

## CHAPTER XII

### SEA TALES

Mr. Sewell, as the reader may perhaps have inferred, was of a nature profoundly secretive. It was in most things quite as pleasant for him to keep matters to himself, as it was to Miss Emily to tell them to somebody else. She resembled more than anything one of those trotting, chattering little brooks that enliven the "back lot" of many a New England home, while he was like one of those wells you shall sometimes see by a deserted homestead, so long unused that ferns and lichens feather every stone down to the dark, cool water.

Dear to him was the stillness and coolness of inner thoughts with which no stranger intermeddles; dear to him every pendent fern-leaf of memory, every dripping moss of old recollection; and though the waters of his soul came up healthy and refreshing enough when one really must have them, yet one had to go armed with bucket and line and draw them up,--they never flowed. One of his favorite maxims was, that the only way to keep a secret was never to let any one suspect that you have one. And as he had one now, he had, as you have seen, done his best to baffle and put to sleep the feminine curiosity of his sister.

He rather wanted to tell her, too, for he was a good-natured brother, and would have liked to have given her the amount of pleasure the

confidence would have produced; but then he reflected with dismay on the number of women in his parish with whom Miss Emily was on tea-drinking terms,--he thought of the wondrous solvent powers of that beverage in whose amber depths so many resolutions yea, and solemn vows, of utter silence have been dissolved like Cleopatra's pearls. He knew that an infusion of his secret would steam up from every cup of tea Emily should drink for six months to come, till gradually every particle would be dissolved and float in the air of common fame. No; it would not do.

You would have thought, however, that something was the matter with Mr. Sewell, had you seen him after he retired for the night, after he had so very indifferently dismissed the subject of Miss Emily's inquiries. For instead of retiring quietly to bed, as had been his habit for years at that hour, he locked his door, and then unlocked a desk of private papers, and emptied certain pigeon-holes of their contents, and for an hour or two sat unfolding and looking over old letters and papers; and when all this was done, he pushed them from him, and sat for a long time buried in thoughts which went down very, very deep into that dark and mossy well of which we have spoken.

Then he took a pen and wrote a letter, and addressed it to a direction for which he had searched through many piles of paper, and having done so, seemed to ponder, uncertainly, whether to send it or not. The Harpswell post-office was kept in Mr. Silas Perrit's store, and the letters were every one of them carefully and curiously investigated by all the gossips of the village, and as this was addressed to St.

Augustine in Florida, he foresaw that before Sunday the news would be in every mouth in the parish that the minister had written to so and so in Florida, "and what do you s'pose it's about?"

"No, no," he said to himself, "that will never do; but at all events there is no hurry," and he put back the papers in order, put the letter with them, and locking his desk, looked at his watch and found it to be two o'clock, and so he went to bed to think the matter over.

Now, there may be some reader so simple as to feel a portion of Miss Emily's curiosity. But, my friend, restrain it, for Mr. Sewell will certainly, as we foresee, become less rather than more communicative on this subject, as he thinks upon it. Nevertheless, whatever it be that he knows or suspects, it is something which leads him to contemplate with more than usual interest this little mortal waif that has so strangely come ashore in his parish. He mentally resolves to study the child as minutely as possible, without betraying that he has any particular reason for being interested in him.

Therefore, in the latter part of this mild November afternoon, which he has devoted to pastoral visiting, about two months after the funeral, he steps into his little sail-boat, and stretches away for the shores of Orr's Island. He knows the sun will be down before he reaches there; but he sees, in the opposite horizon, the spectral, shadowy moon, only waiting for daylight to be gone to come out, calm and radiant, like a saintly friend neglected in the flush of prosperity, who waits patiently

to enliven our hours of darkness.

As his boat-keel grazed the sands on the other side, a shout of laughter came upon his oar from behind a cedar-covered rock, and soon emerged Captain Kittridge, as long and lean and brown as the Ancient Mariner, carrying little Mara on one shoulder, while Sally and little Moses Pennel trotted on before.

It was difficult to say who in this whole group was in the highest spirits. The fact was that Mrs. Kittridge had gone to a tea-drinking over at Maquoit, and left the Captain as housekeeper and general overseer; and little Mara and Moses and Sally had been gloriously keeping holiday with him down by the boat-cove, where, to say the truth, few shavings were made, except those necessary to adorn the children's heads with flowing suits of curls of a most extraordinary effect. The aprons of all of them were full of these most unsubstantial specimens of woody treasure, which hung out in long festoons, looking of a yellow transparency in the evening light. But the delight of the children in their acquisitions was only equaled by that of grown-up people in possessions equally fanciful in value.

The mirth of the little party, however, came to a sudden pause as they met the minister. Mara clung tight to the Captain's neck, and looked out slyly under her curls. But the little Moses made a step forward, and fixed his bold, dark, inquisitive eyes upon him. The fact was, that the minister had been impressed upon the boy, in his few visits to the

"meeting," as such a grand and mysterious reason for good behavior, that he seemed resolved to embrace the first opportunity to study him close at hand.

