CHAPTER XXXI

GREEK MEETS GREEK

Moses was now within a day or two of the time of his sailing, and yet the distance between him and Mara seemed greater than ever. It is astonishing, when two people are once started on a wrong understanding with each other, how near they may live, how intimate they may be, how many things they may have in common, how many words they may speak, how closely they may seem to simulate intimacy, confidence, friendship, while yet there lies a gulf between them that neither crosses,--a reserve that neither explores.

Like most shy girls, Mara became more shy the more really she understood the nature of her own feelings. The conversation with Sally had opened her eyes to the secret of her own heart, and she had a guilty feeling as if what she had discovered must be discovered by every one else. Yes, it was clear she loved Moses in a way that made him, she thought, more necessary to her happiness than she could ever be to his,--in a way that made it impossible to think of him as wholly and for life devoted to another, without a constant inner conflict. In vain had been all her little stratagems practiced upon herself the whole summer long, to prove to herself that she was glad that the choice had fallen upon Sally. She saw clearly enough now that she was not glad,--that there was no woman or girl living, however dear, who could come for life between him and

her, without casting on her heart the shuddering sorrow of a dim eclipse.

But now the truth was plain to herself, her whole force was directed toward the keeping of her secret. "I may suffer," she thought, "but I will have strength not to be silly and weak. Nobody shall know,--nobody shall dream it,--and in the long, long time that he is away, I shall have strength given me to overcome."

So Mara put on her most cheerful and matter-of-fact kind of face, and plunged into the making of shirts and knitting of stockings, and talked of the coming voyage with such a total absence of any concern, that Moses began to think, after all, there could be no depth to her feelings, or that the deeper ones were all absorbed by some one else.

"You really seem to enjoy the prospect of my going away," said he to her, one morning, as she was energetically busying herself with her preparations.

"Well, of course; you know your career must begin. You must make your fortune; and it is pleasant to think how favorably everything is shaping for you."

"One likes, however, to be a little regretted," said Moses, in a tone of pique.

"A little regretted!" Mara's heart beat at these words, but her hypocrisy was well practiced. She put down the rebellious throb, and assuming a look of open, sisterly friendliness, said, quite naturally, "Why, we shall all miss you, of course."

"Of course," said Moses,--"one would be glad to be missed some other way than of course."

"Oh, as to that, make yourself easy," said Mara. "We shall all be dull enough when you are gone to content the most exacting." Still she spoke, not stopping her stitching, and raising her soft brown eyes with a frank, open look into Moses's--no tremor, not even of an eyelid.

"You men must have everything," she continued, gayly, "the enterprise, the adventure, the novelty, the pleasure of feeling that you are something, and can do something in the world; and besides all this, you want the satisfaction of knowing that we women are following in chains behind your triumphal car!"

There was a dash of bitterness in this, which was a rare ingredient in Mara's conversation.

Moses took the word. "And you women sit easy at home, sewing and singing, and forming romantic pictures of our life as like its homely reality as romances generally are to reality; and while we are off in the hard struggle for position and the means of life, you hold your

hearts ready for the first rich man that offers a fortune ready made."

"The first!" said Mara. "Oh, you naughty! sometimes we try two or three."

"Well, then, I suppose this is from one of them," said Moses, flapping down a letter from Boston, directed in a masculine hand, which he had got at the post-office that morning.

Now Mara knew that this letter was nothing in particular, but she was taken by surprise, and her skin was delicate as peach-blossom, and so she could not help a sudden blush, which rose even to her golden hair, vexed as she was to feel it coming. She put the letter quietly in her pocket, and for a moment seemed too discomposed to answer.

"You do well to keep your own counsel," said Moses. "No friend so near as one's self, is a good maxim. One does not expect young girls to learn it so early, but it seems they do."

"And why shouldn't they as well as young men?" said Mara. "Confidence begets confidence, they say."

"I have no ambition to play confidant," said Moses; "although as one who stands to you in the relation of older brother and guardian, and just on the verge of a long voyage, I might be supposed anxious to know."

"And I have no ambition to be confidant," said Mara, all her spirit sparkling in her eyes; "although when one stands to you in the relation of an only sister, I might be supposed perhaps to feel some interest to be in your confidence."

