

## CHAPTER XXI

### THE TEMPTER

It was well for Mara that so much of her life had been passed in wild forest rambles. She looked frail as the rays of moonbeam which slid down the old white-bearded hemlocks, but her limbs were agile and supple as steel; and while the party went crashing on before, she followed with such lightness that the slight sound of her movements was entirely lost in the heavy crackling plunges of the party. Her little heart was beating fast and hard; but could any one have seen her face, as it now and then came into a spot of moonshine, they might have seen it fixed in a deadly expression of resolve and determination. She was going after him--no matter where; she was resolved to know who and what it was that was leading him away, as her heart told her, to no good. Deeper and deeper into the shadows of the forest they went, and the child easily kept up with them.

Mara had often rambled for whole solitary days in this lonely wood, and knew all its rocks and dells the whole three miles to the long bridge at the other end of the island. But she had never before seen it under the solemn stillness of midnight moonlight, which gives to the most familiar objects such a strange, ghostly charm. After they had gone a mile into the forest, she could see through the black spruces silver gleams of the sea, and hear, amid the whirr and sway of the pine-tops, the dash of the

ever restless tide which pushed up the long cove. It was at the full, as she could discern with a rapid glance of her practiced eye, expertly versed in the knowledge of every change of the solitary nature around.

And now the party began to plunge straight down the rocky ledge of the Devil's Back, on which they had been walking hitherto, into the deep ravine where lay the cove. It was a scrambling, precipitous way, over perpendicular walls of rock, whose crevices furnished anchoring-places for grand old hemlocks or silver-birches, and whose rough sides, leathery with black flaps of lichen, were all tangled and interlaced with thick netted bushes. The men plunged down laughing, shouting, and swearing at their occasional missteps, and silently as moonbeam or thistle-down the light-footed shadow went down after them.

She suddenly paused behind a pile of rock, as, through an opening between two great spruces, the sea gleamed out like a sheet of looking-glass set in a black frame. And here the child saw a small vessel swinging at anchor, with the moonlight full on its slack sails, and she could hear the gentle gurgle and lick of the green-tongued waves as they dashed under it toward the rocky shore.

Mara stopped with a beating heart as she saw the company making for the schooner. The tide is high; will they go on board and sail away with him where she cannot follow? What could she do? In an ecstasy of fear she kneeled down and asked God not to let him go,--to give her at least one more chance to save him.

For the pure and pious child had heard enough of the words of these men, as she walked behind them, to fill her with horror. She had never before heard an oath, but there came back from these men coarse, brutal tones and words of blasphemy that froze her blood with horror. And Moses was going with them! She felt somehow as if they must be a company of fiends bearing him to his ruin.

For some time she kneeled there watching behind the rock, while Moses and his companions went on board the little schooner. She had no feeling of horror at the loneliness of her own situation, for her solitary life had made every woodland thing dear and familiar to her. She was cowering down, on a loose, spongy bed of moss, which was all threaded through and through with the green vines and pale pink blossoms of the mayflower, and she felt its fragrant breath streaming up in the moist moonlight. As she leaned forward to look through a rocky crevice, her arms rested on a bed of that brittle white moss she had often gathered with so much admiration, and a scarlet rock-columbine, such as she loved to paint, brushed her cheek,--and all these mute fair things seemed to strive to keep her company in her chill suspense of watchfulness. Two whippoorwills, from a clump of silvery birches, kept calling to each other in melancholy iteration, while she stayed there still listening, and knowing by an occasional sound of laughing, or the explosion of some oath, that the men were not yet gone. At last they all appeared again, and came to a cleared place among the dry leaves, quite near to the rock where she was concealed, and kindled a fire which they

kept snapping and crackling by a constant supply of green resinous hemlock branches.

The red flame danced and leaped through the green fuel, and leaping upward in tongues of flame, cast ruddy bronze reflections on the old pine-trees with their long branches waving with boards of white moss,--and by the firelight Mara could see two men in sailor's dress with pistols in their belts, and the man Atkinson, whom she had recollected as having seen once or twice at her grandfather's. She remembered how she had always shrunk from him with a strange instinctive dislike, half fear, half disgust, when he had addressed her with that kind of free admiration which men of his class often feel themselves at liberty to express to a pretty girl of her early age. He was a man that might have been handsome, had it not been for a certain strange expression of covert wickedness. It was as if some vile evil spirit, walking, as the Scriptures say, through dry places, had lighted on a comely man's body, in which he had set up housekeeping, making it look like a fair house abused by an unclean owner.

As Mara watched his demeanor with Moses, she could think only of a loathsome black snake that she had once seen in those solitary rocks;--she felt as if his handsome but evil eye were charming him with an evil charm to his destruction.

"Well, Mo, my boy," she heard him say,--slapping Moses on the shoulder,--"this is something like. We'll have a 'tempus,' as the

college fellows say,--put down the clams to roast, and I'll mix the punch," he said, setting over the fire a tea-kettle which they brought from the ship.

