

CHAPTER VIII. A TRAGEDY OF CHILDHOOD

The Story Girl went to Charlottetown for a week in June to visit Aunt Louisa. Life seemed very colourless without her, and even Felicity admitted that it was lonesome. But three days after her departure Felix told us something on the way home from school which lent some spice to existence immediately.

"What do you think?" he said in a very solemn, yet excited, tone.

"Jerry Cowan told me at recess this afternoon that he HAD SEEN A PICTURE OF GOD--that he has it at home in an old, red-covered history of the world, and has looked at it OFTEN."

To think that Jerry Cowan should have seen such a picture often! We were as deeply impressed as Felix had meant us to be.

"Did he say what it was like?" asked Peter.

"No--only that it was a picture of God, walking in the garden of Eden."

"Oh," whispered Felicity--we all spoke in low tones on the subject, for, by instinct and training, we thought and uttered the Great Name with reverence, in spite of our devouring curiosity--"oh, WOULD Jerry Cowan bring it to school and let us see it?"

"I asked him that, soon as ever he told me," said Felix. "He said he might, but he couldn't promise, for he'd have to ask his mother if he could bring the book to school. If she'll let him he'll bring it to-morrow."

"Oh, I'll be almost afraid to look at it," said Sara Ray tremulously.

I think we all shared her fear to some extent. Nevertheless, we went to school the next day burning with curiosity. And we were disappointed. Possibly night had brought counsel to Jerry Cowan; or perhaps his mother had put him up to it. At all events, he announced to us that he couldn't bring the red-covered history to school, but if we wanted to buy the picture outright he would tear it out of the book and sell it to us for fifty cents.

We talked the matter over in serious conclave in the orchard that evening. We were all rather short of hard cash, having devoted most of our spare means to the school library fund. But the general consensus of opinion was that we must have the picture, no matter what pecuniary sacrifices were involved. If we could each give about seven cents we would have the amount. Peter could only give four, but Dan gave eleven, which squared matters.

"Fifty cents would be pretty dear for any other picture, but of

course this is different," said Dan.

"And there's a picture of Eden thrown in, too, you know," added Felicity.

"Fancy selling God's picture," said Cecily in a shocked, awed tone.

"Nobody but a Cowan would do it, and that's a fact," said Dan.

"When we get it we'll keep it in the family Bible," said Felicity. "That's the only proper place."

"Oh, I wonder what it will be like," breathed Cecily.

We all wondered. Next day in school we agreed to Jerry Cowan's terms, and Jerry promised to bring the picture up to Uncle Alec's the following afternoon.

We were all intensely excited Saturday morning. To our dismay, it began to rain just before dinner.

"What if Jerry doesn't bring the picture to-day because of the rain?" I suggested.

"Never you fear," answered Felicity decidedly. "A Cowan would

come through ANYTHING for fifty cents."

After dinner we all, without any verbal decision about it, washed our faces and combed our hair. The girls put on their second best dresses, and we boys donned white collars. We all had the unuttered feeling that we must do such honour to that Picture as we could. Felicity and Dan began a small spat over something, but stopped at once when Cecily said severely,

"How DARE you quarrel when you are going to look at a picture of God to-day?"

Owing to the rain we could not foregather in the orchard, where we had meant to transact the business with Jerry. We did not wish our grown-ups around at our great moment, so we betook ourselves to the loft of the granary in the spruce wood, from whose window we could see the main road and hail Jerry. Sara Ray had joined us, very pale and nervous, having had, so it appeared, a difference of opinion with her mother about coming up the hill in the rain.

"I'm afraid I did very wrong to come against ma's will," she said miserably, "but I COULDN'T wait. I wanted to see the picture as soon as you did."

We waited and watched at the window. The valley was full of

mist, and the rain was coming down in slanting lines over the tops of the spruces. But as we waited the clouds broke away and the sun came out flashingly; the drops on the spruce boughs glittered like diamonds.

"I don't believe Jerry can be coming," said Cecily in despair.

"I suppose his mother must have thought it was dreadful, after all, to sell such a picture."

"There he is now!" cried Dan, waving excitedly from the window.

"He's carrying a fish-basket," said Felicity. "You surely don't suppose he would bring THAT picture in a fish-basket!"

Jerry HAD brought it in a fish-basket, as appeared when he mounted the granary stairs shortly afterwards. It was folded up in a newspaper packet on top of the dried herring with which the basket was filled. We paid him his money, but we would not open the packet until he had gone.

"Cecily," said Felicity in a hushed tone. "You are the best of us all. YOU open the parcel."

"Oh, I'm no gooder than the rest of you," breathed Cecily, "but I'll open it if you like."

With trembling fingers Cecily opened the parcel. We stood around, hardly breathing. She unfolded it and held it up. We saw it.

Suddenly Sara began to cry.

"Oh, oh, oh, does God look like THAT?" she wailed.