The words "older brother" and "only sister" grated on the ears of both the combatants as a decisive sentence. Mara never looked so pretty in her life, for the whole force of her being was awake, glowing and watchful, to guard passage, door, and window of her soul, that no treacherous hint might escape. Had he not just reminded her that he was only an older brother? and what would he think if he knew the truth?--and Moses thought the words only sister unequivocal declaration of how the matter stood in her view, and so he rose, and saying, "I won't detain you longer from your letter," took his hat and went out.

"Are you going down to Sally's?" said Mara, coming to the door and looking out after him.

"Yes."

"Well, ask her to come home with you and spend the evening. I have ever so many things to tell her."

"I will," said Moses, as he lounged away.

"The thing is clear enough," said Moses to himself. "Why should I make a fool of myself any further? What possesses us men always to set our hearts precisely on what isn't to be had? There's Sally Kittridge likes me; I can see that plainly enough, for all her mincing; and why couldn't I have had the sense to fall in love with her? She will make a splendid, showy woman. She has talent and tact enough to rise to any position I may rise to, let me rise as high as I will. She will always have skill and energy in the conduct of life; and when all the froth and foam of youth has subsided, she will make a noble woman. Why, then, do I cling to this fancy? I feel that this little flossy cloud, this delicate, quiet little puff of thistledown, on which I have set my heart, is the only thing for me, and that without her my life will always be incomplete. I remember all our early life. It was she who sought me, and ran after me, and where has all that love gone to? Gone to this fellow; that's plain enough. When a girl like her is so comfortably cool and easy, it's because her heart is off somewhere else."

This conversation took place about four o'clock in as fine an October afternoon as you could wish to see. The sun, sloping westward, turned to gold the thousand blue scales of the ever-heaving sea, and soft, pine-scented winds were breathing everywhere through the forests, waving the long, swaying films of heavy moss, and twinkling the leaves of the silver birches that fluttered through the leafy gloom. The moon, already in the sky, gave promise of a fine moonlight night; and the wild and lonely stillness of the island, and the thoughts of leaving in a few days, all conspired to foster the restless excitement in our hero's mind

into a kind of romantic unrest.

Now, in some such states, a man disappointed in one woman will turn to another, because, in a certain way and measure, her presence stills the craving and fills the void. It is a sort of supposititious courtship,--a saying to one woman, who is sympathetic and receptive, the words of longing and love that another will not receive. To be sure it is a game unworthy of any true man,--a piece of sheer, reckless, inconsiderate selfishness. But men do it, as they do many other unworthy things, from the mere promptings of present impulse, and let consequences take care of themselves. Moses met Sally that afternoon in just the frame to play the lover in this hypothetical, supposititious way, with words and looks and tones that came from feelings given to another. And as to Sally? Well, for once, Greek met Greek; for although Sally, as we showed her, was a girl of generous impulses, she was yet in no danger of immediate translation on account of superhuman goodness. In short, Sally had made up her mind that Moses should give her a chance to say that precious and golden No, which should enable her to count him as one of her captives,--and then he might go where he liked for all her.

So said the wicked elf, as she looked into her own great eyes in the little square of mirror shaded by a misty asparagus bush; and to this end there were various braidings and adornings of the lustrous black hair, and coquettish earrings were mounted that hung glancing and twinkling just by the smooth outline of her glowing cheek,--and then Sally looked at herself in a friendly way of approbation, and nodded at

the bright dimpled shadow with a look of secret understanding. The real Sally and the Sally of the looking-glass were on admirable terms with each other, and both of one mind about the plan of campaign against the common enemy. Sally thought of him as he stood kingly and triumphant on the deck of his vessel, his great black eyes flashing confident glances into hers, and she felt a rebellious rustle of all her plumage. "No, sir," she said to herself, "you don't do it. You shall never find me among your slaves,"--"that you know of," added a doubtful voice within her. "Never to your knowledge," she said, as she turned away. "I wonder if he will come here this evening," she said, as she began to work upon a pillow-case,--one of a set which Mrs. Kittridge had confided to her nimble fingers. The seam was long, straight, and monotonous, and Sally was restless and fidgety; her thread would catch in knots, and when she tried to loosen it, would break, and the needle had to be threaded over. Somehow the work was terribly irksome to her, and the house looked so still and dim and lonesome, and the tick-tock of the kitchen-clock was insufferable, and Sally let her work fall in her lap and looked out of the open window, far to the open ocean, where a fresh breeze was blowing toward her, and her eyes grew deep and dreamy following the gliding ship sails. Sally was getting romantic. Had she been reading novels? Novels! What can a pretty woman find in a novel equal to the romance that is all the while weaving and unweaving about her, and of which no human foresight can tell her the catastrophe? It is novels that give false views of life. Is there not an eternal novel, with all these false, cheating views, written in the breast of every beautiful and attractive girl whose witcheries make every man that comes near her

