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Margaret : A Pearl.



MARGARET: A PEARL.

In a certain part of the sea, very many leagues from here, there once lived a large family of oysters noted for their beauty and size. But among them was one so small, so feeble, and so ill-looking as to excite the pity, if not the contempt, of all the others. The father, a venerable, bearded oyster, of august appearance and solemn deportment, was much mortified that one of his family should happen to be so sickly; and he sent for all the doctors in the sea to come and treat her; from which circumstance you are to note that doctors are an evil to be met with not alone upon *terra firma*. The first to come was Dr. Porpoise, a gentleman of the old school, who floundered around in a very important manner and was full of imposing ceremonies.

"Let me look at your tongue," said Dr. Porpoise, stroking his beard with one fin, impressively. "Ahem! somewhat coated, I see. And your pulse is far from normal; no appetite, I presume? Yes, my dear, your system is sadly out of order. You need medicine."

The little oyster hated medicine; so she cried,—yes, she actually shed cold, briny tears at the very thought of taking old Dr. Porpoise's prescriptions. But the father-oyster and the mother-oyster chided her sternly; they said that the medicine would be nice and sweet, and that the little oyster would like it. But the little oyster knew better than all that; yes, she knew a thing or two, even though she *was* only a little oyster.

Now Dr. Porpoise put a plaster on the little oyster's chest and a blister at her feet. He bade her eat nothing but a tiny bit of sea-foam on toast twice a day. Every two hours she was to take a spoonful of cod-liver oil, and before each meal a wineglassful of the essence of distilled cuttlefish. The plaster she didn't mind, but the blister and the cod-liver oil were terrible; and when it came to the essence of distilled cuttlefish—well, she just couldn't stand it! In vain her mother reasoned with her, and promised her a new doll and a skipping-rope and a lot of other nice things: the little oyster would have none of the horrid drug; until at last her father, abandoning his dignity in order to maintain his authority, had to hold her down by main strength and pour the medicine into her mouth. This was, as you will allow, quite dreadful.

But this treatment did the little oyster no good; and her parents made up their minds that they would send for another doctor, and one of a different school. Fortunately they were in a position to indulge in almost any expense, since the father-oyster himself was president of one of the largest banks of Newfoundland. So Dr. Sculpin came with his neat little medicine-box under his arm. And when he had looked at the sick little oyster's tongue, and had taken her temperature, and had felt her pulse, he said he knew what ailed her; but he did not tell anybody what it was. He threw away the plasters, the blisters, the cod-liver oil, and the essence of distilled cuttlefish, and said it was a wonder that the poor child had lived through it all!

"Will you please bring me two tumblerfuls of water?" he remarked to the mother-oyster.

The mother-oyster scuttled away, and soon returned with two conch-shells filled to the brim with pure, clear sea-water. Dr. Sculpin counted three grains of white sand into one shell, and three grains of yellow sand into the other shell, with great care.

"Now," said he to the mother-oyster, "I have numbered these 1 and 2. First, you are to give the patient ten drops out of No. 2, and in an hour after that, eight drops out of No. 1; the next hour, eight drops out of No. 2; and the next, or fourth, hour, ten drops out of No. 1. And so you are to continue hour by hour, until either the medicine or the child gives out."

"Tell me, doctor," asked the mother, "shall she continue the food suggested by Dr. Porpoise?"

"What food did he recommend?" inquired Dr. Sculpin.

"Sea-foam on toast," answered the mother.

Dr. Sculpin smiled a smile which seemed to suggest that Dr. Porpoise's ignorance was really quite annoying.

"My dear madam," said Dr. Sculpin, "the diet suggested by that quack, Porpoise, passed out of the books years ago. Give the child toast on sea-foam, if you wish to build up her debilitated forces."

Now, the sick little oyster did not object to this treatment; on the contrary, she liked it. But it did her no good. And one day, when she was feeling very dry, she drank both tumblerfuls of medicine, and it did not do her any harm; neither did it

cure her: she remained the same sick little oyster,—oh, so sick! This pained her parents very much. They did not know what to do. They took her travelling; they gave her into the care of the eel for electric treatment; they sent her to the Gulf Stream for warm baths,—they tried everything, but to no avail. The sick little oyster remained a sick little oyster, and there was an end of it.

At last one day,—one cruel, fatal day,—a horrid, fierce-looking machine was poked down from the surface of the water far above, and with slow but intrepid movement began exploring every nook and crevice of the oyster village. There was not a family into which it did not intrude, nor a home circle whose sanctity it did not ruthlessly invade. It scraped along the great mossy rock; and lo! with a monstrous scratchy-te-scratch, the mother-oyster and the father-oyster and hundreds of other oysters were torn from their resting-places and borne aloft in a very jumbled and very frightened condition by the impertinent machine. Then down it came again, and the sick little oyster was among the number of those who were seized by the horrid monster this time. She found herself raised to the top of the sea; and all at once she was bumped in a boat, where she lay, puny and helpless, on a huge pile of other oysters. Two men were handling the fierce-looking machine. A little boy sat in the stern of the boat watching the huge pile of oysters. He was a pretty little boy, with bright eyes and long tangled hair. He wore no hat, and his feet were bare and brown.

