

CHAPTER VIII

THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

Life on any shore is a dull affair,--ever degenerating into commonplace; and this may account for the eagerness with which even a great calamity is sometimes accepted in a neighborhood, as affording wherewithal to stir the deeper feelings of our nature. Thus, though Mrs. Kittridge was by no means a hard-hearted woman, and would not for the world have had a ship wrecked on her particular account, yet since a ship had been wrecked and a body floated ashore at her very door, as it were, it afforded her no inconsiderable satisfaction to dwell on the details and to arrange for the funeral.

It was something to talk about and to think of, and likely to furnish subject-matter for talk for years to come when she should go out to tea with any of her acquaintances who lived at Middle Bay, or Maquoit, or Harpswell Neck. For although in those days,--the number of light-houses being much smaller than it is now,--it was no uncommon thing for ships to be driven on shore in storms, yet this incident had undeniably more that was stirring and romantic in it than any within the memory of any tea-table gossip in the vicinity. Mrs. Kittridge, therefore, looked forward to the funeral services on Sunday afternoon as to a species of solemn fête, which imparted a sort of consequence to her dwelling and herself. Notice of it was to be given out in "meeting" after service,

and she might expect both keeping-room and kitchen to be full. Mrs. Pennel had offered to do her share of Christian and neighborly kindness, in taking home to her own dwelling the little boy. In fact, it became necessary to do so in order to appease the feelings of the little Mara, who clung to the new acquisition with most devoted fondness, and wept bitterly when he was separated from her even for a few moments. Therefore, in the afternoon of the day when the body was found, Mrs. Pennel, who had come down to assist, went back in company with Aunt Ruey and the two children.

The September evening set in brisk and chill, and the cheerful fire that snapped and roared up the ample chimney of Captain Kittridge's kitchen was a pleasing feature. The days of our story were before the advent of those sullen gnomes, the "air-tights," or even those more sociable and cheery domestic genii, the cooking-stoves. They were the days of the genial open kitchen-fire, with the crane, the pot-hooks, and trammels,--where hissed and boiled the social tea-kettle, where steamed the huge dinner-pot, in whose ample depths beets, carrots, potatoes, and turnips boiled in jolly sociability with the pork or corned beef which they were destined to flank at the coming meal.

On the present evening, Miss Roxy sat bolt upright, as was her wont, in one corner of the fireplace, with her spectacles on her nose, and an unwonted show of candles on the little stand beside her, having resumed the task of the silk dress which had been for a season interrupted. Mrs. Kittridge, with her spectacles also mounted, was carefully and warily

"running-up breadths," stopping every few minutes to examine her work, and to inquire submissively of Miss Roxy if "it will do?"

Captain Kittridge sat in the other corner busily whittling on a little boat which he was shaping to please Sally, who sat on a low stool by his side with her knitting, evidently more intent on what her father was producing than on the evening task of "ten bouts," which her mother exacted before she could freely give her mind to anything on her own account. As Sally was rigorously sent to bed exactly at eight o'clock, it became her to be diligent if she wished to do anything for her own amusement before that hour.

And in the next room, cold and still, was lying that faded image of youth and beauty which the sea had so strangely given up. Without a name, without a history, without a single accompaniment from which her past could even be surmised,--there she lay, sealed in eternal silence.

"It's strange," said Captain Kittridge, as he whittled away,--"it's very strange we don't find anything more of that ar ship. I've been all up and down the beach a-lookin'. There was a spar and some broken bits of boards and timbers come ashore down on the beach, but nothin' to speak of."

"It won't be known till the sea gives up its dead," said Miss Roxy, shaking her head solemnly, "and there'll be a great givin' up then, I'm a-thinkin'."

"Yes, indeed," said Mrs. Kittridge, with an emphatic nod.

"Father," said Sally, "how many, many things there must be at the bottom of the sea,--so many ships are sunk with all their fine things on board. Why don't people contrive some way to go down and get them?"

