

CHAPTER XXXIII

AT A QUILTING

"And so," said Mrs. Captain Badger to Miss Roxy Toothacre, "it seems that Moses Pennel ain't going to have Sally Kittridge after all,--he's engaged to Mara Lincoln."

"More shame for him," said Miss Roxy, with a frown that made her mohair curls look really tremendous.

Miss Roxy and Mrs. Badger were the advance party at a quilting, to be holden at the house of Mr. Sewell, and had come at one o'clock to do the marking upon the quilt, which was to be filled up by the busy fingers of all the women in the parish. Said quilt was to have a bordering of a pattern commonly denominated in those parts clam-shell, and this Miss Roxy was diligently marking with indigo.

"What makes you say so, now?" said Mrs. Badger, a fat, comfortable, motherly matron, who always patronized the last matrimonial venture that put forth among the young people.

"What business had he to flirt and gallivant all summer with Sally Kittridge, and make everybody think he was going to have her, and then turn round to Mara Lincoln at the last minute? I wish I'd been in Mara's

place."

In Miss Roxy's martial enthusiasm, she gave a sudden poke to her frisette, giving to it a diagonal bristle which extremely increased its usually severe expression; and any one contemplating her at the moment would have thought that for Moses Pennel, or any other young man, to come with tender propositions in that direction would have been indeed a venturesome enterprise.

"I tell you what 'tis, Mis' Badger," she said, "I've known Mara since she was born,--I may say I fetched her up myself, for if I hadn't trotted and tended her them first four weeks of her life, Mis' Pennel'd never have got her through; and I've watched her every year since; and havin' Moses Pennel is the only silly thing I ever knew her to do; but you never can tell what a girl will do when it comes to marryin',--never!"

"But he's a real stirrin', likely young man, and captain of a fine ship," said Mrs. Badger.

"Don't care if he's captain of twenty ships," said Miss Roxy, obdurately; "he ain't a professor of religion, and I believe he's an infidel, and she's one of the Lord's people."

"Well," said Mrs. Badger, "you know the unbelievin' husband shall be sanctified by the believin' wife."

"Much sanctifyin' he'll get," said Miss Roxy, contemptuously. "I don't believe he loves her any more than fancy; she's the last plaything, and when he's got her, he'll be tired of her, as he always was with anything he got ever since. I tell you, Moses Pennel is all for pride and ambition and the world; and his wife, when he gets used to her, 'll be only a circumstance,--that's all."

"Come, now, Miss Roxy," said Miss Emily, who in her best silk and smoothly-brushed hair had just come in, "we must not let you talk so. Moses Pennel has had long talks with brother, and he thinks him in a very hopeful way, and we are all delighted; and as to Mara, she is as fresh and happy as a little rose."

"So I tell Roxy," said Miss Ruey, who had been absent from the room to hold private consultations with Miss Emily concerning the biscuits and sponge-cake for tea, and who now sat down to the quilt and began to unroll a capacious and very limp calico thread-case; and placing her spectacles awry on her little pug nose, she began a series of ingenious dodges with her thread, designed to hit the eye of her needle.

"The old folks," she continued, "are e'en a'most tickled to pieces,--'cause they think it'll jist be the salvation of him to get Mara."

"I ain't one of the sort that wants to be a-usin' up girls for the

salvation of fellers," said Miss Roxy, severely. "Ever since he nearly like to have got her eat up by sharks, by giggiting her off in the boat out to sea when she wa'n't more'n three years old, I always have thought he was a misfortin' in that family, and I think so now."

Here broke in Mrs. Eaton, a thrifty energetic widow of a deceased sea-captain, who had been left with a tidy little fortune which commanded the respect of the neighborhood. Mrs. Eaton had entered silently during the discussion, but of course had come, as every other woman had that afternoon, with views to be expressed upon the subject.

"For my part," she said, as she stuck a decisive needle into the first clam-shell pattern, "I ain't so sure that all the advantage in this match is on Moses Pennel's part. Mara Lincoln is a good little thing, but she ain't fitted to help a man along,--she'll always be wantin' somebody to help her. Why, I 'member goin' a voyage with Cap'n Eaton, when I saved the ship, if anybody did,--it was allowed on all hands. Cap'n Eaton wasn't hearty at that time, he was jist gettin' up from a fever,--it was when Marthy Ann was a baby, and I jist took her and went to sea and took care of him. I used to work the longitude for him and help him lay the ship's course when his head was bad,--and when we came on the coast, we were kept out of harbor beatin' about nearly three weeks, and all the ship's tacklin' was stiff with ice, and I tell you the men never would have stood it through and got the ship in, if it hadn't been for me. I kept their mittens and stockings all the while a-dryin' at my stove in the cabin, and hot coffee all the while

a-boilin' for 'em, or I believe they'd a-frozen their hands and feet, and never been able to work the ship in. That's the way I did. Now Sally Kittridge is a great deal more like that than Mara."

