

CHAPTER XXXIV

FRIENDS

The quilting broke up at the primitive hour of nine o'clock, at which, in early New England days, all social gatherings always dispersed. Captain Kittridge rowed his helpmeet, with Mara and Sally, across the Bay to the island.

"Come and stay with me to-night, Sally," said Mara.

"I think Sally had best be at home," said Mrs. Kittridge. "There's no sense in girls talking all night."

"There ain't sense in nothin' else, mother," said the Captain. "Next to sparkin', which is the Christianist thing I knows on, comes gals' talks 'bout their sparks; they's as natural as crowsfoot and red columbines in the spring, and spring don't come but once a year neither,--and so let 'em take the comfort on't. I warrant now, Polly, you've laid awake nights and talked about me."

"We've all been foolish once," said Mrs. Kittridge.

"Well, mother, we want to be foolish too," said Sally.

"Well, you and your father are too much for me," said Mrs. Kittridge, plaintively; "you always get your own way."

"How lucky that my way is always a good one!" said Sally.

"Well, you know, Sally, you are going to make the beer to-morrow," still objected her mother.

"Oh, yes; that's another reason," said Sally. "Mara and I shall come home through the woods in the morning, and we can get whole apronfuls of young wintergreen, and besides, I know where there's a lot of sassafras root. We'll dig it, won't we, Mara?"

"Yes; and I'll come down and help you brew," said Mara. "Don't you remember the beer I made when Moses came home?"

"Yes, yes, I remember," said the Captain, "you sent us a couple of bottles."

"We can make better yet now," said Mara. "The wintergreen is young, and the green tips on the spruce boughs are so full of strength. Everything is lively and sunny now."

"Yes, yes," said the Captain, "and I 'spect I know why things do look pretty lively to some folks, don't they?"

"I don't know what sort of work you'll make of the beer among you," said Mrs. Kittridge; "but you must have it your own way."

Mrs. Kittridge, who never did anything else among her tea-drinking acquaintances but laud and magnify Sally's good traits and domestic acquirements, felt constantly bound to keep up a faint show of controversy and authority in her dealings with her,--the fading remains of the strict government of her childhood; but it was, nevertheless, very perfectly understood, in a general way, that Sally was to do as she pleased; and so, when the boat came to shore, she took the arm of Mara and started up toward the brown house.

The air was soft and balmy, and though the moon by which the troth of Mara and Moses had been plighted had waned into the latest hours of the night, still a thousand stars were lying in twinkling brightness, reflected from the undulating waves all around them, and the tide, as it rose and fell, made a sound as gentle and soft as the respiration of a peaceful sleeper.

"Well, Mara," said Sally, after an interval of silence, "all has come out right. You see that it was you whom he loved. What a lucky thing for me that I am made so heartless, or I might not be as glad as I am."

"You are not heartless, Sally," said Mara; "it's the enchanted princess asleep; the right one hasn't come to waken her."

"Maybe so," said Sally, with her old light laugh. "If I only were sure he would make you happy now,--half as happy as you deserve,--I'd forgive him his share of this summer's mischief. The fault was just half mine, you see, for I witched with him. I confess it. I have my own little spider-webs for these great lordly flies, and I like to hear them buzz."

"Take care, Sally; never do it again, or the spider-web may get round you," said Mara.

"Never fear me," said Sally. "But, Mara, I wish I felt sure that Moses could make you happy. Do you really, now, when you think seriously, feel as if he would?"

"I never thought seriously about it," said Mara; "but I know he needs me; that I can do for him what no one else can. I have always felt all my life that he was to be mine; that he was sent to me, ordained for me to care for and to love."

"You are well mated," said Sally. "He wants to be loved very much, and you want to love. There's the active and passive voice, as they used to say at Miss Plucher's. But yet in your natures you are opposite as any two could well be."