"What a funny little oyster!" said the boy, picking up the sick little oyster; "it is no bigger than my thumb, and it is very pale."

"Throw it away," said one of the men. "Like as not it is bad and not fit to eat."

"No, keep it and send it out West for a Blue Point," said the other man,—what a heartless wretch he was!

But the little boy had already thrown the sick little oyster overboard. She fell in shallow water, and the rising tide carried her still farther toward shore, until she lodged against an old gum boot that lay half buried in the sand. There were no other oysters in sight. Her head ached and she was very weak; how lonesome, too, she was!—yet anything was better than being eaten,—at least so thought the little oyster, and so, I presume, think you.

For many weeks and many months the sick little oyster lay hard by the old gum boot; and in that time she made many acquaintances and friends among the crabs, the lobsters, the fiddlers, the star-fish, the waves, the shells, and the gay little fishes of the ocean. They did not harm her, for they saw that she was sick; they pitied her—some loved her. The one that loved her most was the perch with green fins that attended school every day in the academic shade of the big rocks in the quiet cove about a mile away. He was very gentle and attentive, and every afternoon he brought fresh cool sea-foam for the sick oyster to eat; he told her pretty stories, too,—stories which his grandmother, the venerable codfish, had told him of the sea king, the mermaids, the pixies, the water sprites, and the other fantastically beautiful dwellers in ocean-depths. Now while all this was very pleasant, the sick little oyster knew that the perch's wooing was hopeless, for she was very ill and helpless, and could never think of becoming a burden upon one so young and so promising as the gallant perch with green fins. But when she spoke to him in this strain, he would not listen; he kept right on bringing her more and more cool sea-foam every day.

The old gum boot was quite a motherly creature, and anon the sick little oyster became very much attached to her. Many times as the little invalid rested her aching head affectionately on the instep of the old gum boot, the old gum boot told her stories of the world beyond the

sea: how she had been born in a mighty forest, and how proud her folks were of their family tree; how she had been taken from that forest and moulded into the shape she now bore; how she had graced and served a foot in amphibious capacities, until at last, having seen many things and having travelled much, she had been cast off and hurled into the sea to be the scorn of every crab and the derision of every fish. These stories were all new to the little oyster, and amazing, too; she knew only of the sea, having lived therein all her life. She in turn told the old gum boot quaint legends of the ocean,—the simple tales she had heard in her early home; and there was a sweetness and a simplicity in these stories of the deep that charmed the old gum boot, shrivelled and hardened and pessimistic though she was.

Yet, in spite of it all,—the kindness, the care, the amusements, and the devotion of her friends,—the little oyster remained always a sick and fragile thing. But no one heard her complain, for she bore her suffering patiently.

Not far from this beach where the ocean ended its long travels there was a city, and in this city there dwelt with her parents a maiden of the name of Margaret. From infancy she had been sickly, and although she had now reached the years of early womanhood, she could not run or walk about as others did, but she had to be wheeled hither and thither in a

chair. This was very sad; yet Margaret was so gentle and uncomplaining that from aught she said you never would have thought her life was full of suffering. Seeing her helplessness, the sympathetic things of Nature had compassion and were very good to Margaret. The sunbeams stole across her pathway everywhere, the grass clustered thickest and greenest where she went, the winds caressed her gently as they passed, and the birds loved to perch near her window and sing their prettiest songs. Margaret loved them all,—the sunlight, the singing winds, the grass, the carolling birds. She communed with them; their wisdom inspired her life, and this wisdom gave her nature a rare beauty.

Every pleasant day Margaret was wheeled from her home in the city down to the beach, and there for hours she would sit, looking out, far out upon the ocean, as if she were communing with the ocean spirits that lifted up their white arms from the restless waters and beckoned her to come. Oftentimes the children playing on the beach came where Margaret sat, and heard her tell little stories of the pebbles and the shells, of the ships away out at sea, of the ever-speeding gulls, of the grass, of the flowers, and of the other beautiful things of life; and so in time the children came to love Margaret. Among those who so often gathered to hear the gentle sick girl tell her pretty stories was a youth of Margaret's age,—older than the others, a youth with sturdy frame and a face full of candor and earnestness. His name was Edward, and he was a student in the city; he hoped to become a great scholar sometime, and he toiled very zealously to that end. The patience, the gentleness, the sweet simplicity, the fortitude of the sick girl charmed him. He found in her little stories a quaint and beautiful philosophy he never yet had found in books; there was a valor in her life he never yet had read of in the histories. So, every day she came and sat upon the beach, Edward came too; and with the children he heard Margaret's stories of the sea, the air, the grass, the birds, and the flowers.