"There's no doubt that Sally is smart," said Mrs. Badger, "but then it ain't every one can do like you, Mrs. Eaton."

"Oh no, oh no," was murmured from mouth to mouth; "Mrs. Eaton mustn't think she's any rule for others,--everybody knows she can do more than most people;" whereat the pacified Mrs. Eaton said "she didn't know as it was anything remarkable,--it showed what anybody might do, if they'd only try and have resolution; but that Mara never had been brought up to have resolution, and her mother never had resolution before her, it wasn't in any of Mary Pennel's family; she knew their grandmother and all their aunts, and they were all a weakly set, and not fitted to get along in life,--they were a kind of people that somehow didn't seem to know how to take hold of things."

At this moment the consultation was hushed up by the entrance of Sally Kittridge and Mara, evidently on the closest terms of intimacy, and more than usually demonstrative and affectionate; they would sit together and use each other's needles, scissors, thread, and thimbles interchangeably, as if anxious to express every minute the most overflowing confidence. Sly winks and didactic nods were covertly exchanged among the elderly people, and when Mrs. Kittridge entered with more than usual airs of impressive solemnity, several of these were

covertly directed toward her, as a matron whose views in life must have been considerably darkened by the recent event.

Mrs. Kittridge, however, found an opportunity to whisper under her breath to Miss Ruey what a relief to her it was that the affair had taken such a turn. She had felt uneasy all summer for fear of what might come. Sally was so thoughtless and worldly, she felt afraid that he would lead her astray. She didn't see, for her part, how a professor of religion like Mara could make up her mind to such an unsettled kind of fellow, even if he did seem to be rich and well-to-do. But then she had done looking for consistency; and she sighed and vigorously applied herself to quilting like one who has done with the world.

In return, Miss Ruey sighed and took snuff, and related for the hundredth time to Mrs. Kittridge the great escape she once had from the addresses of Abraham Peters, who had turned out a "poor drunken creetur." But then it was only natural that Mara should be interested in Moses; and the good soul went off into her favorite verse:--

"The fondness of a creature's love,
How strong it strikes the sense!
Thither the warm affections move,
Nor can we drive them thence."

In fact, Miss Ruey's sentimental vein was in quite a gushing state, for she more than once extracted from the dark corners of the limp calico

thread-case we have spoken of certain long-treasured morceaux of newspaper poetry, of a tender and sentimental cast, which she had laid up with true Yankee economy, in case any one should ever be in a situation to need them. They related principally to the union of kindred hearts, and the joys of reciprocated feeling and the pains of absence. Good Miss Ruey occasionally passed these to Mara, with glances full of meaning, which caused the poor old thing to resemble a sentimental goblin, keeping Sally Kittridge in a perfect hysterical tempest of suppressed laughter, and making it difficult for Mara to preserve the decencies of life toward her well-intending old friend. The trouble with poor Miss Ruey was that, while her body had grown old and crazy, her soul was just as juvenile as ever,--and a simple, juvenile soul disporting itself in a crazy, battered old body, is at great disadvantage. It was lucky for her, however, that she lived in the most sacred unconsciousness of the ludicrous effect of her little indulgences, and the pleasure she took in them was certainly of the most harmless kind. The world would be a far better and more enjoyable place than it is, if all people who are old and uncomely could find amusement as innocent and Christian-like as Miss Ruey's inoffensive thread-case collection of sentimental truisms.

This quilting of which we speak was a solemn, festive occasion of the parish, held a week after Moses had sailed away; and so piquant a morsel as a recent engagement could not, of course, fail to be served up for the company in every variety of garnishing which individual tastes might suggest.

It became an ascertained fact, however, in the course of the evening festivities, that the minister was serenely approbative of the event; that Captain Kittridge was at length brought to a sense of the errors of his way in supposing that Sally had ever cared a pin for Moses more than as a mutual friend and confidant; and the great affair was settled without more ripples of discomposure than usually attend similar announcements in more refined society.