

## CHAPTER XXV

### MISS EMILY

Miss Roxy Toothache was seated by the window of the little keeping-room where Miss Emily Sewell sat on every-day occasions. Around her were the insignia of her power and sway. Her big tailor's goose was heating between Miss Emily's bright brass fire-irons; her great pin-cushion was by her side, bristling with pins of all sizes, and with broken needles thriftily made into pins by heads of red sealing-wax, and with needles threaded with all varieties of cotton, silk, and linen; her scissors hung martially by her side; her black bombazette work-apron was on; and the expression of her iron features was that of deep responsibility, for she was making the minister a new Sunday vest!

The good soul looks not a day older than when we left her, ten years ago. Like the gray, weather-beaten rocks of her native shore, her strong features had an unchangeable identity beyond that of anything fair and blooming. There was of course no chance for a gray streak in her stiff, uncompromising mohair frisette, which still pushed up her cap-border bristlingly as of old, and the clear, high winds and bracing atmosphere of that rough coast kept her in an admirable state of preservation.

Miss Emily had now and then a white hair among her soft, pretty brown ones, and looked a little thinner; but the round, bright spot of bloom

on each cheek was there just as of yore,--and just as of yore she was thinking of her brother, and filling her little head with endless calculations to keep him looking fresh and respectable, and his housekeeping comfortable and easy, on very limited means. She was now officiously and anxiously attending on Miss Roxy, who was in the midst of the responsible operation which should conduce greatly to this end.

"Does that twist work well?" she said, nervously; "because I believe I've got some other upstairs in my India box."

Miss Roxy surveyed the article; bit a fragment off, as if she meant to taste it; threaded a needle and made a few cabalistical stitches; and then pronounced, *ex cathedrâ*, that it would do. Miss Emily gave a sigh of relief. After buttons and tapes and linings, and various other items had been also discussed, the conversation began to flow into general channels.

"Did you know Moses Pennel had got home from Umbagog?" said Miss Roxy.

"Yes. Captain Kittridge told brother so this morning. I wonder he doesn't call over to see us."

"Your brother took a sight of interest in that boy," said Miss Roxy. "I was saying to Ruey, this morning, that if Moses Pennel ever did turn out well, he ought to have a large share of the credit."

"Brother always did feel a peculiar interest in him; it was such a strange providence that seemed to cast in his lot among us," said Miss Emily.

"As sure as you live, there he is a-coming to the front door," said Miss Roxy.

"Dear me," said Miss Emily, "and here I have on this old faded chintz. Just so sure as one puts on any old rag, and thinks nobody will come, company is sure to call."

"Law, I'm sure I shouldn't think of calling him company," said Miss Roxy.

A rap at the door put an end to this conversation, and very soon Miss Emily introduced our hero into the little sitting-room, in the midst of a perfect stream of apologies relating to her old dress and the littered condition of the sitting-room, for Miss Emily held to the doctrine of those who consider any sign of human occupation and existence in a room as being disorder--however reputable and respectable be the cause of it.

"Well, really," she said, after she had seated Moses by the fire, "how time does pass, to be sure; it don't seem more than yesterday since you used to come with your Latin books, and now here you are a grown man! I must run and tell Mr. Sewell. He will be so glad to see you."

Mr. Sewell soon appeared from his study in morning-gown and slippers, and seemed heartily responsive to the proposition which Moses soon made to him to have some private conversation with him in his study.

"I declare," said Miss Emily, as soon as the study-door had closed upon her brother and Moses, "what a handsome young man he is! and what a beautiful way he has with him!--so deferential! A great many young men nowadays seem to think nothing of their minister; but he comes to seek advice. Very proper. It isn't every young man that appreciates the privilege of having elderly friends. I declare, what a beautiful couple he and Mara Lincoln would make! Don't Providence seem in a peculiar way to have designed them for each other?"

"I hope not," said Miss Roxy, with her grimmest expression.

"You don't! Why not?"

"I never liked him," said Miss Roxy, who had possessed herself of her great heavy goose, and was now thumping and squeaking it emphatically on the press-board. "She's a thousand times too good for Moses Pennel,"--thump. "I ne'er had no faith in him,"--thump. "He's drefle unstiddy,"--thump. "He's handsome, but he knows it,"--thump. "He won't never love nobody so much as he does himself,"--thump, fortissimo con spirito.

"Well, really now, Miss Roxy, you mustn't always remember the sins of his youth. Boys must sow their wild oats. He was unsteady for a while, but now everybody says he's doing well; and as to his knowing he's handsome, and all that, I don't see as he does. See how polite and deferential he was to us all, this morning; and he spoke so handsomely to you."

