

CHAPTER XLIII

THE PEARL

The next morning rose calm and bright with that wonderful and mystical stillness and serenity which glorify autumn days. It was impossible that such skies could smile and such gentle airs blow the sea into one great waving floor of sparkling sapphires without bringing cheerfulness to human hearts. You must be very despairing indeed, when Nature is doing her best, to look her in the face sullen and defiant. So long as there is a drop of good in your cup, a penny in your exchequer of happiness, a bright day reminds you to look at it, and feel that all is not gone yet.

So felt Moses when he stood in the door of the brown house, while Mrs. Pennel was clinking plates and spoons as she set the breakfast-table, and Zephaniah Pennel in his shirt-sleeves was washing in the back-room, while Miss Roxy came downstairs in a business-like fashion, bringing sundry bowls, plates, dishes, and mysterious pitchers from the sick-room.

"Well, Aunt Roxy, you ain't one that lets the grass grow under your feet," said Mrs. Pennel. "How is the dear child, this morning?"

"Well, she had a better night than one could have expected," said Miss Roxy, "and by the time she's had her breakfast, she expects to sit up a

little and see her friends." Miss Roxy said this in a cheerful tone, looking encouragingly at Moses, whom she began to pity and patronize, now she saw how real was his affliction.

After breakfast Moses went to see her; she was sitting up in her white dressing-gown, looking so thin and poorly, and everything in the room was fragrant with the spicy smell of the monthly roses, whose late buds and blossoms Miss Roxy had gathered for the vases. She seemed so natural, so calm and cheerful, so interested in all that went on around her, that one almost forgot that the time of her stay must be so short. She called Moses to come and look at her drawings, and paintings of flowers and birds,--full of reminders they were of old times,--and then she would have her pencils and colors, and work a little on a bunch of red rock-columbine, that she had begun to do for him; and she chatted of all the old familiar places where flowers grew, and of the old talks they had had there, till Moses quite forgot himself; forgot that he was in a sick room, till Aunt Roxy, warned by the deepening color on Mara's cheeks, interposed her "nussing" authority, that she must do no more that day.

Then Moses laid her down, and arranged her pillows so that she could look out on the sea, and sat and read to her till it was time for her afternoon nap; and when the evening shadows drew on, he marveled with himself how the day had gone.

Many such there were, all that pleasant month of September, and he was

with her all the time, watching her wants and doing her bidding,--reading over and over with a softened modulation her favorite hymns and chapters, arranging her flowers, and bringing her home wild bouquets from all her favorite wood-haunts, which made her sick-room seem like some sylvan bower. Sally Kittridge was there too, almost every day, with always some friendly offering or some helpful deed of kindness, and sometimes they two together would keep guard over the invalid while Miss Roxy went home to attend to some of her own more peculiar concerns. Mara seemed to rule all around her with calm sweetness and wisdom, speaking unconsciously only the speech of heaven, talking of spiritual things, not in an excited rapture or wild ecstasy, but with the sober certainty of waking bliss. She seemed like one of the sweet friendly angels one reads of in the Old Testament, so lovingly companionable, walking and talking, eating and drinking, with mortals, yet ready at any unknown moment to ascend with the flame of some sacrifice and be gone. There are those (a few at least) whose blessing it has been to have kept for many days, in bonds of earthly fellowship, a perfected spirit in whom the work of purifying love was wholly done, who lived in calm victory over sin and sorrow and death, ready at any moment to be called to the final mystery of joy.

Yet it must come at last, the moment when heaven claims its own, and it came at last in the cottage on Orr's Island. There came a day when the room so sacredly cheerful was hushed to a breathless stillness; the bed was then all snowy white, and that soft still sealed face, the parted waves of golden hair, the little hands folded over the white robe, all

had a sacred and wonderful calm, a rapture of repose that seemed to say "it is done."

They who looked on her wondered; it was a look that sunk deep into every heart; it hushed down the common cant of those who, according to country custom, went to stare blindly at the great mystery of death,--for all that came out of that chamber smote upon their breasts and went away in silence, revolving strangely whence might come that unearthly beauty, that celestial joy.

