

CHAPTER VI

GRANDPARENTS

Zephaniah Pennel came back to his house in the evening, after Miss Roxy had taken the little Mara away. He looked for the flowery face and golden hair as he came towards the door, and put his hand in his vest-pocket, where he had deposited a small store of very choice shells and sea curiosities, thinking of the widening of those dark, soft eyes when he should present them.

"Where's Mara?" was the first inquiry after he had crossed the threshold.

"Why, Roxy's been an' taken her down to Cap'n Kittridge's to spend the night," said Miss Ruey. "Roxy's gone to help Mis' Kittridge to turn her spotted gray and black silk. We was talking this mornin' whether 'no 't would turn, 'cause I thought the spot was overshot, and wouldn't make up on the wrong side; but Roxy she says it's one of them ar Calcutty silks that has two sides to 'em, like the one you bought Miss Pennel, that we made up for her, you know;" and Miss Ruey arose and gave a finishing snap to the Sunday pantaloons, which she had been left to "finish off,"--which snap said, as plainly as words could say that there was a good job disposed of.

Zephaniah stood looking as helpless as animals of the male kind generally do when appealed to with such prolixity on feminine details; in reply to it all, only he asked meekly,--

"Where's Mary?"

"Mis' Pennel? Why, she's up chamber. She'll be down in a minute, she said; she thought she'd have time afore supper to get to the bottom of the big chist, and see if that 'ere vest pattern ain't there, and them sticks o' twist for the button-holes, 'cause Roxy she says she never see nothin' so rotten as that 'ere twist we've been a-workin' with, that Mis' Pennel got over to Portland; it's a clear cheat, and Mis' Pennel she give more'n half a cent a stick more for 't than what Roxy got for her up to Brunswick; so you see these 'ere Portland stores charge up, and their things want lookin' after."

Here Mrs. Pennel entered the room, "the Captain" addressing her eagerly,--

"How came you to let Aunt Roxy take Mara off so far, and be gone so long?"

"Why, law me, Captain Pennel! the little thing seems kind o' lonesome. Chil'en want chil'en; Miss Roxy says she's altogether too sort o' still and old-fashioned, and must have child's company to chirk her up, and so she took her down to play with Sally Kittridge; there's no manner of

danger or harm in it, and she'll be back to-morrow afternoon, and Mara will have a real good time."

"Wal', now, really," said the good man, "but it's 'mazin' lonesome."

"Cap'n Pennel, you're gettin' to make an idol of that 'ere child," said Miss Ruey. "We have to watch our hearts. It minds me of the hymn,--

"The fondness of a creature's love,
How strong it strikes the sense,--
Thither the warm affections move,
Nor can we call them hence."

Miss Ruey's mode of getting off poetry, in a sort of high-pitched canter, with a strong thump on every accented syllable, might have provoked a smile in more sophisticated society, but Zephaniah listened to her with deep gravity, and answered,--

"I'm 'fraid there's truth in what you say, Aunt Ruey. When her mother was called away, I thought that was a warning I never should forget; but now I seem to be like Jonah,--I'm restin' in the shadow of my gourd, and my heart is glad because of it. I kind o' trembled at the prayer meetin' when we was a-singin',--

"The dearest idol I have known,
Whate'er that idol be,

Help me to tear it from Thy throne,
And worship only Thee."

"Yes," said Miss Ruey, "Roxy says if the Lord should take us up short on our prayers, it would make sad work with us sometimes."

"Somehow," said Mrs. Pennel, "it seems to me just her mother over again. She don't look like her. I think her hair and complexion comes from the Badger blood; my mother had that sort o' hair and skin,--but then she has ways like Naomi,--and it seems as if the Lord had kind o' given Naomi back to us; so I hope she's goin' to be spared to us."

Mrs. Pennel had one of those natures--gentle, trustful, and hopeful, because not very deep; she was one of the little children of the world whose faith rests on child-like ignorance, and who know not the deeper needs of deeper natures; such see only the sunshine and forget the storm.

