

CHAPTER XXIX

NIGHT TALKS

October is come, and among the black glooms of the pine forests flare out the scarlet branches of the rock-maple, and the beech-groves are all arrayed in gold, through which the sunlight streams in subdued richness. October is come with long, bright, hazy days, swathing in purple mists the rainbow brightness of the forests, and blending the otherwise gaudy and flaunting colors into wondrous harmonies of splendor. And Moses Pennel's ship is all built and ready, waiting only a favorable day for her launching.

And just at this moment Moses is sauntering home from Captain Kittridge's in company with Sally, for Mara has sent him to bring her to tea with them. Moses is in high spirits; everything has succeeded to his wishes; and as the two walk along the high, bold, rocky shore, his eye glances out to the open ocean, where the sun is setting, and the fresh wind blowing, and the white sails flying, and already fancies himself a sea-king, commanding his own place, and going from land to land.

"There hasn't been a more beautiful ship built here these twenty years," he says, in triumph.

"Oho, Mr. Conceit," said Sally, "that's only because it's yours

now--your geese are all swans. I wish you could have seen the Typhoon, that Ben Drummond sailed in--a real handsome fellow he was. What a pity there aren't more like him!"

"I don't enter on the merits of Ben Drummond's beauty," said Moses; "but I don't believe the Typhoon was one whit superior to our ship. Besides, Miss Sally, I thought you were going to take it under your especial patronage, and let me honor it with your name."

"How absurd you always will be talking about that--why don't you call it after Mara?"

"After Mara?" said Moses. "I don't want to--it wouldn't be appropriate--one wants a different kind of girl to name a ship after--something bold and bright and dashing!"

"Thank you, sir, but I prefer not to have my bold and dashing qualities immortalized in this way," said Sally; "besides, sir, how do I know that you wouldn't run me on a rock the very first thing? When I give my name to a ship, it must have an experienced commander," she added, maliciously, for she knew that Moses was specially vulnerable on this point.

"As you please," said Moses, with heightened color. "Allow me to remark that he who shall ever undertake to command the 'Sally Kittridge' will have need of all his experience--and then, perhaps, not be able to know

the ways of the craft."

"See him now," said Sally, with a malicious laugh; "we are getting wrathful, are we?"

"Not I," said Moses; "it would cost altogether too much exertion to get angry at every teasing thing you choose to say, Miss Sally. By and by I shall be gone, and then won't your conscience trouble you?"

"My conscience is all easy, so far as you are concerned, sir; your self-esteem is too deep-rooted to suffer much from my poor little nips--they produce no more impression than a cat-bird pecking at the cones of that spruce-tree yonder. Now don't you put your hand where your heart is supposed to be--there's nobody at home there, you know. There's Mara coming to meet us;" and Sally bounded forward to meet Mara with all those demonstrations of extreme delight which young girls are fond of showering on each other.

"It's such a beautiful evening," said Mara, "and we are all in such good spirits about Moses's ship, and I told him you must come down and hold counsel with us as to what was to be done about the launching; and the name, you know, that is to be decided on--are you going to let it be called after you?"

"Not I, indeed. I should always be reading in the papers of horrible accidents that had happened to the 'Sally Kittridge.'"

"Sally has so set her heart on my being unlucky," said Moses, "that I believe if I make a prosperous voyage, the disappointment would injure her health."

"She doesn't mean what she says," said Mara; "but I think there are some objections in a young lady's name being given to a ship."

"Then I suppose, Mara," said Moses, "that you would not have yours either?"

"I would be glad to accommodate you in anything but that," said Mara, quietly; but she added, "Why need the ship be named for anybody? A ship is such a beautiful, graceful thing, it should have a fancy name."

"Well, suggest one," said Moses.

"Don't you remember," said Mara, "one Saturday afternoon, when you and Sally and I launched your little ship down in the cove after you had come from your first voyage at the Banks?"

"I do," said Sally. "We called that the Ariel, Mara, after that old torn play you were so fond of. That's a pretty name for a ship."

