CHAPTER XIX. A DREAD PROPHECY

"I've got to go and begin stumping out the elderberry pasture this afternoon," said Peter dolefully. "I tell you it's a tough job. Mr. Roger might wait for cool weather before he sets people to stumping out elderberries, and that's a fact."

"Why don't you tell him so?" asked Dan.

"It ain't my business to tell him things," retorted Peter. "I'm hired to do what I'm told, and I do it. But I can have my own opinion all the same. It's going to be a broiling hot day."

We were all in the orchard, except Felix, who had gone to the post-office. It was the forenoon of an August Saturday. Cecily and Sara Ray, who had come up to spend the day with us--her mother having gone to town--were eating timothy roots. Bertha Lawrence, a Charlottetown girl, who had visited Kitty Marr in June, and had gone to school one day with her, had eaten timothy roots, affecting to consider them great delicacies. The fad was at once taken up by the Carlisle schoolgirls. Timothy roots quite ousted "sours" and young raspberry sprouts, both of which had the real merit of being quite toothsome, while timothy roots were tough and tasteless. But timothy roots were fashionable, therefore timothy roots must be eaten. Pecks of them must have been devoured in Carlisle that summer.

Pat was there also, padding about from one to the other on his black paws, giving us friendly pokes and rubs. We all made much of him except Felicity, who would not take any notice of him because he was the Story Girl's cat.

We boys were sprawling on the grass. Our morning chores were done and the day was before us. We should have been feeling very comfortable and happy, but, as a matter of fact, we were not particularly so.

The Story Girl was sitting on the mint beside the well-house, weaving herself a wreath of buttercups. Felicity was sipping from the cup of clouded blue with an overdone air of unconcern. Each was acutely and miserably conscious of the other's presence, and each was desirous of convincing the rest of us that the other was less than nothing to her. Felicity could not succeed. The Story Girl managed it better. If it had not been for the fact that in all our foregatherings she was careful to sit as far from Felicity as possible, we might have been deceived.

We had not passed a very pleasant week. Felicity and the Story Girl had not been "speaking" to each other, and consequently there had been something rotten in the state of Denmark. An air of restraint was over all our games and conversations.

On the preceding Monday Felicity and the Story Girl had quarrelled over something. What the cause of the quarrel was I cannot tell because I never knew. It remained a "dead secret" between the parties of the first and second part forever. But it was more bitter than the general run of their tiffs, and the consequences were apparent to all. They had not spoken to each other since.

This was not because the rancour of either lasted so long. On the contrary it passed speedily away, not even one low descending sun going down on their wrath. But dignity remained to be considered. Neither would "speak first," and each obstinately declared that she would not speak first, no, not in a hundred years. Neither argument, entreaty, nor expostulation had any effect on those two stubborn girls, nor yet the tears of sweet Cecily, who cried every night about it, and mingled in her pure little prayers fervent petitions that Felicity and the Story Girl might make up.

"I don't know where you expect to go when you die, Felicity," she said tearfully, "if you don't forgive people."

"I have forgiven her," was Felicity's answer, "but I am not going to speak first for all that."

"It's very wrong, and, more than that, it's so uncomfortable,"

complained Cecily. "It spoils everything."

"Were they ever like this before?" I asked Cecily, as we talked the matter over privately in Uncle Stephen's Walk.

"Never for so long," said Cecily. "They had a spell like this last summer, and one the summer before, but they only lasted a couple of days."

"And who spoke first?"

"Oh, the Story Girl. She got excited about something and spoke to Felicity before she thought, and then it was all right. But I'm afraid it isn't going to be like that this time. Don't you notice how careful the Story Girl is not to get excited? That is such a bad sign."

"We've just got to think up something that will excite her, that's all," I said.

"I'm--I'm praying about it," said Cecily in a low voice, her tear-wet lashes trembling against her pale, round cheeks. "Do you suppose it will do any good, Bev?"

"Very likely," I assured her. "Remember Sara Ray and the money. That came from praying."

"I'm glad you think so," said Cecily tremulously. "Dan said it was no use for me to bother praying about it. He said if they COULDN'T speak God might do something, but when they just WOULDN'T it wasn't likely He would interfere. Dan does say such queer things. I'm so afraid he's going to grow up just like Uncle Robert Ward, who never goes to church, and doesn't believe more than half the Bible is true."

