

CHAPTER XXX. A COMPOUND LETTER

Once Peter was out of danger he recovered rapidly, but he found his convalescence rather tedious; and Aunt Olivia suggested to us one day that we write a "compound letter" to amuse him, until he could come to the window and talk to us from a safe distance.

The idea appealed to us; and, the day being Saturday and the apples all picked, we betook ourselves to the orchard to compose our epistles, Cecily having first sent word by a convenient caller to Sara Ray, that she, too, might have a letter ready.

Later, I, having at that time a mania for preserving all documents relating to our life in Carlisle, copied those letters in the blank pages at the back of my dream book. Hence I can reproduce them verbatim, with the bouquet they have retained through all the long years since they were penned in that autumnal orchard on the hill, with its fading leaves and frosted grasses, and the "mild, delightsome melancholy" of the late October day enfolding.

CECILY'S LETTER

"DEAR PETER:--I am so very glad and thankful that you are going to get better. We were so afraid you would not last Tuesday, and we felt dreadful, even Felicity. We all prayed for you. I think the others have stopped now, but I keep it up every night still, for fear you might have a relaps. (I don't know if that is

spelled right. I haven't the dictionary handy, and if I ask the others Felicity will laugh at me, though she cannot spell lots of words herself.) I am saving some of the Honourable Mr. Whalen's pears for you. I've got them hid where nobody can find them. There's only a dozen because Dan et all the rest, but I guess you will like them. We have got all the apples picked, and are all ready to take the measles now, if we have to, but I hope we won't. If we have to, though, I'd rather catch them from you than from any one else, because we are acquainted with you. If I do take the measles and anything happens to me Felicity is to have my cherry vase. I'd rather give it to the Story Girl, but Dan says it ought to be kept in the family, even if Felicity is a crank. I haven't anything else valuable, since I gave Sara Ray my forget-me-not jug, but if you would like anything I've got let me know and I'll leave instructions for you to have it. The Story Girl has told us some splendid stories lately. I wish I was clever like her. Ma says it doesn't matter if you're not clever as long as you are good, but I am not even very good.

"I think this is all my news, except that I want to tell you how much we all think of you, Peter. When we heard you were sick we all said nice things about you, but we were afraid it was too late, and I said if you got better I'd tell you. It is easier to write it than to tell it out to your face. We think you are smart and polite and obliging and a great worker and a gentleman.

"Your true friend,

"CECILY KING.

"P.S. If you answer my letter don't say anything about the pears, because I don't want Dan to find out there's any left. C. K."

FELICITY'S LETTER

"DEAR PETER:--Aunt Olivia says for us all to write a compound letter to cheer you up. We are all awful glad you are getting better. It gave us an awful scare when we heard you were going to die. But you will soon be all right and able to get out again. Be careful you don't catch cold. I am going to bake some nice things for you and send them over, now that the doctor says you can eat them. And I'll send you my rosebud plate to eat off of. I'm only lending it, you know, not giving it. I let very few people use it because it is my greatest treasure. Mind you don't break it. Aunt Olivia must always wash it, not your mother.

"I do hope the rest of us won't catch the measles. It must look horrid to have red spots all over your face. We all feel pretty well yet. The Story Girl says as many queer things as ever. Felix thinks he is getting thin, but he is fatter than ever, and no wonder, with all the apples he eats. He has give up trying to eat the bitter apples at last. Beverley has grown half an inch

since July, by the mark on the hall door, and he is awful pleased about it. I told him I guessed the magic seed was taking effect at last, and he got mad. He never gets mad at anything the Story Girl says, and yet she is so sarkastic by times. Dan is pretty hard to get along with as usual, but I try to bear pashently with him. Cecily is well and says she isn't going to curl her hair any more. She is so conscienshus. I am glad my hair curls of itself, ain't you?

"We haven't seen Sara Ray since you got sick. She is awful lonesome, and Judy says she cries nearly all the time but that is nothing new. I'm awful sorry for Sara but I'm glad I'm not her. She is going to write you a letter too. You'll let me see what she puts in it, won't you? You'd better take some Mexican Tea now. It's a great blood purifyer.

