

## CHAPTER VI. THE MYSTERY OF GOLDEN MILESTONE

Paddy was smeared with medicated lard the next day, all of us assisting at the rite, although the Story Girl was high priestess. Then, out of regard for mats and cushions, he was kept in durance vile in the granary until he had licked his fur clean. This treatment being repeated every day for a week, Pat recovered his usual health and spirits, and our minds were set at rest to enjoy the next excitement--collecting for a school library fund.

Our teacher thought it would be an excellent thing to have a library in connection with the school; and he suggested that each of the pupils should try to see how much money he or she could raise for the project during the month of June. We might earn it by honest toil, or gather it in by contributions levied on our friends.

The result was a determined rivalry as to which pupil should collect the largest sum; and this rivalry was especially intense in our home coterie.

Our relatives started us with a quarter apiece. For the rest, we knew we must depend on our own exertions. Peter was handicapped at the beginning by the fact that he had no family friend to finance him.

"If my Aunt Jane'd been living she'd have given me something," he remarked. "And if my father hadn't run away he might have given me something too. But I'm going to do the best I can anyhow. Your Aunt Olivia says I can have the job of gathering the eggs, and I'm to have one egg out of every dozen to sell for myself."

Felicity made a similar bargain with her mother. The Story Girl and Cecily were each to be paid ten cents a week for washing dishes in their respective homes. Felix and Dan contracted to keep the gardens free from weeds. I caught brook trout in the westering valley of spruces and sold them for a cent apiece.

Sara Ray was the only unhappy one among us. She could do nothing. She had no relatives in Carlisle except her mother, and her mother did not approve of the school library project, and would not give Sara a cent, or put her in any way of earning one. To Sara, this was humiliation indescribable. She felt herself an outcast and an alien to our busy little circle, where each member counted every day, with miserly delight, his slowly increasing hoard of small cash.

"I'm just going to pray to God to send me some money," she announced desperately at last.

"I don't believe that will do any good," said Dan. "He gives

lots of things, but he doesn't give money, because people can earn that for themselves."

"I can't," said Sara, with passionate defiance. "I think He ought to take that into account."

"Don't worry, dear," said Cecily, who always poured balm. "If you can't collect any money everybody will know it isn't your fault."

"I won't ever feel like reading a single book in the library if I can't give something to it," mourned Sara.

Dan and the girls and I were sitting in a row on Aunt Olivia's garden fence, watching Felix weed. Felix worked well, although he did not like weeding--"fat boys never do," Felicity informed him. Felix pretended not to hear her, but I knew he did, because his ears grew red. Felix's face never blushed, but his ears always gave him away. As for Felicity, she did not say things like that out of malice prepense. It never occurred to her that Felix did not like to be called fat.

"I always feel so sorry for the poor weeds," said the Story Girl dreamily. "It must be very hard to be rooted up."

"They shouldn't grow in the wrong place," said Felicity

mercilessly.

"When weeds go to heaven I suppose they will be flowers," continued the Story Girl.

"You do think such queer things," said Felicity.

"A rich man in Toronto has a floral clock in his garden," I said.

"It looks just like the face of a clock, and there are flowers in it that open at every hour, so that you can always tell the time."

"Oh, I wish we had one here," exclaimed Cecily.

"What would be the use of it?" asked the Story Girl a little disdainfully. "Nobody ever wants to know the time in a garden."

I slipped away at this point, suddenly remembering that it was time to take a dose of magic seed. I had bought it from Billy Robinson three days before in school. Billy had assured me that it would make me grow fast.

I was beginning to feel secretly worried because I did not grow. I had overheard Aunt Janet say I was going to be short, like Uncle Alec. Now, I loved Uncle Alec, but I wanted to be taller than he was. So when Billy confided to me, under solemn promise

of secrecy, that he had some "magic seed," which would make boys grow, and would sell me a box of it for ten cents, I jumped at the offer. Billy was taller than any boy of his age in Carlisle, and he assured me it all came from taking magic seed.

"I was a regular runt before I begun," he said, "and look at me now. I got it from Peg Bowen. She's a witch, you know. I wouldn't go near her again for a bushel of magic seed. It was an awful experience. I haven't much left, but I guess I've enough to do me till I'm as tall as I want to be. You must take a pinch of the seed every three hours, walking backward, and you must never tell a soul you're taking it, or it won't work. I wouldn't spare any of it to any one but you."

