

CHAPTER XXIX. THE SHADOW FEARED OF MAN

We were all up early the next morning, dressing by candlelight. But early as it was we found the Story Girl in the kitchen when we went down, sitting on Rachel Ward's blue chest and looking important.

"What do you think?" she exclaimed. "Peter has the measles! He was dreadfully sick all night, and Uncle Roger had to go for the doctor. He was quite light-headed, and didn't know any one. Of course he's far too sick to be taken home, so his mother has come up to wait on him, and I'm to live over here until he is better."

This was mingled bitter and sweet. We were sorry to hear that Peter had the measles; but it would be jolly to have the Story Girl living with us all the time. What orgies of story telling we should have!

"I suppose we'll all have the measles now," grumbled Felicity.

"And October is such an inconvenient time for measles--there's so much to do."

"I don't believe any time is very convenient to have the measles," Cecily said.

"Oh, perhaps we won't have them," said the Story Girl cheerfully.

"Peter caught them at Markdale, the last time he was home, his mother says."

"I don't want to catch the measles from Peter," said Felicity decidedly. "Fancy catching them from a hired boy!"

"Oh, Felicity, don't call Peter a hired boy when he's sick," protested Cecily.

During the next two days we were very busy--too busy to tell tales or listen to them. Only in the frosty dusk did we have time to wander afar in realms of gold with the Story Girl. She had recently been digging into a couple of old volumes of classic myths and northland folklore which she had found in Aunt Olivia's attic; and for us, god and goddess, laughing nymph and mocking satyr, norn and valkyrie, elf and troll, and "green folk" generally, were real creatures once again, inhabiting the orchards and woods and meadows around us, until it seemed as if the Golden Age had returned to earth.

Then, on the third day, the Story Girl came to us with a very white face. She had been over to Uncle Roger's yard to hear the latest bulletin from the sick room. Hitherto they had been of a non-committal nature; but now it was only too evident that she had bad news.

"Peter is very, very sick," she said miserably. "He has caught cold someway--and the measles have struck in--and--and--" the Story Girl wrung her brown hands together--"the doctor is afraid he--he--won't get better."

We all stood around, stricken, incredulous.

"Do you mean," said Felix, finding voice at length, "that Peter is going to die?"

The Story Girl nodded miserably.

"They're afraid so."

Cecily sat down by her half filled basket and began to cry.

Felicity said violently that she didn't believe it.

"I can't pick another apple to-day and I ain't going to try," said Dan.

None of us could. We went to the grown-ups and told them so; and the grown-ups, with unaccustomed understanding and sympathy, told us that we need not. Then we roamed about in our wretchedness and tried to comfort one another. We avoided the orchard; it was for us too full of happy memories to accord with our bitterness of soul. Instead, we resorted to the spruce wood, where the hush

and the sombre shadows and the soft, melancholy sighing of the wind in the branches over us did not jar harshly on our new sorrow.

We could not really believe that Peter was going to die--to DIE. Old people died. Grown-up people died. Even children of whom we had heard died. But that one of US--of our merry little band--should die was unbelievable. We could not believe it. And yet the possibility struck us in the face like a blow. We sat on the mossy stones under the dark old evergreens and gave ourselves up to wretchedness. We all, even Dan, cried, except the Story Girl.

"I don't see how you can be so unfeeling, Sara Stanley," said Felicity reproachfully. "You've always been such friends with Peter--and made out you thought so much of him--and now you ain't shedding a tear for him."

I looked at the Story Girl's dry, piteous eyes, and suddenly remembered that I had never seen her cry. When she told us sad tales, in a voice laden with all the tears that had ever been shed, she had never shed one of her own.

"I can't cry," she said drearily. "I wish I could. I've a dreadful feeling here--" she touched her slender throat--"and if I could cry I think it would make it better. But I can't."

"Maybe Peter will get better after all," said Dan, swallowing a sob. "I've heard of lots of people who went and got better after the doctor said they were going to die."

"While there's life there's hope, you know," said Felix. "We shouldn't cross bridges till we come to them."

"Those are only proverbs," said the Story Girl bitterly.

"Proverbs are all very fine when there's nothing to worry you, but when you're in real trouble they're not a bit of help."

"Oh, I wish I'd never said Peter wasn't fit to associate with," moaned Felicity. "If he ever gets better I'll never say such a thing again--I'll never THINK it. He's just a lovely boy and twice as smart as lots that aren't hired out."

"He was always so polite and good-natured and obliging," sighed Cecily.

"He was just a real gentleman," said the Story Girl.

"There ain't many fellows as fair and square as Peter," said Dan.

"And such a worker," said Felix.

"Uncle Roger says he never had a boy he could depend on like

Peter," I said.

"It's too late to be saying all these nice things about him now," said the Story Girl. "He won't ever know how much we thought of him. It's too late."

