

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE VICTORY

Meanwhile Mara had been lying in the passive calm of fatigue and exhaustion, her eyes fixed on the window, where, as the white curtain drew inward, she could catch glimpses of the bay. Gradually her eyelids fell, and she dropped into that kind of half-waking doze, when the outer senses are at rest, and the mind is all the more calm and clear for their repose. In such hours a spiritual clairvoyance often seems to lift for a while the whole stifling cloud that lies like a confusing mist over the problem of life, and the soul has sudden glimpses of things unutterable which lie beyond. Then the narrow straits, that look so full of rocks and quicksands, widen into a broad, clear passage, and one after another, rosy with a celestial dawn, and ringing silver bells of gladness, the isles of the blessed lift themselves up on the horizon, and the soul is flooded with an atmosphere of light and joy. As the burden of Christian fell off at the cross and was lost in the sepulchre, so in these hours of celestial vision the whole weight of life's anguish is lifted, and passes away like a dream; and the soul, seeing the boundless ocean of Divine love, wherein all human hopes and joys and sorrows lie so tenderly upholden, comes and casts the one little drop of its personal will and personal existence with gladness into that Fatherly depth. Henceforth, with it, God and Saviour is no more word of mine and thine, for in that hour the child of earth feels himself heir

of all things: "All things are yours, and ye are Christ's, and Christ is God's."

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"The child is asleep," said Miss Roxy, as she stole on tiptoe into the room when their noon meal was prepared. A plate and knife had been laid for her, and they had placed for her a tumbler of quaint old engraved glass, reputed to have been brought over from foreign parts, and which had been given to Miss Roxy as her share in the effects of the mysterious Mr. Swadkins. Tea also was served in some egg-like India china cups, which saw the light only on the most high and festive occasions.

"Hadn't you better wake her?" said Miss Ruey; "a cup of hot tea would do her so much good."

Miss Ruey could conceive of few sorrows or ailments which would not be materially better for a cup of hot tea. If not the very elixir of life, it was indeed the next thing to it.

"Well," said Miss Roxy, after laying her hand for a moment with great gentleness on that of the sleeping girl, "she don't wake easy, and she's tired; and she seems to be enjoying it so. The Bible says, 'He giveth his beloved sleep,' and I won't interfere. I've seen more good come of sleep than most things in my nursin' experience," said Miss Roxy, and

she shut the door gently, and the two sisters sat down to their noontide meal.

"How long the child does sleep!" said Miss Ruey as the old clock struck four.

"It was too much for her, this walk down here," said Aunt Roxy. "She's been doin' too much for a long time. I'm a-goin' to put an end to that. Well, nobody needn't say Mara hain't got resolution. I never see a little thing have more. She always did have, when she was the leastest little thing. She was always quiet and white and still, but she did whatever she sot out to."

At this moment, to their surprise, the door opened, and Mara came in, and both sisters were struck with a change that had passed over her. It was more than the result of mere physical repose. Not only had every sign of weariness and bodily languor vanished, but there was about her an air of solemn serenity and high repose that made her seem, as Miss Ruey afterwards said, "like an angel jest walked out of the big Bible."

"Why, dear child, how you have slept, and how bright and rested you look," said Miss Ruey.

"I am rested," said Mara; "oh how much! And happy," she added, laying her little hand on Miss Roxy's shoulder. "I thank you, dear friend, for all your kindness to me. I am sorry I made you feel so sadly; but now

you mustn't feel so any more, for all is well--yes, all is well. I see now that it is so. I have passed beyond sorrow--yes, forever."

Soft-hearted Miss Ruey here broke into audible sobbing, hiding her face in her hands, and looking like a tumbled heap of old faded calico in a state of convulsion.

"Dear Aunt Ruey, you mustn't," said Mara, with a voice of gentle authority. "We mustn't any of us feel so any more. There is no harm done, no real evil is coming, only a good which we do not understand. I am perfectly satisfied--perfectly at rest now. I was foolish and weak to feel as I did this morning, but I shall not feel so any more. I shall comfort you all. Is it anything so dreadful for me to go to heaven? How little while it will be before you all come to me! Oh, how little--little while!"

"I told you, Mara, that you'd be supported in the Lord's time," said Miss Roxy, who watched her with an air of grave and solemn attention. "First and last, folks allers is supported; but sometimes there is a long wrestlin'. The Lord's give you the victory early."

"Victory!" said the girl, speaking as in a deep muse, and with a mysterious brightness in her eyes; "yes, that is the word--it is a victory--no other word expresses it. Come, Aunt Roxy, we will go home. I am not afraid now to tell grandpapa and grandmamma. God will care for them; He will wipe away all tears."

