

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### A COQUETTE

The timbers of the ship which was to carry the fortunes of our hero were laid by the side of Middle Bay, and all these romantic shores could hardly present a lovelier scene. This beautiful sheet of water separates Harpswell from a portion of Brunswick. Its shores are rocky and pine-crowned, and display the most picturesque variety of outline. Eagle Island, Shelter Island, and one or two smaller ones, lie on the glassy surface like soft clouds of green foliage pierced through by the steel-blue tops of arrowy pine-trees.

There were a goodly number of shareholders in the projected vessel; some among the most substantial men in the vicinity. Zephaniah Pennel had invested there quite a solid sum, as had also our friend Captain Kittridge. Moses had placed therein the proceeds of his recent voyage, which enabled him to buy a certain number of shares, and he secretly revolved in his mind whether the sum of money left by his father might not enable him to buy the whole ship. Then a few prosperous voyages, and his fortune was made!

He went into the business of building the new vessel with all the enthusiasm with which he used, when a boy, to plan ships and mould anchors. Every day he was off at early dawn in his working-clothes, and

labored steadily among the men till evening. No matter how early he rose, however, he always found that a good fairy had been before him and prepared his dinner, daintily sometimes adding thereto a fragrant little bunch of flowers. But when his boat returned home at evening, he no longer saw her as in the days of girlhood waiting far out on the farthest point of rock for his return. Not that she did not watch for it and run out many times toward sunset; but the moment she had made out that it was surely he, she would run back into the house, and very likely find an errand in her own room, where she would be so deeply engaged that it would be necessary for him to call her down before she could make her appearance. Then she came smiling, chatty, always gracious, and ready to go or to come as he requested,--the very cheerfulest of household fairies,--but yet for all that there was a cobweb invisible barrier around her that for some reason or other he could not break over. It vexed and perplexed him, and day after day he determined to whistle it down,--ride over it rough-shod,--and be as free as he chose with this apparently soft, unresistant, airy being, who seemed so accessible. Why shouldn't he kiss her when he chose, and sit with his arm around her waist, and draw her familiarly upon his knee,--this little child-woman, who was as a sister to him? Why, to be sure? Had she ever frowned or scolded as Sally Kittridge did when he attempted to pass the air-line that divides man from womanhood? Not at all. She had neither blushed nor laughed, nor ran away. If he kissed her, she took it with the most matter-of-fact composure; if he passed his arm around her, she let it remain with unmoved calmness; and so somehow he did these things less and less, and wondered why.

The fact is, our hero had begun an experiment with his little friend that we would never advise a young man to try on one of these intense, quiet, soft-seeming women, whose whole life is inward. He had determined to find out whether she loved him before he committed himself to her; and the strength of a whole book of martyrs is in women to endure and to bear without flinching before they will surrender the gate of this citadel of silence. Moreover, our hero had begun his siege with precisely the worst weapons.

For on the night that he returned and found Mara conversing with a stranger, the suspicion arose in his mind that somehow Mara might be particularly interested in him, and instead of asking her, which anybody might consider the most feasible step in the case, he asked Sally Kittridge.

Sally's inborn, inherent love of teasing was up in a moment. Did she know anything of that Mr. Adams? Of course she did,--a young lawyer of one of the best Boston families,--a splendid fellow; she wished any such luck might happen to her! Was Mara engaged to him? What would he give to know? Why didn't he ask Mara? Did he expect her to reveal her friend's secrets? Well, she shouldn't,--report said Mr. Adams was well-to-do in the world, and had expectations from an uncle,--and didn't Moses think he was interesting in conversation? Everybody said what a conquest it was for an Orr's Island girl, etc., etc. And Sally said the rest with many a malicious toss and wink and sly twinkle of the dimples of her

cheek, which might mean more or less, as a young man of imaginative temperament was disposed to view it. Now this was all done in pure simple love of teasing. We incline to think phrenologists have as yet been very incomplete in their classification of faculties, or they would have appointed a separate organ for this propensity of human nature. Certain persons, often the most kind-hearted in the world, and who would not give pain in any serious matter, seem to have an insatiable appetite for those small annoyances we commonly denominate teasing,--and Sally was one of this number.

She diverted herself infinitely in playing upon the excitability of Moses,--in awaking his curiosity, and baffling it, and tormenting him with a whole phantasmagoria of suggestions and assertions, which played along so near the line of probability, that one could never tell which might be fancy and which might be fact.