"Why not take that?" said Mara.

"I bow to the decree," said Moses. "The Ariel it shall be."

"Yes; and you remember," said Sally, "Mr. Moses here promised at that time that he would build a ship, and take us two round the world with him."

Moses's eyes fell upon Mara as Sally said these words with a sort of sudden earnestness of expression which struck her. He was really feeling very much about something, under all the bantering disguise of his demeanor, she said to herself. Could it be that he felt unhappy about his prospects with Sally? That careless liveliness of hers might wound him perhaps now, when he felt that he was soon to leave her.

Mara was conscious herself of a deep undercurrent of sadness as the time approached for the ship to sail that should carry Moses from her, and she could not but think some such feeling must possess her mind. In vain she looked into Sally's great Spanish eyes for any signs of a lurking softness or tenderness concealed under her sparkling vivacity. Sally's eyes were admirable windows of exactly the right size and color for an earnest, tender spirit to look out of, but just now there was nobody at the casement but a slippery elf peering out in tricky defiance.

When the three arrived at the house, tea was waiting on the table for them. Mara fancied that Moses looked sad and preoccupied as they sat down to the tea-table, which Mrs. Pennel had set forth festively, with the best china and the finest tablecloth and the choicest sweetmeats. In

fact, Moses did feel that sort of tumult and upheaving of the soul which a young man experiences when the great crisis comes which is to plunge him into the struggles of manhood. It is a time when he wants sympathy and is grated upon by uncomprehending merriment, and therefore his answers to Sally grew brief and even harsh at times, and Mara sometimes perceived him looking at herself with a singular fixedness of expression, though he withdrew his eyes whenever she turned hers to look on him. Like many another little woman, she had fixed a theory about her friends, into which she was steadily interweaving all the facts she saw. Sally must love Moses, because she had known her from childhood as a good and affectionate girl, and it was impossible that she could have been going on with Moses as she had for the last six months without loving him. She must evidently have seen that he cared for her; and in how many ways had she shown that she liked his society and him! But then evidently she did not understand him, and Mara felt a little womanly self-pluming on the thought that she knew him so much better. She was resolved that she would talk with Sally about it, and show her that she was disappointing Moses and hurting his feelings. Yes, she said to herself, Sally has a kind heart, and her coquettish desire to conceal from him the extent of her affection ought now to give way to the outspoken tenderness of real love.

So Mara pressed Sally with the old-times request to stay and sleep with her; for these two, the only young girls in so lonely a neighborhood, had no means of excitement or dissipation beyond this occasional sleeping together--by which is meant, of course, lying awake all night

talking.

When they were alone together in their chamber, Sally let down her long black hair, and stood with her back to Mara brushing it. Mara sat looking out of the window, where the moon was making a wide sheet of silver-sparkling water. Everything was so quiet that the restless dash of the tide could be plainly heard. Sally was rattling away with her usual gayety.

"And so the launching is to come off next Thursday. What shall you wear?"

"I'm sure I haven't thought," said Mara.

"Well, I shall try and finish my blue merino for the occasion. What fun it will be! I never was on a ship when it was launched, and I think it will be something perfectly splendid!"

"But doesn't it sometimes seem sad to think that after all this Moses will leave us to be gone so long?"

"What do I care?" said Sally, tossing back her long hair as she brushed it, and then stopping to examine one of her eyelashes.

"Sally dear, you often speak in that way," said Mara, "but really and seriously, you do yourself great injustice. You could not certainly have

been going on as you have these six months past with a man you did not care for."

"Well, I do care for him, 'sort o'," said Sally; "but is that any reason I should break my heart for his going?--that's too much for any man."

"But, Sally, you must know that Moses loves you."

"I'm not so sure," said Sally, freakishly tossing her head and laughing.

"If he did not," said Mara, "why has he sought you so much, and taken every opportunity to be with you? I'm sure I've been left here alone hour after hour, when my only comfort was that it was because my two best friends loved each other, as I know they must some time love some one better than they do me."

