

CHAPTER XVI. THE GHOSTLY BELL

Friday was a comfortable day in the household of King. Everybody was in good humour. The Story Girl sparkled through several tales that ranged from the afrites and jinns of Eastern myth, through the piping days of chivalry, down to the homely anecdotes of Carlisle workaday folks. She was in turn an Oriental princess behind a silken veil, the bride who followed her bridegroom to the wars of Palestine disguised as a page, the gallant lady who ransomed her diamond necklace by dancing a coranto with a highwayman on a moonlit heath, and "Buskirk's girl" who joined the Sons and Daughters of Temperance "just to see what was into it;" and in each impersonation she was so thoroughly the thing impersonated that it was a matter of surprise to us when she emerged from each our own familiar Story Girl again.

Cecily and Sara Ray found a "sweet" new knitted lace pattern in an old magazine and spent a happy afternoon learning it and "talking secrets." Chancing--accidentally, I vow--to overhear certain of these secrets, I learned that Sara Ray had named an apple for Johnny Price--"and, Cecily, true's you live, there was eight seeds in it, and you know eight means 'they both love' "--while Cecily admitted that Willy Fraser had written on his slate and showed it to her,

"If you love me as I love you,

No knife can cut our love in two"--

"but, Sara Ray, NEVER you breathe this to a living soul."

Felix also averred that he heard Sara ask Cecily very seriously,

"Cecily, how old must we be before we can have a REAL beau?"

But Sara always denied it; so I am inclined to believe Felix simply made it up himself.

Paddy distinguished himself by catching a rat, and being intolerably conceited about it--until Sara Ray cured him by calling him a "dear, sweet cat," and kissing him between the ears. Then Pat sneaked abjectly off, his tail drooping. He resented being called a sweet cat. He had a sense of humour, had Pat. Very few cats have; and most of them have such an inordinate appetite for flattery that they will swallow any amount of it and thrive thereon. Paddy had a finer taste. The Story Girl and I were the only ones who could pay him compliments to his liking. The Story Girl would box his ears with her fist and say, "Bless your gray heart, Paddy, you're a good sort of old rascal," and Pat would purr his satisfaction; I used to take a handful of the skin on his back, shake him gently and say, "Pat, you've forgotten more than any human being ever knew," and I vow Paddy would lick his chops with delight. But to be called "a

sweet cat!" Oh, Sara, Sara!

Felicity tried--and had the most gratifying luck with--a new and complicated cake recipe--a gorgeous compound of a plumminess to make your mouth water. The number of eggs she used in it would have shocked Aunt Janet's thrifty soul, but that cake, like beauty, was its own excuse. Uncle Roger ate three slices of it at tea-time and told Felicity she was an artist. The poor man meant it as a compliment; but Felicity, who knew Uncle Blair was an artist and had a poor opinion of such fry, looked indignant and retorted, indeed she wasn't!

"Peter says there's any amount of raspberries back in the maple clearing," said Dan. "S'posen we all go after tea and pick some?"

"I'd like to," sighed Felicity, "but we'd come home tired and with all the milking to do. You boys better go alone."

"Peter and I will attend to the milking for one evening," said Uncle Roger. "You can all go. I have an idea that a raspberry pie for to-morrow night, when the folks come home, would hit the right spot."

Accordingly, after tea we all set off, armed with jugs and cups. Felicity, thoughtful creature, also took a small basketful of

jelly cookies along with her. We had to go back through the maple woods to the extreme end of Uncle Roger's farm--a pretty walk, through a world of green, whispering boughs and spice-sweet ferns, and shifting patches of sunlight. The raspberries were plentiful, and we were not long in filling our receptacles. Then we foregathered around a tiny wood spring, cold and pellucid under its young maples, and ate the jelly cookies; and the Story Girl told us a tale of a haunted spring in a mountain glen where a fair white lady dwelt, who pledged all comers in a golden cup with jewels bright.

"And if you drank of the cup with her," said the Story Girl, her eyes glowing through the emerald dusk about us, "you were never seen in the world again; you were whisked straightway to fairyland, and lived there with a fairy bride. And you never WANTED to come back to earth, because when you drank of the magic cup you forgot all your past life, except for one day in every year when you were allowed to remember it."

"I wish there was such a place as fairyland--and a way to get to it," said Cecily.

"I think there IS such a place--in spite of Uncle Edward," said the Story Girl dreamily, "and I think there is a way of getting there too, if we could only find it."