"Well, my little man," said Mr. Sewell, with an affability which he could readily assume with children, "you seem to like to look at me."

"I do like to look at you," said the boy gravely, continuing to fix his great black eyes upon him.

"I see you do, my little fellow."

"Are you the Lord?" said the child, solemnly.

"Am I what?"

"The Lord," said the boy.

"No, indeed, my lad," said Mr. Sewell, smiling. "Why, what put that into your little head?"

"I thought you were," said the boy, still continuing to study the pastor with attention. "Miss Roxy said so."

"It's curious what notions chil'en will get in their heads," said Captain Kittridge. "They put this and that together and think it over,

and come out with such queer things."

"But," said the minister, "I have brought something for you all;" saying which he drew from his pocket three little bright-cheeked apples, and gave one to each child; and then taking the hand of the little Moses in his own, he walked with him toward the house-door.

Mrs. Pennel was sitting in her clean kitchen, busily spinning at the little wheel, and rose flushed with pleasure at the honor that was done her.

"Pray, walk in, Mr. Sewell," she said, rising, and leading the way toward the penetralia of the best room.

"Now, Mrs. Pennel, I am come here for a good sit-down by your kitchen-fire, this evening," said Mr. Sewell. "Emily has gone out to sit with old Mrs. Broad, who is laid up with the rheumatism, and so I am turned loose to pick up my living on the parish, and you must give me a seat for a while in your kitchen corner. Best rooms are always cold."

"The minister's right," said Captain Kittridge. "When rooms ain't much set in, folks never feel so kind o' natural in 'em. So you jist let me put on a good back-log and forestick, and build up a fire to tell stories by this evening. My wife's gone out to tea, too," he said, with an elastic skip.

And in a few moments the Captain had produced in the great cavernous chimney a foundation for a fire that promised breadth, solidity, and continuance. A great back-log, embroidered here and there with tufts of green or grayish moss, was first flung into the capacious arms of the fireplace, and a smaller log placed above it. "Now, all you young uns go out and bring in chips," said the Captain. "There's capital ones out to the wood-pile."

Mr. Sewell was pleased to see the flash that came from the eyes of little Moses at this order, how energetically he ran before the others, and came with glowing cheeks and distended arms, throwing down great white chips with their green mossy bark, scattering tufts on the floor. "Good," said he softly to himself, as he leaned on the top of his gold-headed cane; "there's energy, ambition, muscle;" and he nodded his head once or twice to some internal decision.

"There!" said the Captain, rising out of a perfect whirlwind of chips and pine kindlings with which in his zeal he had bestrown the wide, black stone hearth, and pointing to the tongues of flame that were leaping and blazing up through the crevices of the dry pine wood which he had intermingled plentifully with the more substantial fuel,--"there, Mis' Pennel, ain't I a master-hand at a fire? But I'm really sorry I've dirtied your floor," he said, as he brushed down his pantaloons, which were covered with bits of grizzly moss, and looked on the surrounding desolations; "give me a broom, I can sweep up now as well as any woman."

"Oh, never mind," said Mrs. Pennel, laughing, "I'll sweep up."

"Well, now, Mis' Pennel, you're one of the women that don't get put out easy; ain't ye?" said the Captain, still contemplating his fire with a proud and watchful eye.

"Law me!" he exclaimed, glancing through the window, "there's the Cap'n a-comin'. I'm jist goin' to give a look at what he's brought in. Come, chil'en," and the Captain disappeared with all three of the children at his heels, to go down to examine the treasures of the fishing-smack.

Mr. Sewell seated himself cozily in the chimney corner and sank into a state of half-dreamy reverie; his eyes fixed on the fairest sight one can see of a frosty autumn twilight--a crackling wood-fire.

Mrs. Pennel moved soft-footed to and fro, arraying her tea-table in her own finest and pure damask, and bringing from hidden stores her best china and newest silver, her choicest sweetmeats and cake--whatever was fairest and nicest in her house--to honor her unexpected guest.

Mr. Sewell's eyes followed her occasionally about the room, with an expression of pleased and curious satisfaction. He was taking it all in as an artistic picture--that simple, kindly hearth, with its mossy logs, yet steaming with the moisture of the wild woods; the table so neat, so cheery with its many little delicacies, and refinements of appointment, and its ample varieties to tempt the appetite; and then the Captain



coming in, yet fresh and hungry from his afternoon's toil, with the children trotting before him.

"And this is the inheritance he comes into," he murmured;  
"healthy--wholesome--cheerful--secure: how much better than hot,  
stifling luxury!"

Here the minister's meditations were interrupted by the entrance of all the children, joyful and loquacious. Little Moses held up a string of mackerel, with their graceful bodies and elegantly cut fins.

"Just a specimen of the best, Mary," said Captain Pennel. "I thought I'd bring 'em for Miss Emily."

"Miss Emily will be a thousand times obliged to you," said Mr. Sewell, rising up.

As to Mara and Sally, they were reveling in apronfuls of shells and seaweed, which they bustled into the other room to bestow in their spacious baby-house.