"Which half does he believe is true?" I inquired with unholy curiosity.

"Oh, just the nice parts. He says there's a heaven all right, but no--no--HELL. I don't want Dan to grow up like that. It isn't respectable. And you wouldn't want all kinds of people crowding heaven, now, would you?"

"Well, no, I suppose not," I agreed, thinking of Billy Robinson.

"Of course, I can't help feeling sorry for those who have to go to THE OTHER PLACE," said Cecily compassionately. "But I suppose they wouldn't be very comfortable in heaven either. They wouldn't feel at home. Andrew Marr said a simply dreadful thing about THE OTHER PLACE one night last fall, when Felicity and I were down to see Kitty, and they were burning the potato stalks. He said he believed THE OTHER PLACE must be lots more interesting

than heaven because fires were such jolly things. Now, did you ever hear the like?"

"I guess it depends a good deal on whether you're inside or outside the fires," I said.

"Oh, Andrew didn't really mean it, of course. He just said it to sound smart and make us stare. The Marrs are all like that. But anyhow, I'm going to keep on praying that something will happen to excite the Story Girl. I don't believe there is any use in praying that Felicity will speak first, because I am sure she won't."

"But don't you suppose God could make her?" I said, feeling that it wasn't quite fair that the Story Girl should always have to speak first. If she had spoken first the other times it was surely Felicity's turn this time.

"Well, I believe it would puzzle Him," said Cecily, out of the depths of her experience with Felicity.

Peter, as was to be expected, took Felicity's part, and said the Story Girl ought to speak first because she was the oldest. That, he said, had always been his Aunt Jane's rule.

Sara Ray thought Felicity should speak first, because the Story

Girl was half an orphan.

Felix tried to make peace between them, and met the usual fate of all peacemakers. The Story Girl loftily told him that he was too young to understand, and Felicity said that fat boys should mind their own business. After that, Felix declared it would serve Felicity right if the Story Girl never spoke to her again.

Dan had no patience with either of the girls, especially Felicity.

"What they both want is a right good spanking," he said.

If only a spanking would mend the matter it was not likely it would ever be mended. Both Felicity and the Story Girl were rather too old to be spanked, and, if they had not been, none of the grown-ups would have thought it worth while to administer so desperate a remedy for what they considered so insignificant a trouble. With the usual levity of grown-ups, they regarded the coldness between the girls as a subject of mirth and jest, and recked not that it was freezing the genial current of our youthful souls, and blighting hours that should have been fair pages in our book of days.

The Story Girl finished her wreath and put it on. The buttercups drooped over her high, white brow and played peep with her

glowing eyes. A dreamy smile hovered around her poppy-red mouth--a significant smile which, to those of us skilled in its interpretation, betokened the sentence which soon came.

"I know a story about a man who always had his own opinion--"

The Story Girl got no further. We never heard the story of the man who always had his own opinion. Felix came tearing up the lane, with a newspaper in his hand. When a boy as fat as Felix runs at full speed on a broiling August forenoon, he has something to run for--as Felicity remarked.

"He must have got some bad news at the office," said Sara Ray.

"Oh, I hope nothing has happened to father," I exclaimed, springing anxiously to my feet, a sick, horrible feeling of fear running over me like a cool, rippling wave.

"It's just as likely to be good news he is running for as bad," said the Story Girl, who was no believer in meeting trouble half way.

"He wouldn't be running so fast for good news," said Dan cynically.

We were not left long in doubt. The orchard gate flew open and

Felix was among us. One glimpse of his face told us that he was no bearer of glad tidings. He had been running hard and should have been rubicund. Instead, he was "as pale as are the dead." I could not have asked him what was the matter had my life depended on it. It was Felicity who demanded impatiently of my shaking, voiceless brother:

"Felix King, what has scared you?"

Felix held out the newspaper--it was the Charlottetown Daily Enterprise.

"It's there," he gasped. "Look--read--oh, do you--think it's--true? The--end of--the world--is coming to-morrow--at two--o'clock--in the afternoon!"