Well, the Story Girl was right. There is such a place as fairyland--but only children can find the way to it. And they do not know that it is fairyland until they have grown so old that they forget the way. One bitter day, when they seek it and cannot find it, they realize what they have lost; and that is the tragedy of life. On that day the gates of Eden are shut behind them and the age of gold is over. Henceforth they must dwell in the common light of common day. Only a few, who remain children at heart, can ever find that fair, lost path again; and blessed are they above mortals. They, and only they, can bring us tidings from that dear country where we once sojourned and from which we must evermore be exiles. The world calls them its singers and poets and artists and story-tellers; but they are just people who have never forgotten the way to fairyland.

As we sat there the Awkward Man passed by, with his gun over his shoulder and his dog at his side. He did not look like an awkward man, there in the heart of the maple woods. He strode along right masterfully and lifted his head with the air of one who was monarch of all he surveyed.

The Story Girl kissed her fingertips to him with the delightful audacity which was a part of her; and the Awkward Man plucked off his hat and swept her a stately and graceful bow.

"I don't understand why they call him the awkward man," said

Cecily, when he was out of earshot.

"You'd understand why if you ever saw him at a party or a picnic," said Felicity, "trying to pass plates and dropping them whenever a woman looked at him. They say it's pitiful to see him."

"I must get well acquainted with that man next summer," said the Story Girl. "If I put it off any longer it will be too late. I'm growing so fast, Aunt Olivia says I'll have to wear ankle skirts next summer. If I begin to look grown-up he'll get frightened of me, and then I'll never find out the Golden Milestone mystery."

"Do you think he'll ever tell you who Alice is?" I asked.

"I have a notion who Alice is already," said the mysterious creature. But she would tell us nothing more.

When the jelly cookies were all eaten it was high time to be moving homeward, for when the dark comes down there are more comfortable places than a rustling maple wood and the precincts of a possibly enchanted spring. When we reached the foot of the orchard and entered it through a gap in the hedge it was the magical, mystical time of "between lights." Off to the west was a daffodil glow hanging over the valley of lost sunsets, and

Grandfather King's huge willow rose up against it like a rounded mountain of foliage. In the east, above the maple woods, was a silvery sheen that hinted the moonrise. But the orchard was a place of shadows and mysterious sounds. Midway up the open space in its heart we met Peter; and if ever a boy was given over to sheer terror that boy was Peter. His face was as white as a sunburned face could be, and his eyes were brimmed with panic.

"Peter, what is the matter?" cried Cecily.

"There's--SOMETHING--in the house, RINGING A BELL," said Peter, in a shaking voice. Not the Story Girl herself could have invested that "something" with more of creepy horror. We all drew close together. I felt a crinkly feeling along my back which I had never known before. If Peter had not been so manifestly frightened we might have thought he was trying to "pass a joke" on us. But such abject terror as his could not be counterfeited.

"Nonsense!" said Felicity, but her voice shook. "There isn't a bell in the house to ring. You must have imagined it, Peter. Or else Uncle Roger is trying to fool us."

"Your Uncle Roger went to Markdale right after milking," said Peter. "He locked up the house and gave me the key. There wasn't a soul in it then, that I'm sure of. I druv the cows to

the pasture, and I got back about fifteen minutes ago. I set down on the front door steps for a moment, and all at once I heard a bell ring in the house eight times. I tell you I was skeered. I made a bolt for the orchard--and you won't catch me going near that house till your Uncle Roger comes home."

You wouldn't catch any of us doing it. We were almost as badly scared as Peter. There we stood in a huddled demoralized group. Oh, what an eerie place that orchard was! What shadows! What noises! What spooky swooping of bats! You COULDN'T look every way at once, and goodness only knew what might be behind you!

"There CAN'T be anybody in the house," said Felicity.

"Well, here's the key--go and see for yourself," said Peter.

Felicity had no intention of going and seeing.

"I think you boys ought to go," she said, retreating behind the defence of sex. "You ought to be braver than girls."

"But we ain't," said Felix candidly. "I wouldn't be much scared of anything REAL. But a haunted house is a different thing."

"I always thought something had to be done in a place before it could be haunted," said Cecily. "Somebody killed or something

like that, you know. Nothing like that ever happened in our family. The Kings have always been respectable."

"Perhaps it is Emily King's ghost," whispered Felix.

"She never appeared anywhere but in the orchard," said the Story Girl. "Oh, oh, children, isn't there something under Uncle Alec's tree?"

We peered fearfully through the gloom. There WAS something--something that wavered and fluttered--advanced--retreated--

"That's only my old apron," said Felicity. "I hung it there to-day when I was looking for the white hen's nest. Oh, what shall we do? Uncle Roger may not be back for hours. I CAN'T believe there's anything in the house."

"Maybe it's only Peg Bowen," suggested Dan.

There was not a great deal of comfort in this. We were almost as much afraid of Peg Bowen as we would be of any spectral visitant.

Peter scoffed at the idea.

