

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE LAND OF BEULAH

It is now about a month after the conversation which we have recorded, and during that time the process which was to loose from this present life had been going on in Mara with a soft, insensible, but steady power. When she ceased to make efforts beyond her strength, and allowed herself that languor and repose which nature claimed, all around her soon became aware how her strength was failing; and yet a cheerful repose seemed to hallow the atmosphere around her. The sight of her every day in family worship, sitting by in such tender tranquillity, with such a smile on her face, seemed like a present inspiration. And though the aged pair knew that she was no more for this world, yet she was comforting and inspiring to their view as the angel who of old rolled back the stone from the sepulchre and sat upon it. They saw in her eyes, not death, but the solemn victory which Christ gives over death.

Bunyan has no more lovely poem than the image he gives of that land of pleasant waiting which borders the river of death, where the chosen of the Lord repose, while shining messengers, constantly passing and repassing, bear tidings from the celestial shore, opening a way between earth and heaven. It was so, that through the very thought of Mara an influence of tenderness and tranquillity passed through the whole

neighborhood, keeping hearts fresh with sympathy, and causing thought and conversation to rest on those bright mysteries of eternal joy which were reflected on her face.

Sally Kittridge was almost a constant inmate of the brown house, ever ready in watching and waiting; and one only needed to mark the expression of her face to feel that a holy charm was silently working upon her higher and spiritual nature. Those great, dark, sparkling eyes that once seemed to express only the brightness of animal vivacity, and glittered like a brook in unsympathetic gayety, had in them now mysterious depths, and tender, fleeting shadows, and the very tone of her voice had a subdued tremor. The capricious elf, the tricky sprite, was melting away in the immortal soul, and the deep pathetic power of a noble heart was being born. Some influence sprung of sorrow is necessary always to perfect beauty in womanly nature. We feel its absence in many whose sparkling wit and high spirits give grace and vivacity to life, but in whom we vainly seek for some spot of quiet tenderness and sympathetic repose. Sally was, ignorantly to herself, changing in the expression of her face and the tone of her character, as she ministered in the daily wants which sickness brings in a simple household.

For the rest of the neighborhood, the shelves and larder of Mrs. Pennel were constantly crowded with the tributes which one or another sent in for the invalid. There was jelly of Iceland moss sent across by Miss Emily, and brought by Mr. Sewell, whose calls were almost daily. There were custards and preserves, and every form of cake and other

confections in which the housekeeping talent of the neighbors delighted, and which were sent in under the old superstition that sick people must be kept eating at all hazards.

At church, Sunday after Sunday, the simple note requested the prayers of the church and congregation for Mara Lincoln, who was, as the note phrased it, drawing near her end, that she and all concerned might be prepared for the great and last change. One familiar with New England customs must have remembered with what a plaintive power the reading of such a note, from Sunday to Sunday, has drawn the thoughts and sympathies of a congregation to some chamber of sickness; and in a village church, where every individual is known from childhood to every other, the power of this simple custom is still greater.

Then the prayers of the minister would dwell on the case, and thanks would be rendered to God for the great light and peace with which he had deigned to visit his young handmaid; and then would follow a prayer that when these sad tidings should reach a distant friend who had gone down to do business on the great waters, they might be sanctified to his spiritual and everlasting good. Then on Sunday noons, as the people ate their dinners together in a room adjoining the church, all that she said and did was talked over and over,--how quickly she had gained the victory of submission, the peace of a will united with God's, mixed with harmless gossip of the sick chamber,--as to what she ate and how she slept, and who had sent her gruel with raisins in it, and who jelly with wine, and how she had praised this and eaten that twice with a relish,

but how the other had seemed to disagree with her. Thereafter would come scraps of nursing information, recipes against coughing, specifics against short breath, speculations about watchers, how soon she would need them, and long legends of other death-beds where the fear of death had been slain by the power of an endless life.

Yet through all the gossip, and through much that might have been called at other times commonplace cant of religion, there was spread a tender earnestness, and the whole air seemed to be enchanted with the fragrance of that fading rose. Each one spoke more gently, more lovingly to each, for the thought of her.

It was now a bright September morning, and the early frosts had changed the maples in the pine-woods to scarlet, and touched the white birches with gold, when one morning Miss Roxy presented herself at an early hour at Captain Kittridge's.

They were at breakfast, and Sally was dispensing the tea at the head of the table, Mrs. Kittridge having been prevailed on to abdicate in her favor.

"It is such a fine morning," she said, looking out at the window, which showed a waveless expanse of ocean. "I do hope Mara has had a good night."

"I'm a-goin' to make her some jelly this very forenoon," said Mrs.

Kittridge. "Aunt Roxy was a-tellin' me yesterday that she was a-goin' down to stay at the house regular, for she needed so much done now."

"It's 'most an amazin' thing we don't hear from Moses Pennel," said Captain Kittridge. "If he don't make haste, he may never see her."

"There's Aunt Roxy at this minute," said Sally.

In truth, the door opened at this moment, and Aunt Roxy entered with a little blue bandbox and a bundle tied up in a checked handkerchief.

