

## CHAPTER XXXVI

### THE SHADOW OF DEATH

It was in truth Mara herself who came and stood in the doorway. She appeared overwheeled with her walk, for her cheeks had a vivid brightness unlike their usual tender pink. Her eyes had, too, a brilliancy almost painful to look upon. They seemed like ardent fires, in which the life was slowly burning away.

"Sit down, sit down, little Mara," said Aunt Ruey. "Why, how like a picture you look this mornin',--one needn't ask you how you do,--it's plain enough that you are pretty well."

"Yes, I am, Aunt Ruey," she answered, sinking into a chair; "only it is warm to-day, and the sun is so hot, that's all, I believe; but I am very tired."

"So you are now, poor thing," said Miss Ruey. "Roxy, where's my turkey-feather fan? Oh, here 'tis; there, take it, and fan you, child; and maybe you'll have a glass of our spruce beer?"

"Thank you, Aunt Roxy. I brought you some young wintergreen," said Mara, unrolling from her handkerchief a small knot of those fragrant leaves, which were wilted by the heat.

"Thank you, I'm sure," said Miss Ruey, in delight; "you always fetch something, Mara,--always would, ever since you could toddle. Roxy and I was jist talkin' about your weddin'. I s'pose you're gettin' things well along down to your house. Well, here's the beer. I don't hardly know whether you'll think it worked enough, though. I set it Saturday afternoon, for all Mis' Twitchell said it was wicked for beer to work Sundays," said Miss Ruey, with a feeble cackle at her own joke.

"Thank you, Aunt Ruey; it is excellent, as your things always are. I was very thirsty."

"I s'pose you hear from Moses pretty often now," said Aunt Ruey. "How kind o' providential it happened about his getting that property; he'll be a rich man now; and Mara, you'll come to grandeur, won't you? Well, I don't know anybody deserves it more,--I r'ally don't. Mis' Badger was a-sayin' so a-Sunday, and Cap'n Kittridge and all on 'em. I s'pose though we've got to lose you,--you'll be goin' off to Boston, or New York, or somewhere."

"We can't tell what may happen, Aunt Ruey," said Mara, and there was a slight tremor in her voice as she spoke.

Miss Roxy, who beyond the first salutations had taken no part in this conversation, had from time to time regarded Mara over the tops of her spectacles with looks of grave apprehension; and Mara, looking up, now

encountered one of these glances.

"Have you taken the dock and dandelion tea I told you about?" said the wise woman, rather abruptly.

"Yes, Aunt Roxy, I have taken them faithfully for two weeks past."

"And do they seem to set you up any?" said Miss Roxy.

"No, I don't think they do. Grandma thinks I'm better, and grandpa, and I let them think so; but Miss Roxy, can't you think of something else?"

Miss Roxy laid aside the straw bonnet which she was ripping, and motioned Mara into the outer room,--the sink-room, as the sisters called it. It was the scullery of their little establishment,--the place where all dish-washing and clothes-washing was generally performed,--but the boards of the floor were white as snow, and the place had the odor of neatness. The open door looked out pleasantly into the deep forest, where the waters of the cove, now at high tide, could be seen glittering through the trees. Soft moving spots of sunlight fell, checkering the feathery ferns and small piney tribes of evergreen which ran in ruffling wreaths of green through the dry, brown matting of fallen pine needles. Birds were singing and calling to each other merrily from the green shadows of the forest,--everything had a sylvan fullness and freshness of life. There are moods of mind when the sight of the bloom and

freshness of nature affects us painfully, like the want of sympathy in a dear friend. Mara had been all her days a child of the woods; her delicate life had grown up in them like one of their own cool shaded flowers; and there was not a moss, not a fern, not an upspringing thing that waved a leaf or threw forth a flower-bell, that was not a well-known friend to her; she had watched for years its haunts, known the time of its coming and its going, studied its shy and veiled habits, and interwoven with its life each year a portion of her own; and now she looked out into the old mossy woods, with their wavering spots of sun and shadow, with a yearning pain, as if she wanted help or sympathy to come from their silent recesses.

She sat down on the clean, scoured door-sill, and took off her straw hat. Her golden-brown hair was moist with the damps of fatigue, which made it curl and wave in darker little rings about her forehead; her eyes,--those longing, wistful eyes,--had a deeper pathos of sadness than ever they had worn before; and her delicate lips trembled with some strong suppressed emotion.

