

CHAPTER XIV. FORBIDDEN FRUIT

We were all, with the exception of Uncle Roger, more or less grumpy in the household of King next day. Perhaps our nerves had been upset by the excitement attendant on Jimmy Patterson's disappearance. But it is more likely that our crankiness was the result of the supper we had eaten the previous night. Even children cannot devour mince pie, and cold fried pork ham, and fruit cake before going to bed with entire impunity. Aunt Janet had forgotten to warn Uncle Roger to keep an eye on our bedtime snacks, and we ate what seemed good unto us.

Some of us had frightful dreams, and all of us carried chips on our shoulders at breakfast. Felicity and Dan began a bickering which they kept up the entire day. Felicity had a natural aptitude for what we called "bossing," and in her mother's absence she deemed that she had a right to rule supreme. She knew better than to make any attempt to assert authority over the Story Girl, and Felix and I were allowed some length of tether; but Cecily, Dan, and Peter were expected to submit dutifully to her decrees. In the main they did; but on this particular morning Dan was plainly inclined to rebel. He had had time to grow sore over the things that Felicity had said to him when Jimmy Patterson was thought lost, and he began the day with a flatly expressed determination that he was not going to let Felicity rule the roost.

It was not a pleasant day, and to make matters worse it rained until late in the afternoon. The Story Girl had not recovered from the mortifications of the previous day; she would not talk, and she would not tell a single story; she sat on Rachel Ward's chest and ate her breakfast with the air of a martyr. After breakfast she washed the dishes and did the bed-room work in grim silence; then, with a book under one arm and Pat under the other, she betook herself to the window-seat in the upstairs hall, and would not be lured from that retreat, charmed we never so wisely. She stroked the purring Paddy, and read steadily on, with maddening indifference to all our pleadings.

Even Cecily, the meek and mild, was snappish, and complained of headache. Peter had gone home to see his mother, and Uncle Roger had gone to Markdale on business. Sara Ray came up, but was so snubbed by Felicity that she went home, crying. Felicity got the dinner by herself, disdainingly to ask or command assistance. She banged things about and rattled the stove covers until even Cecily protested from her sofa. Dan sat on the floor and whittled, his sole aim and object being to make a mess and annoy Felicity, in which noble ambition he succeeded perfectly.

"I wish Aunt Janet and Uncle Alec were home," said Felix. "It's not half so much fun having the grown-ups away as I thought it would be."

"I wish I was back in Toronto," I said sulkily. The mince pie was to blame for THAT wish.

"I wish you were, I'm sure," said Felicity, riddling the fire noisily.

"Any one who lives with you, Felicity King, will always be wishing he was somewhere else," said Dan.

"I wasn't talking to you, Dan King," retorted Felicity, "Speak when you're spoken to, come when you're called."

"Oh, oh, oh," wailed Cecily on the sofa. "I WISH it would stop raining. I WISH my head would stop aching. I WISH ma had never gone away. I WISH you'd leave Felicity alone, Dan."

"I wish girls had some sense," said Dan--which brought the orgy of wishing to an end for the time. A wishing fairy might have had the time of her life in the King kitchen that morning--particularly if she were a cynically inclined fairy.

But even the effects of unholy snacks wear away at length. By tea-time things had brightened up. The rain had ceased, and the old, low-raftered room was full of sunshine which danced on the shining dishes of the dresser, made mosaics on the floor, and

flickered over the table whereon a delicious meal was spread. Felicity had put on her blue muslin, and looked so beautiful in it that her good humour was quite restored. Cecily's headache was better, and the Story Girl, refreshed by an afternoon siesta, came down with smiles and sparkling eyes. Dan alone continued to nurse his grievances, and would not even laugh when the Story Girl told us a tale brought to mind by some of the "Rev. Mr. Scott's plums" which were on the table.

"The Rev. Mr. Scott was the man who thought the pulpit door must be made for speerits, you know," she said. "I heard Uncle Edward telling ever so many stories about him. He was called to this congregation, and he laboured here long and faithfully, and was much beloved, though he was very eccentric."