After their preparations were finished, all sat down to eat and drink. Mara listened with anxiety and horror to a conversation such as she never heard or conceived before. It is not often that women hear men talk in the undisguised manner which they use among themselves; but the conversation of men of unprincipled lives, and low, brutal habits, unchecked by the presence of respectable female society, might well convey to the horror-struck child a feeling as if she were listening at the mouth of hell. Almost every word was preceded or emphasized by an oath; and what struck with a death chill to her heart was, that Moses swore too, and seemed to show that desperate anxiety to seem au fait in the language of wickedness, which boys often do at that age, when they fancy that to be ignorant of vice is a mark of disgraceful greenness. Moses evidently was bent on showing that he was not green,--ignorant of the pure ear to which every such word came like the blast of death.

He drank a great deal, too, and the mirth among them grew furious and terrific. Mara, horrified and shocked as she was, did not, however, lose that intense and alert presence of mind, natural to persons in whom there is moral strength, however delicate be their physical frame. She felt at once that these men were playing upon Moses; that they had an object in view; that they were flattering and cajoling him, and leading

him to drink, that they might work out some fiendish purpose of their own. The man called Atkinson related story after story of wild adventure, in which sudden fortunes had been made by men who, he said, were not afraid to take "the short cut across lots." He told of piratical adventures in the West Indies,--of the fun of chasing and overhauling ships,--and gave dazzling accounts of the treasures found on board. It was observable that all these stories were told on the line between joke and earnest,--as frolics, as specimens of good fun, and seeing life, etc.

At last came a suggestion,--What if they should start off together some fine day, "just for a spree," and try a cruise in the West Indies, to see what they could pick up? They had arms, and a gang of fine, whole-souled fellows. Moses had been tied to Ma'am Pennel's apron-string long enough. And "hark ye," said one of them, "Moses, they say old Pennel has lots of dollars in that old sea-chest of his'n. It would be a kindness to him to invest them for him in an adventure."

Moses answered with a streak of the boy innocence which often remains under the tramping of evil men, like ribbons of green turf in the middle of roads:--

"You don't know Father Pennel,--why, he'd no more come into it than"--

A perfect roar of laughter cut short this declaration, and Atkinson, slapping Moses on the back, said,--

"By ----, Mo! you are the jolliest green dog! I shall die a-laughing of your innocence some day. Why, my boy, can't you see? Pennel's money can be invested without asking him."

"Why, he keeps it locked," said Moses.

"And supposing you pick the lock?"

"Not I, indeed," said Moses, making a sudden movement to rise.

Mara almost screamed in her ecstasy, but she had sense enough to hold her breath.

"Ho! see him now," said Atkinson, lying back, and holding his sides while he laughed, and rolled over; "you can get off anything on that muff,--any hoax in the world,--he's so soft! Come, come, my dear boy, sit down. I was only seeing how wide I could make you open those great black eyes of your'n,--that's all."

"You'd better take care how you joke with me," said Moses, with that look of gloomy determination which Mara was quite familiar with of old. It was the rallying effort of a boy who had abandoned the first outworks of virtue to make a stand for the citadel. And Atkinson, like a prudent besieger after a repulse, returned to lie on his arms.

He began talking volubly on other subjects, telling stories, and singing songs, and pressing Moses to drink.

Mara was comforted to see that he declined drinking,--that he looked gloomy and thoughtful, in spite of the jokes of his companions; but she trembled to see, by the following conversation, how Atkinson was skillfully and prudently making apparent to Moses the extent to which he had him in his power. He seemed to Mara like an ugly spider skillfully weaving his web around a fly. She felt cold and faint; but within her there was a heroic strength.

She was not going to faint; she would make herself bear up. She was going to do something to get Moses out of this snare,--but what? At last they rose.

"It is past three o'clock," she heard one of them say.

"I say, Mo," said Atkinson, "you must make tracks for home, or you won't be in bed when Mother Pennel calls you."

The men all laughed at this joke, as they turned to go on board the schooner.

When they were gone, Moses threw himself down and hid his face in his hands. He knew not what pitying little face was looking down upon him from the hemlock shadows, what brave little heart was determined to save



him. He was in one of those great crises of agony that boys pass through when they first awake from the fun and frolic of unlawful enterprises to find themselves sold under sin, and feel the terrible logic of evil which constrains them to pass from the less to greater crime. He felt that he was in the power of bad, unprincipled, heartless men, who, if he refused to do their bidding, had the power to expose him. All he had been doing would come out. His kind old foster-parents would know it. Mara would know it. Mr. Sewell and Miss Emily would know the secrets of his life that past month. He felt as if they were all looking at him now. He had disgraced himself,--had sunk below his education,--had been false to all his better knowledge and the past expectations of his friends, living a mean, miserable, dishonorable life,--and now the ground was fast sliding from under him, and the next plunge might be down a precipice from which there would be no return. What he had done up to this hour had been done in the roystering, inconsiderate gamesomeness of boyhood. It had been represented to himself only as "sowing wild oats," "having steep times," "seeing a little of life," and so on; but this night he had had propositions of piracy and robbery made to him, and he had not dared to knock down the man that made them,--had not dared at once to break away from his company. He must meet him again,--must go on with him, or--he groaned in agony at the thought.