"I am going to get a lovely dark blue dress for the winter. It is ever so much prettier than Sara Ray's brown one. Sara Ray's mother has no taste. The Story Girl's father is sending her a new red dress, and a red velvet cap from Paris. She is so fond of red. I can't bear it, it looks so common. Mother says I can get a velvet hood too. Cecily says she doesn't believe it's right to wear velvet when it's so expensive and the heathen are crying for the gospel. She got that idea from a Sunday School paper but I am going to get my hood all the same.

"Well, Peter, I have no more news so I will close for this time.

"hoping you will soon be quite well, I remain

"yours sincerely,

"FELICITY KING.

"P.S. The Story Girl peeked over my shoulder and says I ought to have signed it 'yours affeckshunately,' but I know better, because the Family Guide has told lots of times how you should sign yourself when you are writing to a young man who is only a friend. F. K."

FELIX' LETTER

"DEAR PETER:--I am awful glad you are getting better. We all felt bad when we thought you wouldn't, but I felt worse than the others because we hadn't been on very good terms lately and I had said mean things about you. I'm sorry and, Peter, you can pray for anything you like and I won't ever object again. I'm glad Uncle Alec interfered and stopped the fight. If I had licked you and you had died of the measles it would have been a dreadful thing.

"We have all the apples in and haven't much to do just now and we are having lots of fun but we wish you were here to join in. I'm a lot thinner than I was. I guess working so hard picking apples

is a good thing to make you thin. The girls are all well.

Felicity puts on as many airs as ever, but she makes great things to eat. I have had some splendid dreams since we gave up writing them down. That is always the way. We ain't going to school till we're sure we are not going to have the measles. This is all I can think of, so I will draw to a close. Remember, you can pray for anything you like. FELIX KING."

SARA RAY'S LETTER

"DEAR PETER:--I never wrote to A BOY before, so PLEASE excuse ALL mistakes. I am SO glad you are getting better. We were SO afraid you were GOING TO DIE. I CRIED ALL NIGHT about it. But now that you are OUT OF DANGER will you tell me WHAT IT REALLY FEELS LIKE to think you are going to die? Does it FEEL QUEER? Were you VERY badly frightened?

"Ma won't let me go up the hill AT ALL now. I would DIE if it was not for Judy Pinno. (The French names are SO HARD TO SPELL.) JUDY IS VERY OBLIGING and I feel that she SIMPATHISES WITH ME. In my LONELY HOURS I read my dream book and Cecily's old letters and they are SUCH A COMFORT to me. I have been reading one of the school library books too. I is PRETTY GOOD but I wish they had got more LOVE STORIES because they are so exciting. But the master would not let them.

"If you had DIED, Peter, and YOUR FATHER had heard it wouldn't he have FELT DREADFUL? We are having BEAUTIFUL WEATHER and the scenery is fine since the leaves turned. I think there is nothing so pretty as Nature after all.

"I hope ALL DANGER from the measles will soon be over and we can ALL MEET AGAIN AT THE HOME ON THE HILL. Till then FAREWELL.

"Your true friend,

"SARA RAY.

"P. S. Don't let Felicity see this letter. S. R."

DAN'S LETTER

"DEAR OLD PETE:--Awful glad you cheated the doctor. I thought you weren't the kind to turn up your toes so easy. You should of heard the girls crying.

"They're all getting their winter finery now and the talk about it would make you sick. The Story Girl is getting hers from Paris and Felicity is awful jealous though she pretends she isn't. I can see through her.

"Kitt Mar was up here Thursday to see the girls. She's had the measles so she isn't scared. She's a great girl to laugh. I like a girl that laughs, don't you?

"We had a call from Peg Bowen yesterday. You should of seen the Story Girl hustling Pat out of the way, for all she says she don't believe he was bewitched. Peg had your rheumatism ring on and the Story Girl's blue beads and Sara Ray's lace soed across the front of her dress. She wanted some tobacco and some pickles. Ma gave her some pickles but said we didn't have no tobacco and Peg went off mad but I guess she wouldn't bewitch anything on account of the pickles.

"I ain't any hand to write letters so I guess I'll stop. Hope you'll be out soon. DAN."

