

CHAPTER XVI

THE NATURAL AND THE SPIRITUAL

"Emily," said Mr. Sewell, "did you ever take much notice of that little Mara Lincoln?"

"No, brother; why?"

"Because I think her a very uncommon child."

"She is a pretty little creature," said Miss Emily, "but that is all I know; modest--blushing to her eyes when a stranger speaks to her."

"She has wonderful eyes," said Mr. Sewell; "when she gets excited, they grow so large and so bright, it seems almost unnatural."

"Dear me! has she?" said Miss Emily, in a tone of one who had been called upon to do something about it. "Well?" she added, inquiringly.

"That little thing is only seven years old," said Mr. Sewell; "and she is thinking and feeling herself all into mere spirit--brain and nerves all active, and her little body so frail. She reads incessantly, and thinks over and over what she reads."

"Well?" said Miss Emily, winding very swiftly on a skein of black silk, and giving a little twitch, every now and then, to a knot to make it subservient.

It was commonly the way when Mr. Sewell began to talk with Miss Emily, that she constantly answered him with the manner of one who expects some immediate, practical proposition to flow from every train of thought.

Now Mr. Sewell was one of the reflecting kind of men, whose thoughts have a thousand meandering paths, that lead nowhere in particular. His sister's brisk little "Well's?" and "Ah's!" and "Indeed's!" were sometimes the least bit in the world annoying.

"What is to be done?" said Miss Emily; "shall we speak to Mrs. Pennel?"

"Mrs. Pennel would know nothing about her."

"How strangely you talk!--who should, if she doesn't?"

"I mean, she wouldn't understand the dangers of her case."

"Dangers! Do you think she has any disease? She seems to be a healthy child enough, I'm sure. She has a lovely color in her cheeks."

Mr. Sewell seemed suddenly to become immersed in a book he was reading.

"There now," said Miss Emily, with a little tone of pique, "that's the

way you always do. You begin to talk with me, and just as I get interested in the conversation, you take up a book. It's too bad."

"Emily," said Mr. Sewell, laying down his book, "I think I shall begin to give Moses Pennel Latin lessons this winter."

"Why, what do you undertake that for?" said Miss Emily. "You have enough to do without that, I'm sure."

"He is an uncommonly bright boy, and he interests me."

"Now, brother, you needn't tell me; there is some mystery about the interest you take in that child, you know there is."

"I am fond of children," said Mr. Sewell, dryly.

"Well, but you don't take as much interest in other boys. I never heard of your teaching any of them Latin before."

"Well, Emily, he is an uncommonly interesting child, and the providential circumstances under which he came into our neighborhood"--

"Providential fiddlesticks!" said Miss Emily, with heightened color,

"I believe you knew that boy's mother."

This sudden thrust brought a vivid color into Mr. Sewell's cheeks. To be

interrupted so unceremoniously, in the midst of so very proper and ministerial a remark, was rather provoking, and he answered, with some asperity,--

"And suppose I had, Emily, and supposing there were any painful subject connected with this past event, you might have sufficient forbearance not to try to make me speak on what I do not wish to talk of."

Mr. Sewell was one of your gentle, dignified men, from whom Heaven deliver an inquisitive female friend! If such people would only get angry, and blow some unbecoming blast, one might make something of them; but speaking, as they always do, from the serene heights of immaculate propriety, one gets in the wrong before one knows it, and has nothing for it but to beg pardon. Miss Emily had, however, a feminine resource: she began to cry--wisely confining herself to the simple eloquence of tears and sobs. Mr. Sewell sat as awkwardly as if he had trodden on a kitten's toe, or brushed down a china cup, feeling as if he were a great, horrid, clumsy boor, and his poor little sister a martyr.

"Come, Emily," he said, in a softer tone, when the sobs subsided a little.

But Emily didn't "come," but went at it with a fresh burst. Mr. Sewell had a vision like that which drowning men are said to have, in which all Miss Emily's sisterly devotions, stocking-darnings, account-keepings, nursings and tendings, and infinite self-sacrifices, rose up before him:

and there she was--crying!

"I'm sorry I spoke harshly, Emily. Come, come; that's a good girl."

"I'm a silly fool," said Miss Emily, lifting her head, and wiping the tears from her merry little eyes, as she went on winding her silk.

"Perhaps he will tell me now," she thought, as she wound.

But he didn't.

"What I was going to say, Emily," said her brother, "was, that I thought it would be a good plan for little Mara to come sometimes with Moses; and then, by observing her more particularly, you might be of use to her; her little, active mind needs good practical guidance like yours."

Mr. Sewell spoke in a gentle, flattering tone, and Miss Emily was flattered; but she soon saw that she had gained nothing by the whole breeze, except a little kind of dread, which made her inwardly resolve never to touch the knocker of his fortress again. But she entered into her brother's scheme with the facile alacrity with which she usually seconded any schemes of his proposing.