"They do, child," said Captain Kittridge; "they have diving-bells, and men go down in 'em with caps over their faces, and long tubes to get the air through, and they walk about on the bottom of the ocean."

"Did you ever go down in one, father?"

"Why, yes, child, to be sure; and strange enough it was, to be sure. There you could see great big sea critters, with ever so many eyes and long arms, swimming right up to catch you, and all you could do would be to muddy the water on the bottom, so they couldn't see you."

"I never heard of that, Cap'n Kittridge," said his wife, drawing herself up with a reproving coolness.

"Wal', Mis' Kittridge, you hain't heard of everything that ever happened," said the Captain, imperturbably, "though you do know a sight."

"And how does the bottom of the ocean look, father?" said Sally.

"Laws, child, why trees and bushes grow there, just as they do on land; and great plants,--blue and purple and green and yellow, and lots of great pearls lie round. I've seen 'em big as chippin'-birds' eggs."

"Cap'n Kittridge!" said his wife.

"I have, and big as robins' eggs, too, but them was off the coast of Ceylon and Malabar, and way round the Equator," said the Captain, prudently resolved to throw his romance to a sufficient distance.

"It's a pity you didn't get a few of them pearls," said his wife, with an indignant appearance of scorn.

"I did get lots on 'em, and traded 'em off to the Nabobs in the interior for Cashmere shawls and India silks and sich," said the Captain, composedly; "and brought 'em home and sold 'em at a good figure, too."

"Oh, father!" said Sally, earnestly, "I wish you had saved just one or two for us."

"Laws, child, I wish now I had," said the Captain, good-naturedly. "Why, when I was in India, I went up to Lucknow, and Benares, and round, and saw all the Nabobs and Biggums,--why, they don't make no more of gold and silver and precious stones than we do of the shells we find on the beach. Why, I've seen one of them fellers with a diamond in his turban

as big as my fist."

"Cap'n Kittridge, what are you telling?" said his wife once more.

"Fact,--as big as my fist," said the Captain, obdurately; "and all the clothes he wore was jist a stiff crust of pearls and precious stones. I tell you, he looked like something in the Revelations,--a real New Jerusalem look he had."

"I call that ar talk wicked, Cap'n Kittridge, usin' Scriptur' that ar way," said his wife.

"Why, don't it tell about all sorts of gold and precious stones in the Revelations?" said the Captain; "that's all I meant. Them ar countries off in Asia ain't like our'n,--stands to reason they shouldn't be; them's Scripture countries, and everything is different there."

"Father, didn't you ever get any of those splendid things?" said Sally.

"Laws, yes, child. Why, I had a great green ring, an emerald, that one of the princes giv' me, and ever so many pearls and diamonds. I used to go with 'em rattlin' loose in my vest pocket. I was young and gay in them days, and thought of bringin' of 'em home for the gals, but somehow I always got opportunities for swappin' of 'em off for goods and sich. That ar shawl your mother keeps in her camfire chist was what I got for one on 'em."

"Well, well," said Mrs. Kittridge, "there's never any catchin' you, 'cause you've been where we haven't."

"You've caught me once, and that ought'r do," said the Captain, with unruffled good-nature. "I tell you, Sally, your mother was the handsomest gal in Harpswell in them days."

"I should think you was too old for such nonsense, Cap'n," said Mrs. Kittridge, with a toss of her head, and a voice that sounded far less inexorable than her former admonition. In fact, though the old Captain was as unmanageable under his wife's fireside régime as any brisk old cricket that skipped and sang around the hearth, and though he hopped over all moral boundaries with a cheerful alertness of conscience that was quite discouraging, still there was no resisting the spell of his inexhaustible good-nature.

By this time he had finished the little boat, and to Sally's great delight, began sailing it for her in a pail of water.

"I wonder," said Mrs. Kittridge, "what's to be done with that ar child. I suppose the selectmen will take care on't; it'll be brought up by the town."

"I shouldn't wonder," said Miss Roxy, "if Cap'n Pennel should adopt it."

"You don't think so," said Mrs. Kittridge. "'Twould be taking a great care and expense on their hands at their time of life."