"If he gets better I'll tell him," said Cecily resolutely.

"I wish I hadn't boxed his ears that day he tried to kiss me," went on Felicity, who was evidently raking her conscience for past offences in regard to Peter. "Of course I couldn't be expected to let a hir--to let a boy kiss me. But I needn't have been so cross about it. I might have been more dignified. And I told him I just hated him. That wasn't true, but I s'pose he'll die thinking it is. Oh, dear me, what makes people say things they've got to be so sorry for afterwards?"

"I suppose if Peter d-d-dies he'll go to heaven anyhow," sobbed Cecily. "He's been real good all this summer, but he isn't a church member."

"He's a Presbyterian, you know," said Felicity reassuringly. Her tone expressed her conviction that that would carry Peter through if anything would. "We're none of us church members. But of course Peter couldn't be sent to the bad place. That would be ridiculous. What would they do with him there, when he's so good

and polite and honest and kind?"

"Oh, I think he'll be all right, too," sighed Cecily, "but you know he never did go to church and Sunday School before this summer."

"Well, his father run away, and his mother was too busy earning a living to bring him up right," argued Felicity. "Don't you suppose that anybody, even God, would make allowances for that?"

"Of course Peter will go to heaven," said the Story Girl. "He's not grown up enough to go anywhere else. Children always go to heaven. But I don't want him to go there or anywhere else. I want him to stay right here. I know heaven must be a splendid place, but I'm sure Peter would rather be here, having fun with us."

"Sara Stanley," rebuked Felicity. "I should think you wouldn't say such things at such a solemn time. You're such a queer girl."

"Wouldn't you rather be here yourself than in heaven?" said the Story Girl bluntly. "Wouldn't you now, Felicity King? Tell the truth, 'cross your heart."

But Felicity took refuge from this inconvenient question in

tears.

"If we could only DO something to help Peter!" I said desperately. "It seems dreadful not to be able to do a single thing."

"There's one thing we can do," said Cecily gently. "We can pray for him."

"So we can," I agreed.

"I'm going to pray like sixty," said Felix energetically.

"We'll have to be awful good, you know," warned Cecily. "There's no use praying if you're not good."

"That will be easy," sighed Felicity. "I don't feel a bit like being bad. If anything happens to Peter I feel sure I'll never be naughty again. I won't have the heart."

We did, indeed, pray most sincerely for Peter's recovery. We did not, as in the case of Paddy, "tack it on after more important things," but put it in the very forefront of our petitions. Even skeptical Dan prayed, his skepticism falling away from him like a discarded garment in this valley of the shadow, which sifts out hearts and tries souls, until we all, grown-up or children,

realize our weakness, and, finding that our own puny strength is as a reed shaken in the wind, creep back humbly to the God we have vainly dreamed we could do without.

Peter was no better the next day. Aunt Olivia reported that his mother was broken-hearted. We did not again ask to be released from work. Instead, we went at it with feverish zeal. If we worked hard there was less time for grief and grievous thoughts. We picked apples and dragged them to the granary doggedly. In the afternoon Aunt Janet brought us a lunch of apple turnovers; but we could not eat them. Peter, as Felicity reminded us with a burst of tears, had been so fond of apple turnovers.

And, oh, how good we were! How angelically and unnaturally good! Never was there such a band of kind, sweet-tempered, unselfish children in any orchard. Even Felicity and Dan, for once in their lives, got through the day without any exchange of left-handed compliments. Cecily confided to me that she never meant to put her hair up in curlers on Saturday nights again, because it was pretending. She was so anxious to repent of something, sweet girl, and this was all she could think of.

During the afternoon Judy Pineau brought up a tear-blotted note from Sara Ray. Sara had not been allowed to visit the hill farm since Peter had developed measles. She was an unhappy little exile, and could only relieve her anguish of soul by daily

letters to Cecily, which the faithful and obliging Judy Pineau brought up for her. These epistles were as gushingly underlined as if Sara had been a correspondent of early Victorian days.

Cecily did not write back, because Mrs. Ray had decreed that no letters must be taken down from the hill farm lest they carry infection. Cecily had offered to bake every epistle thoroughly in the oven before sending it; but Mrs. Ray was inexorable, and Cecily had to content herself by sending long verbal messages with Judy Pineau.