"Aunt Roxy," she said suddenly, "I must speak to somebody. I can't go on and keep up without telling some one, and it had better be you, because you have skill and experience, and can help me if anybody can. I've been going on for six months now, taking this and taking that, and trying to get better, but it's of no use. Aunt Roxy, I feel my life going,--going just as steadily and as quietly every day as the sand goes out of your hour-glass. I want to live,--oh, I never wanted to live so

much, and I can't,--oh, I know I can't. Can I now,--do you think I can?"

Mara looked imploringly at Miss Roxy. The hard-visaged woman sat down on the wash-bench, and, covering her worn, stony visage with her checked apron, sobbed aloud.

Mara was confounded. This implacably withered, sensible, dry woman, beneficently impassive in sickness and sorrow, weeping!--it was awful, as if one of the Fates had laid down her fatal distaff to weep.

Mara sprung up impulsively and threw her arms round her neck.

"Now don't, Aunt Roxy, don't. I didn't think you would feel bad, or I wouldn't have told you; but oh, you don't know how hard it is to keep such a secret all to one's self. I have to make believe all the time that I am feeling well and getting better. I really say what isn't true every day, because, poor grandmamma, how could I bear to see her distress? and grandpapa,--oh, I wish people didn't love me so! Why cannot they let me go? And oh, Aunt Roxy, I had a letter only yesterday, and he is so sure we shall be married this fall,--and I know it cannot be." Mara's voice gave way in sobs, and the two wept together,--the old grim, gray woman holding the soft golden head against her breast with a convulsive grasp. "Oh, Aunt Roxy, do you love me, too?" said Mara. "I didn't know you did."

"Love ye, child?" said Miss Roxy; "yes, I love ye like my life. I ain't

one that makes talk about things, but I do; you come into my arms fust of anybody's in this world,--and except poor little Hitty, I never loved nobody as I have you."

"Ah! that was your sister, whose grave I have seen," said Mara, speaking in a soothing, caressing tone, and putting her little thin hand against the grim, wasted cheek, which was now moist with tears.

"Jes' so, child, she died when she was a year younger than you be; she was not lost, for God took her. Poor Hitty! her life jest dried up like a brook in August,--jest so. Well, she was hopefully pious, and it was better for her."

"Did she go like me, Aunt Roxy?" said Mara.

"Well, yes, dear; she did begin jest so, and I gave her everything I could think of; and we had doctors for her far and near; but 'twasn't to be,--that's all we could say; she was called, and her time was come."

"Well, now, Aunt Roxy," said Mara, "at any rate, it's a relief to speak out to some one. It's more than two months that I have felt every day more and more that there was no hope,--life has hung on me like a weight. I have had to make myself keep up, and make myself do everything, and no one knows how it has tried me. I am so tired all the time, I could cry; and yet when I go to bed nights I can't sleep, I lie

in such a hot, restless way; and then before morning I am drenched with cold sweat, and feel so weak and wretched. I force myself to eat, and I force myself to talk and laugh, and it's all pretense; and it wears me out,--it would be better if I stopped trying,--it would be better to give up and act as weak as I feel; but how can I let them know?"

"My dear child," said Aunt Roxy, "the truth is the kindest thing we can give folks in the end. When folks know jest where they are, why they can walk; you'll all be supported; you must trust in the Lord. I have been more'n forty years with sick rooms and dyin' beds, and I never knew it fail that those that trusted in the Lord was brought through."

"Oh, Aunt Roxy, it is so hard for me to give up,--to give up hoping to live. There were a good many years when I thought I should love to depart,--not that I was really unhappy, but I longed to go to heaven, though I knew it was selfish, when I knew how lonesome I should leave my friends. But now, oh, life has looked so bright; I have clung to it so; I do now. I lie awake nights and pray, and try to give it up and be resigned, and I can't. Is it wicked?"

"Well, it's natur' to want to live," said Miss Roxy. "Life is sweet, and in a gen'l way we was made to live. Don't worry; the Lord'll bring you right when His time comes. Folks isn't always supported jest when they want to be, nor as they want to be; but yet they're supported fust and last. Ef I was to tell you how as I has hope in your case, I shouldn't be a-tellin' you the truth. I hasn't much of any; only all things is

possible with God. If you could kind o' give it all up and rest easy in His hands, and keep a-doin' what you can,--why, while there's life there's hope, you know; and if you are to be made well, you will be all the sooner."

"Aunt Roxy, it's all right; I know it's all right. God knows best; He will do what is best; I know that; but my heart bleeds, and is sore. And when I get his letters,--I got one yesterday,--it brings it all back again. Everything is going on so well; he says he has done more than all he ever hoped; his letters are full of jokes, full of spirit. Ah, he little knows,--and how can I tell him?"

