

CHAPTER XXIII

THE BEGINNING OF THE STORY

We have in the last three chapters brought up the history of our characters to the time when our story opens, when Mara and Sally Kittridge were discussing the expected return of Moses. Sally was persuaded by Mara to stay and spend the night with her, and did so without much fear of what her mother would say when she returned; for though Mrs. Kittridge still made bustling demonstrations of authority, it was quite evident to every one that the handsome grown-up girl had got the sceptre into her own hands, and was reigning in the full confidence of being, in one way or another, able to bring her mother into all her views.

So Sally stayed--to have one of those long night-talks in which girls delight, in the course of which all sorts of intimacies and confidences, that shun the daylight, open like the night-blooming cereus in strange successions. One often wonders by daylight at the things one says very naturally in the dark.

So the two girls talked about Moses, and Sally dilated upon his handsome, manly air the one Sunday that he had appeared in Harpswell meeting-house.

"He didn't know me at all, if you'll believe it," said Sally. "I was standing with father when he came out, and he shook hands with him, and looked at me as if I'd been an entire stranger."

"I'm not in the least surprised," said Mara; "you're grown so and altered."

"Well, now, you'd hardly know him, Mara," said Sally. "He is a man--a real man; everything about him is different; he holds up his head in such a proud way. Well, he always did that when he was a boy; but when he speaks, he has such a deep voice! How boys do alter in a year or two!"

"Do you think I have altered much, Sally?" said Mara; "at least, do you think he would think so?"

"Why, Mara, you and I have been together so much, I can't tell. We don't notice what goes on before us every day. I really should like to see what Moses Pennel will think when he sees you. At any rate, he can't order you about with such a grand air as he used to when you were younger."

"I think sometimes he has quite forgotten about me," said Mara.

"Well, if I were you, I should put him in mind of myself by one or two little ways," said Sally. "I'd plague him and tease him. I'd lead him

such a life that he couldn't forget me,--that's what I would."

"I don't doubt you would, Sally; and he might like you all the better for it. But you know that sort of thing isn't my way. People must act in character."

"Do you know, Mara," said Sally, "I always thought Moses was hateful in his treatment of you? Now I'd no more marry that fellow than I'd walk into the fire; but it would be a just punishment for his sins to have to marry me! Wouldn't I serve him out, though!"

With which threat of vengeance on her mind Sally Kittridge fell asleep, while Mara lay awake pondering,--wondering if Moses would come to-morrow, and what he would be like if he did come.

The next morning as the two girls were wiping breakfast dishes in a room adjoining the kitchen, a step was heard on the kitchen-floor, and the first that Mara knew she found herself lifted from the floor in the arms of a tall dark-eyed young man, who was kissing her just as if he had a right to. She knew it must be Moses, but it seemed strange as a dream, for all she had tried to imagine it beforehand.

He kissed her over and over, and then holding her off at arm's length, said, "Why, Mara, you have grown to be a beauty!"

"And what was she, I'd like to know, when you went away, Mr. Moses?"

said Sally, who could not long keep out of a conversation. "She was handsome when you were only a great ugly boy."

"Thank you, Miss Sally!" said Moses, making a profound bow.

"Thank me for what?" said Sally, with a toss.

"For your intimation that I am a handsome young man now," said Moses, sitting with his arm around Mara, and her hand in his.

And in truth he was as handsome now for a man as he was in the promise of his early childhood. All the oafishness and surly awkwardness of the half-boy period was gone. His great black eyes were clear and confident: his dark hair clustering in short curls round his well-shaped head; his black lashes, and fine form, and a certain confident ease of manner, set him off to the greatest advantage.

Mara felt a peculiar dreamy sense of strangeness at this brother who was not a brother,--this Moses so different from the one she had known. The very tone of his voice, which when he left had the uncertain cracked notes which indicate the unformed man, were now mellowed and settled. Mara regarded him shyly as he talked, blushed uneasily, and drew away from his arm around her, as if this handsome, self-confident young man were being too familiar. In fact, she made apology to go out into the other room to call Mrs. Pennel.

Moses looked after her as she went with admiration. "What a little woman she has grown!" he said, naïvely.

"And what did you expect she would grow?" said Sally. "You didn't expect to find her a girl in short clothes, did you?"

"Not exactly, Miss Sally," said Moses, turning his attention to her; "and some other people are changed too."

"Like enough," said Sally, carelessly. "I should think so, since somebody never spoke a word to one the Sunday he was at meeting."

"Oh, you remember that, do you? On my word, Sally"--

"Miss Kittridge, if you please, sir," said Sally, turning round with the air of an empress.

"Well, then, Miss Kittridge," said Moses, making a bow; "now let me finish my sentence. I never dreamed who you were."

"Complimentary," said Sally, pouting.

"Well, hear me through," said Moses; "you had grown so handsome, Miss Kittridge."

