

## CHAPTER XII. THE BLUE CHEST OF RACHEL WARD

"It's utterly out of the question," said Aunt Janet seriously.

When Aunt Janet said seriously that anything was out of the question it meant that she was thinking about it, and would probably end up by doing it. If a thing really was out of the question she merely laughed and refused to discuss it at all.

The particular matter in or out of the question that opening day of August was a project which Uncle Edward had recently mooted. Uncle Edward's youngest daughter was to be married; and Uncle Edward had written over, urging Uncle Alec, Aunt Janet and Aunt Olivia to go down to Halifax for the wedding and spend a week there.

Uncle Alec and Aunt Olivia were eager to go; but Aunt Janet at first declared it was impossible.

"How could we go away and leave the place to the mercy of all those young ones?" she demanded. "We'd come home and find them all sick, and the house burned down."

"Not a bit of fear of it," scoffed Uncle Roger. "Felicity is as good a housekeeper as you are; and I shall be here to look after them all, and keep them from burning the house down. You've been promising Edward for years to visit him, and you'll never have a

better chance. The haying is over and harvest isn't on, and Alec needs a change. He isn't looking well at all."

I think it was Uncle Roger's last argument which convinced Aunt Janet. In the end she decided to go. Uncle Roger's house was to be closed, and he and Peter and the Story Girl were to take up their abode with us.

We were all delighted. Felicity, in especial, seemed to be in seventh heaven. To be left in sole charge of a big house, with three meals a day to plan and prepare, with poultry and cows and dairy and garden to superintend, apparently furnished forth Felicity's conception of Paradise. Of course, we were all to help; but Felicity was to "run things," and she gloried in it.

The Story Girl was pleased, too.

"Felicity is going to give me cooking lessons," she confided to me, as we walked in the orchard. "Isn't that fine? It will be easier when there are no grown-ups around to make me nervous, and laugh if I make mistakes."

Uncle Alec and aunts left on Monday morning. Poor Aunt Janet was full of dismal forebodings, and gave us so many charges and warnings that we did not try to remember any of them; Uncle Alec merely told us to be good and mind what Uncle Roger said. Aunt

Olivia laughed at us out of her pansy-blue eyes, and told us she knew exactly what we felt like and hoped we'd have a gorgeous time.

"Mind they go to bed at a decent hour," Aunt Janet called back to Uncle Roger as she drove out of the gate. "And if anything dreadful happens telegraph us."

Then they were really gone and we were all left "to keep house."

Uncle Roger and Peter went away to their work. Felicity at once set the preparations for dinner a-going, and allotted to each of us his portion of service. The Story Girl was to prepare the potatoes; Felix and Dan were to pick and shell the peas; Cecily was to attend the fire; I was to peel the turnips. Felicity made our mouths water by announcing that she was going to make a roly-poly jam pudding for dinner.

I peeled my turnips on the back porch, put them in their pot, and set them on the stove. Then I was at liberty to watch the others, who had longer jobs. The kitchen was a scene of happy activity. The Story Girl peeled her potatoes, somewhat slowly and awkwardly--for she was not deft at household tasks; Dan and Felix shelled peas and tormented Pat by attaching pods to his ears and tail; Felicity, flushed and serious, measured and stirred skilfully.

"I am sitting on a tragedy," said the Story Girl suddenly.

Felix and I stared. We were not quite sure what a "tragedy" was, but we did not think it was an old blue wooden chest, such as the Story Girl was undoubtedly sitting on, if eyesight counted for anything.

The old chest filled up the corner between the table and the wall. Neither Felix nor I had ever thought about it particularly. It was very large and heavy, and Felicity generally said hard things of it when she swept the kitchen.

"This old blue chest holds a tragedy," explained the Story Girl.

"I know a story about it."

"Cousin Rachel Ward's wedding things are all in that old chest," said Felicity.

Who was Cousin Rachel Ward? And why were her wedding things shut up in an old blue chest in Uncle Alec's kitchen? We demanded the tale instantly. The Story Girl told it to us as she peeled her potatoes. Perhaps the potatoes suffered--Felicity declared the eyes were not properly done at all--but the story did not.

"It is a sad story," said the Story Girl, "and it happened fifty

years ago, when Grandfather and Grandmother King were quite young. Grandmother's cousin Rachel Ward came to spend a winter with them. She belonged to Montreal and she was an orphan too, just like the Family Ghost. I have never heard what she looked like, but she MUST have been beautiful, of course."

"Mother says she was awful sentimental and romantic," interjected Felicity.

"Well, anyway, she met Will Montague that winter. He was handsome--everybody says so"--

"And an awful flirt," said Felicity.

