

CHAPTER XI

LITTLE ADVENTURERS

The little boy who had been added to the family of Zephaniah Pennel and his wife soon became a source of grave solicitude to that mild and long-suffering woman. For, as the reader may have seen, he was a resolute, self-willed little elf, and whatever his former life may have been, it was quite evident that these traits had been developed without any restraint.

Mrs. Pennel, whose whole domestic experience had consisted in rearing one very sensitive and timid daughter, who needed for her development only an extreme of tenderness, and whose conscientiousness was a law unto herself, stood utterly confounded before the turbulent little spirit to which her loving-kindness had opened so ready an asylum, and she soon discovered that it is one thing to take a human being to bring up, and another to know what to do with it after it is taken.

The child had the instinctive awe of Zephaniah which his manly nature and habits of command were fitted to inspire, so that morning and evening, when he was at home, he was demure enough; but while the good man was away all day, and sometimes on fishing excursions which often lasted a week, there was a chronic state of domestic warfare--a succession of skirmishes, pitched battles, long treaties, with divers

articles of capitulation, ending, as treaties are apt to do, in open rupture on the first convenient opportunity.

Mrs. Pennel sometimes reflected with herself mournfully, and with many self-disparaging sighs, what was the reason that young master somehow contrived to keep her far more in awe of him than he was of her. Was she not evidently, as yet at least, bigger and stronger than he, able to hold his rebellious little hands, to lift and carry him, and to shut him up, if so she willed, in a dark closet, and even to administer to him that discipline of the birch which Mrs. Kittridge often and forcibly recommended as the great secret of her family prosperity? Was it not her duty, as everybody told her, to break his will while he was young?--a duty which hung like a millstone round the peaceable creature's neck, and weighed her down with a distressing sense of responsibility.

Now, Mrs. Pennel was one of the people to whom self-sacrifice is constitutionally so much a nature, that self-denial for her must have consisted in standing up for her own rights, or having her own way when it crossed the will and pleasure of any one around her. All she wanted of a child, or in fact of any human creature, was something to love and serve. We leave it entirely to theologians to reconcile such facts with the theory of total depravity; but it is a fact that there are a considerable number of women of this class. Their life would flow on very naturally if it might consist only in giving, never in withholding--only in praise, never in blame--only in acquiescence, never in conflict; and the chief comfort of such women in religion is that it

gives them at last an object for love without criticism, and for whom the utmost degree of self-abandonment is not idolatry, but worship.

Mrs. Pennel would gladly have placed herself and all she possessed at the disposition of the children; they might have broken her china, dug in the garden with her silver spoons, made turf alleys in her best room, drummed on her mahogany tea-table, filled her muslin drawer with their choicest shells and seaweed; only Mrs. Pennel knew that such kindness was no kindness, and that in the dreadful word responsibility, familiar to every New England mother's ear, there lay an awful summons to deny and to conflict where she could so much easier have conceded.

She saw that the tyrant little will would reign without mercy, if it reigned at all; and ever present with her was the uneasy sense that it was her duty to bring this erratic little comet within the laws of a well-ordered solar system,--a task to which she felt about as competent as to make a new ring for Saturn. Then, too, there was a secret feeling, if the truth must be told, of what Mrs. Kittridge would think about it; for duty is never more formidable than when she gets on the cap and gown of a neighbor; and Mrs. Kittridge, with her resolute voice and declamatory family government, had always been a secret source of uneasiness to poor Mrs. Pennel, who was one of those sensitive souls who can feel for a mile or more the sphere of a stronger neighbor. During all the years that they had lived side by side, there had been this shadowy, unconfessed feeling on the part of poor Mrs. Pennel, that Mrs. Kittridge thought her deficient in her favorite virtue of "resolution,"

as, in fact, in her inmost soul she knew she was;--but who wants to have one's weak places looked into by the sharp eyes of a neighbor who is strong precisely where we are weak? The trouble that one neighbor may give to another, simply by living within a mile of one, is incredible; but until this new accession to her family, Mrs. Pennel had always been able to comfort herself with the idea that the child under her particular training was as well-behaved as any of those of her more demonstrative friend. But now, all this consolation had been put to flight; she could not meet Mrs. Kittridge without most humiliating recollections.