Moses therefore pursued the line of tactics for such cases made and provided, and strove to awaken jealousy in Mara by paying marked and violent attentions to Sally. He went there evening after evening, leaving Mara to sit alone at home. He made secrets with her, and alluded to them before Mara. He proposed calling his new vessel the Sally Kittridge; but whether all these things made Mara jealous or not, he could never determine. Mara had no peculiar gift for acting, except in this one point; but here all the vitality of nature rallied to her support, and enabled her to preserve an air of the most unperceiving serenity. If she shed any tears when she spent a long, lonesome evening,

she was quite particular to be looking in a very placid frame when Moses returned, and to give such an account of the books, or the work, or paintings which had interested her, that Moses was sure to be vexed. Never were her inquiries for Sally more cordial,--never did she seem inspired by a more ardent affection for her.

Whatever may have been the result of this state of things in regard to Mara, it is certain that Moses succeeded in convincing the common fame of that district that he and Sally were destined for each other, and the thing was regularly discussed at quilting frolics and tea-drinkings around, much to Miss Emily's disgust and Aunt Roxy's grave satisfaction, who declared that "Mara was altogether too good for Moses Pennel, but Sally Kittridge would make him stand round,"--by which expression she was understood to intimate that Sally had in her the rudiments of the same kind of domestic discipline which had operated so favorably in the case of Captain Kittridge.

These things, of course, had come to Mara's ears. She had overheard the discussions on Sunday noons as the people between meetings sat over their doughnuts and cheese, and analyzed their neighbors' affairs, and she seemed to smile at them all. Sally only laughed, and declared that it was no such thing; that she would no more marry Moses Pennel, or any other fellow, than she would put her head into the fire. What did she want of any of them? She knew too much to get married,--that she did. She was going to have her liberty for one while yet to come, etc., etc.; but all these assertions were of course supposed to mean nothing but the

usual declarations in such cases. Mara among the rest thought it quite likely that this thing was yet to be.

So she struggled and tried to reason down a pain which constantly ached in her heart when she thought of this. She ought to have foreseen that it must some time end in this way. Of course she must have known that Moses would some time choose a wife; and how fortunate that, instead of a stranger, he had chosen her most intimate friend. Sally was careless and thoughtless, to be sure, but she had a good generous heart at the bottom, and she hoped she would love Moses at least as well as she did, and then she would always live with them, and think of any little things that Sally might forget.

After all, Sally was so much more capable and efficient a person than herself,--so much more bustling and energetic, she would make altogether a better housekeeper, and doubtless a better wife for Moses. But then it was so hard that he did not tell her about it. Was she not his sister?--his confidant for all his childhood?--and why should he shut up his heart from her now? But then she must guard herself from being jealous,--that would be mean and wicked. So Mara, in her zeal of self-discipline, pushed on matters; invited Sally to tea to meet Moses; and when she came, left them alone together while she busied herself in hospitable cares. She sent Moses with errands and commissions to Sally, which he was sure to improve into protracted visits; and in short, no young match-maker ever showed more good-will to forward the union of two chosen friends than Mara showed to unite Moses and Sally.

So the flirtation went on all summer, like a ship under full sail, with prosperous breezes; and Mara, in the many hours that her two best friends were together, tried heroically to persuade herself that she was not unhappy. She said to herself constantly that she never had loved Moses other than as a brother, and repeated and dwelt upon the fact to her own mind with a pertinacity which might have led her to suspect the reality of the fact, had she had experience enough to look closer. True, it was rather lonely, she said, but that she was used to,--she always had been and always should be. Nobody would ever love her in return as she loved; which sentence she did not analyze very closely, or she might have remembered Mr. Adams and one or two others, who had professed more for her than she had found herself able to return. That general proposition about nobody is commonly found, if sifted to the bottom, to have specific relation to somebody whose name never appears in the record.

Nobody could have conjectured from Mara's calm, gentle cheerfulness of demeanor, that any sorrow lay at the bottom of her heart; she would not have owned it to herself.

There are griefs which grow with years, which have no marked beginnings,--no especial dates; they are not events, but slow perceptions of disappointment, which bear down on the heart with a constant and equable pressure like the weight of the atmosphere, and these things are never named or counted in words among life's sorrows;

yet through them, as through an unsuspected inward wound, life, energy, and vigor slowly bleed away, and the persons, never owning even to themselves the weight of the pressure,--standing, to all appearance, fair and cheerful, are still undermined with a secret wear of this inner current, and ready to fall with the first external pressure.