Mara felt that there was in these chance words of Sally more than she perceived. No one could feel as intensely as she could that the mind and

heart so dear to her were yet, as to all that was most vital and real in her inner life, unsympathizing. To her the spiritual world was a reality; God an ever-present consciousness; and the line of this present life seemed so to melt and lose itself in the anticipation of a future and brighter one, that it was impossible for her to speak intimately and not unconsciously to betray the fact. To him there was only the life of this world: there was no present God; and from all thought of a future life he shrank with a shuddering aversion, as from something ghastly and unnatural. She had realized this difference more in the few days that followed her betrothal than all her life before, for now first the barrier of mutual constraint and misunderstanding having melted away, each spoke with an abandon and unreserve which made the acquaintance more vitally intimate than ever it had been before. It was then that Mara felt that while her sympathies could follow him through all his plans and interests, there was a whole world of thought and feeling in her heart where his could not follow her; and she asked herself, Would it be so always? Must she walk at his side forever repressing the utterance of that which was most sacred and intimate, living in a nominal and external communion only? How could it be that what was so lovely and clear in its reality to her, that which was to her as life-blood, that which was the vital air in which she lived and moved and had her being, could be absolutely nothing to him? Was it really possible, as he said, that God had no existence for him except in a nominal cold belief; that the spiritual world was to him only a land of pale shades and doubtful glooms, from which he shrank with dread, and

the least allusion to which was distasteful? and would this always be so? and if so, could she be happy?

But Mara said the truth in saying that the question of personal happiness never entered her thoughts. She loved Moses in a way that made it necessary to her happiness to devote herself to him, to watch over and care for him; and though she knew not how, she felt a sort of presentiment that it was through her that he must be brought into sympathy with a spiritual and immortal life.

All this passed through Mara's mind in the reverie into which Sally's last words threw her, as she sat on the door-sill and looked off into the starry distance and heard the weird murmur of the sea.

"How lonesome the sea at night always is," said Sally. "I declare, Mara, I don't wonder you miss that creature, for, to tell the truth, I do a little bit. It was something, you know, to have somebody to come in, and to joke with, and to say how he liked one's hair and one's ribbons, and all that. I quite got up a friendship for Moses, so that I can feel how dull you must be;" and Sally gave a half sigh, and then whistled a tune as adroitly as a blackbird.

"Yes," said Mara, "we two girls down on this lonely island need some one to connect us with the great world; and he was so full of life, and so certain and confident, he seemed to open a way before one out into life."

"Well, of course, while he is gone there will be plenty to do getting ready to be married," said Sally. "By the by, when I was over to Portland the other day, Maria Potter showed me a new pattern for a bed-quilt, the sweetest thing you can imagine,--it is called the morning star. There is a great star in the centre, and little stars all around,--white on a blue ground. I mean to begin one for you."

"I am going to begin spinning some very fine flax next week," said Mara; "and have I shown you the new pattern I drew for a counterpane? it is to be morning-glories, leaves and flowers, you know,--a pretty idea, isn't it?"

And so, the conversation falling from the region of the sentimental to the practical, the two girls went in and spent an hour in discussions so purely feminine that we will not enlighten the reader further therewith. Sally seemed to be investing all her energies in the preparation of the wedding outfit of her friend, about which she talked with a constant and restless activity, and for which she formed a thousand plans, and projected shopping tours to Portland, Brunswick, and even to Boston,--this last being about as far off a venture at that time as Paris now seems to a Boston belle.

"When you are married," said Sally, "you'll have to take me to live with you; that creature sha'n't have you all to himself. I hate men, they are so exorbitant,--they spoil all our playmates; and what shall I do

when you are gone?"

"You will go with Mr.--what's his name?" said Mara.

"Pshaw, I don't know him. I shall be an old maid," said Sally; "and really there isn't much harm in that, if one could have company,--if somebody or other wouldn't marry all one's friends,--that's lonesome," she said, winking a tear out of her black eyes and laughing. "If I were only a young fellow now, Mara, I'd have you myself, and that would be just the thing; and I'd shoot Moses, if he said a word; and I'd have money, and I'd have honors, and I'd carry you off to Europe, and take you to Paris and Rome, and nobody knows where; and we'd live in peace, as the story-books say."

"Come, Sally, how wild you are talking," said Mara, "and the clock has just struck one; let's try to go to sleep."

Sally put her face to Mara's and kissed her, and Mara felt a moist spot on her cheek,--could it be a tear?