On Sundays, when those sharp black eyes gleamed upon her through the rails of the neighboring pew, her very soul shrank within her, as she recollected all the compromises and defeats of the week before. It seemed to her that Mrs. Kittridge saw it all,--how she had ingloriously bought peace with gingerbread, instead of maintaining it by rightful authority,--how young master had sat up till nine o'clock on divers occasions, and even kept little Mara up for his lordly pleasure.

How she trembled at every movement of the child in the pew, dreading some patent and open impropriety which should bring scandal on her government! This was the more to be feared, as the first effort to initiate the youthful neophyte in the decorums of the sanctuary had proved anything but a success,--insomuch that Zephaniah Pennel had been obliged to carry him out from the church; therefore, poor Mrs. Pennel was thankful every Sunday when she got her little charge home without

any distinct scandal and breach of the peace.

But, after all, he was such a handsome and engaging little wretch, attracting all eyes wherever he went, and so full of saucy drolleries, that it seemed to Mrs. Pennel that everything and everybody conspired to help her spoil him. There are two classes of human beings in this world: one class seem made to give love, and the other to take it. Now Mrs. Pennel and Mara belonged to the first class, and little Master Moses to the latter.

It was, perhaps, of service to the little girl to give to her delicate, shrinking, highly nervous organization the constant support of a companion so courageous, so richly blooded, and highly vitalized as the boy seemed to be. There was a fervid, tropical richness in his air that gave one a sense of warmth in looking at him, and made his Oriental name seem in good-keeping. He seemed an exotic that might have waked up under fervid Egyptian suns, and been found cradled among the lotus blossoms of old Nile; and the fair golden-haired girl seemed to be gladdened by his companionship, as if he supplied an element of vital warmth to her being. She seemed to incline toward him as naturally as a needle to a magnet.

The child's quickness of ear and the facility with which he picked up English were marvelous to observe. Evidently, he had been somewhat accustomed to the sound of it before, for there dropped out of his vocabulary, after he began to speak, phrases which would seem to betoken

a longer familiarity with its idioms than could be equally accounted for by his present experience. Though the English evidently was not his native language, there had yet apparently been some effort to teach it to him, although the terror and confusion of the shipwreck seemed at first to have washed every former impression from his mind.

But whenever any attempt was made to draw him to speak of the past, of his mother, or of where he came from, his brow lowered gloomily, and he assumed that kind of moody, impenetrable gravity, which children at times will so strangely put on, and which baffle all attempts to look within them. Zephaniah Pennel used to call it putting up his dead-lights. Perhaps it was the dreadful association of agony and terror connected with the shipwreck, that thus confused and darkened the mirror of his mind the moment it was turned backward; but it was thought wisest by his new friends to avoid that class of subjects altogether--indeed, it was their wish that he might forget the past entirely, and remember them as his only parents.

Miss Roxy and Miss Ruey came duly, as appointed, to initiate the young pilgrim into the habiliments of a Yankee boy, endeavoring, at the same time, to drop into his mind such seeds of moral wisdom as might make the internal economy in time correspond to the exterior. But Miss Roxy declared that "of all the children that ever she see, he beat all for finding out new mischief,--the moment you'd make him understand he mustn't do one thing, he was right at another."

One of his exploits, however, had very nearly been the means of cutting short the materials of our story in the outset.

It was a warm, sunny afternoon, and the three women, being busy together with their stitching, had tied a sun-bonnet on little Mara, and turned the two loose upon the beach to pick up shells. All was serene, and quiet, and retired, and no possible danger could be apprehended. So up and down they trotted, till the spirit of adventure which ever burned in the breast of little Moses caught sight of a small canoe which had been moored just under the shadow of a cedar-covered rock. Forthwith he persuaded his little neighbor to go into it, and for a while they made themselves very gay, rocking it from side to side.