talk like a fool? Like a sovereign princess, she never hears the truth, unless it be from the one manly man in a thousand, who understands both himself and her. From all the rest she hears only flatteries more or less ingenious, according to the ability of the framer. Compare, for instance, what Tom Brown says to little Seraphina at the party to-night, with what Tom Brown sober says to sober sister Maria about her to-morrow. Tom remembers that he was a fool last night, and knows what he thinks and always has thought to-day; but pretty Seraphina thinks he adores her, so that no matter what she does he will never see a flaw, she is sure of that,--poor little puss! She does not know that philosophic Tom looks at her as he does at a glass of champagne, or a dose of exhilarating gas, and calculates how much it will do for him to take of the stimulus without interfering with his serious and settled plans of life, which, of course, he doesn't mean to give up for her. The one-thousand-and-first man in creation is he that can feel the fascination but will not flatter, and that tries to tell to the little tyrant the rare word of truth that may save her; he is, as we say, the one-thousand-and-first. Well, as Sally sat with her great dark eyes dreamily following the ship, she mentally thought over all the compliments Moses had paid her, expressed or understood, and those of all her other admirers, who had built up a sort of cloud-world around her, so that her little feet never rested on the soil of reality. Sally was shrewd and keen, and had a native mother-wit in the discernment of spirits, that made her feel that somehow this was all false coin; but still she counted it over, and it looked so pretty and bright that she sighed to think it was not real.

"If it only had been," she thought; "if there were only any truth to the creature; he is so handsome,--it's a pity. But I do believe in his secret heart he is in love with Mara; he is in love with some one, I know. I have seen looks that must come from something real; but they were not for me. I have a kind of power over him, though," she said, resuming her old wicked look, "and I'll puzzle him a little, and torment him. He shall find his match in me," and Sally nodded to a cat-bird that sat perched on a pine-tree, as if she had a secret understanding with him, and the cat-bird went off into a perfect roulade of imitations of all that was going on in the late bird-operas of the season.

Sally was roused from her revery by a spray of goldenrod that was thrown into her lap by an invisible hand, and Moses soon appeared at the window.

"There's a plume that would be becoming to your hair," he said; "stay, let me arrange it."

"No, no; you'll tumble my hair,--what can you know of such things?"

Moses held the spray aloft, and leaned toward her with a sort of quiet, determined insistence.

"By your leave, fair lady," he said, wreathing it in her hair, and then drawing back a little, he looked at her with so much admiration that

Sally felt herself blush.

"Come, now, I dare say you've made a fright of me," she said, rising and instinctively turning to the looking-glass; but she had too much coquetry not to see how admirably the golden plume suited her black hair, and the brilliant eyes and cheeks; she turned to Moses again, and courtesied, saying "Thank you, sir," dropping her eyelashes with a mock humility.

"Come, now," said Moses; "I am sent after you to come and spend the evening; let's walk along the seashore, and get there by degrees."

And so they set out; but the path was circuitous, for Moses was always stopping, now at this point and now at that, and enacting some of those thousand little by-plays which a man can get up with a pretty woman. They searched for smooth pebbles where the waves had left them,--many-colored, pink and crimson and yellow and brown, all smooth and rounded by the eternal tossings of the old sea that had made playthings of them for centuries, and with every pebble given and taken were things said which should have meant more and more, had the play been earnest. Had Moses any idea of offering himself to Sally? No; but he was in one of those fluctuating, unresisting moods of mind in which he was willing to lie like a chip on the tide of present emotion, and let it rise and fall and dash him when it liked; and Sally never had seemed more beautiful and attractive to him than that afternoon, because there was a shade of reality and depth about her that he had never seen

before.