THE STORY GIRL'S LETTER

"DEAR PETER:--Oh, how glad I am that you are getting better! Those days when we thought you wouldn't were the hardest of my whole life. It seemed too dreadful to be true that perhaps you would die. And then when we heard you were going to get better that seemed too good to be true. Oh, Peter, hurry up and get well, for we are having such good times and we miss you so much. I have coaxed Uncle Alec not to burn his potato stalks till you are well, because I remember how you always liked to see the potato stalks burn. Uncle Alec consented, though Aunt Janet said it was high time they were burned. Uncle Roger burned his last night and it was such fun.

"Pat is splendid. He has never had a sick spell since that bad one. I would send him over to be company for you, but Aunt Janet says no, because he might carry the measles back. I don't see how he could, but we must obey Aunt Janet. She is very good to us all, but I know she does not approve of me. She says I'm my father's own child. I know that doesn't mean anything complimentary because she looked so queer when she saw that I had heard her, but I don't care. I'm glad I'm like father. I had a splendid letter from him this week, with the darlinest pictures in it. He is painting a new picture which is going to make him famous. I wonder what Aunt Janet will say then.

"Do you know, Peter, yesterday I thought I saw the Family Ghost at last. I was coming through the gap in the hedge, and I saw somebody in blue standing under Uncle Alec's tree. How my heart beat! My hair should have stood up on end with terror but it didn't. I felt to see, and it was lying down quite flat. But it was only a visitor after all. I don't know whether I was glad or disappointed. I don't think it would be a pleasant experience to see the ghost. But after I had seen it think what a heroine I would be!

"Oh, Peter, what do you think? I have got acquainted with the Awkward Man at last. I never thought it would be so easy. Yesterday Aunt Olivia wanted some ferns, so I went back to the

maple woods to get them for her, and I found some lovely ones by the spring. And while I was sitting there, looking into the spring who should come along but the Awkward Man himself. He sat right down beside me and began to talk. I never was so surprised in my life. We had a very interesting talk, and I told him two of my best stories, and a great many of my secrets into the bargain. They may say what they like, but he was not one bit shy or awkward, and he has beautiful eyes. He did not tell me any of his secrets, but I believe he will some day. Of course I never said a word about his Alice-room. But I gave him a hint about his little brown book. I said I loved poetry and often felt like writing it, and then I said, 'Do you ever feel like that, Mr. Dale?' He said, yes, he sometimes felt that way, but he did not mention the brown book. I thought he might have. But after all I don't like people who tell you everything the first time you meet them, like Sara Ray. When he went away he said, 'I hope I shall have the pleasure of meeting you again,' just as seriously and politely as if I was a grown-up young lady. I am sure he could never have said it if I had been really grown up. I told him it was likely he would and that he wasn't to mind if I had a longer skirt on next time, because I'd be just the same person.

"I told the children a beautiful new fairy story to-day. I made them go to the spruce wood to hear it. A spruce wood is the proper place to tell fairy stories in. Felicity says she can't see that it makes any difference where you tell them, but oh, it

does. I wish you had been there to hear it too, but when you are well I will tell it over again for you.

"I am going to call the southernwood 'applingie' after this. Beverley says that is what they call it in Scotland, and I think it sounds so much more poetical than southernwood. Felicity says the right name is 'Boy's Love,' but I think that sounds silly.

"Oh, Peter, shadows are such pretty things. The orchard is full of them this very minute. Sometimes they are so still you would think them asleep. Then they go laughing and skipping. Outside, in the oat field, they are always chasing each other. They are the wild shadows. The shadows in the orchard are the tame shadows.

"Everything seems to be rather tired growing except the spruces and chrysanthemums in Aunt Olivia's garden. The sunshine is so thick and yellow and lazy, and the crickets sing all day long. The birds are nearly all gone and most of the maple leaves have fallen.

"Just to make you laugh I'll write you a little story I heard Uncle Alec telling last night. It was about Elder Frewen's grandfather taking a pair of rope reins to lead a piano home. Everybody laughed except Aunt Janet. Old Mr. Frewen was HER grandfather too, and she wouldn't laugh. One day when old Mr.

Frewen was a young man of eighteen his father came home and said, 'Sandy, I bought a piano at Simon Ward's sale to-day. You're to go to-morrow and bring it home.' So next day Sandy started off on horseback with a pair of rope reins to lead the piano home. He thought it was some kind of livestock.