Felix and I spoke not. Disappointment, and something worse, sealed our speech. DID God look like that--like that stern, angrily frowning old man with the tossing hair and beard of the wood-cut Cecily held.

"I suppose He must, since that is His picture," said Dan miserably.

"He looks awful cross," said Peter simply.

"Oh, I wish we'd never, never seen it," cried Cecily.

We all wished that--too late. Our curiosity had led us into some Holy of Holies, not to be profaned by human eyes, and this was our punishment.

"I've always had a feeling right along," wept Sara, "that it wasn't RIGHT to buy--or LOOK AT--God's picture."

As we stood there wretchedly we heard flying feet below and a blithe voice calling,

"Where are you, children?"

The Story Girl had returned! At any other moment we would have rushed to meet her in wild joy. But now we were too crushed and miserable to move.

"Whatever is the matter with you all?" demanded the Story Girl, appearing at the top of the stairs. "What is Sara crying about? What have you got there?"

"A picture of God," said Cecily with a sob in her voice, "and oh, it is so dreadful and ugly. Look!"

The Story Girl looked. An expression of scorn came over her face.

"Surely you don't believe God looks like that," she said impatiently, while her fine eyes flashed. "He doesn't--He couldn't. He is wonderful and beautiful. I'm surprised at you. THAT is nothing but the picture of a cross old man."

Hope sprang up in our hearts, although we were not wholly

convinced.

"I don't know," said Dan dubiously. "It says under the picture 'God in the Garden of Eden.' It's PRINTED."

"Well, I suppose that's what the man who drew it thought God was like," answered the Story Girl carelessly. "But HE couldn't have known any more than you do. HE had never seen Him."

"It's all very well for you to say so," said Felicity, "but YOU don't know either. I wish I could believe that isn't like God--but I don't know what to believe."

"Well, if you won't believe me, I suppose you'll believe the minister," said the Story Girl. "Go and ask him. He's in the house this very minute. He came up with us in the buggy."

At any other time we would never have dared catechize the minister about anything. But desperate cases call for desperate measures. We drew straws to see who should go and do the asking, and the lot fell to Felix.

"Better wait until Mr. Marwood leaves, and catch him in the lane," advised the Story Girl. "You'll have a lot of grown-ups around you in the house."

Felix took her advice. Mr. Marwood, presently walking benignantly along the lane, was confronted by a fat, small boy with a pale face but resolute eyes.

The rest of us remained in the background but within hearing.

"Well, Felix, what is it?" asked Mr. Marwood kindly.

"Please, sir, does God really look like this?" asked Felix, holding out the picture. "We hope He doesn't--but we want to know the truth, and that is why I'm bothering you. Please excuse us and tell me."

The minister looked at the picture. A stern expression came into his gentle blue eyes and he got as near to frowning as it was possible for him to get.

"Where did you get that thing?" he asked.

THING! We began to breathe easier.

"We bought it from Jerry Cowan. He found it in a red-covered history of the world. It SAYS it's God's picture," said Felix.

"It is nothing of the sort," said Mr. Marwood indignantly.

"There is no such thing as a picture of God, Felix. No human

being knows what he looks like--no human being CAN know. We should not even try to think what He looks like. But, Felix, you may be sure that God is infinitely more beautiful and loving and tender and kind than anything we can imagine of Him. Never believe anything else, my boy. As for this--this SACRILEGE--take it and burn it."

We did not know what a sacrilege meant, but we knew that Mr. Marwood had declared that the picture was not like God. That was enough for us. We felt as if a terrible weight had been lifted from our minds.

"I could hardly believe the Story Girl, but of course the minister KNOWS," said Dan happily.

"We've lost fifty cents because of it," said Felicity gloomily.

We had lost something of infinitely more value than fifty cents, although we did not realize it just then. The minister's words had removed from our minds the bitter belief that God was like that picture; but on something deeper and more enduring than mind an impression had been made that was never to be removed. The mischief was done. From that day to this the thought or the mention of God brings up before us involuntarily the vision of a stern, angry, old man. Such was the price we were to pay for the indulgence of a curiosity which each of us, deep in our hearts,

had, like Sara Ray, felt ought not to be gratified.

"Mr. Marwood told me to burn it," said Felix.

"It doesn't seem reverent to do that," said Cecily. "Even if it isn't God's picture, it has His name on it."

"Bury it," said the Story Girl.

We did bury it after tea, in the depths of the spruce grove; and then we went into the orchard. It was so nice to have the Story Girl back again. She had wreathed her hair with Canterbury Bells, and looked like the incarnation of rhyme and story and dream.

"Canterbury Bells is a lovely name for a flower, isn't it?" she said. "It makes you think of cathedrals and chimes, doesn't it? Let's go over to Uncle Stephen's Walk, and sit on the branches of the big tree. It's too wet on the grass, and I know a story--a TRUE story, about an old lady I saw in town at Aunt Louisa's. Such a dear old lady, with lovely silvery curls."