The most practiced self-control must fail some time, and Mara's voice faltered on these last words, and she put her hands over her eyes. Sally turned quickly and looked at her, then giving her hair a sudden fold round her shoulders, and running to her friend, she kneeled down on the floor by her, and put her arms round her waist, and looked up into her face with an air of more gravity than she commonly used.

"Now, Mara, what a wicked, inconsistent fool I have been! Did you feel lonesome?--did you care? I ought to have seen that; but I'm selfish, I

love admiration, and I love to have some one to flatter me, and run after me; and so I've been going on and on in this silly way. But I didn't know you cared--indeed, I didn't--you are such a deep little thing. Nobody can ever tell what you feel. I never shall forgive myself, if you have been lonesome, for you are worth five hundred times as much as I am. You really do love Moses. I don't."

"I do love him as a dear brother," said Mara.

"Dear fiddlestick," said Sally. "Love is love; and when a person loves all she can, it isn't much use to talk so. I've been a wicked sinner, that I have. Love? Do you suppose I would bear with Moses Pennel all his ins and outs and ups and downs, and be always putting him before myself in everything, as you do? No, I couldn't; I haven't it in me; but you have. He's a sinner, too, and deserves to get me for a wife. But, Mara, I have tormented him well--there's some comfort in that."

"It's no comfort to me," said Mara. "I see his heart is set on you--the happiness of his life depends on you--and that he is pained and hurt when you give him only cold, trifling words when he needs real true love. It is a serious thing, dear, to have a strong man set his whole heart on you. It will do him a great good or a great evil, and you ought not to make light of it."

"Oh, pshaw, Mara, you don't know these fellows; they are only playing games with us. If they once catch us, they have no mercy; and for one

here's a child that isn't going to be caught. I can see plain enough that Moses Pennel has been trying to get me in love with him, but he doesn't love me. No, he doesn't," said Sally, reflectively. "He only wants to make a conquest of me, and I'm just the same. I want to make a conquest of him,--at least I have been wanting to,--but now I see it's a false, wicked kind of way to do as we've been doing."

"And is it really possible, Sally, that you don't love him?" said Mara, her large, serious eyes looking into Sally's. "What! be with him so much,--seem to like him so much,--look at him as I have seen you do,--and not love him!"

"I can't help my eyes; they will look so," said Sally, hiding her face in Mara's lap with a sort of coquettish consciousness. "I tell you I've been silly and wicked; but he's just the same exactly."

"And you have worn his ring all summer?"

"Yes, and he has worn mine; and I have a lock of his hair, and he has a lock of mine; yet I don't believe he cares for them a bit. Oh, his heart is safe enough. If he has any, it isn't with me: that I know."

"But if you found it were, Sally? Suppose you found that, after all, you were the one love and hope of his life; that all he was doing and thinking was for you; that he was laboring, and toiling, and leaving home, so that he might some day offer you a heart and home, and be your

best friend for life? Perhaps he dares not tell you how he really does feel."

"It's no such thing! it's no such thing!" said Sally, lifting up her head, with her eyes full of tears, which she dashed angrily away. "What am I crying for? I hate him. I'm glad he's going away. Lately it has been such a trouble to me to have things go on so. I'm really getting to dislike him. You are the one he ought to love. Perhaps all this time you are the one he does love," said Sally, with a sudden energy, as if a new thought had dawned in her mind.

"Oh, no; he does not even love me as he once did, when we were children," said Mara. "He is so shut up in himself, so reserved, I know nothing about what passes in his heart."

"No more does anybody," said Sally. "Moses Pennel isn't one that says and does things straightforward because he feels so; but he says and does them to see what you will do. That's his way. Nobody knows why he has been going on with me as he has. He has had his own reasons, doubtless, as I have had mine."

"He has admired you very much, Sally," said Mara, "and praised you to me very warmly. He thinks you are so handsome. I could tell you ever so many things he has said about you. He knows as I do that you are a more enterprising, practical sort of body than I am, too. Everybody thinks you are engaged. I have heard it spoken of everywhere."