"Child, you needn't yet. You can jest kind o' prepare his mind a little."

"Aunt Roxy, have you spoken of my case to any one,--have you told what you know of me?"

"No, child, I hain't said nothin' more than that you was a little weakly now and then."

"I have such a color every afternoon," said Mara. "Grandpapa talks about my roses, and Captain Kittridge jokes me about growing so handsome; nobody seems to realize how I feel. I have kept up with all the strength I had. I have tried to shake it off, and to feel that nothing was the matter,--really there is nothing much, only this weakness. This morning



I thought it would do me good to walk down here. I remember times when I could ramble whole days in the woods, but I was so tired before I got half way here that I had to stop a long while and rest. Aunt Roxy, if you would only tell grandpapa and grandmamma just how things are, and what the danger is, and let them stop talking to me about wedding things,--for really and truly I am too unwell to keep up any longer."

"Well, child, I will," said Miss Roxy. "Your grandfather will be supported, and hold you up, for he's one of the sort as has the secret of the Lord,--I remember him of old. Why, the day your father and mother was buried he stood up and sung old China, and his face was wonderful to see. He seemed to be standin' with the world under his feet and heaven opening. He's a master Christian, your grandfather is; and now you jest go and lie down in the little bedroom, and rest you a bit, and by and by, in the cool of the afternoon, I'll walk along home with you."

Miss Roxy opened the door of a little room, whose white fringy window-curtains were blown inward by breezes from the blue sea, and laid the child down to rest on a clean sweet-smelling bed with as deft and tender care as if she were not a bony, hard-visaged, angular female, in a black mohair frisette.

She stopped a moment wistfully before a little profile head, of a kind which resembles a black shadow on a white ground. "That was Hitty!" she said.

Mara had often seen in the graveyard a mound inscribed to this young person, and heard traditionally of a young and pretty sister of Miss Roxy who had died very many years before. But the grave was overgrown with blackberry-vines, and gray moss had grown into the crevices of the slab which served for a tombstone, and never before that day had she heard Miss Roxy speak of her. Miss Roxy took down the little black object and handed it to Mara. "You can't tell much by that, but she was a most beautiful creatur'. Well, it's all best as it is." Mara saw nothing but a little black shadow cast on white paper, yet she was affected by the perception how bright, how beautiful, was the image in the memory of that seemingly stern, commonplace woman, and how of all that in her mind's eye she saw and remembered, she could find no outward witness but this black block. "So some day my friends will speak of me as a distant shadow," she said, as with a sigh she turned her head on the pillow.

Miss Roxy shut the door gently as she went out, and betrayed the unwonted rush of softer feelings which had come over her only by being more dictatorial and commanding than usual in her treatment of her sister, who was sitting in fidgety curiosity to know what could have been the subject of the private conference.

"I s'pose Mara wanted to get some advice about makin' up her weddin' things," said Miss Ruey, with a sort of humble quiver, as Miss Roxy began ripping and tearing fiercely at her old straw bonnet, as if she really purposed its utter and immediate demolition.

"No she didn't, neither," said Miss Roxy, fiercely. "I declare, Ruey, you are silly; your head is always full of weddin's, weddin's, weddin's--nothin' else--from mornin' till night, and night till mornin'. I tell you there's other things have got to be thought of in this world besides weddin' clothes, and it would be well, if people would think more o' gettin' their weddin' garments ready for the kingdom of heaven. That's what Mara's got to think of; for, mark my words, Ruey, there is no marryin' and givin' in marriage for her in this world."

"Why, bless me, Roxy, now you don't say so!" said Miss Ruey; "why I knew she was kind o' weakly and ailin', but"--

"Kind o' weakly and ailin'!" said Miss Roxy, taking up Miss Ruey's words in a tone of high disgust, "I should rather think she was; and more'n that, too: she's marked for death, and that before long, too. It may be that Moses Pennel'll never see her again--he never half knew what she was worth--maybe he'll know when he's lost her, that's one comfort!"

"But," said Miss Ruey, "everybody has been a-sayin' what a beautiful color she was a-gettin' in her cheeks."

"Color in her cheeks!" snorted Miss Roxy; "so does a rock-maple get color in September and turn all scarlet, and what for? why, the frost has been at it, and its time is out. That's what your bright colors stand for. Hain't you noticed that little gravestone cough, jest the

faintest in the world, and it don't come from a cold, and it hangs on. I tell you you can't cheat me, she's goin' jest as Mehitabel went, jest as Sally Ann Smith went, jest as Louisa Pearson went. I could count now on my fingers twenty girls that have gone that way. Nobody saw 'em goin' till they was gone."