"What does that mean?" asked Peter.

"Hush! It just means queer," said Cecily, nudging him with her elbow. "A common man would be queer, but when it's a minister, it's eccentric."

"When he gets very old," continued the Story Girl, "the Presbytery thought it was time he was retired. HE didn't think so; but the Presbytery had their way, because there were so many of them to one of him. He was retired, and a young man was called to Carlisle. Mr. Scott went to live in town, but he came

out to Carlisle very often, and visited all the people regularly, just the same as when he was their minister. The young minister was a very good young man, and tried to do his duty; but he was dreadfully afraid of meeting old Mr. Scott, because he had been told that the old minister was very angry at being set aside, and would likely give him a sound drubbing, if he ever met him. One day the young minister was visiting the Crawfords in Markdale, when they suddenly heard old Mr. Scott's voice in the kitchen. The young minister turned pale as the dead, and implored Mrs. Crawford to hid him. But she couldn't get him out of the room, and all she could do was to hide him in the china closet. The young minister slipped into the china closet, and old Mr. Scott came into the room. He talked very nicely, and read, and prayed. They made very long prayers in those days, you know; and at the end of his prayer he said, 'Oh Lord, bless the poor young man hiding in the closet. Give him courage not to fear the face of man. Make him a burning and a shining light to this sadly abused congregation.' Just imagine the feelings of the young minister in the china closet! But he came right out like a man, though his face was very red, as soon as Mr. Scott had done praying. And Mr. Scott was lovely to him, and shook hands, and never mentioned the china closet. And they were the best of friends ever afterwards."

"How did old Mr. Scott find out the young minister was in the closet?" asked Felix.

"Nobody ever knew. They supposed he had seen him through the window before he came into the house, and guessed he must be in the closet--because there was no way for him to get out of the room."

"Mr. Scott planted the yellow plum tree in Grandfather's time," said Cecily, peeling one of the plums, "and when he did it he said it was as Christian an act as he ever did. I wonder what he meant. I don't see anything very Christian about planting a tree."

"I do," said the Story Girl sagely.

When next we assembled ourselves together, it was after milking, and the cares of the day were done with. We foregathered in the balsam-fragrant aisles of the fir wood, and ate early August apples to such an extent that the Story Girl said we made her think of the Irishman's pig.

"An Irishman who lived at Markdale had a little pig," she said, "and he gave it a pailful of mush. The pig ate the whole pailful, and then the Irishman put the pig IN the pail, and it didn't fill more than half the pail. Now, how was that, when it held a whole pailful of mush?"

This seemed to be a rather unanswerable kind of conundrum. We discussed the problem as we roamed the wood, and Dan and Peter almost quarrelled over it, Dan maintaining that the thing was impossible, and Peter being of the opinion that the mush was somehow "made thicker" in the process of being eaten, and so took up less room. During the discussion we came out to the fence of the hill pasture where grew the "bad berry" bushes.

Just what these "bad berries" were I cannot tell. We never knew their real name. They were small, red-clustered berries of a glossy, seductive appearance, and we were forbidden to eat them, because it was thought they might be poisonous. Dan picked a cluster and held it up.

"Dan King, don't you DARE eat those berries," said Felicity in her "bossiest" tone. "They're poison. Drop them right away."

Now, Dan had not had the slightest intention of eating the berries. But at Felicity's prohibition the rebellion which had smouldered in him all day broke into sudden flame. He would show her!

"I'll eat them if I please, Felicity King," he said in a fury:

"I don't believe they're poison. Look here!"

Dan crammed the whole bunch into his capacious mouth and chewed

it up.

"They taste great," he said, smacking; and he ate two more clusters, regardless of our horror-stricken protestations and Felicity's pleadings.

We feared that Dan would drop dead on the spot. But nothing occurred immediately. When an hour had passed we concluded that the bad berries were not poison after all, and we looked upon Dan as quite a hero for daring to eat them.

"I knew they wouldn't hurt me," he said loftily. "Felicity's so fond of making a fuss over everything."

