

CHAPTER VII

FROM THE SEA

During the night and storm, the little Mara had lain sleeping as quietly as if the cruel sea, that had made her an orphan from her birth, were her kind-tempered old grandfather singing her to sleep, as he often did,--with a somewhat hoarse voice truly, but with ever an undertone of protecting love. But toward daybreak, there came very clear and bright into her childish mind a dream, having that vivid distinctness which often characterizes the dreams of early childhood.

She thought she saw before her the little cove where she and Sally had been playing the day before, with its broad sparkling white beach of sand curving round its blue sea-mirror, and studded thickly with gold and silver shells. She saw the boat of Captain Kittridge upon the stocks, and his tar-kettle with the smouldering fires flickering under it; but, as often happens in dreams, a certain rainbow vividness and clearness invested everything, and she and Sally were jumping for joy at the beautiful things they found on the beach.

Suddenly, there stood before them a woman, dressed in a long white garment. She was very pale, with sweet, serious dark eyes, and she led by the hand a black-eyed boy, who seemed to be crying and looking about as for something lost. She dreamed that she stood still, and the woman

came toward her, looking at her with sweet, sad eyes, till the child seemed to feel them in every fibre of her frame. The woman laid her hand on her head as if in blessing, and then put the boy's hand in hers, and said, "Take him, Mara, he is a playmate for you;" and with that the little boy's face flashed out into a merry laugh. The woman faded away, and the three children remained playing together, gathering shells and pebbles of a wonderful brightness. So vivid was this vision, that the little one awoke laughing with pleasure, and searched under her pillows for the strange and beautiful things that she had been gathering in dreamland.

"What's Mara looking after?" said Sally, sitting up in her trundle-bed, and speaking in the patronizing motherly tone she commonly used to her little playmate.

"All gone, pitty boy--all gone!" said the child, looking round regretfully, and shaking her golden head; "pitty lady all gone!"

"How queer she talks!" said Sally, who had awakened with the project of building a sheet-house with her fairy neighbor, and was beginning to loosen the upper sheet and dispose the pillows with a view to this species of architecture. "Come, Mara, let's make a pretty house!" she said.

"Pitty boy out dere--out dere!" said the little one, pointing to the window, with a deeper expression than ever of wishfulness in her eyes.

"Come, Sally Kittridge, get up this minute!" said the voice of her mother, entering the door at this moment; "and here, put these clothes on to Mara, the child mustn't run round in her best; it's strange, now, Mary Pennel never thinks of such things."

Sally, who was of an efficient temperament, was preparing energetically to second these commands of her mother, and endue her little neighbor with a coarse brown stuff dress, somewhat faded and patched, which she herself had outgrown when of Mara's age; with shoes, which had been coarsely made to begin with, and very much battered by time; but, quite to her surprise, the child, generally so passive and tractable, opposed a most unexpected and desperate resistance to this operation. She began to cry and to sob and shake her curly head, throwing her tiny hands out in a wild species of freakish opposition, which had, notwithstanding, a quaint and singular grace about it, while she stated her objections in all the little English at her command.

"Mara don't want--Mara want pitty boo des--and pitty shoes."

"Why, was ever anything like it?" said Mrs. Kittridge to Miss Roxy, as they both were drawn to the door by the outcry; "here's this child won't have decent every-day clothes put on her,--she must be kept dressed up like a princess. Now, that ar's French calico!" said Mrs. Kittridge, holding up the controverted blue dress, "and that ar never cost a cent under five-and-sixpence a yard; it takes a yard and a half to make it,

and it must have been a good day's work to make it up; call that three-and-sixpence more, and with them pearl buttons and thread and all, that ar dress never cost less than a dollar and seventy-five, and here she's goin' to run out every day in it!"

"Well, well!" said Miss Roxy, who had taken the sobbing fair one in her lap, "you know, Mis' Kittridge, this 'ere's a kind o' pet lamb, an old-folks' darling, and things be with her as they be, and we can't make her over, and she's such a nervous little thing we mustn't cross her." Saying which, she proceeded to dress the child in her own clothes.

"If you had a good large checked apron, I wouldn't mind putting that on her!" added Miss Roxy, after she had arrayed the child.