Crash! Felicity had dropped the cup of clouded blue, which had passed unscathed through so many changing years, and now at last lay shattered on the stone of the well curb. At any other time we should all have been aghast over such a catastrophe, but it passed unnoticed now. What mattered it that all the cups in the world be broken to-day if the crack o' doom must sound to-morrow?

"Oh, Sara Stanley, do you believe it? DO you?" gasped Felicity, clutching the Story Girl's hand. Cecily's prayer had been answered. Excitement had come with a vengeance, and under its

stress Felicity had spoken first. But this, like the breaking of the cup, had no significance for us at the moment.

The Story Girl snatched the paper and read the announcement to a group on which sudden, tense silence had fallen. Under a sensational headline, "The Last Trump will sound at Two O'clock To-morrow," was a paragraph to the effect that the leader of a certain noted sect in the United States had predicted that August twelfth would be the Judgment Day, and that all his numerous followers were preparing for the dread event by prayer, fasting, and the making of appropriate white garments for ascension robes.

I laugh at the remembrance now--until I recall the real horror of fear that enwrapped us in that sunny orchard that August morning of long ago; and then I laugh no more. We were only children, be it remembered, with a very firm and simple faith that grown people knew much more than we did, and a rooted conviction that whatever you read in a newspaper must be true. If the Daily Enterprise said that August twelfth was to be the Judgment Day how were you going to get around it?

"Do you believe it, Sara Stanley?" persisted Felicity. "DO you?"

"No--no, I don't believe a word of it," said the Story Girl.

But for once her voice failed to carry conviction--or, rather, it

carried conviction of the very opposite kind. It was borne in upon our miserable minds that if the Story Girl did not altogether believe it was true she believed it might be true; and the possibility was almost as dreadful as the certainty.

"It CAN'T be true," said Sara Ray, seeking refuge, as usual, in tears. "Why, everything looks just the same. Things COULDN'T look the same if the Judgment Day was going to be to-morrow."

"But that's just the way it's to come," I said uncomfortably. "It tells you in the Bible. It's to come just like a thief in the night."

"But it tells you another thing in the Bible, too," said Cecily eagerly. "It says nobody knows when the Judgment Day is to come--not even the angels in heaven. Now, if the angels in heaven don't know it, do you suppose the editor of the Enterprise can know it--and him a Grit, too?"

"I guess he knows as much about it as a Tory would," retorted the Story Girl. Uncle Roger was a Liberal and Uncle Alec a Conservative, and the girls held fast to the political traditions of their respective households. "But it isn't really the Enterprise editor at all who is saying it--it's a man in the States who claims to be a prophet. If he IS a prophet perhaps he has found out somehow."

"And it's in the paper, too, and that's printed as well as the Bible," said Dan.

"Well, I'm going to depend on the Bible," said Cecily. "I don't believe it's the Judgment Day to-morrow--but I'm scared, for all that," she added piteously.

That was exactly the position of us all. As in the case of the bell-ringing ghost, we did not believe but we trembled.

"Nobody might have known when the Bible was written," said Dan, "but maybe somebody knows now. Why, the Bible was written thousands of years ago, and that paper was printed this very morning. There's been time to find out ever so much more."

"I want to do so many things," said the Story Girl, plucking off her crown of buttercup gold with a tragic gesture, "but if it's the Judgment Day to-morrow I won't have time to do any of them."

"It can't be much worse than dying, I s'pose," said Felix, grasping at any straw of comfort.

"I'm awful glad I've got into the habit of going to church and Sunday School this summer," said Peter very soberly. "I wish I'd made up my mind before this whether to be a Presbyterian or a

Methodist. Do you s'pose it's too late now?"

"Oh, that doesn't matter," said Cecily earnestly. "If--if you're a Christian, Peter, that is all that's necessary."

"But it's too late for that," said Peter miserably. "I can't turn into a Christian between this and two o'clock to-morrow. I'll just have to be satisfied with making up my mind to be a Presbyterian or a Methodist. I wanted to wait till I got old enough to make out what was the difference between them, but I'll have to chance it now. I guess I'll be a Presbyterian, 'cause I want to be like the rest of you. Yes, I'll be a Presbyterian."

