

CHAPTER X. A DAUGHTER OF EVE

"I hate the thought of growing up," said the Story Girl reflectively, "because I can never go barefooted then, and nobody will ever see what beautiful feet I have."

She was sitting, the July sunlight, on the ledge of the open hayloft window in Uncle Roger's big barn; and the bare feet below her print skirt WERE beautiful. They were slender and shapely and satin smooth with arched insteps, the daintiest of toes, and nails like pink shells.

We were all the hayloft. The Story Girl had been telling us a tale

"Of old, unhappy, far-off things,
And battles long ago."

Felicity and Cecily were curled up in a corner, and we boys sprawled idly on the fragrant, sun-warm heaps. We had "stowed" the hay in the loft that morning for Uncle Roger, so we felt that we had earned the right to loll on our sweet-smelling couch. Haylofts are delicious places, with just enough of shadow and soft, uncertain noises to give an agreeable tang of mystery. The swallows flew in and out of their nest above our heads, and whenever a sunbeam fell through a chink the air swarmed with

golden dust. Outside of the loft was a vast, sunshiny gulf of blue sky and mellow air, wherein floated argosies of fluffy cloud, and airy tops of maple and spruce.

Pat was with us, of course, prowling about stealthily, or making frantic, bootless leaps at the swallows. A cat in a hayloft is a beautiful example of the eternal fitness of things. We had not heard of this fitness then, but we all felt that Paddy was in his own place in a hayloft.

"I think it is very vain to talk about anything you have yourself being beautiful," said Felicity.

"I am not a bit vain," said the Story Girl, with entire truthfulness. "It is not vanity to know your own good points. It would just be stupidity if you didn't. It's only vanity when you get puffed up about them. I am not a bit pretty. My only good points are my hair and eyes and feet. So I think it's real mean that one of them has to be covered up the most of the time. I'm always glad when it gets warm enough to go barefooted. But, when I grow up they'll have to be covered all the time. It IS mean."

"You'll have to put your shoes and stockings on when you go to the magic lantern show to-night," said Felicity in a tone of satisfaction.

"I don't know that. I'm thinking of going barefooted."

"Oh, you wouldn't! Sara Stanley, you're not in earnest!"
exclaimed Felicity, her blue eyes filling with horror.

The Story Girl winked with the side of her face next to Felix and me, but the side next the girls changed not a muscle. She dearly loved to "take a rise" out of Felicity now and then.

"Indeed, I would if I just made up my mind to. Why not? Why not bare feet--if they're clean--as well as bare hands and face?"

"Oh, you wouldn't! It would be such a disgrace!" said poor Felicity in real distress.

"We went to school barefooted all June," argued that wicked Story Girl. "What is the difference between going to the schoolhouse barefooted in the daytime and going in the evening?"

"Oh, there's EVERY difference. I can't just explain it--but every one KNOWS there is a difference. You know it yourself. Oh, PLEASE, don't do such a thing, Sara."

"Well, I won't, just to oblige you," said the Story Girl, who would have died the death before she would have gone to a "public

meeting" barefooted.

We were all rather excited over the magic lantern show which an itinerant lecturer was to give in the schoolhouse that evening. Even Felix and I, who had seen such shows galore, were interested, and the rest were quite wild. There had never been such a thing in Carlisle before. We were all going, Peter included. Peter went everywhere with us now. He was a regular attendant at church and Sunday School, where his behaviour was as irreproachable as if he had been "raised" in the caste of Vere de Vere. It was feather in the Story Girl's cap, for she took all the credit of having started Peter on the right road. Felicity was resigned, although the fatal patch on Peter's best trousers was still an eyesore to her. She declared she never got any good of the singing, because Peter stood up then and every one could see the patch. Mrs. James Clark, whose pew was behind ours, never took her eye off it--or so Felicity averred.

But Peter's stockings were always darned. Aunt Olivia had seen to that, ever since she heard of Peter's singular device regarding them on his first Sunday. She had also given Peter a Bible, of which he was so proud that he hated to use it lest he should soil it.

"I think I'll wrap it up and keep it in my box," he said. "I've an old Bible of Aunt Jane's at home that I can use. I s'pose

it's just the same, even if it is old, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes," Cecily had assured him. "The Bible is always the same."

"I thought maybe they'd got some new improvements on it since Aunt Jane's day," said Peter, relieved.

"Sara Ray is coming along the lane, and she's crying," announced Dan, who was peering out of a knot-hole on the opposite side of the loft.

"Sara Ray is crying half her time," said Cecily impatiently.

"I'm sure she cries a quartful of tears a month. There are times when you can't help crying. But I hide then. Sara just goes and cries in public."

The lachrymose Sara presently joined us and we discovered the cause of her tears to be the doleful fact that her mother had forbidden her to go to the magic lantern show that night. We all showed the sympathy we felt.