This conversation had been going on to the accompaniment of a clatter of plates and spoons and dishes, and the fizzling of sausages, prefacing the evening meal, to which all now sat down after a lengthened grace from Zephaniah.

"There's a tremendous gale a-brewin'," he said, as they sat at table. "I noticed the clouds to-night as I was comin' home, and somehow I felt kind o' as if I wanted all our folks snug in-doors."

"Why, law, husband, Cap'n Kittridge's house is as good as ours, if it does blow. You never can seem to remember that houses don't run aground or strike on rocks in storms."

"The Cap'n puts me in mind of old Cap'n Jeduth Scranton," said Miss Ruey, "that built that queer house down by Middle Bay. The Cap'n he would insist on havin' on't jist like a ship, and the closet-shelves had holes for the tumblers and dishes, and he had all his tables and chairs battened down, and so when it came a gale, they say the old Cap'n used to sit in his chair and hold on to hear the wind blow."

"Well, I tell you," said Captain, "those that has followed the seas hears the wind with different ears from lands-people. When you lie with only a plank between you and eternity, and hear the voice of the Lord on the waters, it don't sound as it does on shore."

And in truth, as they were speaking, a fitful gust swept by the house, wailing and screaming and rattling the windows, and after it came the heavy, hollow moan of the surf on the beach, like the wild, angry howl of some savage animal just beginning to be lashed into fury.

"Sure enough, the wind is rising," said Miss Ruey, getting up from the table, and flattening her snub nose against the window-pane. "Dear me, how dark it is! Mercy on us, how the waves come in!--all of a sheet of foam. I pity the ships that's comin' on coast such a night."

The storm seemed to have burst out with a sudden fury, as if myriads of howling demons had all at once been loosened in the air. Now they piped and whistled with eldritch screech round the corners of the house--now they thundered down the chimney--and now they shook the door and rattled the casement--and anon mustering their forces with wild ado, seemed to career over the house, and sail high up into the murky air. The dash of the rising tide came with successive crash upon crash like the discharge of heavy artillery, seeming to shake the very house, and the spray borne by the wind dashed whizzing against the window-panes.

Zephaniah, rising from supper, drew up the little stand that had the family Bible on it, and the three old time-worn people sat themselves as seriously down to evening worship as if they had been an extensive congregation. They raised the old psalm-tune which our fathers called "Complaint," and the cracked, wavering voices of the women, with the deep, rough bass of the old sea-captain, rose in the uproar of the storm with a ghostly, strange wildness, like the scream of the curlew or the wailing of the wind:--

"Spare us, O Lord, aloud we pray,
Nor let our sun go down at noon:
Thy years are an eternal day,
And must thy children die so soon!"

Miss Ruey valued herself on singing a certain weird and exalted part

which in ancient days used to be called counter, and which wailed and gyrated in unimaginable heights of the scale, much as you may hear a shrill, fine-voiced wind over a chimney-top; but altogether, the deep and earnest gravity with which the three filled up the pauses in the storm with their quaint minor key, had something singularly impressive. When the singing was over, Zephaniah read to the accompaniment of wind and sea, the words of poetry made on old Hebrew shores, in the dim, gray dawn of the world:--

"The voice of the Lord is upon the waters; the God of glory thundereth; the Lord is upon many waters. The voice of the Lord shaketh the wilderness; the Lord shaketh the wilderness of Kadesh. The Lord sitteth upon the floods, yea, the Lord sitteth King forever. The Lord will give strength to his people; yea, the Lord will bless his people with peace."

How natural and home-born sounded this old piece of Oriental poetry in the ears of the three! The wilderness of Kadesh, with its great cedars, was doubtless Orr's Island, where even now the goodly fellowship of black-winged trees were groaning and swaying, and creaking as the breath of the Lord passed over them.

And the three old people kneeling by their smouldering fireside, amid the general uproar, Zephaniah began in the words of a prayer which Moses the man of God made long ago under the shadows of Egyptian pyramids: "Lord, thou hast been our dwelling-place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and

the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God."

