

## CHAPTER XXX

### THE LAUNCH OF THE ARIEL

In the plain, simple regions we are describing,--where the sea is the great avenue of active life, and the pine forests are the great source of wealth,--ship-building is an engrossing interest, and there is no fête that calls forth the community like the launching of a vessel. And no wonder; for what is there belonging to this workaday world of ours that has such a never-failing fund of poetry and grace as a ship? A ship is a beauty and a mystery wherever we see it: its white wings touch the regions of the unknown and the imaginative; they seem to us full of the odors of quaint, strange, foreign shores, where life, we fondly dream, moves in brighter currents than the muddy, tranquil tides of every day.

Who that sees one bound outward, with her white breasts swelling and heaving, as if with a reaching expectancy, does not feel his own heart swell with a longing impulse to go with her to the far-off shores? Even at dingy, crowded wharves, amid the stir and tumult of great cities, the coming in of a ship is an event that never can lose its interest. But on these romantic shores of Maine, where all is so wild and still, and the blue sea lies embraced in the arms of dark, solitary forests, the sudden incoming of a ship from a distant voyage is a sort of romance. Who that has stood by the blue waters of Middle Bay, engirdled as it is by soft slopes of green farming land, interchanged here and there with heavy

billows of forest-trees, or rocky, pine-crowned promontories, has not felt that sense of seclusion and solitude which is so delightful? And then what a wonder! There comes a ship from China, drifting in like a white cloud,--the gallant creature! how the waters hiss and foam before her! with what a great free, generous splash she throws out her anchors, as if she said a cheerful "Well done!" to some glorious work accomplished! The very life and spirit of strange romantic lands come with her; suggestions of sandal-wood and spice breathe through the pine-woods; she is an oriental queen, with hands full of mystical gifts; "all her garments smell of myrrh and cassia, out of the ivory palaces, whereby they have made her glad." No wonder men have loved ships like birds, and that there have been found brave, rough hearts that in fatal wrecks chose rather to go down with their ocean love than to leave her in the last throes of her death-agony.

A ship-building, a ship-sailing community has an unconscious poetry ever underlying its existence. Exotic ideas from foreign lands relieve the trite monotony of life; the ship-owner lives in communion with the whole world, and is less likely to fall into the petty commonplaces that infest the routine of inland life.

Never arose a clearer or lovelier October morning than that which was to start the Ariel on her watery pilgrimage. Moses had risen while the stars were yet twinkling over their own images in Middle Bay, to go down and see that everything was right; and in all the houses that we know in the vicinity, everybody woke with the one thought of being ready to go

to the launching.

Mrs. Pennel and Mara were also up by starlight, busy over the provisions for the ample cold collation that was to be spread in a barn adjoining the scene,--the materials for which they were packing into baskets covered with nice clean linen cloths, ready for the little sail-boat which lay within a stone's throw of the door in the brightening dawn, her white sails looking rosy in the advancing light.

It had been agreed that the Pennels and the Kittridges should cross together in this boat with their contributions of good cheer.

The Kittridges, too, had been astir with the dawn, intent on their quota of the festive preparations, in which Dame Kittridge's housewifely reputation was involved,--for it had been a disputed point in the neighborhood whether she or Mrs. Pennel made the best doughnuts; and of course, with this fact before her mind, her efforts in this line had been all but superhuman.

The Captain skipped in and out in high feather,--occasionally pinching Sally's cheek, and asking if she were going as captain or mate upon the vessel after it was launched, for which he got in return a fillip of his sleeve or a sly twitch of his coat-tails, for Sally and her old father were on romping terms with each other from early childhood, a thing which drew frequent lectures from the always exhorting Mrs. Kittridge.

"Such levity!" she said, as she saw Sally in full chase after his retreating figure, in order to be revenged for some sly allusions he had whispered in her ear.

"Sally Kittridge! Sally Kittridge!" she called, "come back this minute. What are you about? I should think your father was old enough to know better."

"Lawful sakes, Polly, it kind o' renews one's youth to get a new ship done," said the Captain, skipping in at another door. "Sort o' puts me in mind o' that I went out cap'en in when I was jist beginning to court you, as somebody else is courtin' our Sally here."

"Now, father," said Sally, threateningly, "what did I tell you?"

"It's really lemancholy," said the Captain, "to think how it does distress gals to talk to 'em 'bout the fellers, when they ain't thinkin' o' nothin' else all the time. They can't even laugh without sayin' he-he-he!"

"Now, father, you know I've told you five hundred times that I don't care a cent for Moses Pennel,--that he's a hateful creature," said Sally, looking very red and determined.

"Yes, yes," said the Captain, "I take that ar's the reason you've ben a-wearin' the ring he gin you and them ribbins you've got on your neck

this blessed minute, and why you've giggled off to singin'-school, and Lord knows where with him all summer,--that ar's clear now."