"Oh! that indeed! I suppose you mean to say I was a fright when you

left?"

"Not at all--not at all," said Moses; "but handsome things may grow handsomer, you know."

"I don't like flattery," said Sally.

"I never flatter, Miss Kittridge," said Moses.

Our young gentleman and young lady of Orr's Island went through with this customary little lie of civilized society with as much gravity as if they were practicing in the court of Versailles,--she looking out from the corner of her eye to watch the effect of her words, and he laying his hand on his heart in the most edifying gravity. They perfectly understood one another.

But, says the reader, seems to me Sally Kittridge does all the talking! So she does,--so she always will,--for it is her nature to be bright, noisy, and restless; and one of these girls always overcrows a timid and thoughtful one, and makes her, for the time, seem dim and faded, as does rose color when put beside scarlet.

Sally was a born coquette. It was as natural for her to want to flirt with every man she saw, as for a kitten to scamper after a pin-ball. Does the kitten care a fig for the pin-ball, or the dry leaves, which she whisks, and frisks, and boxes, and pats, and races round and round

after? No; it's nothing but kittenhood; every hair of her fur is alive with it. Her sleepy green eyes, when she pretends to be dozing, are full of it; and though she looks wise a moment, and seems resolved to be a discreet young cat, let but a leaf sway--off she goes again, with a frisk and a rap. So, though Sally had scolded and flounced about Moses's inattention to Mara in advance, she contrived even in this first interview to keep him talking with nobody but herself;--not because she wanted to draw him from Mara, or meant to; not because she cared a pin for him; but because it was her nature, as a frisky young cat. And Moses let himself be drawn, between bantering and contradicting, and jest and earnest, at some moments almost to forget that Mara was in the room.

She took her sewing and sat with a pleased smile, sometimes breaking into the lively flow of conversation, or eagerly appealed to by both parties to settle some rising quarrel.

Once, as they were talking, Moses looked up and saw Mara's head, as a stray sunbeam falling upon the golden hair seemed to make a halo around her face. Her large eyes were fixed upon him with an expression so intense and penetrative, that he felt a sort of wincing uneasiness.

"What makes you look at me so, Mara?" he said, suddenly.

A bright flush came in her cheek as she answered, "I didn't know I was looking. It all seems so strange to me. I am trying to make out who and what you are."

"It's not best to look too deep," Moses said, laughing, but with a slight shade of uneasiness.

When Sally, late in the afternoon, declared that she must go home, she couldn't stay another minute, Moses rose to go with her.

"What are you getting up for?" she said to Moses, as he took his hat.

"To go home with you, to be sure."

"Nobody asked you to," said Sally.

"I'm accustomed to asking myself," said Moses.

"Well, I suppose I must have you along," said Sally. "Father will be glad to see you, of course."

"You'll be back to tea, Moses," said Mara, "will you not? Grandfather will be home, and want to see you."

"Oh, I shall be right back," said Moses, "I have a little business to settle with Captain Kittridge."

But Moses, however, did stay at tea with Mrs. Kittridge, who looked graciously at him through the bows of her black horn spectacles, having heard her liege lord observe that Moses was a smart chap, and had done

pretty well in a money way.

How came he to stay? Sally told him every other minute to go; and then when he had got fairly out of the door, called him back to tell him that there was something she had heard about him. And Moses of course came back; wanted to know what it was; and couldn't be told, it was a secret; and then he would be ordered off, and reminded that he promised to go straight home; and then when he got a little farther off she called after him a second time, to tell him that he would be very much surprised if he knew how she found it out, etc., etc.,--till at last tea being ready, there was no reason why he shouldn't have a cup. And so it was sober moonrise before Moses found himself going home.

"Hang that girl!" he said to himself; "don't she know what she's about, though?"

There our hero was mistaken. Sally never did know what she was about,--had no plan or purpose more than a blackbird; and when Moses was gone laughed to think how many times she had made him come back.

"Now, confound it all," said Moses, "I care more for our little Mara than a dozen of her; and what have I been fooling all this time for?--now Mara will think I don't love her."

And, in fact, our young gentleman rather set his heart on the sensation he was going to make when he got home. It is flattering, after all, to

feel one's power over a susceptible nature; and Moses, remembering how entirely and devotedly Mara had loved him all through childhood, never doubted but he was the sole possessor of uncounted treasure in her heart, which he could develop at his leisure and use as he pleased. He did not calculate for one force which had grown up in the meanwhile between them,--and that was the power of womanhood. He did not know the intensity of that kind of pride, which is the very life of the female nature, and which is most vivid and vigorous in the most timid and retiring.