"Here's one," said Mrs. Kittridge; "that may save her clothes some."

Miss Roxy began to put on the wholesome garment; but, rather to her mortification, the little fairy began to weep again in a most heart-broken manner.

"Don't want che't apon."

"Why don't Mara want nice checked apron?" said Miss Roxy, in that extra cheerful tone by which children are to be made to believe they have mistaken their own mind.

"Don't want it!" with a decided wave of the little hand; "I's too pitty to wear che't apon."

"Well! well!" said Mrs. Kittridge, rolling up her eyes, "did I ever! no, I never did. If there ain't depraved natur' a-comin' out early. Well, if she says she's pretty now, what'll it be when she's fifteen?"

"She'll learn to tell a lie about it by that time," said Miss Roxy, "and say she thinks she's horrid. The child is pretty, and the truth comes uppermost with her now."

"Haw! haw! haw!" burst with a great crash from Captain Kittridge, who had come in behind, and stood silently listening during this conversation; "that's musical now; come here, my little maid, you are too pretty for checked aprons, and no mistake;" and seizing the child in his long arms, he tossed her up like a butterfly, while her sunny curls shone in the morning light.

"There's one comfort about the child, Miss Kittridge," said Aunt Roxy: "she's one of them that dirt won't stick to. I never knew her to stain or tear her clothes,--she always come in jist so nice."

"She ain't much like Sally, then!" said Mrs. Kittridge. "That girl'll run through more clothes! Only last week she walked the crown out of my old black straw bonnet, and left it hanging on the top of a blackberry-bush."

"Wal', wal'," said Captain Kittridge, "as to dressin' this 'ere child,--why, ef Pennel's a mind to dress her in cloth of gold, it's none of our business! He's rich enough for all he wants to do, and so let's eat our breakfast and mind our own business."

After breakfast Captain Kittridge took the two children down to the cove, to investigate the state of his boat and tar-kettle, set high above the highest tide-mark. The sun had risen gloriously, the sky was of an intense, vivid blue, and only great snowy islands of clouds, lying in silver banks on the horizon, showed vestiges of last night's storm. The whole wide sea was one glorious scene of forming and dissolving mountains of blue and purple, breaking at the crest into brilliant silver. All round the island the waves were constantly leaping and springing into jets and columns of brilliant foam, throwing themselves high up, in silvery cataracts, into the very arms of the solemn evergreen forests which overhung the shore.

The sands of the little cove seemed harder and whiter than ever, and were thickly bestrewn with the shells and seaweed which the upturnings of the night had brought in. There lay what might have been fringes and fragments of sea-gods' vestures,--blue, crimson, purple, and orange seaweeds, wreathed in tangled ropes of kelp and sea-grass, or lying separately scattered on the sands. The children ran wildly, shouting as they began gathering sea-treasures; and Sally, with the air of an experienced hand in the business, untwisted the coils of rosy seaweed,

from which every moment she disengaged some new treasure, in some rarer shell or smoother pebble.

Suddenly, the child shook out something from a knotted mass of sea-grass, which she held up with a perfect shriek of delight. It was a bracelet of hair, fastened by a brilliant clasp of green, sparkling stones, such as she had never seen before. She redoubled her cries of delight, as she saw it sparkle between her and the sun, calling upon her father.

"Father! father! do come here, and see what I've found!"

He came quickly, and took the bracelet from the child's hand; but, at the same moment, looking over her head, he caught sight of an object partially concealed behind a projecting rock. He took a step forward, and uttered an exclamation,--

"Well, well! sure enough! poor things!"

There lay, bedded in sand and seaweed, a woman with a little boy clasped in her arms! Both had been carefully lashed to a spar, but the child was held to the bosom of the woman, with a pressure closer than any knot that mortal hands could tie. Both were deep sunk in the sand, into which had streamed the woman's long, dark hair, which sparkled with glittering morsels of sand and pebbles, and with those tiny, brilliant, yellow shells which are so numerous on that shore.

The woman was both young and beautiful. The forehead, damp with ocean-spray, was like sculptured marble,--the eyebrows dark and decided in their outline; but the long, heavy, black fringes had shut down, as a solemn curtain, over all the history of mortal joy or sorrow that those eyes had looked upon. A wedding-ring gleamed on the marble hand; but the sea had divorced all human ties, and taken her as a bride to itself.

