

CHAPTER XXIII. SUCH STUFF AS DREAMS ARE MADE ON

Peter took Dan and me aside one evening, as we were on our way to the orchard with our dream books, saying significantly that he wanted our advice. Accordingly, we went round to the spruce wood, where the girls would not see us to the rousing of their curiosity, and then Peter told us of his dilemma.

"Last night I dreamed I was in church," he said. "I thought it was full of people, and I walked up the aisle to your pew and set down, as unconcerned as a pig on ice. And then I found that I hadn't a stitch of clothes on--NOT ONE BLESSED STITCH. Now"--Peter dropped his voice--"what is bothering me is this--would it be proper to tell a dream like that before the girls?"

I was of the opinion that it would be rather questionable; but Dan vowed he didn't see why. HE'D tell it quick as any other dream. There was nothing bad in it.

"But they're your own relations," said Peter. "They're no relation to me, and that makes a difference. Besides, they're all such ladylike girls. I guess I'd better not risk it. I'm pretty sure Aunt Jane wouldn't think it was proper to tell such a dream. And I don't want to offend Fel--any of them."

So Peter never told that dream, nor did he write it down.

Instead, I remember seeing in his dream book, under the date of September fifteenth, an entry to this effect:--

"Last nite i dremed a drem. it wasent a polit drem so i won't rite it down."

The girls saw this entry but, to their credit be it told, they never tried to find out what the "drem" was. As Peter said, they were "ladies" in the best and truest sense of that much abused appellation. Full of fun and frolic and mischief they were, with all the defects of their qualities and all the wayward faults of youth. But no indelicate thought or vulgar word could have been shaped or uttered in their presence. Had any of us boys ever been guilty of such, Cecily's pale face would have coloured with the blush of outraged purity, Felicity's golden head would have lifted itself in the haughty indignation of insulted womanhood, and the Story Girl's splendid eyes would have flashed with such anger and scorn as would have shrivelled the very soul of the wretched culprit.

Dan was once guilty of swearing. Uncle Alec whipped him for it--the only time he ever so punished any of his children. But it was because Cecily cried all night that Dan was filled with saving remorse and repentance. He vowed next day to Cecily that he would never swear again, and he kept his word.

All at once the Story Girl and Peter began to forge ahead in the matter of dreaming. Their dreams suddenly became so lurid and dreadful and picturesque that it was hard for the rest of us to believe that they were not painting the lily rather freely in their accounts of them. But the Story Girl was the soul of honour; and Peter, early in life, had had his feet set in the path of truthfulness by his Aunt Jane and had never been known to stray from it. When they assured us solemnly that their dreams all happened exactly as they described them we were compelled to believe them. But there was something up, we felt sure of that. Peter and the Story Girl certainly had a secret between them, which they kept for a whole fortnight. There was no finding it out from the Story Girl. She had a knack of keeping secrets, anyhow; and, moreover, all that fortnight she was strangely cranky and petulant, and we found it was not wise to tease her. She was not well, so Aunt Olivia told Aunt Janet.

"I don't know what is the matter with the child," said the former anxiously. "She hasn't seemed like herself the past two weeks. She complains of headache, and she has no appetite, and she is a dreadful colour. I'll have to see a doctor about her if she doesn't get better soon."

"Give her a good dose of Mexican Tea and try that first," said Aunt Janet. "I've saved many a doctor's bill in my family by using Mexican Tea."

The Mexican Tea was duly administered, but produced no improvement in the condition of the Story Girl, who, however, went on dreaming after a fashion which soon made her dream book a veritable curiosity of literature.

"If we can't soon find out what makes Peter and the Story Girl dream like that, the rest of us might as well give up trying to write dream books," said Felix discontentedly.

Finally, we did find out. Felicity wormed the secret out of Peter by the employment of Delilah wiles, such as have been the undoing of many a miserable male creature since Samson's day. She first threatened that she would never speak to him again if he didn't tell her; and then she promised him that, if he did, she would let him walk beside her to and from Sunday School all the rest of the summer, and carry her books for her. Peter was not proof against this double attack. He yielded and told the secret.

I expected the Story Girl would overwhelm him with scorn and indignation. But she took it very coolly.

"I knew Felicity would get it out of him sometime," she said. "I think he has done well to hold out this long."

Peter and the Story Girl, so it appeared, had wooed wild dreams to their pillows by the simple device of eating rich, indigestible things before they went to bed. Aunt Olivia knew nothing about it, of course. She permitted them only a plain, wholesome lunch at bed-time. But during the day the Story Girl would smuggle upstairs various tidbits from the pantry, putting half in Peter's room and half in her own; and the result was these visions which had been our despair.