"Peg Bowen wasn't in the house before your Uncle Roger locked it

up, and how could she get in afterwards?" he said. "No, it isn't Peg Bowen. It's SOMETHING that WALKS."

"I know a story about a ghost," said the Story Girl, the ruling passion strong even in extremity. "It is about a ghost with eyeholes but no eyes--"

"Don't," cried Cecily hysterically. "Don't you go on! Don't you say another word! I can't bear it! Don't you!"

The Story Girl didn't. But she had said enough. There was something in the quality of a ghost with eyeholes but no eyes that froze our young blood.

There never were in all the world six more badly scared children than those who huddled in the old King orchard that August night.

All at once--something--leaped from the bough of a tree and alighted before us. We split the air with a simultaneous shriek. We would have run, one and all, if there had been anywhere to run to. But there wasn't--all around us were only those shadowy arcades. Then we saw with shame that it was only our Paddy.

"Pat, Pat," I said, picking him up, feeling a certain comfort in his soft, solid body. "Stay with us, old fellow."

But Pat would none of us. He struggled out of my clasp and disappeared over the long grasses with soundless leaps. He was no longer our tame, domestic, well acquainted Paddy. He was a strange, furtive animal--a "questing beast."

Presently the moon rose; but this only made matters worse. The shadows had been still before; now they moved and danced, as the night wind tossed the boughs. The old house, with its dreadful secret, was white and clear against the dark background of spruces. We were woefully tired, but we could not sit down because the grass was reeking with dew.

"The Family Ghost only appears in daylight," said the Story Girl. "I wouldn't mind seeing a ghost in daylight. But after dark is another thing."

"There's no such thing as a ghost," I said contemptuously. Oh, how I wished I could believe it!

"Then what rung that bell?" said Peter. "Bells don't ring of themselves, I s'pose, specially when there ain't any in the house to ring."

"Oh, will Uncle Roger never come home!" sobbed Felicity. "I know he'll laugh at us awful, but it's better to be laughed at than scared like this."

Uncle Roger did not come until nearly ten. Never was there a more welcome sound than the rumble of his wheels in the lane. We ran to the orchard gate and swarmed across the yard, just as Uncle Roger alighted at the front door. He stared at us in the moonlight.

"Have you tormented any one into eating more bad berries, Felicity?" he demanded.

"Oh, Uncle Roger, don't go in," implored Felicity seriously.

"There's something dreadful in there--something that rings a bell. Peter heard it. Don't go in."

"There's no use asking the meaning of this, I suppose," said Uncle Roger with the calm of despair. "I've gave up trying to fathom you young ones. Peter, where's the key? What yarn have you been telling?"

"I DID hear a bell ring," said Peter stubbornly.

Uncle Roger unlocked and flung open the front door. As he did so, clear and sweet, rang out ten bell-like chimes.

"That's what I heard," cried Peter. "There's the bell!"

We had to wait until Uncle Roger stopped laughing before we heard the explanation. We thought he never WOULD stop.

"That's Grandfather King's old clock striking," he said, as soon as he was able to speak. "Sammy Prott came along after tea, when you were away to the forge, Peter, and I gave him permission to clean the old clock. He had it going merrily in no time. And now it has almost frightened you poor little monkeys to death."

We heard Uncle Roger chuckling all the way to the barn.

"Uncle Roger can laugh," said Cecily, with a quiver in her voice, "but it's no laughing matter to be so scared. I just feel sick, I was so frightened."

"I wouldn't mind if he'd laugh once and have it done with it," said Felicity bitterly. "But he'll laugh at us for a year, and tell the story to every soul that comes to the place."

"You can't blame him for that," said the Story Girl. "I shall tell it, too. I don't care if the joke is as much on myself as any one. A story is a story, no matter who it's on. But it IS hateful to be laughed at--and grown-ups always do it. I never will when I'm grown up. I'll remember better."

"It's all Peter's fault," said Felicity. "I do think he might

have had more sense than to take a clock striking for a bell ringing."

"I never heard that kind of a strike before," protested Peter.

"It don't sound a bit like other clocks. And the door was shut and the sound kind o' muffled. It's all very fine to say you would have known what it was, but I don't believe you would."

"I wouldn't have," said the Story Girl honestly. "I thought it WAS a bell when I heard it, and the door open, too. Let us be fair, Felicity."

"I'm dreadful tired," sighed Cecily.

We were all "dreadful tired," for this was the third night of late hours and nerve racking strain. But it was over two hours since we had eaten the cookies, and Felicity suggested that a saucerful apiece of raspberries and cream would not be hard to take. It was not, for any one but Cecily, who couldn't swallow a mouthful.

"I'm glad father and mother will be back to-morrow night," she said. "It's too exciting when they're away. That's my opinion."