"I wouldn't want no better fun than to bring up that little shaver,"

said Captain Kittridge; "he's a bright un, I promise you."

"You, Cap'n Kittridge! I wonder you can talk so," said his wife. "It's an awful responsibility, and I wonder you don't think whether or no you're fit for it."

"Why, down here on the shore, I'd as lives undertake a boy as a Newfoundland pup," said the Captain. "Plenty in the sea to eat, drink, and wear. That ar young un may be the staff of their old age yet."

"You see," said Miss Roxy, "I think they'll adopt it to be company for little Mara; they're bound up in her, and the little thing pines bein' alone."

"Well, they make a real graven image of that ar child," said Mrs. Kittridge, "and fairly bow down to her and worship her."

"Well, it's natural," said Miss Roxy. "Besides, the little thing is cunnin'; she's about the cunnin'est little crittur that I ever saw, and has such enticin' ways."

The fact was, as the reader may perceive, that Miss Roxy had been thawed into an unusual attachment for the little Mara, and this affection was beginning to spread a warming element through her whole being. It was as if a rough granite rock had suddenly awakened to a passionate consciousness of the beauty of some fluttering white anemone that nestled in its cleft, and felt warm thrills running through all its veins at every tender motion and shadow. A word spoken against the little one seemed to rouse her combativeness. Nor did Dame Kittridge bear the child the slightest ill-will, but she was one of those naturally care-taking people whom Providence seems to design to perform the picket duties for the rest of society, and who, therefore, challenge everybody and everything to stand and give an account of themselves. Miss Roxy herself belonged to this class, but sometimes found herself so stoutly overhauled by the guns of Mrs. Kittridge's battery, that she could only stand modestly on the defensive.

One of Mrs. Kittridge's favorite hobbies was education, or, as she phrased it, the "fetchin' up" of children, which she held should be performed to the letter of the old stiff rule. In this manner she had already trained up six sons, who were all following their fortunes upon the seas, and, on this account, she had no small conceit of her abilities; and when she thought she discerned a lamb being left to frisk heedlessly out of bounds, her zeal was stirred to bring it under proper sheepfold regulations.

"Come, Sally, it's eight o'clock," said the good woman.

Sally's dark brows lowered over her large, black eyes, and she gave an appealing look to her father.

"Law, mother, let the child sit up a quarter of an hour later, jist for once."

"Cap'n Kittridge, if I was to hear to you, there'd never be no rule in this house. Sally, you go 'long this minute, and be sure you put your knittin' away in its place."

The Captain gave a humorous nod of submissive good-nature to his daughter as she went out. In fact, putting Sally to bed was taking away his plaything, and leaving him nothing to do but study faces in the coals, or watch the fleeting sparks which chased each other in flocks up the sooty back of the chimney.

It was Saturday night, and the morrow was Sunday,--never a very pleasant prospect to the poor Captain, who, having, unfortunately, no spiritual tastes, found it very difficult to get through the day in compliance with his wife's views of propriety, for he, alas! soared no higher in his aims.

"I b'lieve, on the hull, Polly, I'll go to bed, too," said he, suddenly starting up.

"Well, father, your clean shirt is in the right-hand corner of the upper drawer, and your Sunday clothes on the back of the chair by the bed."

The fact was that the Captain promised himself the pleasure of a long conversation with Sally, who nestled in the trundle-bed under the paternal couch, to whom he could relate long, many-colored yarns, without the danger of interruption from her mother's sharp, truth-seeking voice.

A moralist might, perhaps, be puzzled exactly what account to make of the Captain's disposition to romancing and embroidery. In all real, matter-of-fact transactions, as between man and man, his word was as good as another's, and he was held to be honest and just in his dealings. It was only when he mounted the stilts of foreign travel that his paces became so enormous. Perhaps, after all, a rude poetic and artistic faculty possessed the man. He might have been a humbler phase of the "mute, inglorious Milton." Perhaps his narrations required the privileges and allowances due to the inventive arts generally. Certain it was that, in common with other artists, he required an atmosphere of sympathy and confidence in which to develop himself fully; and, when left alone with children, his mind ran such riot, that the bounds between the real and unreal became foggier than the banks of Newfoundland.