"Well, now, I don't think the old folks have the least idea on't," said Miss Ruey. "Only last Saturday Mis' Pennel was a-talkin' to me about the sheets and tablecloths she's got out a-bleachin'; and she said that the weddin' dress was to be made over to Mis' Mosely's in Portland, 'cause Moses he's so particular about havin' things genteel."

"Well, Master Moses'll jest have to give up his particular notions," said Miss Roxy, "and come down in the dust, like all the rest on us, when the Lord sends an east wind and withers our gourds. Moses Pennel's one of the sort that expects to drive all before him with the strong arm, and sech has to learn that things ain't to go as they please in the Lord's world. Sech always has to come to spots that they can't get over nor under nor round, to have their own way, but jest has to give right up square."

"Well, Roxy," said Miss Ruey, "how does the poor little thing take it? Has she got reconciled?"

"Reconciled! Ruey, how you do ask questions!" said Miss Roxy, fiercely pulling a bandanna silk handkerchief out of her pocket, with which she

wiped her eyes in a defiant manner. "Reconciled! It's easy enough to talk, Ruey, but how would you like it, when everything was goin' smooth and playin' into your hands, and all the world smooth and shiny, to be took short up? I guess you wouldn't be reconciled. That's what I guess."

"Dear me, Roxy, who said I should?" said Miss Ruey. "I wa'n't blamin' the poor child, not a grain."

"Well, who said you was, Ruey?" answered Miss Roxy, in the same high key.

"You needn't take my head off," said Aunt Ruey, roused as much as her adipose, comfortable nature could be. "You've been a-talkin' at me ever since you came in from the sink-room, as if I was to blame; and snappin' at me as if I hadn't a right to ask civil questions; and I won't stan' it," said Miss Ruey. "And while I'm about it, I'll say that you always have snubbed me and contradicted and ordered me round. I won't bear it no longer."

"Come, Ruey, don't make a fool of yourself at your time of life," said Miss Roxy. "Things is bad enough in this world without two lone sisters and church-members turnin' agin each other. You must take me as I am, Ruey; my bark's worse than my bite, as you know."

Miss Ruey sank back pacified into her usual state of pillowy dependence; it was so much easier to be good-natured than to contend. As for Miss

Roxy, if you have ever carefully examined a chestnut-burr, you will remember that, hard as it is to handle, no plush of downiest texture can exceed the satin smoothness of the fibres which line its heart. There are a class of people in New England who betray the uprising of the softer feelings of our nature only by an increase of outward asperity--a sort of bashfulness and shyness leaves them no power of expression for these unwonted guests of the heart--they hurry them into inner chambers and slam the doors upon them, as if they were vexed at their appearance.

Now if poor Miss Roxy had been like you, my dear young lady--if her soul had been encased in a round, rosy, and comely body, and looked out of tender blue eyes shaded by golden hair, probably the grief and love she felt would have shown themselves only in bursts of feeling most graceful to see, and engaging the sympathy of all; but this same soul, imprisoned in a dry, angular body, stiff and old, and looking out under beetling eyebrows, over withered high cheek-bones, could only utter itself by a passionate tempest--unlovely utterance of a lovely impulse--dear only to Him who sees with a Father's heart the real beauty of spirits. It is our firm faith that bright solemn angels in celestial watchings were frequent guests in the homely room of the two sisters, and that passing by all accidents of age and poverty, withered skins, bony features, and grotesque movements and shabby clothing, they saw more real beauty there than in many a scented boudoir where seeming angels smile in lace and satin.

"Ruey," said Miss Roxy, in a more composed voice, while her hard, bony

hands still trembled with excitement, "this 'ere's been on my mind a good while. I hain't said nothin' to nobody, but I've seen it a-comin'. I always thought that child wa'n't for a long life. Lives is run in different lengths, and nobody can say what's the matter with some folks, only that their thread's run out; there's more on one spool and less on another. I thought, when we laid Hitty in the grave, that I shouldn't never set my heart on nothin' else--but we can't jest say we will or we won't. Ef we are to be sorely afflicted at any time, the Lord lets us set our hearts before we know it. This 'ere's a great affliction to me, Ruey, but I must jest shoulder my cross and go through with it. I'm goin' down to-night to tell the old folks, and to make arrangements so that the poor little lamb may have the care she needs. She's been a-keepin' up so long, 'cause she dreaded to let 'em know, but this 'ere has got to be looked right in the face, and I hope there'll be grace given to do it."