"But, father," said Sally, getting redder and more earnest, "I don't care for him really, and I've told him so. I keep telling him so, and he will run after me."

"Haw! haw!" laughed the Captain; "he will, will he? Jist so, Sally; that ar's jist the way your ma there talked to me, and it kind o' 'couraged me along. I knew that gals always has to be read back'ard jist like the writin' in the Barbary States."

"Captain Kittridge, will you stop such ridiculous talk?" said his helpmeet; "and jist carry this 'ere basket of cold chicken down to the landin' agin the Pennels come round in the boat; and you must step spry, for there's two more baskets a-comin'."

The Captain shouldered the basket and walked toward the sea with it, and Sally retired to her own little room to hold a farewell consultation with her mirror before she went.

You will perhaps think from the conversation that you heard the other night, that Sally now will cease all thought of coquettish allurements in her acquaintance with Moses, and cause him to see by an immediate and marked change her entire indifference. Probably, as she stands thoughtfully before her mirror, she is meditating on the propriety of

laying aside the ribbons he gave her--perhaps she will alter that arrangement of her hair which is one that he himself particularly dictated as most becoming to the character of her face. She opens a little drawer, which looks like a flower garden, all full of little knots of pink and blue and red, and various fancies of the toilet, and looks into it reflectively. She looses the ribbon from her hair and chooses another,--but Moses gave her that too, and said, she remembers, that when she wore that "he should know she had been thinking of him." Sally is Sally yet--as full of sly dashes of coquetry as a tulip is of streaks.

"There's no reason I should make myself look like a fright because I don't care for him," she says; "besides, after all that he has said, he ought to say more,--he ought at least to give me a chance to say no,--he shall, too," said the gypsy, winking at the bright, elfish face in the glass.

"Sally Kittridge, Sally Kittridge," called her mother, "how long will you stay prinkin'?--come down this minute."

"Law now, mother," said the Captain, "gals must prink afore such times; it's as natural as for hens to dress their feathers afore a thunder-storm."

Sally at last appeared, all in a flutter of ribbons and scarfs, whose bright, high colors assorted well with the ultramarine blue of her

dress, and the vivid pomegranate hue of her cheeks. The boat with its white sails flapping was balancing and courtesying up and down on the waters, and in the stern sat Mara; her shining white straw hat trimmed with blue ribbons set off her golden hair and pink shell complexion. The dark, even penciling of her eyebrows, and the beauty of the brow above, the brown translucent clearness of her thoughtful eyes, made her face striking even with its extreme delicacy of tone. She was unusually animated and excited, and her cheeks had a rich bloom of that pure deep rose-color which flushes up in fair complexions under excitement, and her eyes had a kind of intense expression, for which they had always been remarkable. All the deep secluded yearning of repressed nature was looking out of them, giving that pathos which every one has felt at times in the silence of eyes.

"Now bless that ar gal," said the Captain, when he saw her. "Our Sally here's handsome, but she's got the real New-Jerusalem look, she has--like them in the Revelations that wears the fine linen, clean and white."

"Bless you, Captain Kittridge! don't be a-makin' a fool of yourself about no girl at your time o' life," said Mrs. Kittridge, speaking under her breath in a nipping, energetic tone, for they were coming too near the boat to speak very loud.

"Good mornin', Mis' Pennel; we've got a good day, and a mercy it is so. 'Member when we launched the North Star, that it rained guns all the

mornin', and the water got into the baskets when we was a-fetchin' the things over, and made a sight o' pester."

"Yes," said Mrs. Pennel, with an air of placid satisfaction, "everything seems to be going right about this vessel."

Mrs. Kittridge and Sally were soon accommodated with seats, and Zephaniah Pennel and the Captain began trimming sail. The day was one of those perfect gems of days which are to be found only in the jewel-casket of October, a day neither hot nor cold, with an air so clear that every distant pine-tree top stood out in vivid separateness, and every woody point and rocky island seemed cut out in crystalline clearness against the sky. There was so brisk a breeze that the boat slanted quite to the water's edge on one side, and Mara leaned over and pensively drew her little pearly hand through the water, and thought of the days when she and Moses took this sail together--she in her pink sun-bonnet, and he in his round straw hat, with a tin dinner-pail between them; and now, to-day the ship of her childish dreams was to be launched. That launching was something she regarded almost with superstitious awe. The ship, built on one element, but designed to have its life in another, seemed an image of the soul, framed and fashioned with many a weary hammer-stroke in this life, but finding its true element only when it sails out into the ocean of eternity. Such was her thought as she looked down the clear, translucent depths; but would it have been of any use to try to utter it to anybody?--to Sally Kittridge, for example, who sat all in a cheerful rustle of bright ribbons beside

her, and who would have shown her white teeth all round at such a suggestion, and said, "Now, Mara, who but you would have thought of that?"

