

Stairs of Sand

By Anna M. Regan

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN (Continued from Last Week)

Later, Sara stood looking out her chamber window, drinking in the night scene. The moon rolled, like a silver ball over the far rim of the horizon, and, upsetting, spilled shimmering, shining, dancing, fire in a broad path from sky edge to the beach.

"It do so better!" Sara thought aloud. "What the loveliest moon I ever saw in shining tonight!—I presume likely," she added, with a laugh. "It's the same moon I've always seen. It just looks lovelier, that is all seems to me. It must be beautiful to look at from the top of the bluff, the light on the water, I mean I must walk over there, soon and watch it close at hand."

Beautiful weather continued as August in the banner month at all northern seaside resorts. August at Topham Hill Grand View Inn to overflowing. On pleasant Sundays the long line of cars, straggling through the main road of the village on the way to Provincetown, met and passed the long line returning. The sound of motor horns echoed along the lane to Royce's Bluff.

Sara found it distinctly safer and less nerve-racking to walk along the grassy lane than to follow the hard road. Cy Pratt's son-in-law, the light housekeeper, was harassed by visitors, rocking up and down the lighthouse stairs. He expressed his opinion of those visitors, after their departure, with fluency and freedom.

Sara, in her daily walks, kept far ahead, avoiding the traveled roads. She frequented a path that skirted along the creek, for a little way and climbed the pine-clad hills on the other side. Late one afternoon, she was returning along this path when she observed a young girl sitting on a rock near the pathway. Surprised to meet anyone in this rather remote place Sara stopped and spoke to her.

"Good afternoon," she said. "Specially nice view from here, isn't it?"

The girl's clothes were undeniably dowdy, and except for a pair of large brown eyes she was not particularly pretty. She was white-faced with a red spot on each cheek. Long trouble, Sara concluded.

"It's the smell of the pines and the tang of the sea, that I'm so keen about," the girl answered.

"Is your home here?" Sara asked.

"I work at the Inn," the girl said, sadly. "It's as much my home as any place. You're not of this country either, I feel sure."

"No," said Sara. "I'm visiting my aunt, Mr. Shattick. You can just see her white house from here on that farther hill."

"Oh, you're the girl Lisbeth talks so much about," the girl smiled. "She said you drew her picture and that it was so good she sent it to her mother."

"I make sketches or draw free hand anything I think will sell," Sara informed her. "Oh, what a wealth of pictures one could get from here. I must bring my easel and ink out tomorrow. I think in the early morning."

"Will you be here tomorrow at this time?" the girl asked. "It's the only time in the day I can get away."

"Yes, I'll be here then. Are you a boarder at the Inn?" Sara was sorry after she had asked the question for the girl became embarrassed.

"No, I just work there doing chamber work or I wash the dishes and help in the kitchen—wherever Mr. Cullen sends me."

"Pray me, but are you strong enough to do such heavy work?" Sara asked.

"My mother died four years ago. When I was sixteen, my father, I do not remember, the girl's voice trailed off. "As long as I can remember mother and I had a room with a nice family in South Boston. At mother's death a small inheritance took care of her expenses. I was forced to leave school and secured a job in a five and ten. They kept me mostly in the basement where the air wasn't good. The pay was so poor I had to go without decent clothes, had no money for amusements of any kind, couldn't even afford trolley fare for occasional rides to the park. About two years I had a bad cold and it just on, although I kept warm, but I always felt and returned to the sitting room, to take up again the question of whether it would be better for the doctor to go to Boston or to move back home. Their talk was interrupted by a thud in the kitchen and Lisbeth opened the door.

asking if she couldn't give me some light work at least enough for room and board. She wrote the club ladies and said to have me come down and she'd do what she could for me. They gave me ten dollars and a ticket and I came down about the first of May."

"No one ever realizes, do they?" observed Sara, "how much better off they are than many other people in this world. Well, how did this woman receive you?"

"A man in uniform met at the door. Oh, such a terrifying, frozen faced type he was, too. I have to laugh as I think how scared I was of him," the girl smiled wily. "You see, I have seen under his skin since. Well, he left me in the parlor. Evidently he didn't think much of me as a prospective boarder for it was half an hour before Mrs. Cullen appeared, tall, stately, silver-haired, black silk-clad."

"We haven't any vacant rooms," she told me coldly.

"I gave her the letter from the club to read."

"You're Bessie Herron, Mrs. Mack speaks of here?" she asked me.