The two women sat up, and the night wore on apace, while they kept together that customary vigil which it was thought necessary to hold

over the lifeless casket from which an immortal jewel had recently been withdrawn.

"I re'lly did hope," said Mrs. Kittridge, mournfully, "that this 'ere solemn Providence would have been sent home to the Cap'n's mind; but he seems jist as light and triflin' as ever."

"There don't nobody see these 'ere things unless they's effectually called," said Miss Roxy, "and the Cap'n's time ain't come."

"It's gettin' to be t'ward the eleventh hour," said Mrs. Kittridge, "as I was a-tellin' him this afternoon."

"Well," said Miss Roxy, "you know

"While the lamp holds out to burn,
The vilest sinner may return."

"Yes, I know that," said Mrs. Kittridge, rising and taking up the candle. "Don't you think, Aunt Roxy, we may as well give a look in there at the corpse?"

It was past midnight as they went together into the keeping-room. All was so still that the clash of the rising tide and the ticking of the clock assumed that solemn and mournful distinctness which even tones less impressive take on in the night-watches. Miss Roxy went

mechanically through with certain arrangements of the white drapery around the cold sleeper, and uncovering the face and bust for a moment, looked critically at the still, unconscious countenance.

"Not one thing to let us know who or what she is," she said; "that boy, if he lives, would give a good deal to know, some day."

"What is it one's duty to do about this bracelet?" said Mrs. Kittridge, taking from a drawer the article in question, which had been found on the beach in the morning.

"Well, I s'pose it belongs to the child, whatever it's worth," said Miss Roxy.

"Then if the Pennels conclude to take him, I may as well give it to them," said Mrs. Kittridge, laying it back in the drawer.

Miss Roxy folded the cloth back over the face, and the two went out into the kitchen. The fire had sunk low--the crickets were chirruping gleefully. Mrs. Kittridge added more wood, and put on the tea-kettle that their watching might be refreshed by the aid of its talkative and inspiring beverage. The two solemn, hard-visaged women drew up to each other by the fire, and insensibly their very voices assumed a tone of drowsy and confidential mystery.

"If this 'ere poor woman was hopefully pious, and could see what was

goin' on here," said Mrs. Kittridge, "it would seem to be a comfort to her that her child has fallen into such good hands. It seems a'most a pity she couldn't know it."

"How do you know she don't?" said Miss Roxy, brusquely.

"Why, you know the hymn," said Mrs. Kittridge, quoting those somewhat saddusaical lines from the popular psalm-book:--

"The living know that they must die,
But all the dead forgotten lie--
Their memory and their senses gone,
Alike unknowing and unknown."

"Well, I don't know 'bout that," said Miss Roxy, flavoring her cup of tea; "hymn-book ain't Scriptur', and I'm pretty sure that ar ain't true always;" and she nodded her head as if she could say more if she chose.

Now Miss Roxy's reputation of vast experience in all the facts relating to those last fateful hours, which are the only certain event in every human existence, caused her to be regarded as a sort of Delphic oracle in such matters, and therefore Mrs. Kittridge, not without a share of the latent superstition to which each human heart must confess at some hours, drew confidentially near to Miss Roxy, and asked if she had anything particular on her mind.

"Well, Mis' Kittridge," said Miss Roxy, "I ain't one of the sort as likes to make a talk of what I've seen, but mebbe if I was, I've seen some things as remarkable as anybody. I tell you, Mis' Kittridge, folks don't tend the sick and dyin' bed year in and out, at all hours, day and night, and not see some remarkable things; that's my opinion."

"Well, Miss Roxy, did you ever see a sperit?"

"I won't say as I have, and I won't say as I haven't," said Miss Roxy; "only as I have seen some remarkable things."