"Felicity, I WISH you wouldn't interrupt. It spoils the effect. What would you feel like if I went and kept stirring things that didn't belong to it into that pudding? I feel just the same way. Well, Will Montague fell in love with Rachel Ward, and she with him, and it was all arranged that they were to be married from here in the spring. Poor Rachel was so happy that winter; she made all her wedding things with her own hands. Girls did, then, you know, for there was no such thing as a sewing-machine. Well, at last in April the wedding day came, and all the guests were here, and Rachel was dressed in her wedding robes, waiting for her bridegroom. And"--the Story Girl laid down her knife and potato and clasped her wet hands--"WILL MONTAGUE NEVER CAME!"

We felt as much of a shock as if we had been one of the expectant guests ourselves.

"What happened to him? Was HE killed too?" asked Felix.

The Story Girl sighed and resumed her work.

"No, indeed. I wish he had been. THAT would have been suitable and romantic. No, it was just something horrid. He had to run away for debt! Fancy! He acted mean right through, Aunt Janet says. He never sent even a word to Rachel, and she never heard from him again."

"Pig!" said Felix forcibly.

"She was broken-hearted of course. When she found out what had happened, she took all her wedding things, and her supply of linen, and some presents that had been given her, and packed them all away in this old blue chest. Then she went away back to Montreal, and took the key with her. She never came back to the Island again--I suppose she couldn't bear to. And she has lived in Montreal ever since and never married. She is an old woman now--nearly seventy-five. And this chest has never been opened since."

"Mother wrote to Cousin Rachel ten years ago," said Cecily, "and asked her if she might open the chest to see if the moths had got into it. There's a crack in the back as big as your finger.

Cousin Rachel wrote back that if it wasn't for one thing that was in the trunk she would ask mother to open the chest and dispose of the things as she liked. But she could not bear that any one but herself should see or touch that one thing. So she wanted it left as it was. Ma said she washed her hands of it, moths or no moths. She said if Cousin Rachel had to move that chest every time the floor had to be scrubbed it would cure her of her sentimental nonsense. But I think," concluded Cecily, "that I would feel just like Cousin Rachel in her place."

"What was the thing she couldn't bear any one to see?" I asked.

"Ma thinks it was her wedding dress. But father says he believes it was Will Montague's picture," said Felicity. "He saw her put it in. Father knows some of the things that are in the chest. He was ten years old, and he saw her pack it. There's a white muslin wedding dress and a veil--and--and--a--a"--Felicity dropped her eyes and blushed painfully.

"A petticoat, embroidered by hand from hem to belt," said the Story Girl calmly.

"And a china fruit basket with an apple on the handle," went on

Felicity, much relieved. "And a tea set, and a blue candle-stick."

"I'd dearly love to see all the things that are in it," said the Story Girl.

"Pa says it must never be opened without Cousin Rachel's permission," said Cecily.

Felix and I looked at the chest reverently. It had taken on a new significance in our eyes, and seemed like a tomb wherein lay buried some dead romance of the vanished years.

"What happened to Will Montague?" I asked.

"Nothing!" said the Story Girl viciously. "He just went on living and flourishing. He patched up matters with his creditors after awhile, and came back to the Island; and in the end he married a real nice girl, with money, and was very happy. Did you ever HEAR of anything so unjust?"

"Beverley King," suddenly cried Felicity, who had been peering into a pot, "YOU'VE GONE AND PUT THE TURNIPS ON TO BOIL WHOLE JUST LIKE POTATOES!"

"Wasn't that right?" I cried, in an agony of shame.



"Right!" but Felicity had already whisked the turnips out, and was slicing them, while all the others were laughing at me. I had added a tradition on my own account to the family archives.

Uncle Roger roared when he heard it; and he roared again at night over Peter's account of Felix attempting to milk a cow. Felix had previously acquired the knack of extracting milk from the udder. But he had never before tried to "milk a whole cow." He did not get on well; the cow tramped on his foot, and finally upset the bucket.

"What are you to do when a cow won't stand straight?" spluttered Felix angrily.

"That's the question," said Uncle Roger, shaking his head gravely.

Uncle Roger's laughter was hard to bear, but his gravity was harder.

Meanwhile, in the pantry the Story Girl, apron-enshrouded, was being initiated into the mysteries of bread-making. Under Felicity's eyes she set the bread, and on the morrow she was to bake it.

"The first thing you must do in the morning is knead it well," said Felicity, "and the earlier it's done the better--because it's such a warm night."

With that we went to bed, and slept as soundly as if tragedies of blue chests and turnips and crooked cows had no place in the scheme of things at all.