"She SAID yesterday you could go," said the Story Girl indignantly. "Why has she changed her mind?"

"Because of the measles in Markdale," sobbed Sara. "She says

Markdale is full of them, and there'll be sure to be some of the Markdale people at the show. So I'm not to go. And I've never seen a magic lantern--I've never seen ANYTHING."

"I don't believe there's any danger of catching measles," said Felicity. "If there was we wouldn't be allowed to go."

"I wish I COULD get the measles," said Sara defiantly. "Maybe I'd be of some importance to ma then."

"Suppose Cecily goes down with you and coaxes your mother," suggested the Story Girl. "Perhaps she'd let you go then. She likes Cecily. She doesn't like either Felicity or me, so it would only make matters worse for us to try."

"Ma's gone to town--pa and her went this afternoon--and they're not coming back till to-morrow. There's nobody home but Judy Pineau and me."

"Then," said the Story Girl, "why don't you just go to the show anyhow? Your mother won't ever know, if you coax Judy to hold her tongue."

"Oh, but that's wrong," said Felicity. "You shouldn't put Sara up to disobeying her mother."

Now, Felicity for once was undoubtedly right. The Story Girl's suggestion WAS wrong; and if it had been Cecily who protested, the Story Girl would probably have listened to her, and proceeded no further in the matter. But Felicity was one of those unfortunate people whose protests against wrong-doing serve only to drive the wrong-doer further on her sinful way.

The Story Girl resented Felicity's superior tone, and proceeded to tempt Sara in right good earnest. The rest of us held our tongues. It was, we told ourselves, Sara's own lookout.

"I have a good mind to do it," said Sara. "but I can't get my good clothes; they're in the spare room, and ma locked the door, for fear somebody would get at the fruit cake. I haven't a single thing to wear, except my school gingham."

"Well, that's new and pretty," said the Story Girl. "We'll lend you some things. You can have my lace collar. That'll make the gingham quite elegant. And Cecily will lend you her second best hat."

"But I've no shoes or stockings. They're locked up too."

"You can have a pair of mine," said Felicity, who probably thought that since Sara was certain to yield to temptation, she might as well be garbed decently for her transgression.

Sara did yield. When the Story Girl's voice entreated it was not easy to resist its temptation, even if you wanted to. That evening, when we started for the schoolhouse, Sara Ray was among us, decked out in borrowed plumes.

"Suppose she DOES catch the measles?" Felicity said aside.

"I don't believe there'll be anybody there from Markdale. The lecturer is going to Markdale next week. They'll wait for that," said the Story Girl airily.

It was a cool, dewy evening, and we walked down the long, red hill in the highest of spirits. Over a valley filled with beech and spruce was a sunset afterglow--creamy yellow and a hue that was not so much red as the dream of red, with a young moon swung low in it. The air was sweet with the breath of mown hayfields where swaths of clover had been steeping in the sun. Wild roses grew pinkly along the fences, and the roadsides were star-dusted with buttercups.

Those of us who had nothing the matter with our consciences enjoyed our walk to the little whitewashed schoolhouse in the valley. Felicity and Cecily were void of offence towards all men. The Story Girl walked uprightly like an incarnate flame in her crimson silk. Her pretty feet were hidden in the

tan-coloured, buttoned Paris boots which were the secret envy of every school girl in Carlisle.

But Sara Ray was not happy. Her face was so melancholy that the Story Girl lost patience with her. The Story Girl herself was not altogether at ease. Probably her own conscience was troubling her. But admit it she would not.

"Now, Sara," she said, "you just take my advice and go into this with all your heart if you go at all. Never mind if it is bad. There's no use being naughty if you spoil your fun by wishing all the time you were good. You can repent afterwards, but there is no use in mixing the two things together."

"I'm not repenting," protested Sara. "I'm only scared of ma finding it out."

"Oh!" The Story Girl's voice expressed her scorn. For remorse she had understanding and sympathy; but fear of her fellow creatures was something unknown to her. "Didn't Judy Pineau promise you solemnly she wouldn't tell?"

"Yes; but maybe some one who sees me there will mention it to ma."

"Well, if you're so scared you'd better not go. It isn't too

late. Here's your own gate," said Cecily.

But Sara could not give up the delights of the show. So she walked on, a small, miserable testimony that the way of the transgressor is never easy, even when said transgressor is only a damsel of eleven.

The magic lantern show was a splendid one. The views were good and the lecturer witty. We repeated his jokes to each other all the way home. Sara, who had not enjoyed the exhibition at all, seemed to feel more cheerful when it was over and she was going home. The Story Girl on the contrary was gloomy.