From her moist eyrie in the surf the old gum boot descried the group upon the beach each pleasant day. Now the old gum boot had seen enough of the world to know a thing or two, as we presently shall see.

"That tall young man is not a child," quoth the old gum boot, "yet he comes every day with the children to hear the sick girl tell her stories! Ah, ha!"

"Perhaps he is the doctor," suggested the little oyster; and then she added with a sigh, "but, oh! I hope not."

This suggestion seemed to amuse the old gum boot highly; at least she fell into such hysterical laughter that she sprung a leak near her little toe, which, considering her environments, was a serious mishap.

"Unless I am greatly mistaken, my child," said the old gum boot to the little oyster, "that young man is in love with the sick girl!"

"Oh, how terrible!" said the little oyster; and she meant it too, for she was thinking of the gallant young perch with green fins.

"Well, I've said it, and I mean it!" continued the old gum boot; "now just wait and see."

The old gum boot had guessed aright—so much for the value of worldly experience! Edward loved Margaret; to him she was the most beautiful, the most perfect being in the world; her very words seemed to exalt his nature. Yet he never spoke to her of love. He was content to come with the children to hear her stories, to look upon her sweet face, and to worship her in silence. Was not that a very wondrous love?

In course of time the sick girl Margaret became more interested in the little ones that thronged daily to hear her pretty stories, and she put her beautiful fancies into the little songs and quaint poems and tender legends,—songs and poems and legends about the sea, the flowers, the birds, and the other beautiful creations of Nature; and in all there was a sweet simplicity, a delicacy, a reverence, that bespoke Margaret's spiritual purity and wisdom. In this teaching, and marvelling ever at its beauty, Edward grew to manhood. She was his inspiration, yet he never spoke of love to Margaret. And so the years went by.

Beginning with the children, the world came to know the sick girl's power. Her songs were sung in every home, and in every home her verses and her little stories were repeated. And so it was that Margaret came to be beloved of all, but he who loved her best spoke never of his love to her.

And as these years went by, the sick little oyster lay in the sea cuddled close to the old gum boot. She was wearier now than ever before, for there was no cure for her malady. The gallant perch with green fins was very sad, for his wooing had been hopeless. Still he was devoted, and still he came each day to the little oyster, bringing her cool sea-foam and

other delicacies of the ocean. Oh, how sick the little oyster was! But the end came at last.

The children were on the beach one day, waiting for Margaret, and they wondered that she did not come. Presently, grown restless, many of the boys scampered into the water and stood there, with their trousers rolled up, boldly daring the little waves that rippled up from the overflow of the surf. And one little boy happened upon the old gum boot. It was a great discovery.

"See the old gum boot," cried the boy, fishing it out of the water and holding it on high. "And here is a little oyster fastened to it! How funny!"

The children gathered round the curious object on the beach. None of them had ever seen such a funny old gum boot, and surely none of them had ever seen such a funny little oyster. They tore the pale, knotted little thing from her foster-mother, and handled her with such rough curiosity that even had she been a robust oyster she must certainly have died. At any rate, the little oyster was dead now; and the bereaved perch with green fins must have known it, for he swam up and down his native cove disconsolately.

It befell in that same hour that Margaret lay upon her deathbed, and knowing that she had not long to live, she sent for Edward. And Edward, when he came to her, was filled with anguish, and clasping her hands in his, he told her of his love.

Then Margaret answered him: "I knew it, dear one; and all the songs I have sung and all the words I have spoken and all the prayers I have made have been with you, dear one,—all with *you* in my heart of hearts."

"You have purified and exalted my life," cried Edward; "you have been my best and sweetest inspiration; you have taught me the eternal truth,—you are my beloved!"

And Margaret said: "Then in my weakness hath there been a wondrous strength, and from my sufferings cometh the glory I have sought—"

So Margaret died, and like a broken lily she lay upon her couch; and all the sweetness of her pure and gentle life seemed to come back and rest upon her face; and the songs she had sung and the beautiful stories she had told came back, too, on angel wings, and made sweet music in that chamber.

The children were lingering on the beach when Edward came that day. He could hear them singing the songs Margaret had taught them. They wondered that he came alone.

"See," cried one of the boys, running to meet him and holding a tiny shell in his hand,—"*see* what we have found in this strange little shell. Is it not beautiful!"

Edward took the dwarfed, misshapen thing and lo! it held a beautiful pearl.

O little sister mine, let me look into your eyes and read an inspiration there; let me hold your thin white hand and know the strength of a philosophy more beautiful than human knowledge teaches; let me see in your dear, patient little face and hear in your gentle voice the untold valor of your suffering life. Come, little sister, let me fold you in my arms and have you ever with me, that in the glory of your faith and love I may walk the paths of wisdom and of peace.

1887.

[End of *Margaret: A Pearl* by Eugene Field]