

CHAPTER XXV. A CUP OF FAILURE

One warm Sunday evening in the moon of golden-rod, we all, grown-ups and children, were sitting in the orchard by the Pulpit Stone singing sweet old gospel hymns. We could all sing more or less, except poor Sara Ray, who had once despairingly confided to me that she didn't know what she'd ever do when she went to heaven, because she couldn't sing a note.

That whole scene comes out clearly for me in memory--the arc of primrose sky over the trees behind the old house, the fruit-laden boughs of the orchard, the bank of golden-rod, like a wave of sunshine, behind the Pulpit Stone, the nameless colour seen on a fir wood in a ruddy sunset. I can see Uncle Alec's tired, brilliant, blue eyes, Aunt Janet's wholesome, matronly face, Uncle Roger's sweeping blond beard and red cheeks, and Aunt Olivia's full-blown beauty. Two voices ring out for me above all others in the music that echoes through the halls of recollection. Cecily's sweet and silvery, and Uncle Alec's fine tenor. "If you're a King, you sing," was a Carlisle proverb in those days. Aunt Julia had been the flower of the flock in that respect and had become a noted concert singer. The world had never heard of the rest. Their music echoed only along the hidden ways of life, and served but to lighten the cares of the trivial round and common task.

That evening, after they tired of singing, our grown-ups began talking of their youthful days and doings.

This was always a keen delight to us small fry. We listened avidly to the tales of our uncles and aunts in the days when they, too--hard fact to realize--had been children. Good and proper as they were now, once, so it seemed, they had gotten into mischief and even had their quarrels and disagreements. On this particular evening Uncle Roger told many stories of Uncle Edward, and one in which the said Edward had preached sermons at the mature age of ten from the Pulpit Stone fired, as the sequel will show, the Story Girl's imagination.

"Can't I just see him at it now," said Uncle Roger, "leaning over that old boulder, his cheeks red and his eyes burning with excitement, banging the top of it as he had seen the ministers do in church. It wasn't cushioned, however, and he always bruised his hands in his self-forgetful earnestness. We thought him a regular wonder. We loved to hear him preach, but we didn't like to hear him pray, because he always insisted on praying for each of us by name, and it made us feel wretchedly uncomfortable, somehow. Alec, do you remember how furious Julia was because Edward prayed one day that she might be preserved from vanity and conceit over her singing?"

"I should think I do," laughed Uncle Alec. "She was sitting

right there where Cecily is now, and she got up at once and marched right out of the orchard, but at the gate she turned to call back indignantly, 'I guess you'd better wait till you've prayed the conceit out of yourself before you begin on me, Ned King. I never heard such stuck-up sermons as you preach.' Ned went on praying and never let on he heard her, but at the end of his prayer he wound up with 'Oh, God, I pray you to keep an eye on us all, but I pray you to pay particular attention to my sister Julia, for I think she needs it even more than the rest of us, world without end, Amen.'"

Our uncles roared with laughter over the recollection. We all laughed, indeed, especially over another tale in which Uncle Edward, leaning too far over the "pulpit" in his earnestness, lost his balance altogether and tumbled ingloriously into the grass below.

"He lit on a big Scotch thistle," said Uncle Roger, chuckling, "and besides that, he skinned his forehead on a stone. But he was determined to finish his sermon, and finish it he did. He climbed back into the pulpit, with the tears rolling over his cheeks, and preached for ten minutes longer, with sobs in his voice and drops of blood on his forehead. He was a plucky little beggar. No wonder he succeeded in life."

"And his sermons and prayers were always just about as outspoken

as those Julia objected to," said Uncle Alec. "Well, we're all getting on in life and Edward is gray; but when I think of him I always see him a little, rosy, curly-headed chap, laying down the law to us from the Pulpit Stone. It seems like the other day that we were all here together, just as these children are, and now we are scattered everywhere. Julia in California, Edward in Halifax, Alan in South America, Felix and Felicity and Stephen gone to the land that is very far off."