"I know a story about Judy Pineau and the word Presbyterian," said the Story Girl, "but I can't tell it now. If to-morrow isn't the Judgment Day I'll tell it Monday."

"If I had known that to-morrow might be the Judgment Day I wouldn't have quarrelled with you last Monday, Sara Stanley, or been so horrid and sulky all the week. Indeed I wouldn't," said Felicity, with very unusual humility.

Ah, Felicity! We were all, in the depths of our pitiful little souls, reviewing the innumerable things we would or would not have done "if we had known." What a black and endless list they made--those sins of omission and commission that rushed

accusingly across our young memories! For us the leaves of the Book of Judgment were already opened; and we stood at the bar of our own consciences, than which for youth or eld, there can be no more dread tribunal. I thought of all the evil deeds of my short life--of pinching Felix to make him cry out at family prayers, of playing truant from Sunday School and going fishing one day, of a certain fib--no, no away from this awful hour with all such euphonious evasions--of a LIE I had once told, of many a selfish and unkind word and thought and action. And to-morrow might be the great and terrible day of the last accounting! Oh, if I had only been a better boy!

"The quarrel was as much my fault as yours, Felicity," said the Story Girl, putting her arm around Felicity. "We can't undo it now. But if to-morrow isn't the Judgment Day we must be careful never to quarrel again. Oh, I wish father was here."

"He will be," said Cecily. "If it's the Judgment Day for Prince Edward Island it will be for Europe, too."

"I wish we could just KNOW whether what the paper says is true or not," said Felix desperately. "It seems to me I could brace up if I just KNEW."

But to whom could we appeal? Uncle Alec was away and would not be back until late that night. Neither Aunt Janet nor Uncle

Roger were people to whom we cared to apply in such a crisis. We were afraid of the Judgment Day; but we were almost equally afraid of being laughed at. How about Aunt Olivia?

"No, Aunt Olivia has gone to bed with a sick headache and mustn't be disturbed," said the Story Girl. "She said I must get dinner ready, because there was plenty of cold meat, and nothing to do but boil the potatoes and peas, and set the table. I don't know how I can put my thoughts into it when the Judgment Day may be to-morrow. Besides, what is the good of asking the grown-ups? They don't know anything more about this than we do."

"But if they'd just SAY they didn't believe it, it would be a sort of comfort," said Cecily.

"I suppose the minister would know, but he's away on his vacation" said Felicity. "Anyhow, I'll go and ask mother what she thinks of it."

Felicity picked up the Enterprise and betook herself to the house. We awaited her return in dire suspense.

"Well, what does she say?" asked Cecily tremulously.

"She said, 'Run away and don't bother me. I haven't any time for your nonsense.'" responded Felicity in an injured tone. "And I

said, 'But, ma, the paper SAYS to-morrow is the Judgment Day,' and ma just said 'Judgment Fiddlesticks!'"

"Well, that's kind of comforting," said Peter. "She can't put any faith in it, or she'd be more worked up."

"If it only wasn't PRINTED!" said Dan gloomily.

"Let's all go over and ask Uncle Roger," said Felix desperately.

That we should make Uncle Roger a court of last resort indicated all too clearly the state of our minds. But we went. Uncle Roger was in his barn-yard, hitching his black mare into the buggy. His copy of the Enterprise was sticking out of his pocket. He looked, as we saw with sinking hearts, unusually grave and preoccupied. There was not a glimmer of a smile about his face.

"You ask him," said Felicity, nudging the Story Girl.

"Uncle Roger," said the Story Girl, the golden notes of her voice threaded with fear and appeal. "the Enterprise says that to-morrow is the Judgment Day? IS it? Do YOU think it is?"

"I'm afraid so," said Uncle Roger gravely. "The Enterprise is always very careful to print only reliable news."

"But mother doesn't believe it," cried Felicity.

Uncle Roger shook his head.

"That is just the trouble," he said. "People won't believe it till it's too late. I'm going straight to Markdale to pay a man there some money I owe him, and after dinner I'm going to Summerside to buy me a new suit. My old one is too shabby for the Judgment Day."

He got into his buggy and drove away, leaving eight distracted mortals behind him.

"Well, I suppose that settles it," said Peter, in despairing tone.