And, in truth, it seemed to have made to her a worthy bed, for she was all folded and inwreathed in sand and shells and seaweeds, and a great, weird-looking leaf of kelp, some yards in length, lay twined around her like a shroud. The child that lay in her bosom had hair, and face, and eyelashes like her own, and his little hands were holding tightly a portion of the black dress which she wore.

"Cold,--cold,--stone dead!" was the muttered exclamation of the old seaman, as he bent over the woman.

"She must have struck her head there," he mused, as he laid his finger on a dark, bruised spot on her temple. He laid his hand on the child's heart, and put one finger under the arm to see if there was any lingering vital heat, and then hastily cut the lashings that bound the pair to the spar, and with difficulty disengaged the child from the cold clasp in which dying love had bound him to a heart which should beat no more with mortal joy or sorrow.

Sally, after the first moment, had run screaming toward the house, with

all a child's forward eagerness, to be the bearer of news; but the little Mara stood, looking anxiously, with a wishful earnestness of face.

"Pitty boy,--pitty boy,--come!" she said often; but the old man was so busy, he scarcely regarded her.

"Now, Cap'n Kittridge, do tell!" said Miss Roxy, meeting him in all haste, with a cap-border stiff in air, while Dame Kittridge exclaimed,--

"Now, you don't! Well, well! didn't I say that was a ship last night? And what a solemnizing thought it was that souls might be goin' into eternity!"

"We must have blankets and hot bottles, right away," said Miss Roxy, who always took the earthly view of matters, and who was, in her own person, a personified humane society. "Miss Kittridge, you jist dip out your dishwater into the smallest tub, and we'll put him in. Stand away, Mara! Sally, you take her out of the way! We'll fetch this child to, perhaps. I've fetched 'em to, when they's seemed to be dead as door-nails!"

"Cap'n Kittridge, you're sure the woman's dead?"

"Laws, yes; she had a blow right on her temple here. There's no bringing her to till the resurrection."

"Well, then, you jist go and get Cap'n Pennel to come down and help you, and get the body into the house, and we'll attend to layin' it out by and by. Tell Ruey to come down."

Aunt Roxy issued her orders with all the military vigor and precision of a general in case of a sudden attack. It was her habit. Sickness and death were her opportunities; where they were, she felt herself at home, and she addressed herself to the task before her with undoubting faith.

Before many hours a pair of large, dark eyes slowly emerged from under the black-fringed lids of the little drowned boy,--they rolled dreamily round for a moment, and dropped again in heavy languor.

The little Mara had, with the quiet persistence which formed a trait in her baby character, dragged stools and chairs to the back of the bed, which she at last succeeded in scaling, and sat opposite to where the child lay, grave and still, watching with intense earnestness the process that was going on. At the moment when the eyes had opened, she stretched forth her little arms, and said, eagerly, "Pitty boy, come,"--and then, as they closed again, she dropped her hands with a sigh of disappointment. Yet, before night, the little stranger sat up in bed, and laughed with pleasure at the treasures of shells and pebbles which the children spread out on the bed before him.

He was a vigorous, well-made, handsome child, with brilliant eyes and teeth, but the few words that he spoke were in a language unknown to

most present. Captain Kittridge declared it to be Spanish, and that a call which he most passionately and often repeated was for his mother. But he was of that happy age when sorrow can be easily effaced, and the efforts of the children called forth joyous smiles. When his playthings did not go to his liking, he showed sparkles of a fiery, irascible spirit.

The little Mara seemed to appropriate him in feminine fashion, as a chosen idol and graven image. She gave him at once all her slender stock of infantine treasures, and seemed to watch with an ecstatic devotion his every movement,--often repeating, as she looked delightedly around, "Pitty boy, come."

She had no words to explain the strange dream of the morning; it lay in her, struggling for expression, and giving her an interest in the new-comer as in something belonging to herself. Whence it came,--whence come multitudes like it, which spring up as strange, enchanted flowers, every now and then in the dull, material pathway of life,--who knows? It may be that our present faculties have among them a rudimentary one, like the germs of wings in the chrysalis, by which the spiritual world becomes sometimes an object of perception; there may be natures in which the walls of the material are so fine and translucent that the spiritual is seen through them as through a glass darkly. It may be, too, that the love which is stronger than death has a power sometimes to make itself heard and felt through the walls of our mortality, when it would plead for the defenseless ones it has left behind. All these things may

be,--who knows?