"Last night I ate a piece of mince pie," she said, "and a lot of pickles, and two grape jelly tarts. But I guess I overdid it, because I got real sick and couldn't sleep at all, so of course I didn't have any dreams. I should have stopped with the pie and pickles and left the tarts alone. Peter did, and he had an elegant dream that Peg Bowen caught him and put him on to boil alive in that big black pot that hangs outside her door. He woke up before the water got hot, though. Well, Miss Felicity, you're pretty smart. But how will you like to walk to Sunday School with a boy who wears patched trousers?"

"I won't have to," said Felicity triumphantly. "Peter is having a new suit made. It's to be ready by Saturday. I knew that before I promised."

Having discovered how to produce exciting dreams, we all promptly followed the example of Peter and the Story Girl.

"There is no chance for me to have any horrid dreams," lamented Sara Ray, "because ma won't let me having anything at all to eat before I go to bed. I don't think it's fair."

"Can't you hide something away through the day as we do?" asked Felicity.

"No." Sara shook her fawn-coloured head mournfully. "Ma always keeps the pantry locked, for fear Judy Pineau will treat her friends."

For a week we ate unlawful lunches and dreamed dreams after our own hearts--and, I regret to say, bickered and squabbled incessantly throughout the daytime, for our digestions went out of order and our tempers followed suit. Even the Story Girl and I had a fight--something that had never happened before. Peter was the only one who kept his normal poise. Nothing could upset that boy's stomach.

One night Cecily came into the pantry with a large cucumber, and proceeded to devour the greater part of it. The grown-ups were away that evening, attending a lecture at Markdale, so we ate our snacks openly, without any recourse to ways that were dark. I remember I supped that night off a solid hunk of fat pork, topped off with a slab of cold plum pudding.

"I thought you didn't like cucumber, Cecily," Dan remarked.

"Neither I do," said Cecily with a grimace. "But Peter says they're splendid for dreaming. He et one that night he had the dream about being caught by cannibals. I'd eat three cucumbers if I could have a dream like that."

Cecily finished her cucumber, and then drank a glass of milk, just as we heard the wheels of Uncle Alec's buggy rambling over the bridge in the hollow. Felicity quickly restored pork and pudding to their own places, and by the time Aunt Janet came in we were all in our respective beds. Soon the house was dark and silent. I was just dropping into an uneasy slumber when I heard a commotion in the girls' room across the hall.

Their door opened and through our own open door I saw Felicity's white-clad figure flit down the stairs to Aunt Janet's room. From the room she had left came moans and cries.

"Cecily's sick," said Dan, springing out of bed. "That cucumber must have disagreed with her."

In a few minutes the whole house was astir. Cecily was sick--very, very sick, there was no doubt of that. She was even worse than Dan had been when he had eaten the bad berries. Uncle

Alec, tired as he was from his hard day's work and evening outing, was despatched for the doctor. Aunt Janet and Felicity administered all the homely remedies they could think of, but to no effect. Felicity told Aunt Janet of the cucumber, but Aunt Janet did not think the cucumber alone could be responsible for Cecily's alarming condition.

"Cucumbers are indigestible, but I never knew of them making any one as sick as this," she said anxiously. "What made the child eat a cucumber before going to bed? I didn't think she liked them."

"It was that wretched Peter," sobbed Felicity indignantly. "He told her it would make her dream something extra."

"What on earth did she want to dream for?" demanded Aunt Janet in bewilderment.

"Oh, to have something worth while to write in her dream book, ma. We all have dream books, you know, and every one wants their own to be the most exciting--and we've been eating rich things to make us dream--and it does--but if Cecily--oh, I'll never forgive myself," said Felicity, incoherently, letting all kinds of cats out of the bag in her excitement and alarm.

"Well, I wonder what on earth you young ones will do next," said

Aunt Janet in the helpless tone of a woman who gives it up.

Cecily was no better when the doctor came. Like Aunt Janet, he declared that cucumbers alone would not have made her so ill; but when he found out that she had drunk a glass of milk also the mystery was solved.

"Why, milk and cucumbers together make a rank poison," he said.

"No wonder the child is sick. There--there now--" seeing the alarmed faces around him, "don't be frightened. As old Mrs. Fraser says, 'It's no deidly.' It won't kill her, but she'll probably be a pretty miserable girl for two or three days."

She was. And we were all miserable in company. Aunt Janet investigated the whole affair and the matter of our dream books was aired in family conclave. I do not know which hurt our feelings most--the scolding we got from Aunt Janet, or the ridicule which the other grown-ups, especially Uncle Roger, showered on us. Peter received an extra "setting down," which he considered rank injustice.

"I didn't tell Cecily to drink the milk, and the cucumber alone wouldn't have hurt her," he grumbled. Cecily was able to be out with us again that day, so Peter felt that he might venture on a grumble. "Sides, she coaxed me to tell her what would be good for dreams. I just told her as a favour. And now your Aunt

Janet blames me for the whole trouble."