"And then Uncle Roger told about old Mark Ward who got up to make a speech at a church missionary social when he was drunk. (Of course he didn't get drunk at the social. He went there that way.) And this was his speech.

"Ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Chairman, I can't express my thoughts on this grand subject of missions. It's in this poor human critter'--patting himself on the breast--'but he can't git it out.'

"I'll tell you these stories when you get well. I can tell them ever so much better than I can write them.

"I know Felicity is wondering why I'm writing such a long letter, so perhaps I'd better stop. If your mother reads it to you there is a good deal of it she may not understand, but I think your Aunt Jane would.

"I remain

"your very affectionate friend,

"SARA STANLEY."

I did not keep a copy of my own letter, and I have forgotten everything that was in it, except the first sentence, in which I told Peter I was awful glad he was getting better.

Peter's delight on receiving our letters knew no bounds. He insisted on answering them and his letter, painstakingly disinfected, was duly delivered to us. Aunt Olivia had written it at his dictation, which was a gain, as far as spelling and punctuation went. But Peter's individuality seemed merged and lost in Aunt Olivia's big, dashing script. Not until the Story Girl read the letter to us in the granary by jack-o-lantern light, in a mimicry of Peter's very voice, did we savour the real bouquet of it.

PETER'S LETTER

"DEAR EVERYBODY, BUT ESPECIALLY FELICITY:--I was awful glad to get your letters. It makes you real important to be sick, but the time seems awful long when you're getting better. Your letters were all great, but I liked Felicity's best, and next to hers the Story Girl's. Felicity, it will be awful good of you to send me things to eat and the rosebud plate. I'll be awful careful of it. I hope you won't catch the measles, for they are not nice, especially when they strike in, but you would look all right, even if you did have red spots on your face. I would like

to try the Mexican Tea, because you want me to, but mother says no, she doesn't believe in it, and Burtons Bitters are a great deal healthier. If I was you I would get the velvet hood all right. The heathen live in warm countries so they don't want hoods.

"I'm glad you are still praying for me, Cecily, for you can't trust the measles. And I'm glad you're keeping you know what for me. I don't believe anything will happen to you if you do take the measles; but if anything does I'd like that little red book of yours, The Safe Compass, just to remember you by. It's such a good book to read on Sundays. It is interesting and religious, too. So is the Bible. I hadn't quite finished the Bible before I took the measles, but ma is reading the last chapters to me. There's an awful lot in that book. I can't understand the whole of it, since I'm only a hired boy, but some parts are real easy.

"I'm awful glad you have such a good opinion of me. I don't deserve it, but after this I'll try to. I can't tell you how I feel about all your kindness. I'm like the fellow the Story Girl wrote about who couldn't get it out. I have the picture the Story Girl gave me for my sermon on the wall at the foot of my bed. I like to look at it, it looks so much like Aunt Jane.

"Felix, I've given up praying that I'd be the only one to eat the bitter apples, and I'll never pray for anything like that again.

It was a horrid mean prayer. I didn't know it then, but after the measles struck in I found out it was. Aunt Jane wouldn't have liked it. After this I'm going to pray prayers I needn't be ashamed of.

"Sara Ray, I don't know what it feels like to be going to die because I didn't know I was going to die till I got better. Mother says I was lunny most of the time after they struck in. It was just because they struck in I was lunny. I ain't lunny naturally, Felicity. I will do what you asked in your postscript, Sara, although it will be hard.

"I'm glad Peg Bowen didn't catch you, Dan. Maybe she bewitched me that night we were at her place, and that is why the measles struck in. I'm awful glad Mr. King is going to leave the potato stalks until I get well, and I'm obliged to the Story Girl for coaxing him. I guess she will find out about Alice yet. There were some parts of her letter I couldn't see through, but when the measles strike in, they leave you stupid for a spell. Anyhow, it was a fine letter, and they were all fine, and I'm awful glad I have so many nice friends, even if I am only a hired boy. Perhaps I'd never have found it out if the measles hadn't struck in. So I'm glad they did but I hope they never will again.

"Your obedient servant,

"PETER CRAIG."