"I said I was. I could hardly breathe, she looked at me so coldly and without a bit of kindness."

"I'll do what I can for you," she said, "on account of Mrs. Mack."

"She said there was a small room on the third floor I could have, but she couldn't pay me any wages until the boarders came in June. When I had climbed to the room on the third floor, I found it had one window, one door, one cot-bed, one chair, a dilapidated chest of drawers, a worn, faded rug."

"Poor child," Sara breathed, her eyes moist with tears.

"I walked over to raise the window," the girl went on, "and there spread out before me was a picture so beautiful that no money could buy it. My window was over the sunlit, sparkling sea and I could taste in the very air, its salty tang."

"Isn't it true, there's always something to compensate us just around the corner," Sara observed.

"I had to work hard and the food she gave the help was none too good," Bessie went on, "but after I met Lisbeth I went up there once in a while in the evening when I wasn't to bed. Isn't Mrs. Shattick the kindest-hearted woman? She always comes into the kitchen and talks with me. She's so witty too. Then she'd bring out chunks of home-made cake or pie and milk and Lisbeth and I would feast."

"Aunt Anne would do just that."

"That kitchen up there is a dream. All in white with flowered curtains, and red geraniums and pretty linoleum on the floor. You see I never had a kitchen to live in in my whole life. If I ever do have one I'm going to have it just like Mrs. Shattick's."

Sara came to the same place the day following, with her easel and drawing kit. The wealth of drawing material around was confusing. She was disappointed when Bessie failed to put in an appearance at the afternoon draw to a close.

Sara remained to enjoy the sunset over the dunes and the bay, where wonderful fantasies of crimson and purple and gold and sapphires were spread before her, with the nets and the poles of the distant fish were scattered here and there about the placid waters like bits of fairy embroidery.

Sara enjoyed the walk home, turning in at her aunt's gate; the lamplight in the cozy sitting room and her aunt's pleasant face shining a welcome.

"Did you get a letter?" she asked her.

"Aunt was sitting in a rocker with an open letter in her hand."

"This letter came this afternoon from Ruth," she explained. "They don't neither of 'em know just what they want to do. He has some friend or other in Boston who says he'll get him into a pretty fair job there if he'll come on. That maybe he couldn't get a thing to do here."

"Maybe he couldn't either, Aunt Anne, and then you'd be sorry you brought them back here."

"Cy Pratt makes quite well selling real estate here, and he says he will take him in as partner. But of course there won't be a thing sure about it."

"Aunt supper Sara and her aunt returned to the sitting room, to take up again the question of whether it would be better for the doctor to go to Boston or to move back home. Their talk was interrupted by a thud in the kitchen and Lisbeth opened the door.

"Dear quick, Bessie's fainting!"

They found the girl slumped down on the floor beside the table. Sara went down on her knees beside her. Her dark lashes rested on cheeks that were as colorless as marble. Even her lips looked white, but she was breathing.

Mrs. Shattick brought a glass of water and Sara rubbed her face with it. She opened her eyes and regarded Sara blankly.

"I can't go on there—what will I do?" Delirious, obviously!

Sara and her aunt picked her up and carried her to the couch in the sitting room. How could anyone weigh so little! They were scarcely conscious of having anything in their arms.

The "nitting fit" did not last long. When Bessie again became interested in the affairs of this world it was to see a glass containing something not unpleasantly fragrant held directly beneath her nose and that some one was commanding her to drink.

So she drank, and the fragrant liquid in the tumbler descended to her stomach and thence to her lungs and toes; at all event those chilled members began to tingle agreeably. She attempted to sit up.

"No, no you stay right where you are!" said a voice, the same that had urged her to drink.

"But really—I'm quite all right."

"No, you mind me and be still. Lisbeth!"

"Yes, here I be."

"Did you get the doctor on the phone?"

"Yes'm. He said he'd be right down soon's ever he could. He was kind of fussy at first; said he hadn't had no supper and his office was full of patients, and all such talk as that. But I headed him off, say I had of mercy yes! Says I, 'Thee's a young girl here too terrible that's worth more'n all yer cases; she ain't had a thing but rum since I don't know when!'"

"Heaven's and earth! What did you tell him that for?"

"Yes'm, but—"

"Hurry . . . ! And Lisbeth, if you scorch that toast-bread I'll scrape off the burned part and make you eat it, I declare I will. Now you lie right still Bessie—"

"Yes, but really, Mrs. Shattick—I cannot let you take so much trouble. I must go on, back to the Inn—or somewhere. I—Oh, dear me!"