There was a little space of silence; and then Uncle Alec began, in a low, impressive voice, to repeat the wonderful verses of the ninetieth Psalm--verses which were thenceforth bound up for us with the beauty of that night and the memories of our kindred. Very reverently we all listened to the majestic words.

"Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting thou art God.... For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night.... For all our days are passed away in thy wrath; we spend our years as a tale that is told. The days of our years are threescore and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years yet is their strength, labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off and we fly away.... So teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.... Oh, satisfy us

early with thy mercy; that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.... And let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us; and establish thou the work of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands establish thou it."

The dusk crept into the orchard like a dim, bewitching personality. You could see her--feel her--hear her. She tiptoed softly from tree to tree, ever drawing nearer. Presently her filmy wings hovered over us and through them gleamed the early stars of the autumn night.

The grown-ups rose reluctantly and strolled away; but we children lingered for a moment to talk over an idea the Story Girl broached--a good idea, we thought enthusiastically, and one that promised to add considerable spice to life.

We were on the lookout for some new amusement. Dream books had begun to pall. We no longer wrote in them very regularly, and our dreams were not what they used to be before the mischance of the cucumber. So the Story Girl's suggestion came pat to the psychological moment.

"I've thought of a splendid plan," she said. "It just flashed into my mind when the uncles were talking about Uncle Edward. And the beauty of it is we can play it on Sundays, and you know there are so few things it is proper to play on Sundays. But

this is a Christian game, so it will be all right."

"It isn't like the religious fruit basket game, is it?" asked Cecily anxiously.

We had good reason to hope that it wasn't. One desperate Sunday afternoon, when we had nothing to read and the time seemed endless, Felix had suggested that we have a game of fruit-basket; only instead of taking the names of fruits, we were to take the names of Bible characters. This, he argued, would make it quite lawful and proper to play on Sunday. We, too desirous of being convinced, also thought so; and for a merry hour Lazarus and Martha and Moses and Aaron and sundry other worthies of Holy Writ had a lively time of it in the King orchard. Peter having a Scriptural name of his own, did not want to take another; but we would not allow this, because it would give him an unfair advantage over the rest of us. It would be so much easier to call out your own name than fit your tongue to an unfamiliar one. So Peter retaliated by choosing Nebuchadnezzar, which no one could ever utter three times before Peter shrieked it out once.

In the midst of our hilarity, however, Uncle Alec and Aunt Janet came down upon us. It is best to draw a veil over what followed. Suffice it to say that the recollection gave point to Cecily's question.

"No, it isn't that sort of game at all," said the Story Girl.

"It is this; each of you boys must preach a sermon, as Uncle Edward used to do. One of you next Sunday, and another the next, and so on. And whoever preaches the best sermon is to get a prize."

Dan promptly declared he wouldn't try to preach a sermon; but Peter, Felix and I thought the suggestion a very good one. Secretly, I believed I could cut quite a fine figure preaching a sermon.

"Who'll give the prize?" asked Felix.

"I will," said the Story Girl. "I'll give that picture father sent me last week."

As the said picture was an excellent copy of one of Landseer's stags, Felix and I were well pleased; but Peter averred that he would rather have the Madonna that looked like his Aunt Jane, and the Story Girl agreed that if his sermon was the best she would give him that.

"But who's to be the judge?" I said, "and what kind of a sermon would you call the best?"

"The one that makes the most impression," answered the Story Girl

promptly. "And we girls must be the judges, because there's nobody else. Now, who is to preach next Sunday?"