* * * * *

"There," said Miss Roxy, coming out of the keeping-room at sunset; "I wouldn't ask to see a better-lookin' corpse. That ar woman was a sight to behold this morning. I guess I shook a double handful of stones and them little shells out of her hair,--now she reely looks beautiful. Captain Kittridge has made a coffin out o' some cedar-boards he happened to have, and I lined it with bleached cotton, and stuffed the pillow nice and full, and when we come to get her in, she reely will look lovely."

"I s'pose, Mis' Kittridge, you'll have the funeral to-morrow,--it's Sunday."

"Why, yes, Aunt Roxy,--I think everybody must want to improve such a dispensation. Have you took little Mara in to look at the corpse?"

"Well, no," said Miss Roxy; "Mis' Pennel's gettin' ready to take her home."

"I think it's an opportunity we ought to improve," said Mrs. Kittridge, "to learn children what death is. I think we can't begin to solemnize their minds too young."

At this moment Sally and the little Mara entered the room.

"Come here, children," said Mrs. Kittridge, taking a hand of either one, and leading them to the closed door of the keeping-room; "I've got somethin' to show you."

The room looked ghostly and dim,--the rays of light fell through the closed shutter on an object mysteriously muffled in a white sheet.

Sally's bright face expressed only the vague curiosity of a child to see something new; but the little Mara resisted and hung back with all her force, so that Mrs. Kittridge was obliged to take her up and hold her.

She folded back the sheet from the chill and wintry form which lay so icily, lonely, and cold. Sally walked around it, and gratified her curiosity by seeing it from every point of view, and laying her warm, busy hand on the lifeless and cold one; but Mara clung to Mrs. Kittridge, with eyes that expressed a distressed astonishment. The good woman stooped over and placed the child's little hand for a moment on the icy forehead. The little one gave a piercing scream, and struggled to get away; and as soon as she was put down, she ran and hid her face in Aunt Roxy's dress, sobbing bitterly.

"That child'll grow up to follow vanity," said Mrs. Kittridge; "her little head is full of dress now, and she hates anything serious,--it's easy to see that."

The little Mara had no words to tell what a strange, distressful chill had passed up her arm and through her brain, as she felt that icy cold of death,--that cold so different from all others. It was an impression of fear and pain that lasted weeks and months, so that she would start out of sleep and cry with a terror which she had not yet a sufficiency of language to describe.

"You seem to forget, Mis' Kittridge, that this 'ere child ain't rugged like our Sally," said Aunt Roxy, as she raised the little Mara in her arms. "She was a seven-months' baby, and hard to raise at all, and a shivery, scary little creature."

"Well, then, she ought to be hardened," said Dame Kittridge. "But Mary Pennel never had no sort of idea of bringin' up children; 'twas jist so with Naomi,--the girl never had no sort o' resolution, and she just died for want o' resolution,--that's what came of it. I tell ye, children's got to learn to take the world as it is; and 'tain't no use bringin' on 'em up too tender. Teach 'em to begin as they've got to go out,--that's my maxim."

"Mis' Kittridge," said Aunt Roxy, "there's reason in all things, and there's difference in children. 'What's one's meat's another's pison.' You couldn't fetch up Mis' Pennel's children, and she couldn't fetch up your'n,--so let's say no more 'bout it."

"I'm always a-tellin' my wife that ar," said Captain Kittridge; "she's always wantin' to make everybody over after her pattern."

"Cap'n Kittridge, I don't think you need to speak," resumed his wife.

"When such a loud providence is a-knockin' at your door, I think you'd better be a-searchin' your own heart,--here it is the eleventh hour, and you hain't come into the Lord's vineyard yet."

"Oh! come, come, Mis' Kittridge, don't twit a feller afore folks," said the Captain. "I'm goin' over to Harpswell Neck this blessed minute after the minister to 'tend the funeral,--so we'll let him preach."