"My OWN DEAREST Cecily," ran Sara's letter. "I have just heard the sad news about POOR DEAR PETER. I can't describe MY FEELINGS. They are DREADFUL. I have been crying ALL THE AFTERNOON. I wish I could FLY to you, but ma will not let me. She is afraid I will catch the measles, but I would rather have the measles A DOZEN TIMES OVER than be separated from you all like this. But I have felt, ever since the Judgment Sunday that I MUST OBEY MA BETTER than I used to do. If ANYTHING HAPPENS to Peter and you are let see him BEFORE IT HAPPENS give him MY LOVE and tell him HOW SORRY I AM, and that I hope we will ALL meet in A BETTER WORLD Everything in school is about the same. The master is awful cross by spells. Jimmy Frewen walked home with Nellie Bowan last night from prayer-meeting and HER ONLY FOURTEEN. Don't you think it horrid BEGINNING SO YOUNG? YOU AND ME would NEVER do anything like that till we were GROWN UP, would

we? Willy Fraser looks SO LONESOME in school these days. I must stop for ma says I waste FAR TOO MUCH TIME writing letters. Tell Judy ALL THE NEWS for me.

"Your OWN TRUE FRIEND,

"SARA RAY.

"P.S. Oh I DO hope Peter will get better. Ma is going to get me a new brown dress for the winter.

"S. R."

When evening came we went to our seats under the whispering, sighing fir trees. It was a beautiful night--clear, windless, frosty. Some one galloped down the road on horseback, lustily singing a comic song. How dared he? We felt that it was an insult to our wretchedness. If Peter were going to--going to--well, if anything happened to Peter, we felt so miserably sure that the music of life would be stilled for us for ever. How could any one in the world be happy when we were so unhappy?

Presently Aunt Olivia came down the long twilight arcade. Her bright hair was uncovered and she looked slim and queen-like in her light dress. We thought Aunt Olivia very pretty then.

Looking back from a mature standpoint I realize that she must have been an unusually beautiful woman; and she looked her prettiest as she stood under the swaying boughs in the last faint

light of the autumn dusk and smiled down at our woebegone faces.

"Dear, sorrowful little people, I bring you glad tidings of great joy," she said. "The doctor has just been here, and he finds Peter much better, and thinks he will pull through after all."

We gazed up at her in silence for a few moments. When we had heard the news of Paddy's recovery we had been noisy and jubilant; but we were very quiet now. We had been too near something dark and terrible and menacing; and though it was thus suddenly removed the chill and shadow of it were about us still. Presently the Story Girl, who had been standing up, leaning against a tall fir, slipped down to the ground in a huddled fashion and broke into a very passion of weeping. I had never heard any one cry so, with dreadful, rending sobs. I was used to hearing girls cry. It was as much Sara Ray's normal state as any other, and even Felicity and Cecily availed themselves occasionally of the privilege of sex. But I had never heard any girl cry like this. It gave me the same unpleasant sensation which I had felt one time when I had seen my father cry.

"Oh, don't, Sara, don't," I said gently, patting her convulsed shoulder.

"You ARE a queer girl," said Felicity--more tolerantly than usual however--"you never cried a speck when you thought Peter was

going to die--and now when he is going to get better you cry like that."

"Sara, child, come with me," said Aunt Olivia, bending over her. The Story Girl got up and went away, with Aunt Olivia's arms around her. The sound of her crying died away under the firs, and with it seemed to go the dread and grief that had been our portion for hours. In the reaction our spirits rose with a bound.

"Oh, ain't it great that Peter's going to be all right?" said Dan, springing up.

"I never was so glad of anything in my whole life," declared Felicity in shameless rapture.

"Can't we send word somehow to Sara Ray to-night?" asked Cecily, the ever-thoughtful. "She's feeling so bad--and she'll have to feel that way till to-morrow if we can't."

"Let's all go down to the Ray gate and holler to Judy Pineau till she comes out," suggested Felix.

Accordingly, we went and "hollered," with a right good will. We were much taken aback to find that Mrs. Ray came to the gate instead of Judy, and rather sourly demanded what we were yelling

about. When she heard our news, however, she had the decency to say she was glad, and to promise she would convey the good tidings to Sara--"who is already in bed, where all children of her age should be," added Mrs. Ray severely.

WE had no intention of going to bed for a good two hours yet. Instead, after devoutly thanking goodness that our grown-ups, in spite of some imperfections, were not of the Mrs. Ray type, we betook ourselves to the granary, lighted a huge lantern which Dan had made out of a turnip, and proceeded to devour all the apples we might have eaten through the day but had not. We were a blithe little crew, sitting there in the light of our goblin lantern. We had in very truth been given beauty for ashes and the oil of joy for mourning. Life was as a red rose once more.

"I'm going to make a big batch of patty-pans, first thing in the morning," said Felicity jubilantly. "Isn't it queer? Last night I felt just like praying, and tonight I feel just like cooking."

"We mustn't forget to thank God for making Peter better," said Cecily, as we finally went to the house.

"Do you s'pose Peter wouldn't have got better anyway?" said Dan.

"Oh, Dan, what makes you ask such questions?" exclaimed Cecily in real distress.

"I dunno," said Dan. "They just kind of come into my head, like.
But of course I mean to thank God when I say my prayers to-night.
That's only decent."