"Is there anything we can do to PREPARE?" asked Cecily.

"I wish I had a white dress like you girls," sobbed Sara Ray. "But I haven't, and it's too late to get one. Oh, I wish I had minded what ma said better. I wouldn't have disobeyed her so often if I'd thought the Judgment Day was so near. When I go home I'm going to tell her about going to the magic lantern show."

"I'm not sure that Uncle Roger meant what he said," remarked the Story Girl. "I couldn't get a look into his eyes. If he was trying to hoax us there would have been a twinkle in them. He can never help that. You know he would think it a great joke to frighten us like this. It's really dreadful to have no grown-ups you can depend on."

"We could depend on father if he was here," said Dan stoutly. "HE'D tell us the truth."

"He would tell us what he THOUGHT was true, Dan, but he couldn't KNOW. He's not such a well-educated man as the editor of the Enterprise. No, there's nothing to do but wait and see."

"Let us go into the house and read just what the Bible does say about it," suggested Cecily.

We crept in carefully, lest we disturb Aunt Olivia, and Cecily found and read the significant portion of Holy Writ. There was little comfort for us in that vivid and terrible picture.

"Well," said the Story Girl finally. "I must go and get the potatoes ready. I suppose they must be boiled even if it is the Judgment Day to-morrow. But I don't believe it is."

"And I've got to go and stump elderberries," said Peter. "I

don't see how I can do it--go away back there alone. I'll feel scared to death the whole time."

"Tell Uncle Roger that, and say if to-morrow is the end of the world that there is no good in stumping any more fields," I suggested.

"Yes, and if he lets you off then we'll know he was in earnest," chimed in Cecily. "But if he still says you must go that'll be a sign he doesn't believe it."

Leaving the Story Girl and Peter to peel their potatoes, the rest of us went home, where Aunt Janet, who had gone to the well and found the fragments of the old blue cup, gave poor Felicity a bitter scolding about it. But Felicity bore it very patiently--nay, more, she seemed to delight in it.

"Ma can't believe to-morrow is the last day, or she wouldn't scold like that," she told us; and this comforted us until after dinner, when the Story Girl and Peter came over and told us that Uncle Roger had really gone to Summerside. Then we plunged down into fear and wretchedness again.

"But he said I must go and stump elderberries just the same" said Peter. "He said it might NOT be the Judgment Day to-morrow, though he believed it was, and it would keep me out of mischief.

But I just can't stand it back there alone. Some of you fellows must come with me. I don't want you to work, but just for company."

It was finally decided that Dan and Felix should go. I wanted to go also, but the girls protested.

"YOU must stay and keep us cheered up," implored Felicity. "I just don't know how I'm ever going to put in the afternoon. I promised Kitty Marr that I'd go down and spend it with her, but I can't now. And I can't knit any at my lace. I'd just keep thinking, 'What is the use? Perhaps it'll all be burned up to-morrow.'"

So I stayed with the girls, and a miserable afternoon we had of it. The Story Girl again and again declared that she "didn't believe it," but when we asked her to tell a story, she evaded it with a flimsy excuse. Cecily pestered at Aunt Janet's life out, asking repeatedly, "Ma, will you be washing Monday?" "Ma, will you be going to prayer meeting Tuesday night?" "Ma, will you be preserving raspberries next week?" and various similar questions. It was a huge comfort to her that Aunt Janet always said, "Yes," or "Of course," as if there could be no question about it.

Sara Ray cried until I wondered how one small head could contain all the tears she shed. But I do not believe she was half as

much frightened as disappointed that she had no white dress. In mid-afternoon Cecily came downstairs with her forget-me-not jug in her hand--a dainty bit of china, wreathed with dark blue forget-me-nots, which Cecily prized highly, and in which she always kept her toothbrush.

"Sara, I am going to give you this jug," she said solemnly.

Now, Sara had always coveted this particular jug. She stopped crying long enough to clutch it delightedly.

"Oh, Cecily, thank you. But are you sure you won't want it back if to-morrow isn't the Judgment Day?"

"No, it's yours for good," said Cecily, with the high, remote air of one to whom forget-me-not jugs and all such pomps and vanities of the world were as a tale that is told.

