

Chapter VI - Twinkle is Taken to the Judge

AT this the woodchuck children all hooted with joy, crying: "Take her, Daddy! Take her to old Stoneyheart! Oh, my! won't he give it to her, though!"

"Who is Judge Stoneyheart?" asked Twinkle, a little uneasily.

"A highly respected and aged woodchuck who is cousin to my wife's grandfather," was the reply. "We consider him the wisest and most intelligent of our race; but, while he is very just in all things, the judge never shows any mercy to evil-doers."

"I haven't done anything wrong," said the girl.

"But your father has, and much wrong is done us by the other farmers around here. They fight my people without mercy, and kill every woodchuck they can possibly catch."

Twinkle was silent, for she knew this to be true.

"For my part," continued Mister Woodchuck, "I'm very soft-hearted, and wouldn't even step on an ant if I could help it. Also I am sure you have a kind disposition. But you are a human, and I am a woodchuck; so I think I will take you to old Stoneyheart and let him decide your fate."

"Hooray!" yelled the young woodchucks, and away they ran through the paths of the garden, followed slowly by their fat mother, who held the lace parasol over her head as if she feared she would be sunstruck.

Twinkle was glad to see them go. She didn't care much for the woodchuck children, they were so wild and ill-mannered, and their mother was even more disagreeable than they were. As for Mister Woodchuck, she did not object to him so much; in fact, she rather liked to talk to him, for his words were polite and his eyes pleasant and kindly.

"Now, my dear," he said, "as we are about to leave this garden, where you have been quite secure, I must try to prevent your running away when we are outside the wall. I hope it won't hurt your feelings to become a real prisoner for a few minutes."

Then Mister Woodchuck drew from his pocket a leather collar, very much like a dog-collar, Twinkle thought, and proceeded to buckle it around the girl's

neck. To the collar was attached a fine chain about six feet long, and the other end of the chain Mister Woodchuck held in his hand.

"Now, then," said he, "please come along quietly, and don't make a fuss."

He led her to the end of the garden and opened a wooden gate in the wall, through which they passed. Outside the garden the ground was nothing but hard, baked earth, without any grass or other green thing growing upon it, or any tree or shrub to shade it from the hot sun. And not far away stood a round mound, also of baked earth, which Twinkle at once decided to be a house, because it had a door and some windows in it.

There was no living thing in sight--not even a woodchuck--and Twinkle didn't care much for the baked-clay scenery.

Mister Woodchuck, holding fast to the chain, led his prisoner across the barren space to the round mound, where he paused to rap softly upon the door.