"I don't want none of his politeness," said Miss Roxy, inexorably; "and as to Mara Lincoln, she might have better than him any day. Miss Badger was a-tellin' Captain Brown, Sunday noon, that she was very much admired in Boston."

"So she was," said Miss Emily, bridling. "I never reveal secrets, or I might tell something,--but there has been a young man,--but I promised not to speak of it, and I sha'n't."

"If you mean Mr. Adams," said Miss Roxy, "you needn't worry about keepin' that secret, 'cause that ar was all talked over atween meetin's a-Sunday noon; for Mis' Kittridge she used to know his aunt Jerushy, her that married Solomon Peters, and Mis' Captain Badger she says that he has a very good property, and is a professor in the Old South church in Boston."

"Dear me," said Miss Emily, "how things do get about!"

"People will talk, there ain't no use trying to help it," said Miss

Roxy; "but it's strongly borne in on my mind that it ain't Adams, nor 't ain't Moses Pennel that's to marry her. I've had peculiar exercises of mind about that ar child,--well I have;" and Miss Roxy pulled a large spotted bandanna handkerchief out of her pocket, and blew her nose like a trumpet, and then wiped the withered corners of her eyes, which were humid as some old Orr's Island rock wet with sea-spray.

Miss Emily had a secret love of romancing. It was one of the recreations of her quiet, monotonous life to build air-castles, which she furnished regardless of expense, and in which she set up at housekeeping her various friends and acquaintances, and she had always been bent on weaving a romance on the history of Mara and Moses Pennel. The good little body had done her best to second Mr. Sewell's attempts toward the education of the children. It was little busy Miss Emily who persuaded honest Zephaniah and Mary Pennel that talents such as Mara's ought to be cultivated, and that ended in sending her to Miss Plucher's school in Portland. There her artistic faculties were trained into creating funereal monuments out of chenille embroidery, fully equal to Miss Emily's own; also to painting landscapes, in which the ground and all the trees were one unvarying tint of blue-green; and also to creating flowers of a new and particular construction, which, as Sally Kittridge remarked, were pretty, but did not look like anything in heaven or earth. Mara had obediently and patiently done all these things; and solaced herself with copying flowers and birds and landscapes as near as possible like nature, as a recreation from these more dignified toils.

Miss Emily also had been the means of getting Mara invited to Boston, where she saw some really polished society, and gained as much knowledge of the forms of artificial life as a nature so wholly and strongly individual could obtain. So little Miss Emily regarded Mara as her godchild, and was intent on finishing her up into a romance in real life, of which a handsome young man, who had been washed ashore in a shipwreck, should be the hero.

What would she have said could she have heard the conversation that was passing in her brother's study? Little could she dream that the mystery, about which she had timidly nibbled for years, was now about to be unrolled;--but it was even so. But, upon what she does not see, good reader, you and I, following invisibly on tiptoe, will make our observations.

When Moses was first ushered into Mr. Sewell's study, and found himself quite alone, with the door shut, his heart beat so that he fancied the good man must hear it. He knew well what he wanted and meant to say, but he found in himself all that shrinking and nervous repugnance which always attends the proposing of any decisive question.

"I thought it proper," he began, "that I should call and express my sense of obligation to you, sir, for all the kindness you showed me when a boy. I'm afraid in those thoughtless days I did not seem to appreciate it so much as I do now."

As Moses said this, the color rose in his cheeks, and his fine eyes grew moist with a sort of subdued feeling that made his face for the moment more than usually beautiful.

Mr. Sewell looked at him with an expression of peculiar interest, which seemed to have something almost of pain in it, and answered with a degree of feeling more than he commonly showed,--

"It has been a pleasure to me to do anything I could for you, my young friend. I only wish it could have been more. I congratulate you on your present prospects in life. You have perfect health; you have energy and enterprise; you are courageous and self-reliant, and, I trust, your habits are pure and virtuous. It only remains that you add to all this that fear of the Lord which is the beginning of wisdom."

Moses bowed his head respectfully, and then sat silent a moment, as if he were looking through some cloud where he vainly tried to discover objects.

Mr. Sewell continued, gravely,--

"You have the greatest reason to bless the kind Providence which has cast your lot in such a family, in such a community. I have had some means in my youth of comparing other parts of the country with our New England, and it is my opinion that a young man could not ask a better



introduction into life than the wholesome nurture of a Christian family in our favored land."

