finny, fishy, or aquatic,--no legend of strange and unaccountable incident of fire or flood,--no romance of foreign scenery and productions, to which his tongue was not competent, when he had once seated himself in a double bow-knot at a neighbor's

evening fireside.

His good wife, a sharp-eyed, literal body, and a vigorous church-member, felt some concern of conscience on the score of these narrations; for, being their constant auditor, she, better than any one else, could perceive the variations and discrepancies of text which showed their mythical character, and oftentimes her black eyes would snap and her knitting-needles rattle with an admonitory vigor as he went on, and sometimes she would unmercifully come in at the end of a narrative with,--

"Well, now, the Cap'n's told them ar stories till he begins to b'lieve 'em himself, I think."

But works of fiction, as we all know, if only well gotten up, have always their advantages in the hearts of listeners over plain, homely truth; and so Captain Kittridge's yarns were marketable fireside commodities still, despite the skepticisms which attended them.

The afternoon sunbeams at this moment are painting the gambrel-roof with a golden brown. It is September again, as it was three years ago when our story commenced, and the sea and sky are purple and amethystine with its Italian haziness of atmosphere.

The brown house stands on a little knoll, about a hundred yards from the open ocean. Behind it rises a ledge of rocks, where cedars and hemlocks

make deep shadows into which the sun shoots golden shafts of light, illuminating the scarlet feathers of the sumach, which throw themselves jauntily forth from the crevices; while down below, in deep, damp, mossy recesses, rise ferns which autumn has just begun to tinge with yellow and brown. The little knoll where the cottage stood had on its right hand a tiny bay, where the ocean water made up amid picturesque rocks--shaggy and solemn. Here trees of the primeval forest, grand and lordly, looked down silently into the waters which ebbed and flowed daily into this little pool. Every variety of those beautiful evergreens which feather the coast of Maine, and dip their wings in the very spray of its ocean foam, found here a representative. There were aspiring black spruces, crowned on the very top with heavy coronets of cones; there were balsamic firs, whose young buds breathe the scent of strawberries; there were cedars, black as midnight clouds, and white pines with their swaying plumage of needle-like leaves, strewing the ground beneath with a golden, fragrant matting; and there were the gigantic, wide-winged hemlocks, hundreds of years old, and with long, swaying, gray beards of moss, looking white and ghostly under the deep shadows of their boughs. And beneath, creeping round trunk and matting over stones, were many and many of those wild, beautiful things which embellish the shadows of these northern forests. Long, feathery wreaths of what are called ground-pines ran here and there in little ruffles of green, and the prince's pine raised its oriental feather, with a mimic cone on the top, as if it conceived itself to be a grown-up tree. Whole patches of partridge-berry wove their evergreen matting, dotted plentifully with brilliant scarlet berries. Here and there, the rocks

were covered with a curiously inwoven tapestry of moss, overshot with the exquisite vine of the *Linnea borealis*, which in early spring rings its two fairy bells on the end of every spray; while elsewhere the wrinkled leaves of the mayflower wove themselves through and through deep beds of moss, meditating silently thoughts of the thousand little cups of pink shell which they had it in hand to make when the time of miracles should come round next spring.

Nothing, in short, could be more quaintly fresh, wild, and beautiful than the surroundings of this little cove which Captain Kittridge had thought fit to dedicate to his boat-building operations,--where he had set up his tar-kettle between two great rocks above the highest tide-mark, and where, at the present moment, he had a boat upon the stocks.

Mrs. Kittridge, at this hour, was sitting in her clean kitchen, very busily engaged in ripping up a silk dress, which Miss Roxy had engaged to come and make into a new one; and, as she ripped, she cast now and then an eye at the face of a tall, black clock, whose solemn tick-tock was the only sound that could be heard in the kitchen.

By her side, on a low stool, sat a vigorous, healthy girl of six years, whose employment evidently did not please her, for her well-marked black eyebrows were bent in a frown, and her large black eyes looked surly and wrathful, and one versed in children's grievances could easily see what the matter was,--she was turning a sheet! Perhaps, happy young female

reader, you don't know what that is,--most likely not; for in these degenerate days the strait and narrow ways of self-denial, formerly thought so wholesome for little feet, are quite grass-grown with neglect. Childhood nowadays is unceasingly fêted and caressed, the principal difficulty of the grown people seeming to be to discover what the little dears want,--a thing not always clear to the little dears themselves. But in old times, turning sheets was thought a most especial and wholesome discipline for young girls; in the first place, because it took off the hands of their betters a very uninteresting and monotonous labor; and in the second place, because it was such a long, straight, unending turnpike, that the youthful travelers, once started thereupon, could go on indefinitely, without requiring guidance and direction of their elders. For these reasons, also, the task was held in special detestation by children in direct proportion to their amount of life, and their ingenuity and love of variety. A dull child took it tolerably well; but to a lively, energetic one, it was a perfect torture.

"I don't see the use of sewing up sheets one side, and ripping up the other," at last said Sally, breaking the monotonous tick-tock of the clock by an observation which has probably occurred to every child in similar circumstances.

"Sally Kittridge, if you say another word about that ar sheet, I'll whip you," was the very explicit rejoinder; and there was a snap of Mrs. Kittridge's black eyes, that seemed to make it likely that she would keep her word. It was answered by another snap from the six-year-old

eyes, as Sally comforted herself with thinking that when she was a woman she'd speak her mind out in pay for all this.