"Oh, Aunt Roxy," said Mrs. Kittridge, "you are on your way, are you? Do sit down, right here, and get a cup of strong tea."

"Thank you," said Aunt Roxy, "but Ruey gave me a humming cup before I came away."

"Aunt Roxy, have they heard anything from Moses?" said the Captain.

"No, father, I know they haven't," said Sally. "Mara has written to him, and so has Mr. Sewell, but it is very uncertain whether he ever got the letters."

"It's most time to be a-lookin' for him home," said the Captain. "I shouldn't be surprised to see him any day."

At this moment Sally, who sat where she could see from the window, gave a sudden start and a half scream, and rising from the table, darted first to the window and then to the door, whence she rushed out eagerly.

"Well, what now?" said the Captain.

"I am sure I don't know what's come over her," said Mrs. Kittridge, rising to look out.

"Why, Aunt Roxy, do look; I believe to my soul that ar's Moses Pennel!"

And so it was. He met Sally, as she ran out, with a gloomy brow and scarcely a look even of recognition; but he seized her hand and wrung it in the stress of his emotion so that she almost screamed with the pain.

"Tell me, Sally," he said, "tell me the truth. I dared not go home without I knew. Those gossiping, lying reports are always exaggerated. They are dreadful exaggerations,--they frighten a sick person into the grave; but you have good sense and a hopeful, cheerful temper,--you must see and know how things are. Mara is not so very--very"--He held Sally's hand and looked at her with a burning eagerness. "Say, what do you think of her?"

"We all think that we cannot long keep her with us," said Sally. "And oh, Moses, I am so glad you have come."

"It's false,--it must be false," he said, violently; "nothing is more deceptive than these ideas that doctors and nurses pile on when a sensitive person is going down a little. I know Mara; everything depends on the mind with her. I shall wake her up out of this dream. She is not to die. She shall not die,--I come to save her."

"Oh, if you could!" said Sally, mournfully.

"It cannot be; it is not to be," he said again, as if to convince himself. "No such thing is to be thought of. Tell me, Sally, have you tried to keep up the cheerful side of things to her,--have you?"

"Oh, you cannot tell, Moses, how it is, unless you see her. She is cheerful, happy; the only really joyous one among us."

"Cheerful! joyous! happy! She does not believe, then, these frightful things? I thought she would keep up; she is a brave little thing."

"No, Moses, she does believe. She has given up all hope of life,--all wish to live; and oh, she is so lovely,--so sweet,--so dear."

Sally covered her face with her hands and sobbed. Moses stood still, looking at her a moment in a confused way, and then he answered,--

"Come, get your bonnet, Sally, and go with me. You must go in and tell them; tell her that I am come, you know."

"Yes, I will," said Sally, as she ran quickly back to the house.

Moses stood listlessly looking after her. A moment after she came out of the door again, and Miss Roxy behind. Sally hurried up to Moses.

"Where's that black old raven going?" said Moses, in a low voice, looking back on Miss Roxy, who stood on the steps.

"What, Aunt Roxy?" said Sally; "why, she's going up to nurse Mara, and take care of her. Mrs. Pennel is so old and infirm she needs somebody to depend on."

"I can't bear her," said Moses. "I always think of sick-rooms and coffins and a stifling smell of camphor when I see her. I never could endure her. She's an old harpy going to carry off my dove."

"Now, Moses, you must not talk so. She loves Mara dearly, the poor old soul, and Mara loves her, and there is no earthly thing she would not do for her. And she knows what to do for sickness better than you or I. I have found out one thing, that it isn't mere love and good-will that is needed in a sick-room; it needs knowledge and experience."

Moses assented in gloomy silence, and they walked on together the way that they had so often taken laughing and chatting. When they came within sight of the house, Moses said,--

"Here she came running to meet us; do you remember?"

"Yes," said Sally.

"I was never half worthy of her. I never said half what I ought to," he added. "She must live! I must have one more chance."

When they came up to the house, Zephaniah Pennel was sitting in the door, with his gray head bent over the leaves of the great family Bible.

He rose up at their coming, and with that suppression of all external signs of feeling for which the New Englander is remarkable, simply shook the hand of Moses, saying,--

"Well, my boy, we are glad you have come."

Mrs. Pennel, who was busied in some domestic work in the back part of the kitchen, turned away and hid her face in her apron when she saw him. There fell a great silence among them, in the midst of which the old clock ticked loudly and importunately, like the inevitable approach of fate.

"I will go up and see her, and get her ready," said Sally, in a whisper to Moses. "I'll come and call you."

Moses sat down and looked around on the old familiar scene; there was the great fireplace where, in their childish days, they had sat together winter nights,--her fair, spiritual face enlivened by the blaze, while she knit and looked thoughtfully into the coals; there she had played checkers, or fox and geese, with him; or studied with him the Latin lessons; or sat by, grave and thoughtful, hemming his toyship sails, while he cut the moulds for his anchors, or tried experiments on pulleys; and in all these years he could not remember one selfish action,--one unlovely word,--and he thought to himself, "I hoped to possess this angel as a mortal wife! God forgive my presumption."