

CHAPTER XI. THE STORY GIRL DOES PENANCE

Ten days later, Aunt Olivia and Uncle Roger went to town one evening, to remain over night, and the next day. Peter and the Story Girl were to stay at Uncle Alec's during their absence.

We were in the orchard at sunset, listening to the story of King Cophetua and the beggar maid--all of us, except Peter, who was hoeing turnips, and Felicity, who had gone down the hill on an errand to Mrs. Ray.

The Story Girl impersonated the beggar maid so vividly, and with such an illusion of beauty, that we did not wonder in the least at the king's love for her. I had read the story before, and it had been my opinion that it was "rot." No king, I felt certain, would ever marry a beggar maid when he had princesses galore from whom to choose. But now I understood it all.

When Felicity returned we concluded from her expression that she had news. And she had.

"Sara is real sick," she said, with regret, and something that was not regret mingled in her voice. "She has a cold and sore throat, and she is feverish. Mrs. Ray says if she isn't better by the morning she's going to send for the doctor. AND SHE IS AFRAID IT'S THE MEASLES."

Felicity flung the last sentence at the Story Girl, who turned very pale.

"Oh, do you suppose she caught them at the magic lantern show?" she said miserably.

"Where else could she have caught them?" said Felicity mercilessly. "I didn't see her, of course--Mrs. Ray met me at the door and told me not to come in. But Mrs. Ray says the measles always go awful hard with the Rays--if they don't die completely of them it leaves them deaf or half blind, or something like that. Of course," added Felicity, her heart melting at sight of the misery in the Story Girl's piteous eyes, "Mrs. Ray always looks on the dark side, and it may not be the measles Sara has after all."

But Felicity had done her work too thoroughly. The Story Girl was not to be comforted.

"I'd give anything if I'd never put Sara up to going to that show," she said. "It's all my fault--but the punishment falls on Sara, and that isn't fair. I'd go this minute and confess the whole thing to Mrs. Ray; but if I did it might get Sara into more trouble, and I mustn't do that. I sha'n't sleep a wink to-night."

I don't think she did. She looked very pale and woebegone when she came down to breakfast. But, for all that, there was a certain exhilaration about her.

"I'm going to do penance all day for coaxing Sara to disobey her mother," she announced with chastened triumph.

"Penance?" we murmured in bewilderment.

"Yes. I'm going to deny myself everything I like, and do everything I can think of that I don't like, just to punish myself for being so wicked. And if any of you think of anything I don't, just mention it to me. I thought it out last night. Maybe Sara won't be so very sick if God sees I'm truly sorry."

"He can see it anyhow, without you're doing anything," said Cecily.

"Well, my conscience will feel better."

"I don't believe Presbyterians ever do penance," said Felicity dubiously. "I never heard of one doing it."

But the rest of us rather looked with favour on the Story Girl's idea. We felt sure that she would do penance as picturesquely

and thoroughly as she did everything else.

"You might put peas in your shoes, you know," suggested Peter.

"The very thing! I never thought of that. I'll get some after breakfast. I'm not going to eat a single thing all day, except bread and water--and not much of that!"

This, we felt, was a heroic measure indeed. To sit down to one of Aunt Janet's meals, in ordinary health and appetite, and eat nothing but bread and water--that would be penance with a vengeance! We felt WE could never do it. But the Story Girl did it. We admired and pitied her. But now I do not think that she either needed our pity or deserved our admiration. Her ascetic fare was really sweeter to her than honey of Hymettus. She was, though quite unconsciously, acting a part, and tasting all the subtle joy of the artist, which is so much more exquisite than any material pleasure.

Aunt Janet, of course, noticed the Story Girl's abstinence and asked if she was sick.

"No. I am just doing penance, Aunt Janet, for a sin I committed. I can't confess it, because that would bring trouble on another person. So I'm going to do penance all day. You don't mind, do you?"

Aunt Janet was in a very good humour that morning, so she merely laughed.

"Not if you don't go too far with your nonsense," she said tolerantly.

"Thank you. And will you give me a handful of hard peas after breakfast, Aunt Janet? I want to put them in my shoes."

"There isn't any; I used the last in the soup yesterday."

"Oh!" The Story Girl was much disappointed. "Then I suppose I'll have to do without. The new peas wouldn't hurt enough. They're so soft they'd just squash flat."

"I'll tell you," said Peter, "I'll pick up a lot of those little round pebbles on Mr. King's front walk. They'll be just as good as peas."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," said Aunt Janet. "Sara must not do penance in that way. She would wear holes in her stockings, and might seriously bruise her feet."

"What would you say if I took a whip and whipped my bare shoulders till the blood came?" demanded the Story Girl

aggrieved.

"I wouldn't SAY anything," retorted Aunt Janet. "I'd simply turn you over my knee and give you a sound, solid spanking, Miss Sara. You'd find that penance enough."

The Story Girl was crimson with indignation. To have such a remark made to you--when you were fourteen and a half--and before the boys, too! Really, Aunt Janet could be very dreadful.

It was vacation, and there was not much to do that day; we were soon free to seek the orchard. But the Story Girl would not come. She had seated herself in the darkest, hottest corner of the kitchen, with a piece of old cotton in her hand.

"I am not going to play to-day," she said, "and I'm not going to tell a single story. Aunt Janet won't let me put pebbles in my shoes, but I've put a thistle next my skin on my back and it sticks into me if I lean back the least bit. And I'm going to work buttonholes all over this cotton. I hate working buttonholes worse than anything in the world, so I'm going to work them all day."

"What's the good of working buttonholes on an old rag?" asked Felicity.

"It isn't any good. The beauty of penance is that it makes you feel uncomfortable. So it doesn't matter what you do, whether it's useful or not, so long as it's nasty. Oh, I wonder how Sara is this morning."