After the rain the air seemed dripping with odours in the warm west wind--the tang of fir balsam, the spice of mint, the wild woodsiness of ferns, the aroma of grasses steeping in the sunshine,--and with it all a breath of wild sweetness from far

hill pastures.

Scattered through the grass in Uncle Stephen's Walk, were blossoming pale, aerial flowers which had no name that we could ever discover. Nobody seemed to know anything about them. They had been there when Great-grandfather King bought the place. I have never seen them elsewhere, or found them described in any floral catalogue. We called them the White Ladies. The Story Girl gave them the name. She said they looked like the souls of good women who had had to suffer much and had been very patient. They were wonderfully dainty, with a strange, faint, aromatic perfume which was only to be detected at a little distance and vanished if you bent over them. They faded soon after they were plucked; and, although strangers, greatly admiring them, often carried away roots and seeds, they could never be coaxed to grow elsewhere.

"My story is about Mrs. Dunbar and the Captain of the FANNY," said the Story Girl, settling herself comfortably on a bough, with her brown head against a gnarled trunk. "It's sad and beautiful--and true. I do love to tell stories that I know really happened. Mrs. Dunbar lives next door to Aunt Louisa in town. She is so sweet. You wouldn't think to look at her that she had a tragedy in her life, but she has. Aunt Louisa told me the tale. It all happened long, long ago. Interesting things like this all did happen long ago, it seems to me. They never

seem to happen now. This was in '49, when people were rushing to the gold fields in California. It was just like a fever, Aunt Louisa says. People took it, right here on the Island; and a number of young men determined they would go to California.

"It is easy to go to California now; but it was a very different matter then. There were no railroads across the land, as there are now, and if you wanted to go to California you had to go in a sailing vessel, all the way around Cape Horn. It was a long and dangerous journey; and sometimes it took over six months. When you got there you had no way of sending word home again except by the same plan. It might be over a year before your people at home heard a word about you--and fancy what their feelings would be!

"But these young men didn't think of these things; they were led on by a golden vision. They made all their arrangements, and they chartered the brig Fanny to take them to California.

"The captain of the Fanny is the hero of my story. His name was Alan Dunbar, and he was young and handsome. Heroes always are, you know, but Aunt Louisa says he really was. And he was in love--wildly in love,--with Margaret Grant. Margaret was as beautiful as a dream, with soft blue eyes and clouds of golden hair; and she loved Alan Dunbar just as much as he loved her. But her parents were bitterly opposed to him, and they had

forbidden Margaret to see him or speak to him. They hadn't anything against him as a MAN, but they didn't want her to throw herself away on a sailor.

"Well, when Alan Dunbar knew that he must go to California in the Fanny he was in despair. He felt that he could NEVER go so far away for so long and leave his Margaret behind. And Margaret felt that she could never let him go. I know EXACTLY how she felt."

"How can you know?" interrupted Peter suddenly. "You ain't old enough to have a beau. How can you know?"

The Story Girl looked at Peter with a frown. She did not like to be interrupted when telling a story.

"Those are not things one KNOWS about," she said with dignity. "One FEELS about them."

Peter, crushed but not convinced, subsided, and the Story Girl went on.

"Finally, Margaret ran away with Alan, and they were married in Charlottetown. Alan intended to take his wife with him to California in the Fanny. If it was a hard journey for a man it was harder still for a woman, but Margaret would have dared

anything for Alan's sake. They had three days--ONLY three days--of happiness, and then the blow fell. The crew and the passengers of the Fanny refused to let Captain Dunbar take his wife with him. They told him he must leave her behind. And all his prayers were of no avail. They say he stood on the deck of the Fanny and pleaded with the men while the tears ran down his face; but they would not yield, and he had to leave Margaret behind. Oh, what a parting it was!"

There was heartbreak in the Story Girl's voice and tears came into our eyes. There, in the green bower of Uncle Stephen's Walk, we cried over the pathos of a parting whose anguish had been stilled for many years.

"When it was all over, Margaret's father and mother forgave her, and she went back home to wait--to WAIT. Oh, it is so dreadful just to WAIT, and do nothing else. Margaret waited for nearly a year. How long it must have seemed to her! And at last there came a letter--but not from Alan. Alan was DEAD. He had died in California and had been buried there. While Margaret had been thinking of him and longing for him and praying for him he had been lying in his lonely, faraway grave."

Cecily sprang up, shaking with sobs.

"Oh, don't--don't go on," she implored. "I CAN'T bear any more."

"There is no more," said the Story Girl. "That was the end of it--the end of everything for Margaret. It didn't kill HER, but her heart died."

"I just wish I'd hold of those fellows who wouldn't let the Captain take his wife," said Peter savagely.

"Well, it was awful said," said Felicity, wiping her eyes. "But it was long ago and we can't do any good by crying over it now. Let us go and get something to eat. I made some nice little rhubarb tarts this morning."

We went. In spite of new disappointments and old heartbreaks we had appetites. And Felicity did make scrumptious rhubarb tarts!