

CHAPTER III. LEGENDS OF THE OLD ORCHARD

Outside of the orchard the grass was only beginning to grow green; but here, sheltered by the spruce hedges from uncertain winds and sloping to southern suns, it was already like a wonderful velvet carpet; the leaves on the trees were beginning to come out in woolly, grayish clusters; and there were purple-pencilled white violets at the base of the Pulpit Stone.

"It's all just as father described it," said Felix with a blissful sigh, "and there's the well with the Chinese roof."

We hurried over to it, treading on the spears of mint that were beginning to shoot up about it. It was a very deep well, and the curb was of rough, undressed stones. Over it, the queer, pagoda-like roof, built by Uncle Stephen on his return from a voyage to China, was covered with yet leafless vines.

"It's so pretty, when the vines leaf out and hang down in long festoons," said the Story Girl. "The birds build their nests in it. A pair of wild canaries come here every summer. And ferns grow out between the stones of the well as far down as you can see. The water is lovely. Uncle Edward preached his finest sermon about the Bethlehem well where David's soldiers went to get him water, and he illustrated it by describing his old well at the homestead--this very well--and how in foreign lands he had

longed for its sparkling water. So you see it is quite famous."

"There's a cup just like the one that used to be here in father's time," exclaimed Felix, pointing to an old-fashioned shallow cup of clouded blue ware on a little shelf inside the curb.

"It is the very same cup," said the Story Girl impressively.

"Isn't it an amazing thing? That cup has been here for forty years, and hundreds of people have drunk from it, and it has never been broken. Aunt Julia dropped it down the well once, but they fished it up, not hurt a bit except for that little nick in the rim. I think it is bound up with the fortunes of the King family, like the Luck of Edenhall in Longfellow's poem. It is the last cup of Grandmother King's second best set. Her best set is still complete. Aunt Olivia has it. You must get her to show it to you. It's so pretty, with red berries all over it, and the funniest little pot-bellied cream jug. Aunt Olivia never uses it except on a family anniversary."

We took a drink from the blue cup and then went to find our birthday trees. We were rather disappointed to find them quite large, sturdy ones. It seemed to us that they should still be in the sapling stage corresponding to our boyhood.

"Your apples are lovely to eat," the Story Girl said to me, "but Felix's are only good for pies. Those two big trees behind them

are the twins' trees--my mother and Uncle Felix, you know. The apples are so dead sweet that nobody but us children and the French boys can eat them. And that tall, slender tree over there, with the branches all growing straight up, is a seedling that came up of itself, and NOBODY can eat its apples, they are so sour and bitter. Even the pigs won't eat them. Aunt Janet tried to make pies of them once, because she said she hated to see them going to waste. But she never tried again. She said it was better to waste apples alone than apples and sugar too. And then she tried giving them away to the French hired men, but they wouldn't even carry them home."

The Story Girl's words fell on the morning air like pearls and diamonds. Even her prepositions and conjunctions had untold charm, hinting at mystery and laughter and magic bound up in everything she mentioned. Apple pies and sour seedlings and pigs became straightway invested with a glamour of romance.

"I like to hear you talk," said Felix in his grave, stodgy way.

"Everybody does," said the Story Girl coolly. "I'm glad you like the way I talk. But I want you to like ME, too--AS WELL as you like Felicity and Cecily. Not BETTER. I wanted that once but I've got over it. I found out in Sunday School, the day the minister taught our class, that it was selfish. But I want you to like me AS WELL."

"Well, I will, for one," said Felix emphatically. I think he was remembering that Felicity had called him fat.

Cecily now joined us. It appeared that it was Felicity's morning to help prepare breakfast, therefore she could not come. We all went to Uncle Stephen's Walk.