"Mother's going down this afternoon," said Felicity. "She says none of us must go near the place till we know whether it is the measles or not."

"I've thought of a great penance," said Cecily eagerly. "Don't go to the missionary meeting to-night."

The Story Girl looked piteous.

"I thought of that myself--but I CAN'T stay home, Cecily. It would be more than flesh and blood could endure. I MUST hear that missionary speak. They say he was all but eaten by cannibals once. Just think how many new stories I'd have to tell after I'd heard him! No, I must go, but I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll wear my school dress and hat. THAT will be penance. Felicity, when you set the table for dinner, put the broken-handled knife for me. I hate it so. And I'm going to take a dose of Mexican Tea every two hours. It's such dreadful tasting stuff--but it's a good blood purifier, so Aunt Janet can't object to it."

The Story Girl carried out her self-imposed penance fully. All day she sat in the kitchen and worked buttonholes, subsisting on bread and water and Mexican Tea.

Felicity did a mean thing. She went to work and made little raisin pies, right there in the kitchen before the Story Girl. The smell of raisin pies is something to tempt an anchorite; and the Story Girl was exceedingly fond of them. Felicity ate two in her very presence, and then brought the rest out to us in the orchard. The Story Girl could see us through the window, carousing without stint on raisin pies and Uncle Edward's cherries. But she worked on at her buttonholes. She would not look at the exciting serial in the new magazine Dan brought home from the post-office, neither would she open a letter from her father. Pat came over, but his most seductive purrs won no notice from his mistress, who refused herself the pleasure of even patting him.

Aunt Janet could not go down the hill in the afternoon to find out how Sara was because company came to tea--the Millwards from Markdale. Mr. Millward was a doctor, and Mrs. Millward was a B.A. Aunt Janet was very desirous that everything should be as nice as possible, and we were all sent to our rooms before tea to wash and dress up. The Story Girl slipped over home, and when she came back we gasped. She had combed her hair out straight, and braided it in a tight, kinky, pudgy braid; and she wore an

old dress of faded print, with holes in the elbows and ragged flounces, which was much too short for her.

"Sara Stanley, have you taken leave of your senses?" demanded Aunt Janet. "What do you mean by putting on such a rig! Don't you know I have company to tea?"

"Yes, and that is just why I put it on, Aunt Janet. I want to mortify the flesh--"

"I'll 'mortify' you, if I catch you showing yourself to the Millwards like that, my girl! Go right home and dress yourself decently--or eat your supper in the kitchen."

The Story Girl chose the latter alternative. She was highly indignant. I verily believe that to sit at the dining-room table, in that shabby, outgrown dress, conscious of looking her ugliest, and eating only bread and water before the critical Millwards would have been positive bliss to her.

When we went to the missionary meeting that evening, the Story Girl wore her school dress and hat, while Felicity and Cecily were in their pretty muslins. And she had tied her hair with a snuff-brown ribbon which was very unbecoming to her.

The first person we saw in the church porch was Mrs. Ray. She

told us that Sara had nothing worse than a feverish cold.

The missionary had at least seven happy listeners that night. We were all glad that Sara did not have measles, and the Story Girl was radiant.

"Now you see all your penance was wasted," said Felicity, as we walked home, keeping close together because of the rumour that Peg Bowen was abroad.

"Oh, I don't know. I feel better since I punished myself. But I'm going to make up for it to-morrow," said the Story Girl energetically. "In fact, I'll begin to-night. I'm going to the pantry as soon as I get home, and I'll read father's letter before I go to bed. Wasn't the missionary splendid? That cannibal story was simply grand. I tried to remember every word, so that I can tell it just as he told it. Missionaries are such noble people."

"I'd like to be a missionary and have adventures like that," said Felix.

"It would be all right if you could be sure the cannibals would be interrupted in the nick of time as his were," said Dan. "But sposed they weren't?"

"Nothing would prevent cannibals from eating Felix if they once caught him," giggled Felicity. "He's so nice and fat."

I am sure Felix felt very unlike a missionary at that precise moment.

"I'm going to put two cents more a week in my missionary box than I've been doing," said Cecily determinedly.

Two cents more a week out of Cecily's egg money, meant something of a sacrifice. It inspired the rest of us. We all decided to increase our weekly contribution by a cent or so. And Peter, who had had no missionary box at all, up to this time, determined to start one.

"I don't seem to be able to feel as int'rested in missionaries as you folks do," he said, "but maybe if I begin to give something I'll get int'rested. I'll want to know how my money's being spent. I won't be able to give much. When your father's run away, and your mother goes out washing, and you're only old enough to get fifty cents a week, you can't give much to the heathen. But I'll do the best I can. My Aunt Jane was fond of missions. Are there any Methodist heathen? I s'pose I ought to give my box to them, rather than to Presbyterian heathen."

"No, it's only after they're converted that they're anything in

particular," said Felicity. "Before that, they're just plain heathen. But if you want your money to go to a Methodist missionary you can give it to the Methodist minister at Markdale. I guess the Presbyterians can get along without it, and look after their own heathen."

"Just smell Mrs. Sampson's flowers," said Cecily, as we passed a trim white paling close to the road, over which blew odours sweeter than the perfume of Araby's shore. "Her roses are all out and that bed of Sweet William is a sight by daylight."

"Sweet William is a dreadful name for a flower," said the Story Girl. "William is a man's name, and men are NEVER sweet. They are a great many nice things, but they are NOT sweet and shouldn't be. That is for women. Oh, look at the moonshine on the road in that gap between the spruces! I'd like a dress of moonshine, with stars for buttons."

"It wouldn't do," said Felicity decidedly. "You could see through it."

Which seemed to settle the question of moonshine dresses effectually.