It was decided that I should lead off, and I lay awake for an extra hour that night thinking what text I should take for the following Sunday. The next day I bought two sheets of foolscap from the schoolmaster, and after tea I betook myself to the granary, barred the door, and fell to writing my sermon. I did not find it as easy a task as I had anticipated; but I pegged grimly away at it, and by dint of severe labour for two evenings I eventually got my four pages of foolscap filled, although I had to pad the subject-matter not a little with verses of quotable hymns. I had decided to preach on missions, as being a topic more within my grasp than abstruse theological doctrines or evangelical discourses; and, mindful of the need of making an impression, I drew a harrowing picture of the miserable plight of the heathen who in their darkness bowed down to wood and stone. Then I urged our responsibility concerning them, and meant to wind up by reciting, in a very solemn and earnest voice, the verse beginning, "Can we whose souls are lighted." When I had completed my sermon I went over it very carefully again and wrote with red ink--Cecily made it for me out of an aniline dye--the word "thump" wherever I deemed it advisable to chastise the pulpit.

I have that sermon still, all its red thumps unfaded, lying

beside my dream book; but I am not going to inflict it on my readers. I am not so proud of it as I once was. I was really puffed up with earthly vanity over it at that time. Felix, I thought, would be hard put to it to beat it. As for Peter, I did not consider him a rival to be feared. It was un-supposable that a hired boy, with little education and less experience of church-going, should be able to preach better than could I, in whose family there was a real minister.

The sermon written, the next thing was to learn it off by heart and then practise it, thumps included, until I was letter and gesture perfect. I preached it over several times in the granary with only Paddy, sitting immovably on a puncheon, for audience. Paddy stood the test fairly well. At least, he made an adorable listener, save at such times as imaginary rats distracted his attention.

Mr. Marwood had at least three absorbed listeners the next Sunday morning. Felix, Peter and I were all among the chieils who were taking mental notes on the art of preaching a sermon. Not a motion, or glance, or intonation escaped us. To be sure, none of us could remember the text when we got home; but we knew just how you should throw back your head and clutch the edge of the pulpit with both hands when you announced it.

In the afternoon we all repaired to the orchard, Bibles and hymn

books in hand. We did not think it necessary to inform the grown-ups of what was in the wind. You could never tell what kink a grown-up would take. They might not think it proper to play any sort of a game on Sunday, not even a Christian game. Least said was soonest mended where grown-ups were concerned.

I mounted the pulpit steps, feeling rather nervous, and my audience sat gravely down on the grass before me. Our opening exercises consisted solely of singing and reading. We had agreed to omit prayer. Neither Felix, Peter nor I felt equal to praying in public. But we took up a collection. The proceeds were to go to missions. Dan passed the plate--Felicity's rosebud plate--looking as preternaturally solemn as Elder Frewen himself. Every one put a cent on it.

Well, I preached my sermon. And it fell horribly flat. I realized that, before I was half way through it. I think I preached it very well; and never a thump did I forget or misplace. But my audience was plainly bored. When I stepped down from the pulpit, after demanding passionately if we whose souls were lighted and so forth, I felt with secret humiliation that my sermon was a failure. It had made no impression at all. Felix would be sure to get the prize.

"That was a very good sermon for a first attempt," said the Story Girl graciously. "It sounded just like real sermons I have

heard."

For a moment the charm of her voice made me feel that I had not done so badly after all; but the other girls, thinking it their duty to pay me some sort of a compliment also, quickly dispelled that pleasing delusion.

"Every word of it was true," said Cecily, her tone unconsciously implying that this was its sole merit.

"I often feel," said Felicity primly, "that we don't think enough about the heathens. We ought to think a great deal more."

Sara Ray put the finishing touch to my mortification.

"It was so nice and short," she said.

"What was the matter with my sermon?" I asked Dan that night. Since he was neither judge nor competitor I could discuss the matter with him.

"It was too much like a reg'lar sermon to be interesting," said Dan frankly.

"I should think the more like a regular sermon it was, the better," I said.

"Not if you want to make an impression," said Dan seriously.

"You must have something sort of different for that. Peter, now, HE'LL have something different."

"Oh, Peter! I don't believe he can preach a sermon," I said.

"Maybe not, but you'll see he'll make an impression," said Dan.

Dan was neither the prophet nor the son of a prophet, but he had the second sight for once; Peter DID make an impression.