We hear sometimes in these days that the Bible is no more inspired of God than many other books of historic and poetic merit. It is a fact, however, that the Bible answers a strange and wholly exceptional purpose by thousands of firesides on all shores of the earth; and, till some other book can be found to do the same thing, it will not be surprising if a belief of its Divine origin be one of the ineffaceable ideas of the popular mind. It will be a long while before a translation from Homer or a chapter in the Koran, or any of the beauties of Shakespeare, will be read in a stormy night on Orr's Island with the same sense of a Divine presence as the Psalms of David, or the prayer of Moses, the man of God.

Boom! boom! "What's that?" said Zephaniah, starting, as they rose up from prayer. "Hark! again, that's a gun,--there's a ship in distress."

"Poor souls," said Miss Ruey; "it's an awful night!"

The captain began to put on his sea-coat.

"You ain't a-goin' out?" said his wife.

"I must go out along the beach a spell, and see if I can hear any more of that ship."

"Mercy on us; the wind'll blow you over!" said Aunt Ruey.

"I rayther think I've stood wind before in my day," said Zephaniah, a grim smile stealing over his weather-beaten cheeks. In fact, the man felt a sort of secret relationship to the storm, as if it were in some manner a family connection--a wild, roystering cousin, who drew him out by a rough attraction of comradeship.

"Well, at any rate," said Mrs. Pennel, producing a large tin lantern perforated with many holes, in which she placed a tallow candle, "take this with you, and don't stay out long."

The kitchen door opened, and the first gust of wind took off the old man's hat and nearly blew him prostrate. He came back and shut the door. "I ought to have known better," he said, knotting his pocket-handkerchief over his head, after which he waited for a momentary lull, and went out into the storm.

Miss Ruey looked through the window-pane, and saw the light go twinkling far down into the gloom, and ever and anon came the mournful boom of distant guns.

"Certainly there is a ship in trouble somewhere," she said.

"He never can be easy when he hears these guns," said Mrs. Pennel; "but what can he do, or anybody, in such a storm, the wind blowing right on to shore?"

"I shouldn't wonder if Cap'n Kittridge should be out on the beach, too," said Miss Ruey; "but laws, he ain't much more than one of these 'ere old grasshoppers you see after frost comes. Well, any way, there ain't much help in man if a ship comes ashore in such a gale as this, such a dark night too."

"It's kind o' lonesome to have poor little Mara away such a night as this is," said Mrs. Pennel; "but who would a-thought it this afternoon, when Aunt Roxy took her?"

"I 'member my grandmother had a silver cream-pitcher that come ashore in a storm on Mare P'int," said Miss Ruey, as she sat trotting her knitting-needles. "Grand'ther found it, half full of sand, under a knot of seaweed way up on the beach. It had a coat of arms on it,--might have belonged to some grand family, that pitcher; in the Toothacre family yet."

"I remember when I was a girl," said Mrs. Pennel, "seeing the hull of a ship that went on Eagle Island; it run way up in a sort of gully between two rocks, and lay there years. They split pieces off it sometimes to make fires, when they wanted to make a chowder down on the beach."

"My aunt, Lois Toothacre, that lives down by Middle Bay," said Miss Ruey, "used to tell about a dreadful blow they had once in time of the equinoctial storm; and what was remarkable, she insisted that she heard

a baby cryin' out in the storm,--she heard it just as plain as could be."

"Laws a-mercy," said Mrs. Pennel, nervously, "it was nothing but the wind,--it always screeches like a child crying; or maybe it was the seals; seals will cry just like babes."

"So they told her; but no,--she insisted she knew the difference,--it was a baby. Well, what do you think, when the storm cleared off, they found a baby's cradle washed ashore sure enough!"

"But they didn't find any baby," said Mrs. Pennel, nervously.

"No; they searched the beach far and near, and that cradle was all they found. Aunt Lois took it in--it was a very good cradle, and she took it to use, but every time there came up a gale, that ar cradle would rock, rock, jist as if somebody was a-sittin' by it; and you could stand across the room and see there wa'n't nobody there."