And now, after due time for Zephaniah to assume a land toilet, all sat down to the evening meal.

After supper was over, the Captain was besieged by the children. Little Mara mounted first into his lap, and nestled herself quietly under his

coat--Moses and Sally stood at each knee.

"Come, now," said Moses, "you said you would tell us about the mermen to-night."

"Yes, and the mermaids," said Sally. "Tell them all you told me the other night in the trundle-bed."

Sally valued herself no little on the score of the Captain's talent as a romancer.

"You see, Moses," she said, volubly, "father saw mermen and mermaids a plenty of them in the West Indies."

"Oh, never mind about 'em now," said Captain Kittridge, looking at Mr. Sewell's corner.

"Why not, father? mother isn't here," said Sally, innocently.

A smile passed round the faces of the company, and Mr. Sewell said, "Come, Captain, no modesty; we all know you have as good a faculty for telling a story as for making a fire."

"Do tell me what mermen are," said Moses.

"Wal'," said the Captain, sinking his voice confidentially, and hitching

his chair a little around, "mermen and maids is a kind o' people that have their world jist like our'n, only it's down in the bottom of the sea, 'cause the bottom of the sea has its mountains and its valleys, and its trees and its bushes, and it stands to reason there should be people there too."

Moses opened his broad black eyes wider than usual, and looked absorbed attention.

"Tell 'em about how you saw 'em," said Sally.

"Wal', yes," said Captain Kittridge; "once when I was to the Bahamas,--it was one Sunday morning in June, the first Sunday in the month,--we cast anchor pretty nigh a reef of coral, and I was jist a-sittin' down to read my Bible, when up comes a merman over the side of the ship, all dressed as fine as any old beau that ever ye see, with cocked hat and silk stockings, and shoe-buckles, and his clothes were sea-green, and his shoe-buckles shone like diamonds."

"Do you suppose they were diamonds, really?" said Sally.

"Wal', child, I didn't ask him, but I shouldn't be surprised, from all I know of their ways, if they was," said the Captain, who had now got so wholly into the spirit of his fiction that he no longer felt embarrassed by the minister's presence, nor saw the look of amusement with which he was listening to him in his chimney-corner. "But, as I was

sayin', he came up to me, and made the politest bow that ever ye see, and says he, 'Cap'n Kittridge, I presume,' and says I, 'Yes, sir.' 'I'm sorry to interrupt your reading,' says he; and says I, 'Oh, no matter, sir.' 'But,' says he, 'if you would only be so good as to move your anchor. You've cast anchor right before my front-door, and my wife and family can't get out to go to meetin'.'

"Why, do they go to meeting in the bottom of the sea?" said Moses.

"Law, bless you sonny, yes. Why, Sunday morning, when the sea was all still, I used to hear the bass-viol a-soundin' down under the waters, jist as plain as could be,--and psalms and preachin'. I've reason to think there's as many hopefully pious mermaids as there be folks," said the Captain.

"But," said Moses, "you said the anchor was before the front-door, so the family couldn't get out,--how did the merman get out?"

"Oh! he got out of the scuttle on the roof," said the Captain, promptly.

"And did you move your anchor?" said Moses.

"Why, child, yes, to be sure I did; he was such a gentleman I wanted to oblige him,--it shows you how important it is always to be polite," said the Captain, by way of giving a moral turn to his narrative.

Mr. Sewell, during the progress of this story, examined the Captain with eyes of amused curiosity. His countenance was as fixed and steady, and his whole manner of reciting as matter-of-fact and collected, as if he were relating some of the every-day affairs of his boat-building.

"Wal', Sally," said the Captain, rising, after his yarn had proceeded for an indefinite length in this manner, "you and I must be goin'. I promised your ma you shouldn't be up late, and we have a long walk home,--besides it's time these little folks was in bed."

The children all clung round the Captain, and could hardly be persuaded to let him go.

When he was gone, Mrs. Pennel took the little ones to their nest in an adjoining room.

Mr. Sewell approached his chair to that of Captain Pennel, and began talking to him in a tone of voice so low, that we have never been able to make out exactly what he was saying. Whatever it might be, however, it seemed to give rise to an anxious consultation. "I did not think it advisable to tell any one this but yourself, Captain Pennel. It is for you to decide, in view of the probabilities I have told you, what you will do."

"Well," said Zephaniah, "since you leave it to me, I say, let us keep him. It certainly seems a marked providence that he has been thrown upon

us as he has, and the Lord seemed to prepare a way for him in our hearts. I am well able to afford it, and Mis' Pennel, she agrees to it, and on the whole I don't think we'd best go back on our steps; besides, our little Mara has thrived since he came under our roof. He is, to be sure, kind o' masterful, and I shall have to take him off Mis' Pennel's hands before long, and put him into the sloop. But, after all, there seems to be the makin' of a man in him, and when we are called away, why he'll be as a brother to poor little Mara. Yes, I think it's best as 't is."

The minister, as he flitted across the bay by moonlight, felt relieved of a burden. His secret was locked up as safe in the breast of Zephaniah Pennel as it could be in his own.