I felt deeply grateful to Billy, and sorry that I had not liked him better. Somehow, nobody did like Billy Robinson over and above. But I vowed I WOULD like him in future. I paid him the ten cents cheerfully and took the magic seed as directed, measuring myself carefully every day by a mark on the hall door. I could not see any advance in growth yet, but then I had been taking it only three days.

One day the Story Girl had an inspiration.

"Let us go and ask the Awkward Man and Mr. Campbell for a contribution to the library fund," she said. "I am sure no one

else has asked them, because nobody in Carlisle is related to them. Let us all go, and if they give us anything we'll divide it equally among us."

It was a daring proposition, for both Mr. Campbell and the Awkward Man were regarded as eccentric personages; and Mr. Campbell was supposed to detest children. But where the Story Girl led we would follow to the death. The next day being Saturday, we started out in the afternoon.

We took a short cut to Golden Milestone, over a long, green, dewy land full of placid meadows, where sunshine had fallen asleep. At first all was not harmonious. Felicity was in an ill humour; she had wanted to wear her second best dress, but Aunt Janet had decreed that her school clothes were good enough to go "traipsing about in the dust." Then the Story Girl arrived, arrayed not in any second best but in her very best dress and hat, which her father had sent her from Paris--a dress of soft, crimson silk, and a white leghorn hat encircled by flame-red poppies. Neither Felicity nor Cecily could have worn it; but it became the Story Girl perfectly. In it she was a thing of fire and laughter and glow, as if the singular charm of her temperament were visible and tangible in its vivid colouring and silken texture.

"I shouldn't think you'd put on your best clothes to go begging for the library in," said Felicity cuttingly.

"Aunt Olivia says that when you are going to have an important interview with a man you ought to look your very best," said the Story Girl, giving her skirt a lustrous swirl and enjoying the effect.

"Aunt Olivia spoils you," said Felicity.

"She doesn't either, Felicity King! Aunt Olivia is just sweet. She kisses me good-night every night, and your mother NEVER kisses you."

"My mother doesn't make kisses so common," retorted Felicity.

"But she gives us pie for dinner every day."

"So does Aunt Olivia."

"Yes, but look at the difference in the size of the pieces! And Aunt Olivia only gives you skim milk. My mother gives us cream."

"Aunt Olivia's skim milk is as good as your mother's cream," cried the Story Girl hotly.

"Oh, girls, don't fight," said Cecily, the peacemaker. "It's such a nice day, and we'll have a nice time if you don't spoil it by fighting."

"We're NOT fighting," said Felicity. "And I like Aunt Olivia. But my mother is just as good as Aunt Olivia, there now!"

"Of course she is. Aunt Janet is splendid," agreed the Story Girl.

They smiled at each other amicably. Felicity and the Story Girl were really quite fond of each other, under the queer surface friction that commonly resulted from their intercourse.

"You said once you knew a story about the Awkward Man," said Felix. "You might tell it to us."

"All right," agreed the Story Girl. "The only trouble is, I don't know the whole story. But I'll tell you all I do know. I call it 'The Mystery of the Golden Milestone.'"

"Oh, I don't believe that story is true," said Felicity. "I believe Mrs. Griggs was just romancing. She DOES romance, mother says."

"Yes; but I don't believe she could ever have thought of such a thing as this herself, so I believe it must be true," said the Story Girl. "Anyway, this is the story, boys. You know the Awkward Man has lived alone ever since his mother died, ten years



ago. Abel Griggs is his hired man, and he and his wife live in a little house down the Awkward Man's lane. Mrs. Griggs makes his bread for him, and she cleans up his house now and then. She says he keeps it very neat. But till last fall there was one room she never saw. It was always locked--the west one, looking out over his garden. One day last fall the Awkward Man went to Summerside, and Mrs. Griggs scrubbed his kitchen. Then she went over the whole house and she tried the door of the west room. Mrs. Griggs is a VERY curious woman. Uncle Roger says all women have as much curiosity as is good for them, but Mrs. Griggs has more. She expected to find the door locked as usual. It was NOT locked. She opened it and went in. What do you suppose she found?"