This was a double row of apple trees, running down the western side of the orchard. Uncle Stephen was the first born of Abraham and Elizabeth King. He had none of grandfather's abiding love for woods and meadows and the kindly ways of the warm red earth. Grandmother King had been a Ward, and in Uncle Stephen the blood of the seafaring race claimed its own. To sea he must go, despite the pleadings and tears of a reluctant mother; and it was from the sea he came to set out his avenue in the orchard with trees brought from a foreign land.

Then he sailed away again--and the ship was never heard of more. The gray first came in grandmother's brown hair in those months of waiting. The, for the first time, the orchard heard the sound of weeping and was consecrated by a sorrow.

"When the blossoms come out it's wonderful to walk here," said the Story Girl. "It's like a dream of fairyland--as if you were walking in a king's palace. The apples are delicious, and in

winter it's a splendid place for coasting."

From the Walk we went to the Pulpit Stone--a huge gray boulder, as high as a man's head, in the southeastern corner. It was straight and smooth in front, but sloped down in natural steps behind, with a ledge midway on which one could stand. It had played an important part in the games of our uncles and aunts, being fortified castle, Indian ambush, throne, pulpit, or concert platform, as occasion required. Uncle Edward had preached his first sermon at the age of eight from that old gray boulder; and Aunt Julia, whose voice was to delight thousands, sang her earliest madrigals there.

The Story Girl mounted to the ledge, sat on the rim, and looked at us. Pat sat gravely at its base and daintily washed his face with his black paws.

"Now for your stories about the orchard," said I.

"There are two important ones," said the Story Girl. "The story of the Poet Who Was Kissed, and the Tale of the Family Ghost. Which one shall I tell?"

"Tell them both," said Felix greedily, "but tell the ghost one first."

"I don't know." The Story Girl looked dubious. "That sort of story ought to be told in the twilight among the shadows. Then it would frighten the souls out of your bodies."

We thought it might be more agreeable not to have the souls frightened out of our bodies, and we voted for the Family Ghost.

"Ghost stories are more comfortable in daytime," said Felix.

The Story Girl began it and we listened avidly. Cecily, who had heard it many times before, listened just as eagerly as we did. She declared to me afterwards that no matter how often the Story Girl told a story it always seemed as new and exciting as if you had just heard it for the first time.

"Long, long ago," began the Story Girl, her voice giving us an impression of remote antiquity, "even before Grandfather King was born, an orphan cousin of his lived here with his parents. Her name was Emily King. She was very small and very sweet. She had soft brown eyes that were too timid to look straight at anybody--like Cecily's there--and long, sleek, brown curls--like mine; and she had a tiny birthmark like a pink butterfly on one cheek--right here.

"Of course, there was no orchard here then. It was just a field; but there was a clump of white birches in it, right where that

big, spreading tree of Uncle Alec's is now, and Emily liked to sit among the ferns under the birches and read or sew. She had a lover. His name was Malcolm Ward and he was as handsome as a prince. She loved him with all her heart and he loved her the same; but they had never spoken about it. They used to meet under the birches and talk about everything except love. One day he told her he was coming the next day to ask A VERY IMPORTANT QUESTION, and he wanted to find her under the birches when he came. Emily promised to meet him there. I am sure she stayed awake that night, thinking about it, and wondering what the important question would be, although she knew perfectly well. I would have. And the next day she dressed herself beautifully in her best pale blue muslin and sleeked her curls and went smiling to the birches. And while she was waiting there, thinking such lovely thoughts, a neighbour's boy came running up--a boy who didn't know about her romance--and cried out that Malcolm Ward had been killed by his gun going off accidentally. Emily just put her hands to her heart--so--and fell, all white and broken among the ferns. And when she came back to life she never cried or lamented. She was CHANGED. She was never, never like herself again; and she was never contented unless she was dressed in her blue muslin and waiting under the birches. She got paler and paler every day, but the pink butterfly grew redder, until it looked just like a stain of blood on her white cheek. When the winter came she died. But next spring"--the Story Girl dropped her voice to a whisper that was as audible and thrilling as her

louder tones--"people began to tell that Emily was sometimes seen waiting under the birches still. Nobody knew just who told it first. But more than one person saw her. Grandfather saw her when he was a little boy. And my mother saw her once."