Once more, in that very room where James and Naomi Lincoln had lain side by side in their coffins, sleeping restfully, there was laid another form, shrouded and confined, but with such a fairness and tender purity, such a mysterious fullness of joy in its expression, that it seemed more natural to speak of that rest as some higher form of life than of death.

Once more were gathered the neighborhood; all the faces known in this history shone out in one solemn picture, of which that sweet restful form was the centre. Zephaniah Pennel and Mary his wife, Moses and Sally, the dry form of Captain Kittridge and the solemn face of his wife, Aunt Roxy and Aunt Ruey, Miss Emily and Mr. Sewell; but their faces all wore a tender brightness, such as we see falling like a thin celestial veil over all the faces in an old Florentine painting. The room was full of sweet memories, of words of cheer, words of assurance, words of triumph, and the mysterious brightness of that young face

forbade them to weep. Solemnly Mr. Sewell read,--

"He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from off all faces; and the rebuke of his people shall he take away from off all the earth; for the Lord hath spoken it. And it shall be said in that day, Lo this is our God; we have waited for him, and he will save us; this is the Lord; we have waited for him, we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation."

Then the prayer trembled up to heaven with thanksgiving, for the early entrance of that fair young saint into glory, and then the same old funeral hymn, with its mournful triumph:--

"Why should we mourn departed friends,
Or shake at death's alarms,
'Tis but the voice that Jesus sends
To call them to his arms."

Then in a few words Mr. Sewell reminded them how that hymn had been sung in this room so many years ago, when that frail, fluttering orphan soul had been baptized into the love and care of Jesus, and how her whole life, passing before them in its simplicity and beauty, had come to so holy and beautiful a close; and when, pointing to the calm sleeping face he asked, "Would we call her back?" there was not a heart at that moment that dared answer, Yes. Even he that should have been her bridegroom could not at that moment have unsealed the holy charm, and so they bore

her away, and laid the calm smiling face beneath the soil, by the side of poor Dolores.

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"I had a beautiful dream last night," said Zephaniah Pennel, the next morning after the funeral, as he opened his Bible to conduct family worship.

"What was it?" said Miss Roxy.

"Well, ye see, I thought I was out a-walkin' up and down, and lookin' and lookin' for something that I'd lost. What it was I couldn't quite make out, but my heart felt heavy as if it would break, and I was lookin' all up and down the sands by the seashore, and somebody said I was like the merchantman, seeking goodly pearls. I said I had lost my pearl--my pearl of great price--and then I looked up, and far off on the beach, shining softly on the wet sands, lay my pearl. I thought it was Mara, but it seemed a great pearl with a soft moonlight on it; and I was running for it when some one said 'hush,' and I looked and I saw Him a-coming--Jesus of Nazareth, jist as he walked by the sea of Galilee. It was all dark night around Him, but I could see Him by the light that came from his face, and the long hair was hanging down on his shoulders. He came and took up my pearl and put it on his forehead, and it shone out like a star, and shone into my heart, and I felt happy; and he looked at me steadily, and rose and rose in the air, and melted in the

clouds, and I awoke so happy, and so calm!"

CHAPTER XLIV

FOUR YEARS AFTER

It was a splendid evening in July, and the sky was filled high with gorgeous tabernacles of purple and gold, the remains of a grand thunder-shower which had freshened the air and set a separate jewel on every needle leaf of the old pines.

Four years had passed since the fair Pearl of Orr's Island had been laid beneath the gentle soil, which every year sent monthly tributes of flowers to adorn her rest, great blue violets, and starry flocks of ethereal eye-brights in spring, and fringy asters, and goldenrod in autumn. In those days, the tender sentiment which now makes the burial-place a cultivated garden was excluded by the rigid spiritualism of the Puritan life, which, ever jealous of that which concerned the body, lest it should claim what belonged to the immortal alone, had frowned on all watching of graves, as an earthward tendency, and enjoined the flight of faith with the spirit, rather than the yearning for its cast-off garments.