At this moment a burst of silvery child-laughter rang out, and there appeared in the doorway, illuminated by the afternoon sunbeams, the vision of Miss Roxy's tall, lank figure, with the little golden-haired, blue-robed fairy, hanging like a gay butterfly upon the tip of a thorn-bush. Sally dropped the sheet and clapped her hands, unnoticed by her mother, who rose to pay her respects to the "cunning woman" of the neighborhood.

"Well, now, Miss Roxy, I was 'mazin' afraid you wer'n't a-comin'. I'd just been an' got my silk ripped up, and didn't know how to get a step farther without you."

"Well, I was finishin' up Cap'n Pennel's best pantaloons," said Miss Roxy; "and I've got 'em along so, Ruey can go on with 'em; and I told Mis' Pennel I must come to you, if 'twas only for a day; and I fetched the little girl down, 'cause the little thing's so kind o' lonesome like. I thought Sally could play with her, and chirk her up a little."

"Well, Sally," said Mrs. Kittridge, "stick in your needle, fold up your sheet, put your thimble in your work-pocket, and then you may take the little Mara down to the cove to play; but be sure you don't let her go near the tar, nor wet her shoes. D'ye hear?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Sally, who had sprung up in light and radiance, like a translated creature, at this unexpected turn of fortune, and performed the welcome orders with a celerity which showed how agreeable they were; and then, stooping and catching the little one in her arms, disappeared through the door, with the golden curls fluttering over her own crow-black hair.

The fact was, that Sally, at that moment, was as happy as human creature could be, with a keenness of happiness that children who have never been made to turn sheets of a bright afternoon can never realize. The sun was yet an hour high, as she saw, by the flash of her shrewd, time-keeping eye, and she could bear her little prize down to the cove, and collect unknown quantities of gold and silver shells, and starfish, and salad-dish shells, and white pebbles for her, besides quantities of well turned shavings, brown and white, from the pile which constantly was falling under her father's joiner's bench, and with which she would make long extemporaneous tresses, so that they might play at being mermaids, like those that she had heard her father tell about in some of his sea-stories.

"Now, raily, Sally, what you got there?" said Captain Kittridge, as he stood in his shirt-sleeves peering over his joiner's bench, to watch the little one whom Sally had dumped down into a nest of clean white shavings. "Wal', wal', I should think you'd a-stolen the big doll I see in a shop-window the last time I was to Portland. So this is Pennel's little girl?--poor child!"

"Yes, father, and we want some nice shavings."

"Stay a bit, I'll make ye a few a-purpose," said the old man, reaching his long, bony arm, with the greatest ease, to the farther part of his bench, and bringing up a board, from which he proceeded to roll off shavings in fine satin rings, which perfectly delighted the hearts of the children, and made them dance with glee; and, truth to say, reader, there are coarser and homelier things in the world than a well turned shaving.

"There, go now," he said, when both of them stood with both hands full; "go now and play; and mind you don't let the baby wet her feet, Sally; them shoes o' hern must have cost five-and-sixpence at the very least."

That sunny hour before sundown seemed as long to Sally as the whole seam of the sheet; for childhood's joys are all pure gold; and as she ran up and down the white sands, shouting at every shell she found, or darted up into the overhanging forest for checkerberries and ground-pine, all the sorrows of the morning came no more into her remembrance.

The little Mara had one of those sensitive, excitable natures, on which every external influence acts with immediate power. Stimulated by the society of her energetic, buoyant little neighbor, she no longer seemed wishful or pensive, but kindled into a perfect flame of wild delight, and gamboled about the shore like a blue and gold-winged fly; while her

bursts of laughter made the squirrels and blue jays look out inquisitively from their fastnesses in the old evergreens. Gradually the sunbeams faded from the pines, and the waves of the tide in the little cove came in, solemnly tinted with purple, flaked with orange and crimson, borne in from a great rippling sea of fire, into which the sun had just sunk.

"Mercy on us--them children!" said Miss Roxy.

"He's bringin' 'em along," said Mrs. Kittridge, as she looked out of the window and saw the tall, lank form of the Captain, with one child seated on either shoulder, and holding on by his head.

The two children were both in the highest state of excitement, but never was there a more marked contrast of nature. The one seemed a perfect type of well-developed childish health and vigor, good solid flesh and bones, with glowing skin, brilliant eyes, shining teeth, well-knit, supple limbs,--vigorously and healthily beautiful; while the other appeared one of those aerial mixtures of cloud and fire, whose radiance seems scarcely earthly. A physiologist, looking at the child, would shake his head, seeing one of those perilous organizations, all nerve and brain, which come to life under the clear, stimulating skies of America, and, burning with the intensity of lighted phosphorus, waste themselves too early.

The little Mara seemed like a fairy sprite, possessed with a wild spirit

of glee. She laughed and clapped her hands incessantly, and when set down on the kitchen-floor spun round like a little elf; and that night it was late and long before her wide, wakeful eyes could be veiled in sleep.

"Company jist sets this 'ere child crazy," said Miss Roxy; "it's jist her lonely way of livin'; a pity Mis' Pennel hadn't another child to keep company along with her."

"Mis' Pennel oughter be trainin' of her up to work," said Mrs. Kittridge. "Sally could oversew and hem when she wa'n't more'n three years old; nothin' straightens out children like work. Mis' Pennel she just keeps that ar child to look at."

"All children ain't alike, Mis' Kittridge," said Miss Roxy, sententiously. "This 'un ain't like your Sally. 'A hen and a bumble-bee can't be fetched up alike, fix it how you will!"