Our little Mara was tender, self-devoting, humble, and religious, but she was woman after all to the tips of her fingers,--quick to feel slights, and determined with the intensest determination, that no man should wrest from her one of those few humble rights and privileges, which Nature allows to woman. Something swelled and trembled in her when she felt the confident pressure of that bold arm around her waist,--like the instinct of a wild bird to fly. Something in the deep, manly voice, the determined, self-confident air, aroused a vague feeling of defiance and resistance in her which she could scarcely explain to herself. Was he to assume a right to her in this way without even asking? When he did not come to tea nor long after, and Mrs. Pennel and her grandfather wondered, she laughed, and said gayly,--

"Oh, he knows he'll have time enough to see me. Sally seems more like a stranger."

But when Moses came home after moonrise, determined to go and console Mara for his absence, he was surprised to hear the sound of a rapid and pleasant conversation, in which a masculine and feminine voice were intermingled in a lively duet. Coming a little nearer, he saw Mara sitting knitting in the doorway, and a very good-looking young man seated on a stone at her feet, with his straw hat flung on the ground, while he was looking up into her face, as young men often do into pretty faces seen by moonlight. Mara rose and introduced Mr. Adams of Boston to Mr. Moses Pennel.

Moses measured the young man with his eye as if he could have shot him with a good will. And his temper was not at all bettered as he observed that he had the easy air of a man of fashion and culture, and learned by a few moments of the succeeding conversation, that the acquaintance had commenced during Mara's winter visit to Boston.

"I was staying a day or two at Mr. Sewell's," he said, carelessly, "and the night was so fine I couldn't resist the temptation to row over."

It was now Moses's turn to listen to a conversation in which he could bear little part, it being about persons and places and things unfamiliar to him; and though he could give no earthly reason why the conversation was not the most proper in the world,--yet he found that it made him angry.

In the pauses, Mara inquired, prettily, how he found the Kittridges, and

reproved him playfully for staying, in despite of his promise to come home. Moses answered with an effort to appear easy and playful, that there was no reason, it appeared, to hurry on her account, since she had been so pleasantly engaged.

"That is true," said Mara, quietly; "but then grandpapa and grandmamma expected you, and they have gone to bed, as you know they always do after tea."

"They'll keep till morning, I suppose," said Moses, rather gruffly.

"Oh yes; but then as you had been gone two or three months, naturally they wanted to see a little of you at first."

The stranger now joined in the conversation, and began talking with Moses about his experiences in foreign parts, in a manner which showed a man of sense and breeding. Moses had a jealous fear of people of breeding,--an apprehension lest they should look down on one whose life had been laid out of the course of their conventional ideas; and therefore, though he had sufficient ability and vigor of mind to acquit himself to advantage in this conversation, it gave him all the while a secret uneasiness. After a few moments, he rose up moodily, and saying that he was very much fatigued, he went into the house to retire.

Mr. Adams rose to go also, and Moses might have felt in a more Christian frame of mind, had he listened to the last words of the conversation

between him and Mara.

"Do you remain long in Harpswell?" she asked.

"That depends on circumstances," he replied. "If I do, may I be permitted to visit you?"

"As a friend--yes," said Mara; "I shall always be happy to see you."

"No more?"

"No more," replied Mara.

"I had hoped," he said, "that you would reconsider."

"It is impossible," said she; and soft voices can pronounce that word, impossible, in a very fateful and decisive manner.

"Well, God bless you, then, Miss Lincoln," he said, and was gone.

Mara stood in the doorway and saw him loosen his boat from its moorings and float off in the moonlight, with a long train of silver sparkles behind.

A moment after Moses was looking gloomily over her shoulder.

"Who is that puppy?" he said.

"He is not a puppy, but a very fine young man," said Mara.

"Well, that very fine young man, then?"

"I thought I told you. He is a Mr. Adams of Boston, and a distant connection of the Sewells. I met him when I was visiting at Judge Sewell's in Boston."

"You seemed to be having a very pleasant time together?"

"We were," said Mara, quietly.

"It's a pity I came home as I did. I'm sorry I interrupted you," said Moses, with a sarcastic laugh.

"You didn't interrupt us; he had been here almost two hours."

Now Mara saw plainly enough that Moses was displeased and hurt, and had it been in the days of her fourteenth summer, she would have thrown her arms around his neck, and said, "Moses, I don't care a fig for that man, and I love you better than all the world." But this the young lady of eighteen would not do; so she wished him good-night very prettily, and pretended not to see anything about it.

Mara was as near being a saint as human dust ever is; but--she was a woman saint; and therefore may be excused for a little gentle vindictiveness. She was, in a merciful way, rather glad that Moses had gone to bed dissatisfied, and rather glad that he did not know what she might have told him--quite resolved that he should not know at present. Was he to know that she liked nobody so much as him? Not he, unless he loved her more than all the world, and said so first. Mara was resolved upon that. He might go where he liked--flirt with whom he liked--come back as late as he pleased; never would she, by word or look, give him reason to think she cared.