"Everybody is mistaken, then, as usual," said Sally. "Perhaps Aunt Roxy was in the right of it when she said that Moses would never be in love with anybody but himself."

"Aunt Roxy has always been prejudiced and unjust to Moses," said Mara, her cheeks flushing. "She never liked him from a child, and she never can be made to see anything good in him. I know that he has a deep heart,--a nature that craves affection and sympathy; and it is only because he is so sensitive that he is so reserved and conceals his feelings so much. He has a noble, kind heart, and I believe he truly loves you, Sally; it must be so."

Sally rose from the floor and went on arranging her hair without speaking. Something seemed to disturb her mind. She bit her lip, and threw down the brush and comb violently. In the clear depths of the little square of looking-glass a face looked into hers, whose eyes were perturbed as if with the shadows of some coming inward storm; the black brows were knit, and the lips quivered. She drew a long breath and burst out into a loud laugh.

"What are you laughing at now?" said Mara, who stood in her white night-dress by the window, with her hair falling in golden waves about her face.

"Oh, because these fellows are so funny," said Sally; "it's such fun to

see their actions. Come now," she added, turning to Mara, "don't look so grave and sanctified. It's better to laugh than cry about things, any time. It's a great deal better to be made hard-hearted like me, and not care for anybody, than to be like you, for instance. The idea of any one's being in love is the drollest thing to me. I haven't the least idea how it feels. I wonder if I ever shall be in love!"

"It will come to you in its time, Sally."

"Oh, yes,--I suppose like the chicken-pox or the whooping cough," said Sally; "one of the things to be gone through with, and rather disagreeable while it lasts,--so I hope to put it off as long as possible."

"Well, come," said Mara, "we must not sit up all night."

After the two girls were nestled into bed and the light out, instead of the brisk chatter there fell a great silence between them. The full round moon cast the reflection of the window on the white bed, and the ever restless moan of the sea became more audible in the fixed stillness. The two faces, both young and fair, yet so different in their expression, lay each still on its pillow,--their wide-open eyes gleaming out in the shadow like mystical gems. Each was breathing softly, as if afraid of disturbing the other. At last Sally gave an impatient movement.

"How lonesome the sea sounds in the night," she said. "I wish it would ever be still."

"I like to hear it," said Mara. "When I was in Boston, for a while I thought I could not sleep, I used to miss it so much."

There was another silence, which lasted so long that each girl thought the other asleep, and moved softly, but at a restless movement from Sally, Mara spoke again.

"Sally,--you asleep?"

"No,--I thought you were."

"I wanted to ask you," said Mara, "did Moses ever say anything to you about me?--you know I told you how much he said about you."

"Yes; he asked me once if you were engaged to Mr. Adams."

"And what did you tell him?" said Mara, with increasing interest.

"Well, I only plagued him. I sometimes made him think you were, and sometimes that you were not; and then again, that there was a deep mystery in hand. But I praised and glorified Mr. Adams, and told him what a splendid match it would be, and put on any little bits of embroidery here and there that I could lay hands on. I used to make him

sulky and gloomy for a whole evening sometimes. In that way it was one of the best weapons I had."

"Sally, what does make you love to tease people so?" said Mara.

"Why, you know the hymn says,--

'Let dogs delight to bark and bite,
For God hath made them so;
Let bears and lions growl and fight,
For 'tis their nature too.'

That's all the account I can give of it."

"But," said Mara, "I never can rest easy a moment when I see I am making a person uncomfortable."

"Well, I don't tease anybody but the men. I don't tease father or mother or you,--but men are fair game; they are such thumbby, blundering creatures, and we can confuse them so."

"Take care, Sally, it's playing with edge tools; you may lose your heart some day in this kind of game."

"Never you fear," said Sally; "but aren't you sleepy?--let's go to sleep."

Both girls turned their faces resolutely in opposite directions, and remained for an hour with their large eyes looking out into the moonlit chamber, like the fixed stars over Harpswell Bay. At last sleep drew softly down the fringy curtains.