"Well, though, you mus'n't think of goin' till you've had a cup of tea," said Aunt Ruey, wiping her eyes. "I've kep' the tea-pot hot by the fire, and you must eat a little somethin', for it's long past dinner-time."

"Is it?" said Mara. "I had no idea I had slept so long--how thoughtful and kind you are!"

"I do wish I could only do more for you," said Miss Ruey. "I don't seem to get reconciled no ways; it seems dreffle hard--dreffle; but I'm glad you can feel so;" and the good old soul proceeded to press upon the child not only the tea, which she drank with feverish relish, but every hoarded dainty which their limited housekeeping commanded.

It was toward sunset before Miss Roxy and Mara started on their walk homeward. Their way lay over the high stony ridge which forms the central part of the island. On one side, through the pines, they looked out into the boundless blue of the ocean, and on the other caught glimpses of Harpswell Bay as it lay glorified in the evening light. The fresh cool breeze blowing landward brought with it an invigorating influence, which Mara felt through all her feverish frame. She walked with an energy to which she had long been a stranger. She said little, but there was a sweetness, a repose, in her manner contrasting singularly with the passionate melancholy which she had that morning expressed.

Miss Roxy did not interrupt her meditations. The nature of her profession had rendered her familiar with all the changing mental and physical phenomena that attend the development of disease and the gradual loosening of the silver cords of a present life. Certain well-understood phrases everywhere current among the mass of the people in New England, strikingly tell of the deep foundations of religious earnestness on which its daily life is built. "A triumphant death" was a matter often casually spoken of among the records of the neighborhood; and Miss Roxy felt that there was a vague and solemn charm about its approach. Yet the soul of the gray, dry woman was hot within her, for the conversation of the morning had probed depths in her own nature of whose existence she had never before been so conscious. The roughest and most matter-of-fact minds have a craving for the ideal somewhere; and often this craving, forbidden by uncomeliness and ungenial surroundings from having any personal history of its own, attaches itself to the fortune of some other one in a kind of strange disinterestedness. Some one young and beautiful is to live the life denied to them--to be the poem and the romance; it is the young mistress of the poor black slave--the pretty sister of the homely old spinster--or the clever son of the consciously ill-educated father. Something of this unconscious personal investment had there been on the part of Miss Roxy in the nursling whose singular loveliness she had watched for so many years, and on whose fair virgin orb she had marked the growing shadow of a fatal eclipse, and as she saw her glowing and serene, with that peculiar brightness that she felt came from no earthly presence or influence, she could scarcely keep the tears from her honest gray eyes.

When they arrived at the door of the house, Zephaniah Pennel was sitting in it, looking toward the sunset.

"Why, reely," he said, "Miss Roxy, we thought you must a-run away with Mara; she's been gone a'most all day."

"I expect she's had enough to talk with Aunt Roxy about," said Mrs. Pennel. "Girls goin' to get married have a deal to talk about, what with patterns and contrivin' and makin' up. But come in, Miss Roxy; we're glad to see you."

Mara turned to Miss Roxy, and gave her a look of peculiar meaning. "Aunt Roxy," she said, "you must tell them what we have been talking about to-day;" and then she went up to her room and shut the door.

Miss Roxy accomplished her task with a matter-of-fact distinctness to which her business-like habits of dealing with sickness and death had accustomed her, yet with a sympathetic tremor in her voice which softened the hard directness of her words. "You can take her over to Portland, if you say so, and get Dr. Wilson's opinion," she said, in conclusion. "It's best to have all done that can be, though in my mind the case is decided."

The silence that fell between the three was broken at last by the sound of a light footstep descending the stairs, and Mara entered among them.

She came forward and threw her arms round Mrs. Pennel's neck, and kissed her; and then turning, she nestled down in the arms of her old grandfather, as she had often done in the old days of childhood, and laid her hand upon his shoulder. There was no sound for a few moments but one of suppressed weeping; but she did not weep--she lay with bright calm eyes, as if looking upon some celestial vision.

"It is not so very sad," she said at last, in a gentle voice, "that I should go there; you are going, too, and grandmamma; we are all going; and we shall be forever with the Lord. Think of it! think of it!"

Many were the words spoken in that strange communing; and before Miss Roxy went away, a calmness of solemn rest had settled down on all. The old family Bible was brought forth, and Zephaniah Pennel read from it those strange words of strong consolation, which take the sting from death and the victory from the grave:--

"And I heard a great voice out of heaven. Behold the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people; and God himself shall be with them and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying, for the former things are passed away."