"Mr. Sewell," said Moses, raising his head, and suddenly looking him straight in the eyes, "do you know anything of my family?"

The question was so point-blank and sudden, that for a moment Mr. Sewell made a sort of motion as if he dodged a pistol-shot, and then his face assumed an expression of grave thoughtfulness, while Moses drew a long breath. It was out,--the question had been asked.

"My son," replied Mr. Sewell, "it has always been my intention, when you had arrived at years of discretion, to make you acquainted with all that I know or suspect in regard to your life. I trust that when I tell you all I do know, you will see that I have acted for the best in the matter. It has been my study and my prayer to do so."

Mr. Sewell then rose, and unlocking the cabinet, of which we have before made mention, in his apartment, drew forth a very yellow and time-worn package of papers, which he untied. From these he selected one which enveloped an old-fashioned miniature case.

"I am going to show you," he said, "what only you and my God know that I possess. I have not looked at it now for ten years, but I have no doubt that it is the likeness of your mother."

Moses took it in his hand, and for a few moments there came a mist over his eyes,--he could not see clearly. He walked to the window as if needing a clearer light.

What he saw was a painting of a beautiful young girl, with large melancholy eyes, and a clustering abundance of black, curly hair. The face was of a beautiful, clear oval, with that warm brunette tint in which the Italian painters delight. The black eyebrows were strongly and clearly defined, and there was in the face an indescribable expression of childish innocence and shyness, mingled with a kind of confiding frankness, that gave the picture the charm which sometimes fixes itself in faces for which we involuntarily make a history. She was represented as simply attired in a white muslin, made low in the neck, and the hands and arms were singularly beautiful. The picture, as Moses looked at it, seemed to stand smiling at him with a childish grace,--a tender, ignorant innocence which affected him deeply.

"My young friend," said Mr. Sewell, "I have written all that I know of the original of this picture, and the reasons I have for thinking her your mother.

"You will find it all in this paper, which, if I had been providentially removed, was to have been given you in your twenty-first year. You will see in the delicate nature of the narrative that it could not properly have been imparted to you till you had arrived at years of understanding. I trust when you know all that you will be satisfied with

the course I have pursued. You will read it at your leisure, and after reading I shall be happy to see you again."

Moses took the package, and after exchanging salutations with Mr. Sewell, hastily left the house and sought his boat.

When one has suddenly come into possession of a letter or paper in which is known to be hidden the solution of some long-pondered secret, of the decision of fate with regard to some long-cherished desire, who has not been conscious of a sort of pain,--an unwillingness at once to know what is therein? We turn the letter again and again, we lay it by and return to it, and defer from moment to moment the opening of it. So Moses did not sit down in the first retired spot to ponder the paper. He put it in the breast pocket of his coat, and then, taking up his oars, rowed across the bay. He did not land at the house, but passed around the south point of the Island, and rowed up the other side to seek a solitary retreat in the rocks, which had always been a favorite with him in his early days.

The shores of the Island, as we have said, are a precipitous wall of rock, whose long, ribbed ledges extend far out into the sea. At high tide these ledges are covered with the smooth blue sea quite up to the precipitous shore. There was a place, however, where the rocky shore shelved over, forming between two ledges a sort of grotto, whose smooth floor of shells and many-colored pebbles was never wet by the rising tide. It had been the delight of Moses when a boy, to come here and

watch the gradual rise of the tide till the grotto was entirely cut off from all approach, and then to look out in a sort of hermit-like security over the open ocean that stretched before him. Many an hour he had sat there and dreamed of all the possible fortunes that might be found for him when he should launch away into that blue smiling futurity.

It was now about half-tide, and Moses left his boat and made his way over the ledge of rocks toward his retreat. They were all shaggy and slippery with yellow seaweeds, with here and there among them wide crystal pools, where purple and lilac and green mosses unfolded their delicate threads, and thousands of curious little shell-fish were tranquilly pursuing their quiet life. The rocks where the pellucid water lay were in some places crusted with barnacles, which were opening and shutting the little white scaly doors of their tiny houses, and drawing in and out those delicate pink plumes which seem to be their nerves of enjoyment. Moses and Mara had rambled and played here many hours of their childhood, amusing themselves with catching crabs and young lobsters and various little fish for these rocky aquariums, and then studying at their leisure their various ways. Now he had come hither a man, to learn the secret of his life.

Moses stretched himself down on the clean pebbly shore of the grotto, and drew forth Mr. Sewell's letter.