"And Aunt Janet says we are never to have anything to eat before we go to bed after this except plain bread and milk," said Felix sadly.

"They'd like to stop us from dreaming altogether if they could," said the Story Girl wrathfully.

"Well, anyway, they can't prevent us from growing up," consoled Dan.

"We needn't worry about the bread and milk rule," added Felicity.

"Ma made a rule like that once before, and kept it for a week, and then we just slipped back to the old way. That will be what will happen this time, too. But of course we won't be able to get any more rich things for supper, and our dreams will be pretty flat after this."

"Well, let's go down to the Pulpit Stone and I'll tell you a story I know," said the Story Girl.

We went--and straightway drank of the waters of forgetfulness.

In a brief space we were laughing right merrily, no longer remembering our wrongs at the hands of those cruel grown-ups.

Our laughter echoed back from the barns and the spruce grove, as

if elfin denizens of upper air were sharing in our mirth.

Presently, also, the laughter of the grown-ups mingled with ours. Aunt Olivia and Uncle Roger, Aunt Janet and Uncle Alec, came strolling through the orchard and joined our circle, as they sometimes did when the toil of the day was over, and the magic time 'twixt light and dark brought truce of care and labour.

'Twas then we liked our grown-ups best, for then they seemed half children again. Uncle Roger and Uncle Alec lolled in the grass like boys; Aunt Olivia, looking more like a pansy than ever in the prettiest dress of pale purple print, with a knot of yellow ribbon at her throat, sat with her arm about Cecily and smiled on us all; and Aunt Janet's motherly face lost its every-day look of anxious care.

The Story Girl was in great fettle that night. Never had her tales sparkled with such wit and archness.

"Sara Stanley," said Aunt Olivia, shaking her finger at her after a side-splitting yarn, "if you don't watch out you'll be famous some day."

"These funny stories are all right," said Uncle Roger, "but for real enjoyment give me something with a creep in it. Sara, tell us that story of the Serpent Woman I heard you tell one day last summer."

The Story Girl began it glibly. But before she had gone far with it, I, who was sitting beside her, felt an unaccountable repulsion creeping over me. For the first time since I had known her I wanted to draw away from the Story Girl. Looking around on the faces of the group, I saw that they all shared my feeling. Cecily had put her hands over her eyes. Peter was staring at the Story Girl with a fascinated, horror-stricken gaze. Aunt Olivia was pale and troubled. All looked as if they were held prisoners in the bonds of a fearsome spell which they would gladly break but could not.

It was not our Story Girl who sat there, telling that weird tale in a sibilant, curdling voice. She had put on a new personality like a garment, and that personality was a venomous, evil, loathly thing. I would rather have died than have touched the slim, brown wrist on which she supported herself. The light in her narrowed orbs was the cold, merciless gleam of the serpent's eye. I felt frightened of this unholy creature who had suddenly come in our dear Story Girl's place.

When the tale ended there was a brief silence. Then Aunt Janet said severely, but with a sigh of relief,

"Little girls shouldn't tell such horrible stories."

This truly Aunt Janetian remark broke the spell. The grown-ups laughed, rather shakily, and the Story Girl--our own dear Story Girl once more, and no Serpent Woman--said protestingly,

"Well, Uncle Roger asked me to tell it. I don't like telling such stories either. They make me feel dreadful. Do you know, for just a little while, I felt exactly like a snake."

"You looked like one," said Uncle Roger. "How on earth do you do it?"

"I can't explain how I do it," said the Story Girl perplexedly.

"It just does itself."

Genius can never explain how it does it. It would not be genius if it could. And the Story Girl had genius.

As we left the orchard I walked along behind Uncle Roger and Aunt Olivia.

"That was an uncanny exhibition for a girl of fourteen, you know, Roger," said Aunt Olivia musingly. "What is in store for that child?"

"Fame," said Uncle Roger. "If she ever has a chance, that is, and I suppose her father will see to that. At least, I hope he

will. You and I, Olivia, never had our chance. I hope Sara will have hers."

This was my first inkling of what I was to understand more fully in later years. Uncle Roger and Aunt Olivia had both cherished certain dreams and ambitions in youth, but circumstances had denied them their "chance" and those dreams had never been fulfilled.

"Some day, Olivia," went on Uncle Roger, "you and I may find ourselves the aunt and uncle of the foremost actress of her day. If a girl of fourteen can make a couple of practical farmers and a pair of matter-of-fact housewives half believe for ten minutes that she really is a snake, what won't she be able to do when she is thirty? Here, you," added Uncle Roger, perceiving me, "cut along and get off to your bed. And mind you don't eat cucumbers and milk before you go."