"Are you going to give any one your cherry vase?" asked Felicity, trying to speak indifferently. Felicity had never admired the forget-me-not jug, but she had always hankered after the cherry vase--an affair of white glass, with a cluster of red glass cherries and golden-green glass leaves on its side, which Aunt Olivia had given Cecily one Christmas.

"No, I'm not," answered Cecily, with a change of tone.

"Oh, well, I don't care," said Felicity quickly. "Only, if to-morrow is the last day, the cherry vase won't be much use to you."

"I guess it will be as much use to me as to any one else," said Cecily indignantly. She had sacrificed her dear forget-me-not jug to satisfy some pang of conscience, or propitiate some threatening fate, but surrender her precious cherry vase she could not and would not. Felicity needn't be giving any hints!

With the gathering shades of night our plight became pitiful. In the daylight, surrounded by homely, familiar sights and sounds, it was not so difficult to fortify our souls with a cheering incredulity. But now, in this time of shadows, dread belief clutched us and wrung us with terror. If there had been one wise older friend to tell us, in serious fashion, that we need not be afraid, that the Enterprise paragraph was naught save the idle report of a deluded fanatic, it would have been well for us. But there was not. Our grown-ups, instead, considered our terror an exquisite jest. At that very moment, Aunt Olivia, who had recovered from her headache, and Aunt Janet were laughing in the kitchen over the state the children were in because they were afraid the end of the world was close at hand. Aunt Janet's throaty gurgle and Aunt Olivia's trilling mirth floated out through the open window.

"Perhaps they'll laugh on the other side of their faces to-morrow," said Dan, with gloomy satisfaction.

We were sitting on the cellar hatch, watching what might be our last sunset o'er the dark hills of time. Peter was with us. It was his last Sunday to go home, but he had elected to remain.

"If to-morrow is the Judgment Day I want to be with you fellows," he said.

Sara Ray had also yearned to stay, but could not because her mother had told her she must be home before dark.

"Never mind, Sara," comforted Cecily. "It's not to be till two o'clock to-morrow, so you'll have plenty of time to get up here before anything happens."

"But there might be a mistake," sobbed Sara. "It might be two o'clock to-night instead of to-morrow."

It might, indeed. This was a new horror, which had not occurred to us.

"I'm sure I won't sleep a wink to-night," said Felix.

"The paper SAYS two o'clock to-morrow," said Dan. "You needn't worry, Sara."

But Sara departed, weeping. She did not, however, forget to carry the forget-me-not jug with her. All things considered, her departure was a relief. Such a constantly tearful damsel was not a pleasant companion. Cecily and Felicity and the Story Girl did not cry. They were made of finer, firmer stuff. Dry-eyed, with such courage as they might, they faced whatever might be in store for them.

"I wonder where we'll all be this time to-morrow night," said Felix mournfully, as we watched the sunset between the dark fir boughs. It was an ominous sunset. The sun dropped down amid dark, livid clouds, that turned sullen shades of purple and fiery red behind him.

"I hope we'll be all together, wherever we are," said Cecily gently. "Nothing can be so very bad then."

"I'm going to read the Bible all to-morrow forenoon," said Peter.

When Aunt Olivia came out to go home the Story Girl asked her permission to stay all night with Felicity and Cecily. Aunt Olivia assented lightly, swinging her hat on her arm and including us all in a friendly smile. She looked very pretty,

with her big blue eyes and warm-hued golden hair. We loved Aunt Olivia; but just now we resented her having laughed at us with Aunt Janet, and we refused to smile back.

"What a sulky, sulky lot of little people," said Aunt Olivia, going away across the yard, holding her pretty dress up from the dewy grass.

Peter resolved to stay all night with us, too, not troubling himself about anybody's permission. When we went to bed it was settling down for a stormy night, and the rain was streaming wetly on the roof, as if the world, like Sara Ray, were weeping because its end was so near. Nobody forgot or hurried over his prayers that night. We would dearly have loved to leave the candle burning, but Aunt Janet's decree regarding this was as inexorable as any of Mede and Persia. Out the candle must go; and we lay there, quaking, with the wild rain streaming down on the roof above us, and the voices of the storm wailing through the writhing spruce trees.