

CHAPTER IX. MAGIC SEED

When the time came to hand in our collections for the library fund Peter had the largest--three dollars. Felicity was a good second with two and a half. This was simply because the hens had laid so well.

"If you'd had to pay father for all the extra handfuls of wheat you've fed to those hens, Miss Felicity, you wouldn't have so much," said Dan spitefully.

"I didn't," said Felicity indignantly. "Look how Aunt Olivia's hens laid, too, and she fed them herself just the same as usual."

"Never mind," said Cecily, "we have all got something to give. If you were like poor Sara Ray, and hadn't been able to collect anything, you might feel bad."

But Sara Ray HAD something to give. She came up the hill after tea, all radiant. When Sara Ray smiled--and she did not waste her smiles--she was rather pretty in a plaintive, apologetic way. A dimple or two came into sight, and she had very nice teeth--small and white, like the traditional row of pearls.

"Oh, just look," she said. "Here are three dollars--and I'm going to give it all to the library fund. I had a letter to-day

from Uncle Arthur in Winnipeg, and he sent me three dollars. He said I was to use it ANY way I liked, so ma couldn't refuse to let me give it to the fund. She thinks it's an awful waste, but she always goes by what Uncle Arthur says. Oh, I've prayed so hard that some money might come some way, and now it has. See what praying does!"

I was very much afraid that we did not rejoice quite as unselfishly in Sara's good fortune as we should have done. WE had earned our contributions by the sweat of our brow, or by the scarcely less disagreeable method of "begging." And Sara's had as good as descended upon her out of the skies, as much like a miracle as anything you could imagine.

"She prayed for it, you know," said Felix, after Sara had gone home.

"That's too easy a way of earning money," grumbled Peter resentfully. "If the rest of us had just set down and done nothing, only prayed, how much do you s'pose we'd have? It don't seem fair to me."

"Oh, well, it's different with Sara," said Dan. "We COULD earn money and she COULDN'T. You see? But come on down to the orchard. The Story Girl had a letter from her father to-day and she's going to read it to us."

We went promptly. A letter from the Story Girl's father was always an event; and to hear her read it was almost as good as hearing her tell a story.

Before coming to Carlisle, Uncle Blair Stanley had been a mere name to us. Now he was a personality. His letters to the Story Girl, the pictures and sketches he sent her, her adoring and frequent mention of him, all combined to make him very real to us.

We FELT then, what we did not understand till later years, that our grown-up relatives did not altogether admire or approve of Uncle Blair. He belonged to a different world from theirs. They had never known him very intimately or understood him. I realize now that Uncle Blair was a bit of a Bohemian--a respectable sort of tramp. Had he been a poor man he might have been a more successful artist. But he had a small fortune of his own and, lacking the spur of necessity, or of disquieting ambition, he remained little more than a clever amateur. Once in a while he painted a picture which showed what he could do; but for the rest, he was satisfied to wander over the world, light-hearted and content. We knew that the Story Girl was thought to resemble him strongly in appearance and temperament, but she had far more fire and intensity and strength of will--her inheritance from King and Ward. She would never be satisfied as a dabbler;

whatever her future career should be, into it she would throw all her powers of mind and heart and soul.

But Uncle Blair could do at least one thing surpassingly well. He could write letters. Such letters! By contrast, Felix and I were secretly ashamed of father's epistles. Father could talk well but, as Felix said, he couldn't write worth a cent. The letters we had received from him since his arrival in Rio de Janeiro were mere scrawls, telling us to be good boys and not trouble Aunt Janet, incidentally adding that he was well and lonesome. Felix and I were always glad to get his letters, but we never read them aloud to an admiring circle in the orchard.

Uncle Blair was spending the summer in Switzerland; and the letter the Story Girl read to us, among the fair, frail White Ladies of the Walk, where the west wind came now with a sigh, and again with a rush, and then brushed our faces as softly as the down of a thistle, was full of the glamour of mountain-rimmed lakes, and purple chalets, and "snowy summits old in story." We climbed Mount Blanc, saw the Jungfrau soaring into cloudland, and walked among the gloomy pillars of Bonnivard's prison. Finally, the Story Girl told us the tale of the Prisoner of Chillon, in words that were Byron's, but in a voice that was all her own.