"I might teach her painting and embroidery," said Miss Emily, glancing, with a satisfied air, at a framed piece of her own work which hung over the mantelpiece, revealing the state of the fine arts in this country,

as exhibited in the performances of well-instructed young ladies of that period. Miss Emily had performed it under the tuition of a celebrated teacher of female accomplishments. It represented a white marble obelisk, which an inscription, in legible India ink letters, stated to be "Sacred to the memory of Theophilus Sewell," etc. This obelisk stood in the midst of a ground made very green by an embroidery of different shades of chenille and silk, and was overshadowed by an embroidered weeping-willow. Leaning on it, with her face concealed in a plentiful flow of white handkerchief, was a female figure in deep mourning, designed to represent the desolate widow. A young girl, in a very black dress, knelt in front of it, and a very lugubrious-looking young man, standing bolt upright on the other side, seemed to hold in his hand one end of a wreath of roses, which the girl was presenting, as an appropriate decoration for the tomb. The girl and gentleman were, of course, the young Theophilus and Miss Emily, and the appalling grief conveyed by the expression of their faces was a triumph of the pictorial art.

Miss Emily had in her bedroom a similar funeral trophy, sacred to the memory of her deceased mother,--besides which there were, framed and glazed, in the little sitting-room, two embroidered shepherdesses standing with rueful faces, in charge of certain animals of an uncertain breed between sheep and pigs. The poor little soul had mentally resolved to make Mara the heiress of all the skill and knowledge of the arts by which she had been enabled to consummate these marvels.

"She is naturally a lady-like little thing," she said to herself, "and if I know anything of accomplishments, she shall have them."

Just about the time that Miss Emily came to this resolution, had she been clairvoyant, she might have seen Mara sitting very quietly, busy in the solitude of her own room with a little sprig of partridge-berry before her, whose round green leaves and brilliant scarlet berries she had been for hours trying to imitate, as appeared from the scattered sketches and fragments around her. In fact, before Zephaniah started on his spring fishing, he had caught her one day very busy at work of the same kind, with bits of charcoal, and some colors compounded out of wild berries; and so out of his capacious pocket, after his return, he drew a little box of water-colors and a lead-pencil and square of India-rubber, which he had bought for her in Portland on his way home.

Hour after hour the child works, so still, so fervent, so earnest,--going over and over, time after time, her simple, ignorant methods to make it "look like," and stopping, at times, to give the true artist's sigh, as the little green and scarlet fragment lies there hopelessly, unapproachably perfect. Ignorantly to herself, the hands of the little pilgrim are knocking at the very door where Giotto and Cimabue knocked in the innocent child-life of Italian art.

"Why won't it look round?" she said to Moses, who had come in behind her.

"Why, Mara, did you do these?" said Moses, astonished; "why, how well they are done! I should know in a minute what they were meant for."

Mara flushed up at being praised by Moses, but heaved a deep sigh as she looked back.

"It's so pretty, that sprig," she said; "if I only could make it just like"--

"Why, nobody expects that," said Moses, "it's like enough, if people only know what you mean it for. But come, now, get your bonnet, and come with me in the boat. Captain Kittridge has just brought down our new one, and I'm going to take you over to Eagle Island, and we'll take our dinner and stay all day; mother says so."

"Oh, how nice!" said the little girl, running cheerfully for her sun-bonnet.

At the house-door they met Mrs. Pennel, with a little closely covered tin pail.

"Here's your dinner, children; and, Moses, mind and take good care of her."

"Never fear me mother, I've been to the Banks; there wasn't a man there could manage a boat better than I could."

"Yes, grandmother," said Mara, "you ought to see how strong his arms are; I believe he will be like Samson one of these days if he keeps on."

So away they went. It was a glorious August forenoon, and the sombre spruces and shaggy hemlocks that dipped and rippled in the waters were penetrated to their deepest recesses with the clear brilliancy of the sky,--a true northern sky, without a cloud, without even a softening haze, defining every outline, revealing every minute point, cutting with sharp decision the form of every promontory and rock, and distant island.

The blue of the sea and the blue of the sky were so much the same, that when the children had rowed far out, the little boat seemed to float midway, poised in the centre of an azure sphere, with a firmament above and a firmament below. Mara leaned dreamily over the side of the boat, and drew her little hands through the waters as they rippled along to the swift oars' strokes, and she saw as the waves broke, and divided and shivered around the boat, a hundred little faces, with brown eyes and golden hair, gleaming up through the water, and dancing away over rippling waves, and thought that so the sea-nymphs might look who came up from the coral caves when they ring the knell of drowned people. Moses sat opposite to her, with his coat off, and his heavy black curls more wavy and glossy than ever, as the exercise made them damp with perspiration.

Eagle Island lay on the blue sea, a tangled thicket of evergreens,--white pine, spruce, arbor vitæ, and fragrant silver firs. A little strip of white beach bound it, like a silver setting to a gem. And there Moses at length moored his boat, and the children landed. The island was wholly solitary, and there is something to children quite delightful in feeling that they have a little lonely world all to themselves. Childhood is itself such an enchanted island, separated by mysterious depths from the mainland of nature, life, and reality.

