

## CHAPTER XXXII

### THE BETROTHAL

Moses walked slowly home from his interview with Sally, in a sort of maze of confused thought. In general, men understand women only from the outside, and judge them with about as much real comprehension as an eagle might judge a canary-bird. The difficulty of real understanding intensifies in proportion as the man is distinctively manly, and the woman womanly. There are men with a large infusion of the feminine element in their composition who read the female nature with more understanding than commonly falls to the lot of men; but in general, when a man passes beyond the mere outside artifices and unrealities which lie between the two sexes, and really touches his finger to any vital chord in the heart of a fair neighbor, he is astonished at the quality of the vibration.

"I could not have dreamed there was so much in her," thought Moses, as he turned away from Sally Kittridge. He felt humbled as well as astonished by the moral lecture which this frisky elf with whom he had all summer been amusing himself, preached to him from the depths of a real woman's heart. What she said of Mara's loving him filled his eyes with remorseful tears,--and for the moment he asked himself whether this restless, jealous, exacting desire which he felt to appropriate her whole life and heart to himself were as really worthy of the name of

love as the generous self-devotion with which she had, all her life, made all his interests her own.

Was he to go to her now and tell her that he loved her, and therefore he had teased and vexed her,--therefore he had seemed to prefer another before her,--therefore he had practiced and experimented upon her nature? A suspicion rather stole upon him that love which expresses itself principally in making exactions and giving pain is not exactly worthy of the name. And yet he had been secretly angry with her all summer for being the very reverse of this; for her apparent cheerful willingness to see him happy with another; for the absence of all signs of jealousy,--all desire of exclusive appropriation. It showed, he said to himself, that there was no love; and now when it dawned on him that this might be the very heroism of self-devotion, he asked himself which was best worthy to be called love.

"She did love him, then!" The thought blazed up through the smouldering embers of thought in his heart like a tongue of flame. She loved him! He felt a sort of triumph in it, for he was sure Sally must know, they were so intimate. Well, he would go to her, and tell her all, confess all his sins, and be forgiven.

When he came back to the house, all was still evening. The moon, which was playing brightly on the distant sea, left one side of the brown house in shadow. Moses saw a light gleaming behind the curtain in the little room on the lower floor, which had been his peculiar sanctum

during the summer past. He had made a sort of library of it, keeping there his books and papers. Upon the white curtain flitted, from time to time, a delicate, busy shadow; now it rose and now it stooped, and then it rose again--grew dim and vanished, and then came out again. His heart beat quick.

Mara was in his room, busy, as she always had been before his departures, in cares for him. How many things had she made for him, and done and arranged for him, all his life long! things which he had taken as much as a matter of course as the shining of that moon. His thought went back to the times of his first going to sea,--he a rough, chaotic boy, sensitive and surly, and she the ever thoughtful good angel of a little girl, whose loving-kindness he had felt free to use and to abuse. He remembered that he made her cry there when he should have spoken lovingly and gratefully to her, and that the words of acknowledgment that ought to have been spoken, never had been said,--remained unsaid to that hour. He stooped low, and came quite close to the muslin curtain. All was bright in the room, and shadowy without; he could see her movements as through a thin white haze. She was packing his sea-chest; his things were lying about her, folded or rolled nicely. Now he saw her on her knees writing something with a pencil in a book, and then she enveloped it very carefully in silk paper, and tied it trimly, and hid it away at the bottom of the chest. Then she remained a moment kneeling at the chest, her head resting in her hands. A sort of strange, sacred feeling came over him as he heard a low murmur, and knew that she felt a Presence that he never felt or acknowledged. He felt somehow that he was

doing her a wrong thus to be prying upon moments when she thought herself alone with God; a sort of vague remorse filled him; he felt as if she were too good for him. He turned away, and entering the front door of the house, stepped noiselessly along and lifted the latch of the door. He heard a rustle as of one rising hastily as he opened it and stood before Mara. He had made up his mind what to say; but when she stood there before him, with her surprised, inquiring eyes, he felt confused.

"What, home so soon?" she said.

"You did not expect me, then?"

"Of course not,--not for these two hours; so," she said, looking about, "I found some mischief to do among your things. If you had waited as long as I expected, they would all have been quite right again, and you would never have known."

Moses sat down and drew her toward him, as if he were going to say something, and then stopped and began confusedly playing with her work-box.

"Now, please don't," said she, archly. "You know what a little old maid I am about my things!"

"Mara," said Moses, "people have asked you to marry them, have they

not?"

"People asked me to marry them!" said Mara. "I hope not. What an odd question!"

"You know what I mean," said Moses; "you have had offers of marriage--from Mr. Adams, for example."

"And what if I have?"

"You did not accept him, Mara?" said Moses.

"No, I did not."

"And yet he was a fine man, I am told, and well fitted to make you happy."

"I believe he was," said Mara, quietly.

"And why were you so foolish?"

Mara was fretted at this question. She supposed Moses had come to tell her of his engagement to Sally, and that this was a kind of preface, and she answered,--

"I don't know why you call it foolish. I was a true friend to Mr. Adams.

I saw intellectually that he might have the power of making any reasonable woman happy. I think now that the woman will be fortunate who becomes his wife; but I did not wish to marry him."

"Is there anybody you prefer to him, Mara?" said Moses.

She started up with glowing cheeks and sparkling eyes.

"You have no right to ask me that, though you are my brother."

"I am not your brother, Mara," said Moses, rising and going toward her, "and that is why I ask you. I feel I have a right to ask you."

"I do not understand you," she said, faintly.

"I can speak plainer, then. I wish to put in my poor venture. I love you, Mara--not as a brother. I wish you to be my wife, if you will."