"Something like--like Bluebeard's chamber?" suggested Felix in a scared tone.

"Oh, no, NO! Nothing like THAT could happen in Prince Edward Island. But if there HAD been beautiful wives hanging up by their hair all round the walls I don't believe Mrs. Griggs could have been much more astonished. The room had never been furnished in his mother's time, but now it was ELEGANTLY furnished, though Mrs. Griggs says SHE doesn't know when or how that furniture was brought there. She says she never saw a room like it in a country farmhouse. It was like a bed-room and sitting-room combined. The floor was covered with a carpet like

green velvet. There were fine lace curtains at the windows and beautiful pictures on the walls. There was a little white bed, and a dressing-table, a bookcase full of books, a stand with a work basket on it, and a rocking-chair. There was a woman's picture above the bookcase. Mrs. Griggs says she thinks it was a coloured photograph, but she didn't know who it was. Anyway, it was a very pretty girl. But the most amazing thing of all was that A WOMAN'S DRESS was hanging over a chair by the table. Mrs. Griggs says it NEVER belonged to Jasper Dale's mother, for she thought it a sin to wear anything but print and drugget; and this dress was of PALE BLUE silk. Besides that, there was a pair of blue satin slippers on the floor beside it--HIGH-HEELED slippers. And on the fly-leaves of the books the name 'Alice' was written. Now, there never was an Alice in the Dale connection and nobody ever heard of the Awkward Man having a sweetheart. There, isn't that a lovely mystery?"

"It's a pretty queer yarn," said Felix. "I wonder if it is true--and what it means."

"I intend to find out what it means," said the Story Girl. "I am going to get acquainted with the Awkward Man sometime, and then I'll find out his Alice-secret."

"I don't see how you'll ever get acquainted with him," said Felicity. "He never goes anywhere except to church. He just

stays home and reads books when he isn't working. Mother says he is a perfect hermit."

"I'll manage it somehow," said the Story Girl--and we had no doubt that she would. "But I must wait until I'm a little older, for he wouldn't tell the secret of the west room to a little girl. And I mustn't wait till I'm TOO old, for he is frightened of grown-up girls, because he thinks they laugh at his awkwardness. I know I will like him. He has such a nice face, even if he is awkward. He looks like a man you could tell things to."

"Well, I'd like a man who could move around without falling over his own feet," said Felicity. "And then the look of him! Uncle Roger says he is long, lank, lean, narrow, and contracted."

"Things always sound worse than they are when Uncle Roger says them," said the Story Girl. "Uncle Edward says Jasper Dale is a very clever man and it's a great pity he wasn't able to finish his college course. He went to college two years, you know. Then his father died, and he stayed home with his mother because she was very delicate. I call him a hero. I wonder if it is true that he writes poetry. Mrs. Griggs says it is. She says she has seen him writing it in a brown book. She said she couldn't get near enough to read it, but she knew it was poetry by the shape of it."

"Very likely. If that blue silk dress story is true, I'd believe ANYTHING of him," said Felicity.

We were near Golden Milestone now. The house was a big, weather-gray structure, overgrown with vines and climbing roses. Something about the three square windows in the second story gave it an appearance of winking at us in a friendly fashion through its vines--at least, so the Story Girl said; and, indeed, we could see it for ourselves after she had once pointed it out to us.

We did not get into the house, however. We met the Awkward man in his yard, and he gave us a quarter apiece for our library. He did not seem awkward or shy; but then we were only children, and his foot was on his native heath.

He was a tall, slender man, who did not look his forty years, so unwrinkled was his high, white forehead, so clear and lustrous his large, dark-blue eyes, so free from silver threads his rather long black hair. He had large hands and feet, and walked with a slight stoop. I am afraid we stared at him rather rudely while the Story Girl talked to him. But was not an Awkward Man, who was also a hermit and kept blue silk dresses in a locked room, and possibly wrote poetry, a legitimate object of curiosity? I leave it to you.

When we got away we compared notes, and found that we all liked him--and this, although he had said little and had appeared somewhat glad to get rid of us.

"He gave us the money like a gentleman," said the Story Girl. "I felt he didn't grudge it. And now for Mr. Campbell. It was on HIS account I put on my red silk. I don't suppose the Awkward Man noticed it at all, but Mr. Campbell will, or I'm much mistaken."