Moses had subsided a little from the glorious heights on which he seemed to be in the first flush of his return, and he and Mara, in consequence, were the friends of old time. It is true he thought himself quite a man, but the manhood of a boy is only a tiny masquerade,--a fantastic, dreamy prevision of real manhood. It was curious that Mara, who was by all odds the most precociously developed of the two, never thought of asserting herself a woman; in fact, she seldom thought of herself at all, but dreamed and pondered of almost everything else.

"I declare," said Moses, looking up into a thick-branched, rugged old hemlock, which stood all shaggy, with heavy beards of gray moss drooping from its branches, "there's an eagle's nest up there; I mean to go and see." And up he went into the gloomy embrace of the old tree, crackling the dead branches, wrenching off handfuls of gray moss, rising higher and higher, every once in a while turning and showing to Mara his glowing face and curly hair through a dusky green frame of boughs, and

then mounting again. "I'm coming to it," he kept exclaiming.

Meanwhile his proceedings seemed to create a sensation among the feathered house-keepers, one of whom rose and sailed screaming away into the air. In a moment after there was a swoop of wings, and two eagles returned and began flapping and screaming about the head of the boy.

Mara, who stood at the foot of the tree, could not see clearly what was going on, for the thickness of the boughs; she only heard a great commotion and rattling of the branches, the scream of the birds, and the swooping of their wings, and Moses's valorous exclamations, as he seemed to be laying about him with a branch which he had broken off.

At last he descended victorious, with the eggs in his pocket. Mara stood at the foot of the tree, with her sun-bonnet blown back, her hair streaming, and her little arms upstretched, as if to catch him if he fell.

"Oh, I was so afraid!" she said, as he set foot on the ground.

"Afraid? Pooh! Who's afraid? Why, you might know the old eagles couldn't beat me."

"Ah, well, I know how strong you are; but, you know, I couldn't help it. But the poor birds,--do hear 'em scream. Moses, don't you suppose they feel bad?"

"No, they're only mad, to think they couldn't beat me. I beat them just as the Romans used to beat folks,--I played their nest was a city, and I spoiled it."

"I shouldn't want to spoil cities!" said Mara.

"That's 'cause you are a girl,--I'm a man, and men always like war; I've taken one city this afternoon, and mean to take a great many more."

"But, Moses, do you think war is right?"

"Right? why, yes, to be sure; if it ain't, it's a pity; for it's all that has ever been done in this world. In the Bible, or out, certainly it's right. I wish I had a gun now, I'd stop those old eagles' screeching."

"But, Moses, we shouldn't want any one to come and steal all our things, and then shoot us."

"How long you do think about things!" said Moses, impatient at her pertinacity. "I am older than you, and when I tell you a thing's right, you ought to believe it. Besides, don't you take hens' eggs every day, in the barn? How do you suppose the hens like that?"

This was a home-thrust, and for the moment threw the little casuist off

the track. She carefully folded up the idea, and laid it away on the inner shelves of her mind till she could think more about it. Pliable as she was to all outward appearances, the child had her own still, interior world, where all her little notions and opinions stood up crisp and fresh, like flowers that grow in cool, shady places. If anybody too rudely assailed a thought or suggestion she put forth, she drew it back again into this quiet inner chamber, and went on. Reader, there are some women of this habit; and there is no independence and pertinacity of opinion like that of these seemingly soft, quiet creatures, whom it is so easy to silence, and so difficult to convince. Mara, little and unformed as she yet was, belonged to the race of those spirits to whom is deputed the office of the angel in the Apocalypse, to whom was given the golden rod which measured the New Jerusalem. Infant though she was, she had ever in her hands that invisible measuring-rod, which she was laying to the foundations of all actions and thoughts. There may, perhaps, come a time when the saucy boy, who now steps so superbly, and predominates so proudly in virtue of his physical strength and daring, will learn to tremble at the golden measuring-rod, held in the hand of a woman.

"Howbeit, that is not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural." Moses is the type of the first unreflecting stage of development, in which are only the out-reachings of active faculties, the aspirations that tend toward manly accomplishments. Seldom do we meet sensitiveness of conscience or discriminating reflection as the indigenous growth of a very vigorous physical development. Your true

healthy boy has the breezy, hearty virtues of a Newfoundland dog, the wild fullness of life of the young race-colt. Sentiment, sensibility, delicate perceptions, spiritual aspirations, are plants of later growth.

But there are, both of men and women, beings born into this world in whom from childhood the spiritual and the reflective predominate over the physical. In relation to other human beings, they seem to be organized much as birds are in relation to other animals. They are the artists, the poets, the unconscious seers, to whom the purer truths of spiritual instruction are open. Surveying man merely as an animal, these sensitively organized beings, with their feebler physical powers, are imperfect specimens of life. Looking from the spiritual side, they seem to have a noble strength, a divine force. The types of this latter class are more commonly among women than among men. Multitudes of them pass away in earlier years, and leave behind in many hearts the anxious wonder, why they came so fair only to mock the love they kindled. They who live to maturity are the priests and priestesses of the spiritual life, ordained of God to keep the balance between the rude but absolute necessities of physical life and the higher sphere to which that must at length give place.