"Did YOU ever see her?" asked Felix skeptically.

"No, but I shall some day, if I keep on believing in her," said the Story Girl confidently.

"I wouldn't like to see her. I'd be afraid," said Cecily with a shiver.

"There wouldn't be anything to be afraid of," said the Story Girl reassuringly. "It's not as if it were a strange ghost. It's our own family ghost, so of course it wouldn't hurt us."

We were not so sure of this. Ghosts were unchancy folk, even if they were our family ghosts. The Story Girl had made the tale very real to us. We were glad we had not heard it in the evening. How could we ever have got back to the house through the shadows and swaying branches of a darkening orchard? As it was, we were almost afraid to look up it, lest we should see the waiting, blue-clad Emily under Uncle Alec's tree. But all we saw was Felicity, tearing over the green sward, her curls streaming behind her in a golden cloud.

"Felicity's afraid she's missed something," remarked the Story Girl in a tone of quiet amusement. "Is your breakfast ready, Felicity, or have I time to tell the boys the Story of the Poet Who Was Kissed?"

"Breakfast is ready, but we can't have it till father is through attending to the sick cow, so you will likely have time," answered Felicity.

Felix and I couldn't keep our eyes off her. Crimson-cheeked, shining-eyed from her haste, her face was like a rose of youth. But when the Story Girl spoke, we forgot to look at Felicity.

"About ten years after Grandfather and Grandmother King were married, a young man came to visit them. He was a distant relative of grandmother's and he was a Poet. He was just beginning to be famous. He was VERY famous afterward. He came into the orchard to write a poem, and he fell asleep with his head on a bench that used to be under grandfather's tree. Then Great-Aunt Edith came into the orchard. She was not a Great-Aunt then, of course. She was only eighteen, with red lips and black, black hair and eyes. They say she was always full of mischief. She had been away and had just come home, and she didn't know about the Poet. But when she saw him, sleeping there, she thought he was a cousin they had been expecting from Scotland.

And she tiptoed up--so--and bent over--so--and kissed his cheek. Then he opened his big blue eyes and looked up into Edith's face. She blushed as red as a rose, for she knew she had done a dreadful thing. This could not be her cousin from Scotland. She knew, for he had written so to her, that he had eyes as black as her own. Edith ran away and hid; and of course she felt still worse when she found out that he was a famous poet. But he wrote one of his most beautiful poems on it afterwards and sent it to her--and it was published in one of his books."

We had SEEN it all--the sleeping genius--the roguish, red-lipped girl--the kiss dropped as lightly as a rose-petal on the sunburned cheek.

"They should have got married," said Felix.

"Well, in a book they would have, but you see this was in real life," said the Story Girl. "We sometimes act the story out. I like it when Peter plays the poet. I don't like it when Dan is the poet because he is so freckled and screws his eyes up so tight. But you can hardly ever coax Peter to be the poet--except when Felicity is Edith--and Dan is so obliging that way."

"What is Peter like?" I asked.

"Peter is splendid. His mother lives on the Markdale road and

washes for a living. Peter's father ran away and left them when Peter was only three years old. He has never come back, and they don't know whether he is alive or dead. Isn't that a nice way to behave to your family? Peter has worked for his board ever since he was six. Uncle Roger sends him to school, and pays him wages in summer. We all like Peter, except Felicity."

"I like Peter well enough in his place," said Felicity primly, "but you make far too much of him, mother says. He is only a hired boy, and he hasn't been well brought up, and hasn't much education. I don't think you should make such an equal of him as you do."

Laughter rippled over the Story Girl's face as shadow waves go over ripe wheat before a wind.

"Peter is a real gentleman, and he is more interesting than YOU could ever be, if you were brought up and educated for a hundred years," she said.