The tide was going out, and each retreating wave washed the boat up and down, till it came into the boy's curly head how beautiful it would be to sail out as he had seen men do,--and so, with much puffing and earnest tugging of his little brown hands, the boat at last was loosed from her moorings and pushed out on the tide, when both children laughed gayly to find themselves swinging and balancing on the amber surface, and watching the rings and sparkles of sunshine and the white pebbles below. Little Moses was glorious,--his adventures had begun,--and with a fairy-princess in his boat, he was going to stretch away to some of the islands of dreamland. He persuaded Mara to give him her pink sun-bonnet, which he placed for a pennon on a stick at the end of the boat, while he made a vehement dashing with another, first on one side of the boat and then on the other,--spattering the water in diamond showers, to the

infinite amusement of the little maiden.

Meanwhile the tide waves danced them out and still outward, and as they went farther and farther from shore, the more glorious felt the boy. He had got Mara all to himself, and was going away with her from all grown people, who wouldn't let children do as they pleased,--who made them sit still in prayer-time, and took them to meeting, and kept so many things which they must not touch, or open, or play with. Two white sea-gulls came flying toward the children, and they stretched their little arms in welcome, nothing doubting but these fair creatures were coming at once to take passage with them for fairy-land. But the birds only dived and shifted and veered, turning their silvery sides toward the sun, and careering in circles round the children. A brisk little breeze, that came hurrying down from the land, seemed disposed to favor their unsubstantial enterprise,--for your winds, being a fanciful, uncertain tribe of people, are always for falling in with anything that is contrary to common sense. So the wind trolled them merrily along, nothing doubting that there might be time, if they hurried, to land their boat on the shore of some of the low-banked red clouds that lay in the sunset, where they could pick up shells,--blue and pink and purple,--enough to make them rich for life. The children were all excitement at the rapidity with which their little bark danced and rocked, as it floated outward to the broad, open ocean; at the blue, freshening waves, at the silver-glancing gulls, at the floating, white-winged ships, and at vague expectations of going rapidly somewhere, to something more beautiful still. And what is the happiness

of the brightest hours of grown people more than this?

"Roxy," said Aunt Ruey innocently, "seems to me I haven't heard nothin' o' them children lately. They're so still, I'm 'fraid there's some mischief."

"Well, Ruey, you jist go and give a look at 'em," said Miss Roxy. "I declare, that boy! I never know what he will do next; but there didn't seem to be nothin' to get into out there but the sea, and the beach is so shelving, a body can't well fall into that."

Alas! good Miss Roxy, the children are at this moment tilting up and down on the waves, half a mile out to sea, as airily happy as the sea-gulls; and little Moses now thinks, with glorious scorn, of you and your press-board, as of grim shadows of restraint and bondage that shall never darken his free life more.

Both Miss Roxy and Mrs. Pennel were, however, startled into a paroxysm of alarm when poor Miss Ruey came screaming, as she entered the door,--

"As sure as you're alive, them chil'en are off in the boat,--they're out to sea, sure as I'm alive! What shall we do? The boat'll upset, and the sharks'll get 'em."

Miss Roxy ran to the window, and saw dancing and courtesying on the blue waves the little pinnace, with its fanciful pink pennon fluttered gayly

by the indiscreet and flattering wind.

Poor Mrs. Pennel ran to the shore, and stretched her arms wildly, as if she would have followed them across the treacherous blue floor that heaved and sparkled between them.

"Oh, Mara, Mara! Oh, my poor little girl! Oh, poor children!"

"Well, if ever I see such a young un as that," soliloquized Miss Roxy from the chamber-window; "there they be, dancin' and giggitin' about; they'll have the boat upset in a minit, and the sharks are waitin' for 'em, no doubt. I b'lieve that ar young un's helped by the Evil One,--not a boat round, else I'd push off after 'em. Well, I don't see but we must trust in the Lord,--there don't seem to be much else to trust to," said the spinster, as she drew her head in grimly.

To say the truth, there was some reason for the terror of these most fearful suggestions; for not far from the place where the children embarked was Zephaniah's fish-drying ground, and multitudes of sharks came up with every rising tide, allured by the offal that was here constantly thrown into the sea. Two of these prowlers, outward-bound from their quest, were even now assiduously attending the little boat, and the children derived no small amusement from watching their motions in the pellucid water,--the boy occasionally almost upsetting the boat by valorous plunges at them with his stick. It was the most exhilarating and piquant entertainment he had found for many a day; and little Mara

laughed in chorus at every lunge that he made.