While Moses was saying these words, Mara felt a sort of whirling in her head, and it grew dark before her eyes; but she had a strong, firm will, and she mastered herself and answered, after a moment, in a quiet, sorrowful tone, "How can I believe this, Moses? If it is true, why have you done as you have this summer?"

"Because I was a fool, Mara,--because I was jealous of Mr. Adams,--because I somehow hoped, after all, that you either loved me or

that I might make you think more of me through jealousy of another. They say that love always is shown by jealousy."

"Not true love, I should think," said Mara. "How could you do so?--it was cruel to her,--cruel to me."

"I admit it,--anything, everything you can say. I have acted like a fool and a knave, if you will; but after all, Mara, I do love you. I know I am not worthy of you--never was--never can be; you are in all things a true, noble woman, and I have been unmanly."

It is not to be supposed that all this was spoken without accompaniments of looks, movements, and expressions of face such as we cannot give, but such as doubled their power to the parties concerned; and the "I love you" had its usual conclusive force as argument, apology, promise,--covering, like charity, a multitude of sins.

Half an hour after, you might have seen a youth and a maiden coming together out of the door of the brown house, and walking arm in arm toward the sea-beach.

It was one of those wonderfully clear moonlight evenings, when the ocean, like a great reflecting mirror, seems to double the brightness of the sky,--and its vast expanse lay all around them in its stillness, like an eternity of waveless peace. Mara remembered that time in her girlhood when she had followed Moses into the woods on just such a

night,--how she had sat there under the shadows of the trees, and looked over to Harpswell and noticed the white houses and the meeting-house, all so bright and clear in the moonlight, and then off again on the other side of the island where silent ships were coming and going in the mysterious stillness. They were talking together now with that outflowing fullness which comes when the seal of some great reserve has just been broken,--going back over their lives from day to day, bringing up incidents of childhood, and turning them gleefully like two children.

And then Moses had all the story of his life to relate, and to tell Mara all he had learned of his mother,--going over with all the narrative contained in Mr. Sewell's letter.

"You see, Mara, that it was intended that you should be my fate," he ended; "so the winds and waves took me up and carried me to the lonely island where the magic princess dwelt."

"You are Prince Ferdinand," said Mara.

"And you are Miranda," said he.

"Ah!" she said with fervor, "how plainly we can see that our heavenly Father has been guiding our way! How good He is,--and how we must try to live for Him,--both of us."

A sort of cloud passed over Moses's brow. He looked embarrassed, and



there was a pause between them, and then he turned the conversation.

Mara felt pained; it was like a sudden discord; such thoughts and feelings were the very breath of her life; she could not speak in perfect confidence and unreserve, as she then spoke, without uttering them; and her finely organized nature felt a sort of electric consciousness of repulsion and dissent. She grew abstracted, and they walked on in silence.

"I see now, Mara, I have pained you," said Moses, "but there are a class of feelings that you have that I have not and cannot have. No, I cannot feign anything. I can understand what religion is in you, I can admire its results. I can be happy, if it gives you any comfort; but people are differently constituted. I never can feel as you do."

"Oh, don't say never," said Mara, with an intensity that nearly startled him; "it has been the one prayer, the one hope, of my life, that you might have these comforts,--this peace."

"I need no comfort or peace except what I shall find in you," said Moses, drawing her to himself, and looking admiringly at her; "but pray for me still. I always thought that my wife must be one of the sort of women who pray."

"And why?" said Mara, in surprise.

"Because I need to be loved a great deal, and it is only that kind who pray who know how to love really. If you had not prayed for me all this time, you never would have loved me in spite of all my faults, as you did, and do, and will, as I know you will," he said, folding her in his arms, and in his secret heart he said, "Some of this intensity, this devotion, which went upward to heaven, will be mine one day. She will worship me."

"The fact is, Mara," he said, "I am a child of this world. I have no sympathy with things not seen. You are a half-spiritual creature,--a child of air; and but for the great woman's heart in you, I should feel that you were something uncanny and unnatural. I am selfish, I know; I frankly admit, I never disguised it; but I love your religion because it makes you love me. It is an incident to that loving, trusting nature which makes you all and wholly mine, as I want you to be. I want you all and wholly; every thought, every feeling,--the whole strength of your being. I don't care if I say it: I would not wish to be second in your heart even to God himself!"

"Oh, Moses!" said Mara, almost starting away from him, "such words are dreadful; they will surely bring evil upon us."

"I only breathed out my nature, as you did yours. Why should you love an unseen and distant Being more than you do one whom you can feel and see, who holds you in his arms, whose heart beats like your own?"

"Moses," said Mara, stopping and looking at him in the clear moonlight, "God has always been to me not so much like a father as like a dear and tender mother. Perhaps it was because I was a poor orphan, and my father and mother died at my birth, that He has been so loving to me. I never remember the time when I did not feel His presence in my joys and my sorrows. I never had a thought of joy and sorrow that I could not say to Him. I never woke in the night that I did not feel that He was loving and watching me, and that I loved Him in return. Oh, how many, many things I have said to Him about you! My heart would have broken years ago, had it not been for Him; because, though you did not know it, you often seemed unkind; you hurt me very often when you did not mean to. His love is so much a part of my life that I cannot conceive of life without it. It is the very air I breathe."

Moses stood still a moment, for Mara spoke with a fervor that affected him; then he drew her to his heart, and said,--

"Oh, what could ever make you love me?"

"He sent you and gave you to me," she answered, "to be mine in time and eternity."

The words were spoken in a kind of enthusiasm so different from the usual reserve of Mara, that they seemed like a prophecy. That night, for the first time in her life, had she broken the reserve which was her very nature, and spoken of that which was the intimate and hidden

history of her soul.