"He can hardly write," said Felicity.

"William the Conqueror couldn't write at all," said the Story Girl crushingly.

"He never goes to church, and he never says his prayers,"

retorted Felicity, uncrushed.

"I do, too," said Peter himself, suddenly appearing through a little gap in the hedge. "I say my prayers sometimes."

This Peter was a slim, shapely fellow, with laughing black eyes and thick black curls. Early in the season as it was, he was barefooted. His attire consisted of a faded, gingham shirt and a scanty pair of corduroy knickerbockers; but he wore it with such an unconscious air of purple and fine linen that he seemed to be much better dressed than he really was.

"You don't pray very often," insisted Felicity.

"Well, God will be all the more likely to listen to me if I don't pester Him all the time," argued Peter.

This was rank heresy to Felicity, but the Story Girl looked as if she thought there might be something in it.

"You NEVER go to church, anyhow," continued Felicity, determined not to be argued down.

"Well, I ain't going to church till I've made up my mind whether I'm going to be a Methodist or a Presbyterian. Aunt Jane was a Methodist. My mother ain't much of anything but I mean to be

something. It's more respectable to be a Methodist or a Presbyterian, or SOMETHING, than not to be anything. When I've settled what I'm to be I'm going to church same as you."

"That's not the same as being BORN something," said Felicity loftily.

"I think it's a good deal better to pick your own religion than have to take it just because it was what your folks had," retorted Peter.

"Now, never mind quarrelling," said Cecily. "You leave Peter alone, Felicity. Peter, this is Beverley King, and this is Felix. And we're all going to be good friends and have a lovely summer together. Think of the games we can have! But if you go squabbling you'll spoil it all. Peter, what are you going to do to-day?"

"Harrow the wood field and dig your Aunt Olivia's flower beds."

"Aunt Olivia and I planted sweet peas yesterday," said the Story Girl, "and I planted a little bed of my own. I am NOT going to dig them up this year to see if they have sprouted. It is bad for them. I shall try to cultivate patience, no matter how long they are coming up."

"I am going to help mother plant the vegetable garden to-day," said Felicity.

"Oh, I never like the vegetable garden," said the Story Girl.

"Except when I am hungry. Then I DO like to go and look at the nice little rows of onions and beets. But I love a flower garden. I think I could be always good if I lived in a garden all the time."

"Adam and Eve lived in a garden all the time," said Felicity, "and THEY were far from being always good."

"They mightn't have kept good as long as they did if they hadn't lived in a garden," said the Story Girl.

We were now summoned to breakfast. Peter and the Story Girl slipped away through the gap, followed by Paddy, and the rest of us walked up the orchard to the house.

"Well, what do you think of the Story Girl?" asked Felicity.

"She's just fine," said Felix, enthusiastically. "I never heard anything like her to tell stories."

"She can't cook," said Felicity, "and she hasn't a good complexion. Mind you, she says she's going to be an actress when

she grows up. Isn't that dreadful?"

We didn't exactly see why.

"Oh, because actresses are always wicked people," said Felicity in a shocked tone. "But I daresay the Story Girl will go and be one just as soon as she can. Her father will back her up in it. He is an artist, you know."

Evidently Felicity thought artists and actresses and all such poor trash were members one of another.

"Aunt Olivia says the Story Girl is fascinating," said Cecily.

The very adjective! Felix and I recognized its beautiful fitness at once. Yes, the Story Girl WAS fascinating and that was the final word to be said on the subject.

Dan did not come down until breakfast was half over, and Aunt Janet talked to him after a fashion which made us realize that it would be well to keep, as the piquant country phrase went, from the rough side of her tongue. But all things considered, we liked the prospect of our summer very much. Felicity to look at--the Story Girl to tell us tales of wonder--Cecily to admire us--Dan and Peter to play with--what more could reasonable fellows want?