"Come on, and let me show you my hermitage," said Moses, guiding her along the slippery projecting rocks, all covered with yellow tresses of seaweed. Sally often slipped on this treacherous footing, and Moses was obliged to hold her up, and instinctively he threw a meaning into his manner so much more than ever he had before, that by the time they had gained the little cove both were really agitated and excited. He felt that temporary delirium which is often the mesmeric effect of a strong womanly presence, and she felt that agitation which every woman must when a determined hand is striking on the great vital chord of her being. When they had stepped round the last point of rock they found themselves driven by the advancing tide up into the little lonely grotto,--and there they were with no lookout but the wide blue sea, all spread out in rose and gold under the twilight skies, with a silver moon looking down upon them.

"Sally," said Moses, in a low, earnest whisper, "you love me,--do you not?" and he tried to pass his arm around her.

She turned and flashed at him a look of mingled terror and defiance, and struck out her hands at him; then impetuously turning away and retreating to the other end of the grotto, she sat down on a rock and began to cry.

Moses came toward her, and kneeling, tried to take her hand. She raised

her head angrily, and again repulsed him.

"Go!" she said. "What right had you to say that? What right had you even to think it?"

"Sally, you do love me. It cannot but be. You are a woman; you could not have been with me as we have and not feel more than friendship."

"Oh, you men!--your conceit passes understanding," said Sally. "You think we are born to be your bond slaves,--but for once you are mistaken, sir. I don't love you; and what's more, you don't love me,--you know you don't; you know that you love somebody else. You love Mara,--you know you do; there's no truth in you," she said, rising indignantly.

Moses felt himself color. There was an embarrassed pause, and then he answered,--

"Sally, why should I love Mara? Her heart is all given to another,--you yourself know it."

"I don't know it either," said Sally; "I know it isn't so."

"But you gave me to understand so."

"Well, sir, you put prying questions about what you ought to have asked

her, and so what was I to do? Besides, I did want to show you how much better Mara could do than to take you; besides, I didn't know till lately. I never thought she could care much for any man more than I could."

"And you think she loves me?" said Moses, eagerly, a flash of joy illuminating his face; "do you, really?"

"There you are," said Sally; "it's a shame I have let you know! Yes, Moses Pennel, she loves you like an angel, as none of you men deserve to be loved,--as you in particular don't."

Moses sat down on a point of rock, and looked on the ground discountenanced. Sally stood up glowing and triumphant, as if she had her foot on the neck of her oppressor and meant to make the most of it.

"Now what do you think of yourself for all this summer's work?--for what you have just said, asking me if I didn't love you? Supposing, now, I had done as other girls would, played the fool and blushed, and said yes? Why, to-morrow you would have been thinking how to be rid of me! I shall save you all that trouble, sir."

"Sally, I own I have been acting like a fool," said Moses, humbly.

"You have done more than that,--you have acted wickedly," said Sally.

"And am I the only one to blame?" said Moses, lifting his head with a show of resistance.

"Listen, sir!" said Sally, energetically; "I have played the fool and acted wrong too, but there is just this difference between you and me: you had nothing to lose, and I a great deal; your heart, such as it was, was safely disposed of. But supposing you had won mine, what would you have done with it? That was the last thing you considered."

"Go on, Sally, don't spare; I'm a vile dog, unworthy of either of you," said Moses.

Sally looked down on her handsome penitent with some relenting, as he sat quite dejected, his strong arms drooping, and his long eyelashes cast down.

"I'll be friends with you," she said, "because, after all, I'm not so very much better than you. We have both done wrong, and made dear Mara very unhappy. But after all, I was not so much to blame as you; because, if there had been any reality in your love, I could have paid it honestly. I had a heart to give,--I have it now, and hope long to keep it," said Sally.

"Sally, you are a right noble girl. I never knew what you were till now," said Moses, looking at her with admiration.

"It's the first time for all these six months that we have either of us spoken a word of truth or sense to each other. I never did anything but trifle with you, and you the same. Now we've come to some plain dry land, we may walk on and be friends. So now help me up these rocks, and I will go home."

"And you'll not come home with me?"

"Of course not. I think you may now go home and have one talk with Mara without witnesses."