What would have been the end of it all, it is difficult to say, had not some mortal power interfered before they had sailed finally away into the sunset. But it so happened, on this very afternoon, Rev. Mr. Sewell was out in a boat, busy in the very apostolic employment of catching fish, and looking up from one of the contemplative pauses which his occupation induced, he rubbed his eyes at the apparition which presented itself. A tiny little shell of a boat came drifting toward him, in which was a black-eyed boy, with cheeks like a pomegranate and lustrous tendrils of silky dark hair, and a little golden-haired girl, white as a water-lily, and looking ethereal enough to have risen out of the sea-foam. Both were in the very sparkle and effervescence of that fanciful glee which bubbles up from the golden, untried fountains of early childhood. Mr. Sewell, at a glance, comprehended the whole, and at once overhauling the tiny craft, he broke the spell of fairy-land, and constrained the little people to return to the confines, dull and dreary, of real and actual life.

Neither of them had known a doubt or a fear in that joyous trance of forbidden pleasure which shadowed with so many fears the wiser and more far-seeing heads and hearts of the grown people; nor was there enough language yet in common between the two classes to make the little ones comprehend the risk they had run. Perhaps so do our elder brothers, in our Father's house, look anxiously out when we are sailing gayly over life's sea,--over unknown depths,--amid threatening monsters,--but want

words to tell us why what seems so bright is so dangerous.

Duty herself could not have worn a more rigid aspect than Miss Roxy, as she stood on the beach, press-board in hand; for she had forgotten to lay it down in the eagerness of her anxiety. She essayed to lay hold of the little hand of Moses to pull him from the boat, but he drew back, and, looking at her with a world of defiance in his great eyes, jumped magnanimously upon the beach. The spirit of Sir Francis Drake and of Christopher Columbus was swelling in his little body, and was he to be brought under by a dry-visaged woman with a press-board? In fact, nothing is more ludicrous about the escapades of children than the utter insensibility they feel to the dangers they have run, and the light esteem in which they hold the deep tragedy they create.

That night, when Zephaniah, in his evening exercise, poured forth most fervent thanksgivings for the deliverance, while Mrs. Pennel was sobbing in her handkerchief, Miss Roxy was much scandalized by seeing the young cause of all the disturbance sitting upon his heels, regarding the emotion of the kneeling party with his wide bright eyes, without a wink of compunction.

"Well, for her part," she said, "she hoped Cap'n Pennel would be blessed in takin' that ar boy; but she was sure she didn't see much that looked like it now."

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The Rev. Mr. Sewell fished no more that day, for the draught from fairy-land with which he had filled his boat brought up many thoughts into his mind, which he pondered anxiously.

"Strange ways of God," he thought, "that should send to my door this child, and should wash upon the beach the only sign by which he could be identified. To what end or purpose? Hath the Lord a will in this matter, and what is it?"

So he thought as he slowly rowed homeward, and so did his thoughts work upon him that half way across the bay to Harpswell he slackened his oar without knowing it, and the boat lay drifting on the purple and gold-tinted mirror, like a speck between two eternities. Under such circumstances, even heads that have worn the clerical wig for years at times get a little dizzy and dreamy. Perhaps it was because of the impression made upon him by the sudden apparition of those great dark eyes and sable curls, that he now thought of the boy that he had found floating that afternoon, looking as if some tropical flower had been washed landward by a monsoon; and as the boat rocked and tilted, and the minister gazed dreamily downward into the wavering rings of purple, orange, and gold which spread out and out from it, gradually it seemed to him that a face much like the child's formed itself in the waters; but it was the face of a girl, young and radiantly beautiful, yet with those same eyes and curls,--he saw her distinctly, with her thousand rings of silky hair, bound with strings of pearls and clasped with

strange gems, and she raised one arm imploringly to him, and on the wrist he saw the bracelet embroidered with seed pearls, and the letters D.M. "Ah, Dolores," he said, "well wert thou called so. Poor Dolores! I cannot help thee."

"What am I dreaming of?" said the Rev. Mr. Sewell. "It is my Thursday evening lecture on Justification, and Emily has got tea ready, and here I am catching cold out on the bay."