There was a pause, in which Mrs. Kittridge stirred her tea, looking intensely curious, while the old kitchen-clock seemed to tick with one of those fits of loud insistence which seem to take clocks at times when all is still, as if they had something that they were getting ready to say pretty soon, if nobody else spoke.

But Miss Roxy evidently had something to say, and so she began:--

"Mis' Kittridge, this 'ere's a very particular subject to be talkin' of. I've had opportunities to observe that most haven't, and I don't care if I jist say to you, that I'm pretty sure spirits that has left the body do come to their friends sometimes."

The clock ticked with still more empressement, and Mrs. Kittridge glared through the horn bows of her glasses with eyes of eager

curiosity.

"Now, you remember Cap'n Titcomb's wife, that died fifteen years ago when her husband had gone to Archangel; and you remember that he took her son John out with him--and of all her boys, John was the one she was particular sot on."

"Yes, and John died at Archangel; I remember that."

"Jes' so," said Miss Roxy, laying her hand on Mrs. Kittridge's; "he died at Archangel the very day his mother died, and jist the hour, for the Cap'n had it down in his log-book."

"You don't say so!"

"Yes, I do. Well, now," said Miss Roxy, sinking her voice, "this 'ere was remarkable. Mis' Titcomb was one of the fearful sort, tho' one of the best women that ever lived. Our minister used to call her 'Mis' Muchafraid'--you know, in the 'Pilgrim's Progress'--but he was satisfied with her evidences, and told her so; she used to say she was 'afraid of the dark valley,' and she told our minister so when he went out, that ar last day he called; and his last words, as he stood with his hand on the knob of the door, was 'Mis' Titcomb, the Lord will find ways to bring you thro' the dark valley.' Well, she sunk away about three o'clock in the morning. I remember the time, 'cause the Cap'n's chronometer watch that he left with her lay on the stand for her to take her drops by. I

heard her kind o' restless, and I went up, and I saw she was struck with death, and she looked sort o' anxious and distressed.

"'Oh, Aunt Roxy,' says she, 'it's so dark, who will go with me?' and in a minute her whole face brightened up, and says she, 'John is going with me,' and she jist gave the least little sigh and never breathed no more--she jist died as easy as a bird. I told our minister of it next morning, and he asked if I'd made a note of the hour, and I told him I had, and says he, 'You did right, Aunt Roxy.'"

"What did he seem to think of it?"

"Well, he didn't seem inclined to speak freely. 'Miss Roxy,' says he, 'all natur's in the Lord's hands, and there's no saying why he uses this or that; them that's strong enough to go by faith, he lets 'em, but there's no saying what he won't do for the weak ones.'"

"Wa'n't the Cap'n overcome when you told him?" said Mrs. Kittridge.

"Indeed he was; he was jist as white as a sheet."

Miss Roxy now proceeded to pour out another cup of tea, and having mixed and flavored it, she looked in a weird and sibylline manner across it, and inquired,--

"Mis' Kittridge, do you remember that ar Mr. Wadkins that come to

Brunswick twenty years ago, in President Averill's days?"

"Yes, I remember the pale, thin, long-nosed gentleman that used to sit in President Averill's pew at church. Nobody knew who he was, or where he came from. The college students used to call him Thaddeus of Warsaw. Nobody knew who he was but the President, 'cause he could speak all the foreign tongues--one about as well as another; but the President he knew his story, and said he was a good man, and he used to stay to the sacrament regular, I remember."

"Yes," said Miss Roxy, "he used to live in a room all alone, and keep himself. Folks said he was quite a gentleman, too, and fond of reading."

"I heard Cap'n Atkins tell," said Mrs. Kittridge, "how they came to take him up on the shores of Holland. You see, when he was somewhere in a port in Denmark, some men come to him and offered him a pretty good sum of money if he'd be at such a place on the coast of Holland on such a day, and take whoever should come. So the Cap'n he went, and sure enough on that day there come a troop of men on horseback down to the beach with this man, and they all bid him good-by, and seemed to make much of him, but he never told 'em nothin' on board ship, only he seemed kind o' sad and pinin'."