"You make me all of a shiver," said Mrs. Pennel.

This, of course, was just what Miss Ruey intended, and she went on:--

"Wal', you see they kind o' got used to it; they found there wa'n't no harm come of its rockin', and so they didn't mind; but Aunt Lois had a sister Cerinthy that was a weakly girl, and had the janders. Cerinthy

was one of the sort that's born with veils over their faces, and can see sperits; and one time Cerinthy was a-visitin' Lois after her second baby was born, and there came up a blow, and Cerinthy comes out of the keepin'-room, where the cradle was a-standin', and says, 'Sister,' says she, 'who's that woman sittin' rockin' the cradle?' and Aunt Lois says she, 'Why, there ain't nobody. That ar cradle always will rock in a gale, but I've got used to it, and don't mind it.' 'Well,' says Cerinthy, 'jist as true as you live, I just saw a woman with a silk gown on, and long black hair a-hangin' down, and her face was pale as a sheet, sittin' rockin' that ar cradle, and she looked round at me with her great black eyes kind o' mournful and wishful, and then she stooped down over the cradle.' 'Well,' says Lois, 'I ain't goin' to have no such doin's in my house,' and she went right in and took up the baby, and the very next day she jist had the cradle split up for kindlin'; and that night, if you'll believe, when they was a-burnin' of it, they heard, jist as plain as could be, a baby scream, scream, screamin' round the house; but after that they never heard it no more."

"I don't like such stories," said Dame Pennel, "'specially to-night, when Mara's away. I shall get to hearing all sorts of noises in the wind. I wonder when Cap'n Pennel will be back."

And the good woman put more wood on the fire, and as the tongues of flame streamed up high and clear, she approached her face to the window-pane and started back with half a scream, as a pale, anxious visage with sad dark eyes seemed to approach her. It took a moment or

two for her to discover that she had seen only the reflection of her own anxious, excited face, the pitchy blackness without having converted the window into a sort of dark mirror.

Miss Ruey meanwhile began solacing herself by singing, in her chimney-corner, a very favorite sacred melody, which contrasted oddly enough with the driving storm and howling sea:--

"Haste, my beloved, haste away,
Cut short the hours of thy delay;
Fly like the bounding hart or roe,
Over the hills where spices grow."

The tune was called "Invitation,"--one of those profusely florid in runs, and trills, and quavers, which delighted the ears of a former generation; and Miss Ruey, innocently unconscious of the effect of old age on her voice, ran them up and down, and out and in, in a way that would have made a laugh, had there been anybody there to notice or to laugh.

"I remember singin' that ar to Mary Jane Wilson the very night she died," said Aunt Ruey, stopping. "She wanted me to sing to her, and it was jist between two and three in the mornin'; there was jist the least red streak of daylight, and I opened the window and sat there and sung, and when I come to 'over the hills where spices grow,' I looked round and there was a change in Mary Jane, and I went to the bed, and says she

very bright, 'Aunt Ruey, the Beloved has come,' and she was gone afore I could raise her up on her pillow. I always think of Mary Jane at them words; if ever there was a broken-hearted crittur took home, it was her."

At this moment Mrs. Pennel caught sight through the window of the gleam of the returning lantern, and in a moment Captain Pennel entered, dripping with rain and spray.

"Why, Cap'n! you're e'en a'most drowned," said Aunt Ruey.

"How long have you been gone? You must have been a great ways," said Mrs. Pennel.

"Yes, I have been down to Cap'n Kittridge's. I met Kittridge out on the beach. We heard the guns plain enough, but couldn't see anything. I went on down to Kittridge's to get a look at little Mara."

"Well, she's all well enough?" said Mrs. Pennel, anxiously.

"Oh, yes, well enough. Miss Roxy showed her to me in the trundle-bed, 'long with Sally. The little thing was lying smiling in her sleep, with her cheek right up against Sally's. I took comfort looking at her. I couldn't help thinking: 'So he giveth his beloved sleep!'"