"What's the matter, dear?" Sara asked.

"Nothing, nothing, my head is rather dizzy—confused. I shall be all right again, shortly. I'm ashamed of myself."

"There, there! don't try to talk any more. The doctor will be here any minute now. I'm afraid he's liable to have a queer idea of what's the matter with you. The idea of Lisbeth telling him you hadn't had anything but rum for she didn't know how long! There, there! Don't talk. I'll talk for both of us. I have a faculty, that way."

When the doctor arrived a little later, he found his patient drinking hot tea and eating buttered toast. She was wrapped up sitting in a big rocker in front of the fireplace. Mrs. Shattick introduced the pair and explained matters to the extent of her knowledge. Bessie added the lacking details. The doctor felt her pulse and took her temperature. The owner of the pulse and temperature made feeble protests, declaring that she must go back to the Inn. She couldn't think of getting everyone to so much trouble.

"My young lady," the doctor ordered, "you're to go straight to bed and stay there for ten days or even two weeks, with all the cream and fresh eggs you can consume. At the end of that time you can probably get out on the porch for a couple of weeks more. After that I'll decide when the time comes. I want to say further, my dear young lady, you couldn't have fallen into better hands. I've known Mrs. Shattick for forty years."

"But, Doctor, I haven't any money to repay Mrs. Shattick with."

"I'll take care of that, Bessie," Mrs. Shattick decided. "Sara and I will find something else for you to do when you're well."

Bessie woke early the next morning, at least she was sure it was early until she heard a creak down stairs like hers. She had enjoyed a wonderful night's rest and felt quite herself again.

Whew! Her shoulder was a little stiff. Yes, and her ankles and knees were lame. Perhaps after all she'd better not get up yet. She decided to lie there a little longer, perhaps someone would bring her some breakfast, and she remembered that she wasn't at the Inn; she was occupying a room at Mrs. Shattick's. No doubt they were keeping breakfast for her. Dear me, dear me!"

She climbed stiffly out of bed and began to dress; to correct this statement, she prepared to begin to dress. Just then she made a startling discovery. Her clothes were gone!

It was true. They were gone, every last item of them. Bessie looked helplessly around the room and shivered. A voice outside her chamber made answer.

"Here's your clothes. The Doctor told me to take them out of your room so's you'd stay in bed this morning."

Lisbeth came in and deposited the clothes on a chair.

"Mrs. Shattick said if you was awake to ask you how you was?"

"Oh, tell her I'm much better, thank you."

"That's good," Lisbeth returned. "But don't be in any hurry coming down, will you?"

"Lisbeth hurried back downstairs to her work."

Shakily, Bessie got to her feet and dressed slowly. When she came downstairs there was no one in the sitting room and she had no opportunity to look about at the pleasant room, with the east streaming in through the eastern windows, and a canary warbling merrily in one of them.

She sat down on the sofa as she heard voices in the kitchen. Mrs. Shattick bustled in.

"Mercy on us!" she exclaimed. "What in the world are you doing downstairs here?"

Bessie hastened to explain that she was feeling quite herself, really, and so had, of course, risen and dressed. She was quite sorry if she had kept breakfast waiting.

"No, my dear child, you haven't at all. Sara and I had our coffee and rolled and went into the garden while it was cool. We picked a mess of cherries and a large dish-pan full of the prettiest strawberries you ever did lay your eyes on. There's lots more to ripen, too. Now, I know you must be famished. I know how I should feel if I hadn't eaten a thing since yesterday, but toast-bread. Come right out to the table."

Bessie followed her to the dining room, where Lisbeth, grinning broadly, served her with oatmeal and boiled eggs, toast and coffee besides a large dish of strawberries and thick cream.

Sara looked in to say good morning and tell her how glad every one was that she felt better.

"I'll be right out there in one moment," Mrs. Shattick told Lisbeth, "to help shell the peas. I say, there's the Doctor."

The doctor scolded Bessie for getting up against his orders. After a pretty thorough examination, he said:

"You're better this morning, but you're not out of the woods yet. What you need is time to gain strength and that means you must have rest and quiet and good food. Besides, you must forget to worry. Let me do that for you for a while. I don't know of a place you could get well in faster than here with Mrs. Shattick to nurse you."

"Oh, I am comfortable," Bessie confessed. "I never slept better in my life than I did last night. I never ate a better breakfast than this one."

The doctor whistled.