"There WERE Markdale people there," she confided to me, "and the Williamsons live next door to the Cowans, who have measles. I wish I'd never egged Sara on to going--but don't tell Felicity I said so. If Sara Ray had really enjoyed the show I wouldn't mind. But she didn't. I could see that. So I've done wrong and made her do wrong--and there's nothing to show for it."

The night was scented and mysterious. The wind was playing an eerie fleshless melody in the reeds of the brook hollow. The sky was dark and starry, and across it the Milky Way flung its shimmering misty ribbons.

"There's four hundred million stars in the Milky Way," quoth

Peter, who frequently astonished us by knowing more than any hired boy could be expected to. He had a retentive memory, and never forgot anything he heard or read. The few books left to him by his oft-referred-to Aunt Jane had stocked his mind with a miscellaneous information which sometimes made Felix and me doubt if we knew as much as Peter after all. Felicity was so impressed by his knowledge of astronomy that she dropped back from the other girls and walked beside him. She had not done so before because he was barefooted. It was permissible for hired boys to go to public meetings--when not held in the church--with bare feet, and no particular disgrace attached to it. But Felicity would not walk with a barefooted companion. It was dark now, so nobody would notice his feet.

"I know a story about the Milky Way," said the Story Girl, brightening up. "I read it in a book of Aunt Louisa's in town, and I learned it off by heart. Once there were two archangels in heaven, named Zerah and Zulamith--"

"Have angels names--same as people?" interrupted Peter.

"Yes, of course. They MUST have. They'd be all mixed up if they hadn't."

"And when I'm an angel--if I ever get to be one--will my name still be Peter?"

"No. You'll have a new name up there," said Cecily gently. "It says so in the Bible."

"Well, I'm glad of that. Peter would be such a funny name for an angel. And what is the difference between angels and archangels?"

"Oh, archangels are angels that have been angels so long that they've had time to grow better and brighter and more beautiful than newer angels," said the Story Girl, who probably made that explanation up on the spur of the moment, just to pacify Peter.

"How long does it take for an angel to grow into an archangel?" pursued Peter.

"Oh, I don't know. Millions of years likely. And even then I don't suppose ALL the angels do. A good many of them must just stay plain angels, I expect."

"I shall be satisfied just to be a plain angel," said Felicity modestly.

"Oh, see here, if you're going to interrupt and argue over everything, we'll never get the story told," said Felix. "Dry up, all of you, and let the Story Girl go on."

We dried up, and the Story Girl went on.

"Zerah and Zulamith loved each other, just as mortals love, and this is forbidden by the laws of the Almighty. And because Zerah and Zulamith had so broken God's law they were banished from His presence to the uttermost bounds of the universe. If they had been banished TOGETHER it would have been no punishment; so Zerah was exiled to a star on one side of the universe, and Zulamith was sent to a star on the other side of the universe; and between them was a fathomless abyss which thought itself could not cross. Only one thing could cross it--and that was love. Zulamith yearned for Zerah with such fidelity and longing that he began to build up a bridge of light from his star; and Zerah, not knowing this, but loving and longing for him, began to build a similar bridge of light from her star. For a thousand thousand years they both built the bridge of light, and at last they met and sprang into each other's arms. Their toil and loneliness and suffering were all over and forgotten, and the bridge they had built spanned the gulf between their stars of exile.

"Now, when the other archangels saw what had been done they flew in fear and anger to God's white throne, and cried to Him,

"See what these rebellious ones have done! They have built them a bridge of light across the universe, and set Thy decree of

separation at naught. Do Thou, then, stretch forth Thine arm and destroy their impious work.'

"They ceased--and all heaven was hushed. Through the silence sounded the voice of the Almighty.

"'Nay,' He said, 'whatsoever in my universe true love hath builded not even the Almighty can destroy. The bridge must stand forever.'

"And," concluded the Story Girl, her face upturned to the sky and her big eyes filled with starlight, "it stands still. That bridge is the Milky Way."

"What a lovely story," sighed Sara Ray, who had been wooed to a temporary forgetfulness of her woes by its charm.

The rest of us came back to earth, feeling that we had been wandering among the hosts of heaven. We were not old enough to appreciate fully the wonderful meaning of the legend; but we felt its beauty and its appeal. To us forevermore the Milky Way would be, not Peter's overwhelming garland of suns, but the lucent bridge, love-created, on which the banished archangels crossed from star to star.

We had to go up Sara Ray's lane with her to her very door, for

she was afraid Peg Bowen would catch her if she went alone. Then the Story Girl and I walked up the hill together. Peter and Felicity lagged behind. Cecily and Dan and Felix were walking before us, hand in hand, singing a hymn. Cecily had a very sweet voice, and I listened in delight. But the Story Girl sighed.

"What if Sara does take the measles?" she asked miserably.

"Everyone has to have the measles sometime," I said comfortingly, "and the younger you are the better."