There are persons often brought into near contact by the relations of life, and bound to each other by a love so close, that they are perfectly indispensable to each other, who yet act upon each other as a file upon a diamond, by a slow and gradual friction, the pain of which is so equable, so constantly diffused through life, as scarcely ever at any time to force itself upon the mind as a reality.

Such had been the history of the affection of Mara for Moses. It had been a deep, inward, concentrated passion that had almost absorbed self-consciousness, and made her keenly alive to all the moody, restless, passionate changes of his nature; it had brought with it that craving for sympathy and return which such love ever will, and yet it was fixed upon a nature so different and so uncomprehending that the action had for years been one of pain more than pleasure. Even now, when she had him at home with her and busied herself with constant cares for him, there was a sort of disturbing, unquiet element in the history of every day. The longing for him to come home at night,--the wish that he would stay with her,--the uncertainty whether he would or would not go and spend the evening with Sally,--the musing during the day over all that he had done and said the day before, were a constant interior

excitement. For Moses, besides being in his moods quite variable and changeable, had also a good deal of the dramatic element in him, and put on sundry appearances in the way of experiment.

He would feign to have quarreled with Sally, that he might detect whether Mara would betray some gladness; but she only evinced concern and a desire to make up the difficulty. He would discuss her character and her fitness to make a man happy in matrimony in the style that young gentlemen use who think their happiness a point of great consequence in the creation; and Mara, always cool, and firm, and sensible, would talk with him in the most maternal style possible, and caution him against trifling with her affections. Then again he would be lavish in his praise of Sally's beauty, vivacity, and energy, and Mara would join with the most apparently unaffected delight. Sometimes he ventured, on the other side, to rally her on some future husband, and predict the days when all the attentions which she was daily bestowing on him would be for another; and here, as everywhere else, he found his little Sphinx perfectly inscrutable. Instinct teaches the grass-bird, who hides her eggs under long meadow grass, to creep timidly yards from the nest, and then fly up boldly in the wrong place; and a like instinct teaches shy girls all kinds of unconscious stratagems when the one secret of their life is approached. They may be as truthful in all other things as the strictest Puritan, but here they deceive by an infallible necessity. And meanwhile, where was Sally Kittridge in all this matter? Was her heart in the least touched by the black eyes and long lashes? Who can say? Had she a heart? Well, Sally was a good girl. When one got

sufficiently far down through the foam and froth of the surface to find what was in the depths of her nature, there was abundance there of good womanly feeling, generous and strong, if one could but get at it.

She was the best and brightest of daughters to the old Captain, whose accounts she kept, whose clothes she mended, whose dinner she often dressed and carried to him, from loving choice; and Mrs. Kittridge regarded her housewifely accomplishments with pride, though she never spoke to her otherwise than in words of criticism and rebuke, as in her view an honest mother should who means to keep a flourishing sprig of a daughter within limits of a proper humility.

But as for any sentiment or love toward any person of the other sex, Sally, as yet, had it not. Her numerous admirers were only so many subjects for the exercise of her dear delight of teasing, and Moses Pennel, the last and most considerable, differed from the rest only in the fact that he was a match for her in this redoubtable art and science, and this made the game she was playing with him altogether more stimulating than that she had carried on with any other of her admirers. For Moses could sulk and storm for effect, and clear off as bright as Harpswell Bay after a thunder-storm--for effect also. Moses could play jealous, and make believe all those thousand-and-one shadowy nothings that coquettes, male and female, get up to carry their points with; and so their quarrels and their makings-up were as manifold as the sea-breezes that ruffled the ocean before the Captain's door.

There is but one danger in play of this kind, and that is, that deep down in the breast of every slippery, frothy, elfish Undine sleeps the germ of an unawakened soul, which suddenly, in the course of some such trafficking with the outward shows and seemings of affection, may wake up and make of the teasing, tricky elf a sad and earnest woman--a creature of loves and self-denials and faithfulness unto death--in short, something altogether too good, too sacred to be trifled with; and when a man enters the game protected by a previous attachment which absorbs all his nature, and the woman awakes in all her depth and strength to feel the real meaning of love and life, she finds that she has played with one stronger than she, at a terrible disadvantage.

Is this mine lying dark and evil under the saucy little feet of our Sally? Well, we should not of course be surprised some day to find it so.