It was a strong indication of that repressed, considerate habit of mind which love had wrought in the child, that when Mara heard the boy's sobs rising in the stillness, she did not, as she wished to, rush out and throw her arms around his neck and try to comfort him.

But she felt instinctively that she must not do this. She must not let him know that she had discovered his secret by stealing after him thus in the night shadows. She knew how nervously he had resented even the compassionate glances she had cast upon him in his restless, turbid intervals during the past few weeks, and the fierceness with which he had replied to a few timid inquiries. No,--though her heart was breaking for him, it was a shrewd, wise little heart, and resolved not to spoil all by yielding to its first untaught impulses. She repressed herself as the mother does who refrains from crying out when she sees her unconscious little one on the verge of a precipice.

When Moses rose and moodily began walking homeward, she followed at a distance. She could now keep farther off, for she knew the way through every part of the forest, and she only wanted to keep within sound of his footsteps to make sure that he was going home. When he emerged from the forest into the open moonlight, she sat down in its shadows and watched him as he walked over the open distance between her and the house. He went in; and then she waited a little longer for him to be quite retired. She thought he would throw himself on the bed, and then she could steal in after him. So she sat there quite in the shadows.

The grand full moon was riding high and calm in the purple sky, and Harpswell Bay on the one hand, and the wide, open ocean on the other, lay all in a silver shimmer of light. There was not a sound save the splash of the tide, now beginning to go out, and rolling and rattling

the pebbles up and down as it came and went, and once in a while the distant, mournful intoning of the whippoorwill. There were silent lonely ships, sailing slowly to and fro far out to sea, turning their fair wings now into bright light and now into shadow, as they moved over the glassy stillness. Mara could see all the houses on Harpswell Neck and the white church as clear as in the daylight. It seemed to her some strange, unearthly dream.

As she sat there, she thought over her whole little life, all full of one thought, one purpose, one love, one prayer, for this being so strangely given to her out of that silent sea, which lay so like a still eternity around her,--and she revolved again what meant the vision of her childhood. Did it not mean that she was to watch over him and save him from some dreadful danger? That poor mother was lying now silent and peaceful under the turf in the little graveyard not far off, and she must care for her boy.

A strong motherly feeling swelled out the girl's heart,--she felt that she must, she would, somehow save that treasure which had so mysteriously been committed to her. So, when she thought she had given time enough for Moses to be quietly asleep in his room, she arose and ran with quick footsteps across the moonlit plain to the house.

The front-door was standing wide open, as was always the innocent fashion in these regions, with a half-angle of moonlight and shadow lying within its dusky depths. Mara listened a moment,--no sound: he had

gone to bed then. "Poor boy," she said, "I hope he is asleep; how he must feel, poor fellow! It's all the fault of those dreadful men!" said the little dark shadow to herself, as she stole up the stairs past his room as guiltily as if she were the sinner. Once the stairs creaked, and her heart was in her mouth, but she gained her room and shut and bolted the door. She kneeled down by her little white bed, and thanked God that she had come in safe, and then prayed him to teach her what to do next. She felt chilly and shivering, and crept into bed, and lay with her great soft brown eyes wide open, intently thinking what she should do.

Should she tell her grandfather? Something instinctively said No; that the first word from him which showed Moses he was detected would at once send him off with those wicked men. "He would never, never bear to have this known," she said. Mr. Sewell?--ah, that was worse. She herself shrank from letting him know what Moses had been doing; she could not bear to lower him so much in his eyes. He could not make allowances, she thought. He is good, to be sure, but he is so old and grave, and doesn't know how much Moses has been tempted by these dreadful men; and then perhaps he would tell Miss Emily, and they never would want Moses to come there any more.

"What shall I do?" she said to herself. "I must get somebody to help me or tell me what to do. I can't tell grandmamma; it would only make her ill, and she wouldn't know what to do any more than I. Ah, I know what I will do,--I'll tell Captain Kittridge; he was always so kind to me; and

he has been to sea and seen all sorts of men, and Moses won't care so much perhaps to have him know, because the Captain is such a funny man, and don't take everything so seriously. Yes, that's it. I'll go right down to the cove in the morning. God will bring me through, I know He will;" and the little weary head fell back on the pillow asleep. And as she slept, a smile settled over her face, perhaps a reflection from the face of her good angel, who always beholdeth the face of our Father in Heaven.