Nevertheless, when it grew dark and we returned to the house, I noticed that Dan was rather pale and quiet. He lay down on the kitchen sofa.

"Don't you feel all right, Dan?" I whispered anxiously.

"Shut up," he said.

I shut up.

Felicity and Cecily were setting out a lunch in the pantry when we were all startled by a loud groan from the sofa.

"Oh, I'm sick--I'm awful sick," said Dan abjectly, all the defiance and bravado gone out of him.

We all went to pieces, except Cecily, who alone retained her presence of mind.

"Have you got a pain in your stomach?" she demanded.

"I've got an awful pain here, if that's where my stomach is," moaned Dan, putting his hand on a portion of his anatomy considerably below his stomach. "Oh--oh--oh!"

"Go for Uncle Roger," commanded Cecily, pale but composed.

"Felicity, put on the kettle. Dan, I'm going to give you mustard and warm water."

The mustard and warm water produced its proper effect promptly, but gave Dan no relief. He continued to writhe and groan. Uncle Roger, who had been summoned from his own place, went at once for the doctor, telling Peter to go down the hill for Mrs. Ray.

Peter went, but returned accompanied by Sara only. Mrs. Ray and Judy Pineau were both away. Sara might better have stayed home; she was of no use, and could only add to the general confusion, wandering aimlessly about, crying and asking if Dan was going to die.

Cecily took charge of things. Felicity might charm the palate, and the Story Girl bind captive the soul; but when pain and sickness wrung the brow it was Cecily who was the ministering angel. She made the writhing Dan go to bed. She made him swallow every available antidote which was recommended in "the doctor's book;" and she applied hot cloths to him until her faithful little hands were half scalded off.

There was no doubt Dan was suffering intense pain. He moaned and writhed, and cried for his mother.

"Oh, isn't it dreadful!" said Felicity, wringing her hands as she walked the kitchen floor. "Oh, why doesn't the doctor come? I TOLD Dan the bad berries were poison. But surely they can't kill people ALTOGETHER."

"Pa's cousin died of eating something forty years ago," sobbed Sara Ray.

"Hold your tongue," said Peter in a fierce whisper. "You oughter have more sense than to say such things to the girls. They don't want to be any worse scared than they are."

"But Pa's cousin DID die," reiterated Sara.

"My Aunt Jane used to rub whisky on for a pain," suggested Peter.

"We haven't any whisky," said Felicity disapprovingly. "This is a temperance house."

"But rubbing whisky on the OUTSIDE isn't any harm," argued Peter.

"It's only when you take it inside it is bad for you."

"Well, we haven't any, anyhow," said Felicity. "I suppose blueberry wine wouldn't do in its place?"

Peter did not think blueberry wine would be any good.

It was ten o'clock before Dan began to get better; but from that time he improved rapidly. When the doctor, who had been away from home when Uncle Roger reached Markdale, came at half past ten, he found his patient very weak and white, but free from pain.

Dr. Grier patted Cecily on the head, told her she was a little brick, and had done just the right thing, examined some of the fatal berries and gave it as his opinion that they were probably poisonous, administered some powders to Dan and advised him not to tamper with forbidden fruit in future, and went away.

Mrs. Ray now appeared, looking for Sara, and said she would stay

all night with us.

"I'll be much obliged to you if you will," said Uncle Roger. "I feel a bit shook. I urged Janet and Alec to go to Halifax, and took the responsibility of the children while they were away, but I didn't know what I was letting myself in for. If anything had happened I could never have forgiven myself--though I believe it's beyond the power of mortal man to keep watch over the things children WILL eat. Now, you young fry, get straight off to your beds. Dan is out of danger, and you can't do any more good. Not that any of you have done much, except Cecily. She's got a head of her shoulders."

"It's been a horrid day all through," said Felicity drearily, as we climbed the stairs.

"I suppose we made it horrid ourselves," said the Story Girl candidly. "But it'll be a good story to tell sometime," she added.

"I'm awful tired and thankful," sighed Cecily.

We all felt that way.