But there are souls sent into this world who seem to have always mysterious affinities for the invisible and the unknown--who see the face of everything beautiful through a thin veil of mystery and sadness. The Germans call this yearning of spirit home-sickness--the dim remembrances of a spirit once affiliated to some higher sphere, of whose lost brightness all things fair are the vague reminders. As Mara looked pensively into the water, it seemed to her that every incident of life came up out of its depths to meet her. Her own face reflected in a wavering image, sometimes shaped itself to her gaze in the likeness of the pale lady of her childhood, who seemed to look up at her from the waters with dark, mysterious eyes of tender longing. Once or twice this dreamy effect grew so vivid that she shivered, and drawing herself up from the water, tried to take an interest in a very minute account which Mrs. Kittridge was giving of the way to make corn-fritters which should taste exactly like oysters. The closing direction about the quantity of mace Mrs. Kittridge felt was too sacred for common ears, and therefore whispered it into Mrs. Pennel's bonnet with a knowing nod and a look from her black spectacles which would not have been bad for a priestess of Dodona in giving out an oracle. In this secret direction about the mace lay the whole mystery of corn-oysters; and who can say what consequences might ensue from casting it in an unguarded manner before the world?

And now the boat which has rounded Harpswell Point is skimming across to the head of Middle Bay, where the new ship can distinctly be discerned standing upon her ways, while moving clusters of people were walking up and down her decks or lining the shore in the vicinity. All sorts of gossiping and neighborly chit-chat is being interchanged in the little world assembling there.

"I hain't seen the Pennels nor the Kittridges yet," said Aunt Ruey, whose little roly-poly figure was made illustrious in her best cinnamon-colored dyed silk. "There's Moses Pennel a-goin' up that ar ladder. Dear me, what a beautiful feller he is! it's a pity he ain't a-goin' to marry Mara Lincoln, after all."

"Ruey, do hush up," said Miss Roxy, frowning sternly down from under the shadow of a preternatural black straw bonnet, trimmed with huge bows of black ribbon, which head-piece sat above her curls like a helmet. "Don't be a-gettin' sentimental, Ruey, whatever else you get--and talkin' like Miss Emily Sewell about match-makin'; I can't stand it; it rises on my stomach, such talk does. As to that ar Moses Pennel, folks ain't so certain as they thinks what he'll do. Sally Kittridge may think he's a-goin' to have her, because he's been a-foolin' round with her all summer, and Sally Kittridge may jist find she's mistaken, that's all."

"Yes," said Miss Ruey, "I 'member when I was a girl my old aunt, Jerushy Hopkins, used to be always a-dwellin' on this Scripture, and I've been

havin' it brought up to me this mornin': 'There are three things which are too wonderful for me, yea, four, which I know not: the way of an eagle in the air, the way of a serpent upon a rock, the way of a ship in the sea, and the way of a man with a maid.' She used to say it as a kind o' caution to me when she used to think Abram Peters was bein' attentive to me. I've often reflected what a massy it was that ar never come to nothin', for he's a poor drunken critter now."

"Well, for my part," said Miss Roxy, fixing her eyes critically on the boat that was just at the landing, "I should say the ways of a maid with a man was full as particular as any of the rest of 'em. Do look at Sally Kittridge now. There's Tom Hiers a-helpin' her out of the boat; and did you see the look she gin Moses Pennel as she went by him? Wal', Moses has got Mara on his arm anyhow; there's a gal worth six-and-twenty of the other. Do see them ribbins and scarfs, and the furbelows, and the way that ar Sally Kittridge handles her eyes. She's one that one feller ain't never enough for."

Mara's heart beat fast when the boat touched the shore, and Moses and one or two other young men came to assist in their landing. Never had he looked more beautiful than at this moment, when flushed with excitement and satisfaction he stood on the shore, his straw hat off, and his black curls blowing in the sea-breeze. He looked at Sally with a look of frank admiration as she stood there dropping her long black lashes over her bright cheeks, and coquettishly looking out from under them, but she stepped forward with a little energy of movement, and took the offered

hand of Tom Hiers, who was gazing at her too with undisguised rapture, and Moses, stepping into the boat, helped Mrs. Pennel on shore, and then took Mara on his arm, looking her over as he did so with a glance far less assured and direct than he had given to Sally.

"You won't be afraid to climb the ladders, Mara?" said he.

"Not if you help me," she said.

Sally and Tom Hiers had already walked on toward the vessel, she ostentatiously chatting and laughing with him. Moses's brow clouded a little, and Mara noticed it. Moses thought he did not care for Sally; he knew that the little hand that was now lying on his arm was the one he wanted, and yet he felt vexed when he saw Sally walk off triumphantly with another. It was the dog-in-the-manger feeling which possesses coquettes of both sexes. Sally, on all former occasions, had shown a marked preference for him, and professed supreme indifference to Tom Hiers.