"It must be splendid to go to Europe," sighed Cecily longingly.

"I am going some day," said the Story Girl airily.

We looked at her with a slightly incredulous awe. To us, in those years, Europe seemed almost as remote and unreachable as the moon. It was hard to believe that one of US should ever go there. But Aunt Julia had gone--and SHE had been brought up in Carlisle on this very farm. So it was possible that the Story Girl might go too.

"What will you do there?" asked Peter practically.

"I shall learn how to tell stories to all the world," said the Story Girl dreamily.

It was a lovely, golden-brown evening; the orchard, and the farm-lands beyond, were full of ruby lights and kissing shadows. Over in the east, above the Awkward Man's house, the Wedding Veil of the Proud Princess floated across the sky, presently turning as rosy as if bedewed with her heart's blood. We sat there and talked until the first star lighted a white taper over the beech hill.

Then I remembered that I had forgotten to take my dose of magic seed, and I hastened to do it, although I was beginning to lose faith in it. I had not grown a single bit, by the merciless testimony of the hall door.

I took the box of seed out of my trunk in the twilit room and swallowed the decreed pinch. As I did so, Dan's voice rang out behind me.

"Beverley King, what have you got there?"

I thrust the box hastily into my trunk and confronted Dan.

"None of your business," I said defiantly.

"Yes, 'tis." Dan was too much in earnest to resent my blunt speech. "Look here, Bev, is that magic seed? And did you get it from Billy Robinson?"

Dan and I looked at each other, suspicion dawning in our eyes.

"What do you know about Billy Robinson and his magic seed?" I demanded.

"Just this. I bought a box from him for--for--something. He said he wasn't going to sell any of it to anybody else. Did he sell any to you?"

"Yes, he did," I said in disgust--for I was beginning to understand that Billy and his magic seed were arrant frauds.

"What for? YOUR mouth is a decent size," said Dan.

"Mouth? It had nothing to do with my mouth! He said it would make me grow tall. And it hasn't--not an inch! I don't see what you wanted it for! You are tall enough."

"I got it for my mouth," said Dan with a shame-faced grin. "The girls in school laugh at it so. Kate Marr says it's like a gash in a pie. Billy said that seed would shrink it for sure."

Well, there it was! Billy had deceived us both. Nor were we the only victims. We did not find the whole story out at once. Indeed, the summer was almost over before, in one way or another, the full measure of that shameless Billy Robinson's iniquity was revealed to us. But I shall anticipate the successive relations in this chapter. Every pupil of Carlisle school, so it eventually appeared, had bought magic seed, under solemn promise of secrecy. Felix had believed blissfully that it would make him thin. Cecily's hair was to become naturally curly, and Sara Ray was not to be afraid of Peg Bowen any more. It was to make Felicity as clever as the Story Girl and it was to make the Story Girl as good a cook as Felicity. What Peter had bought magic seed for remained a secret longer than any of the others. Finally--it was the night before what we expected would be the Judgment Day--he confessed to me that he had taken it to make

Felicity fond of him. Skilfully indeed had that astute Billy played on our respective weaknesses.

The keenest edge to our humiliation was given by the discovery that the magic seed was nothing more or less than caraway, which grew in abundance at Billy Robinson's uncle's in Markdale. Peg Bowen had had nothing to do with it.

Well, we had all been badly hoaxed. But we did not trumpet our wrongs abroad. We did not even call Billy to account. We thought that least said was soonest mended in such a matter. We went very softly indeed, lest the grown-ups, especially that terrible Uncle Roger, should hear of it.

"We should have known better than to trust Billy Robinson," said Felicity, summing up the case one evening when all had been made known. "After all, what could you expect from a pig but a grunt?"

We were not surprised to find that Billy Robinson's contribution to the library fund was the largest handed in by any of the scholars. Cecily said she didn't envy him his conscience. But I am afraid she measured his conscience by her own. I doubt very much if Billy's troubled him at all.