"Now," Mrs. Shattick planned. "I know I should feel the same as you do about this, Bessie. This house of mine isn't a hotel and doesn't pretend to be, but if you think you can be comfortable here for a couple of weeks, and it will make you feel happier to pay later—say two dollars a day for the privilege, why—well!"

The doctor slapped his knee.

"Splendid!" he exclaimed. "Mrs. Shattick, as usual you've said and done the right thing. Now, Miss, I'll see you again tomorrow morning. You may go outside for a while, this day is so nice."

He was at the door before Bessie realized what he was about.

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The door closed. She turned to Mrs. Shattick in bewildered consternation. She smiled at her reassuringly.

"So that's all settled," Mrs. Shattick concluded.

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"Oh, tell her I'm much better, thank you."

"That's good," Lisbeth returned. "But don't be in any hurry coming down, will you?"

"Lisbeth hurried back downstairs to her work."

Shakily, Bessie got to her feet and dressed slowly. When she came downstairs there was no one in the sitting room and she had no opportunity to look about at the pleasant room, with the east streaming in through the eastern windows, and a canary warbling merrily in one of them.

She sat down on the sofa as she heard voices in the kitchen. Mrs. Shattick bustled in.

"Mercy on us!" she exclaimed. "What in the world are you doing downstairs here?"

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"I'll be right out there in one moment," Mrs. Shattick told Lisbeth, "to help shell the peas. I say, there's the Doctor."

The doctor scolded Bessie for getting up against his orders. After a pretty thorough examination, he said:

"You're better this morning, but you're not out of the woods yet. What you need is time to gain strength and that means you must have rest and quiet and good food. Besides, you must forget to worry. Let me do that for you for a while. I don't know of a place you could get well in faster than here with Mrs. Shattick to nurse you."

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"No, my dear child, you haven't at all. Sara and I had our coffee and rolled and went into the garden while it was cool. We picked a mess of cherries and a large dish-pan full of the prettiest strawberries you ever did lay your eyes on. There's lots more to ripen, too. Now, I know you must be famished. I know how I should feel if I hadn't eaten a thing since yesterday, but toast-bread. Come right out to the table."

Bessie followed her to the dining room, where Lisbeth, grinning broadly, served her with oatmeal and boiled eggs, toast and coffee besides a large dish of strawberries and thick cream.

Sara looked in to say good morning and tell her how glad every one was that she felt better.

"I'll be right out there in one moment," Mrs. Shattick told Lisbeth, "to help shell the peas. I say, there's the Doctor."

The doctor scolded Bessie for getting up against his orders. After a pretty thorough examination, he said:

"You're better this morning, but you're not out of the woods yet. What you need is time to gain strength and that means you must have rest and quiet and good food. Besides, you must forget to worry. Let me do that for you for a while. I don't know of a place you could get well in faster than here with Mrs. Shattick to nurse you."

"Oh, I am comfortable," Bessie confessed. "I never slept better in my life than I did last night. I never ate a better breakfast than this one."

The doctor whistled.

"Now," Mrs. Shattick planned. "I know I should feel the same as you do about this, Bessie. This house of mine isn't a hotel and doesn't pretend to be, but if you think you can be comfortable here for a couple of weeks, and it will make you feel happier to pay later—say two dollars a day for the privilege, why—well!"

The doctor slapped his knee.

"Splendid!" he exclaimed. "Mrs. Shattick, as usual you've said and done the right thing. Now, Miss, I'll see you again tomorrow morning. You may go outside for a while, this day is so nice."

He was at the door before Bessie realized what he was about.

"But Doctor," cried Bessie, "I—I—really I—Oh, dear!"

The door closed. She turned to Mrs. Shattick in bewildered consternation. She smiled at her reassuringly.

"So that's all settled," Mrs. Shattick concluded.

"Now, sit-down again, Bessie, and eat your breakfast—Lis-

Beth came in and deposited the clothes on a chair.

"Mrs. Shattick said if you was awake to ask you how you was?"

"Oh, tell her I'm much better, thank you."

"That's good," Lisbeth returned. "But don't be in any hurry coming down, will you?"

"Lisbeth hurried back downstairs to her work."

Shakily, Bessie got to her feet and dressed slowly. When she came downstairs there was no one in the sitting room and she had no opportunity to look about at the pleasant room, with the east streaming in through the eastern windows, and a canary warbling merrily in one of them.

She sat down on the sofa as she heard voices in the kitchen. Mrs. Shattick bustled in.

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