"It's all well enough," he said to himself, and he helped Mara up the ladders with the greatest deference and tenderness. "This little woman is worth ten such girls as Sally, if one only could get her heart. Here we are on our ship, Mara," he said, as he lifted her over the last barrier and set her down on the deck. "Look over there, do you see Eagle Island? Did you dream when we used to go over there and spend the day that you ever would be on my ship, as you are to-day? You won't be

afraid, will you, when the ship starts?"

"I am too much of a sea-girl to fear on anything that sails in water," said Mara with enthusiasm. "What a splendid ship! how nicely it all looks!"

"Come, let me take you over it," said Moses, "and show you my cabin."

Meanwhile the graceful little vessel was the subject of various comments by the crowd of spectators below, and the clatter of workmen's hammers busy in some of the last preparations could yet be heard like a shower of hail-stones under her.

"I hope the ways are well greased," said old Captain Eldritch. "'Member how the John Peters stuck in her ways for want of their being greased?"

"Don't you remember the Grand Turk, that keeled over five minutes after she was launched?" said the quavering voice of Miss Ruey; "there was jist such a company of thoughtless young creatures aboard as there is now."

"Well, there wasn't nobody hurt," said Captain Kittridge. "If Mis' Kittridge would let me, I'd be glad to go aboard this 'ere, and be launched with 'em."

"I tell the Cap'n he's too old to be climbin' round and mixin' with

young folks' frolics," said Mrs. Kittridge.

"I suppose, Cap'n Pennel, you've seen that the ways is all right," said Captain Broad, returning to the old subject.

"Oh yes, it's all done as well as hands can do it," said Zephaniah.

"Moses has been here since starlight this morning, and Moses has pretty good faculty about such matters."

"Where's Mr. Sewell and Miss Emily?" said Miss Ruey. "Oh, there they are over on that pile of rocks; they get a pretty fair view there."

Mr. Sewell and Miss Emily were sitting under a cedar-tree, with two or three others, on a projecting point whence they could have a clear view of the launching. They were so near that they could distinguish clearly the figures on deck, and see Moses standing with his hat off, the wind blowing his curls back, talking earnestly to the golden-haired little woman on his arm.

"It is a launch into life for him," said Mr. Sewell, with suppressed feeling.

"Yes, and he has Mara on his arm," said Miss Emily; "that's as it should be. Who is that that Sally Kittridge is flirting with now? Oh, Tom Hiers. Well! he's good enough for her. Why don't she take him?" said Miss Emily, in her zeal jogging her brother's elbow.

"I'm sure, Emily, I don't know," said Mr. Sewell dryly; "perhaps he won't be taken."

"Don't you think Moses looks handsome?" said Miss Emily. "I declare there is something quite romantic and Spanish about him; don't you think so, Theophilus?"

"Yes, I think so," said her brother, quietly looking, externally, the meekest and most matter-of-fact of persons, but deep within him a voice sighed, "Poor Dolores, be comforted, your boy is beautiful and prosperous!"

"There, there!" said Miss Emily, "I believe she is starting."

All eyes of the crowd were now fixed on the ship; the sound of hammers stopped; the workmen were seen flying in every direction to gain good positions to see her go,--that sight so often seen on those shores, yet to which use cannot dull the most insensible.

First came a slight, almost imperceptible, movement, then a swift exultant rush, a dash into the hissing water, and the air was rent with hurrahs as the beautiful ship went floating far out on the blue seas, where her fairer life was henceforth to be.

Mara was leaning on Moses's arm at the instant the ship began to move,

but in the moment of the last dizzy rush she felt his arm go tightly round her, holding her so close that she could hear the beating of his heart.

"Hurrah!" he said, letting go his hold the moment the ship floated free, and swinging his hat in answer to the hats, scarfs, and handkerchiefs, which fluttered from the crowd on the shore. His eyes sparkled with a proud light as he stretched himself upward, raising his head and throwing back his shoulders with a triumphant movement. He looked like a young sea-king just crowned; and the fact is the less wonderful, therefore, that Mara felt her heart throb as she looked at him, and that a treacherous throb of the same nature shook the breezy ribbons fluttering over the careless heart of Sally. A handsome young sea-captain, treading the deck of his own vessel, is, in his time and place, a prince.

Moses looked haughtily across at Sally, and then passed a half-laughing defiant flash of eyes between them. He looked at Mara, who could certainly not have known what was in her eyes at the moment,--an expression that made his heart give a great throb, and wonder if he saw aright: but it was gone a moment after, as all gathered around in a knot exchanging congratulations on the fortunate way in which the affair had gone off. Then came the launching in boats to go back to the collation on shore, where were high merry-makings for the space of one or two hours: and thus was fulfilled the first part of Moses Pennel's Saturday afternoon prediction.