"Well," said Miss Roxy; "Ruey and I we took care o' that man in his last sickness, and we watched with him the night he died, and there was something quite remarkable."

"Do tell now," said Mrs. Kittridge.

"Well, you see," said Miss Roxy, "he'd been low and poorly all day, kind o' tossin' and restless, and a little light-headed, and the Doctor said he thought he wouldn't last till morning, and so Ruey and I we set up with him, and between twelve and one Ruey said she thought she'd jist lop down a few minutes on the old sofa at the foot of the bed, and I made me a cup of tea like as I'm a-doin' now, and set with my back to him."

"Well?" said Mrs. Kittridge, eagerly.

"Well, you see he kept a-tossin' and throwin' off the clothes, and I kept a-gettin' up to straighten 'em; and once he threw out his arms, and something bright fell out on to the pillow, and I went and looked, and it was a likeness that he wore by a ribbon round his neck. It was a woman--a real handsome one--and she had on a low-necked black dress, of the cut they used to call Marie Louise, and she had a string of pearls round her neck, and her hair curled with pearls in it, and very wide blue eyes. Well, you see, I didn't look but a minute before he seemed to wake up, and he caught at it and hid it in his clothes. Well, I went and sat down, and I grew kind o' sleepy over the fire; but pretty soon I heard him speak out very clear, and kind o' surprised, in a tongue I didn't understand, and I looked round."

Miss Roxy here made a pause, and put another lump of sugar into her tea.

"Well?" said Mrs. Kittridge, ready to burst with curiosity.

"Well, now, I don't like to tell about these 'ere things, and you mustn't never speak about it; but as sure as you live, Polly Kittridge, I see that ar very woman standin' at the back of the bed, right in the partin' of the curtains, jist as she looked in the pictur'--blue eyes and curly hair and pearls on her neck, and black dress."

"What did you do?" said Mrs. Kittridge.

"Do? Why, I jist held my breath and looked, and in a minute it kind o' faded away, and I got up and went to the bed, but the man was gone. He lay there with the pleasantest smile on his face that ever you see; and I woke up Ruey, and told her about it."

Mrs. Kittridge drew a long breath. "What do you think it was?"

"Well," said Miss Roxy, "I know what I think, but I don't think best to tell. I told Doctor Meritts, and he said there were more things in heaven and earth than folks knew about--and so I think."

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Meanwhile, on this same evening, the little Mara frisked like a

household fairy round the hearth of Zephaniah Pennel.

The boy was a strong-limbed, merry-hearted little urchin, and did full justice to the abundant hospitalities of Mrs. Pennel's tea-table; and after supper little Mara employed herself in bringing apronful after apronful of her choicest treasures, and laying them down at his feet. His great black eyes flashed with pleasure, and he gamboled about the hearth with his new playmate in perfect forgetfulness, apparently, of all the past night of fear and anguish.

When the great family Bible was brought out for prayers, and little Mara composed herself on a low stool by her grandmother's side, he, however, did not conduct himself as a babe of grace. He resisted all Miss Ruey's efforts to make him sit down beside her, and stood staring with his great, black, irreverent eyes during the Bible-reading, and laughed out in the most inappropriate manner when the psalm-singing began, and seemed disposed to mingle incoherent remarks of his own even in the prayers.

"This is a pretty self-willed youngster," said Miss Ruey, as they rose from the exercises, "and I shouldn't think he'd been used to religious privileges."

"Perhaps not," said Zephaniah Pennel; "but who can say but what this providence is a message of the Lord to us--such as Pharaoh's daughter sent about Moses, 'Take this child, and bring him up for me?'"

"I'd like to take him, if I thought I was capable," said Mrs. Pennel, timidly. "It seems a real providence to give Mara some company; the poor child pines so for want of it."

"Well, then, Mary, if you say so, we will bring him up with our little Mara," said Zephaniah, drawing the child toward him. "May the Lord bless him!" he added, laying his great brown hands on the shining black curls of the child.