

CHAPTER XXXII. THE OPENING OF THE BLUE CHEST

November wakened from her dream of May in a bad temper. The day after the picnic a cold autumn rain set in, and we got up to find our world a drenched, wind-writhen place, with sodden fields and dour skies. The rain was weeping on the roof as if it were shedding the tears of old sorrows; the willow by the gate tossed its gaunt branches wildly, as if it were some passionate, spectral thing, wringing its fleshless hands in agony; the orchard was haggard and uncomely; nothing seemed the same except the staunch, trusty, old spruces.

It was Friday, but we were not to begin going to school again until Monday, so we spent the day in the granary, sorting apples and hearing tales. In the evening the rain ceased, the wind came around to the northwest, freezing suddenly, and a chilly yellow sunset beyond the dark hills seemed to herald a brighter morrow.

Felicity and the Story Girl and I walked down to the post-office for the mail, along a road where fallen leaves went eddying fitfully up and down before us in weird, uncanny dances of their own. The evening was full of eerie sounds--the creaking of fir boughs, the whistle of the wind in the tree-tops, the vibrations of strips of dried bark on the rail fences. But we carried summer and sunshine in our hearts, and the bleak unloveliness of the outer world only intensified our inner radiance.

Felicity wore her new velvet hood, with a coquettish little collar of white fur about her neck. Her golden curls framed her lovely face, and the wind stung the pink of her cheeks to crimson. On my left hand walked the Story Girl, her red cap on her jaunty brown head. She scattered her words along the path like the pearls and diamonds of the old fairy tale. I remember that I strutted along quite insufferably, for we met several of the Carlisle boys and I felt that I was an exceptionally lucky fellow to have such beauty on one side and such charm on the other.

There was one of father's thin letters for Felix, a fat, foreign letter for the Story Girl, addressed in her father's minute handwriting, a drop letter for Cecily from some school friend, with "In Haste" written across the corner, and a letter for Aunt Janet, postmarked Montreal.

"I can't think who that is from," said Felicity. "Nobody in Montreal ever writes to mother. Cecily's letter is from Em Frewen. She always puts 'In Haste' on her letters, no matter what is in them."

When we reached home, Aunt Janet opened and read her Montreal letter. Then she laid it down and looked about her in astonishment.

"Well, did ever any mortal!" she said.

"What in the world is the matter?" said Uncle Alec.

"This letter is from James Ward's wife in Montreal," said Aunt Janet solemnly. "Rachel Ward is dead. And she told James' wife to write to me and tell me to open the old blue chest."

"Hurrah!" shouted Dan.

"Donald King," said his mother severely, "Rachel Ward was your relation and she is dead. What do you mean by such behaviour?"

"I never was acquainted with her," said Dan sulkily. "And I wasn't hurrahing because she is dead. I hurrahed because that blue chest is to be opened at last."

"So poor Rachel is gone," said Uncle Alec. "She must have been an old woman--seventy-five I suppose. I remember her as a fine, blooming young woman. Well, well, and so the old chest is to be opened at last. What is to be done with its contents?"

"Rachel left instructions about them," answered Aunt Janet, referring to the letter. "The wedding dress and veil and letters are to be burned. There are two jugs in it which are to be sent

to James' wife. The rest of the things are to be given around among the connection. Each members is to have one, 'to remember her by.'"

"Oh, can't we open it right away this very night?" said Felicity eagerly.

"No, indeed!" Aunt Janet folded up the letter decidedly. "That chest has been locked up for fifty years, and it'll stand being locked up one more night. You children wouldn't sleep a wink to-night if we opened it now. You'd go wild with excitement."

"I'm sure I won't sleep anyhow," said Felicity. "Well, at least you'll open it the first thing in the morning, won't you, ma?"

"No, I'll do nothing of the sort," was Aunt Janet's pitiless decree. "I want to get the work out of the way first--and Roger and Olivia will want to be here, too. We'll say ten o'clock to-morrow forenoon."

"That's sixteen whole hours yet," sighed Felicity.

"I'm going right over to tell the Story Girl," said Cecily.

"Won't she be excited!"

We were all excited. We spent the evening speculating on the

possible contents of the chest, and Cecily dreamed miserably that night that the moths had eaten everything in it.

The morning dawned on a beautiful world. A very slight fall of snow had come in the night--just enough to look like a filmy veil of lace flung over the dark evergreens, and the hard frozen ground. A new blossom time seemed to have revisited the orchard. The spruce wood behind the house appeared to be woven out of enchantment. There is nothing more beautiful than a thickly growing wood of firs lightly powdered with new-fallen snow. As the sun remained hidden by gray clouds, this fairy-beauty lasted all day.

The Story Girl came over early in the morning, and Sara Ray, to whom faithful Cecily had sent word, was also on hand. Felicity did not approve of this.

"Sara Ray isn't any relation to our family," she scolded to Cecily, "and she has no right to be present."

"She's a particular friend of mine," said Cecily with dignity.

"We have her in everything, and it would hurt her feelings dreadfully to be left out of this. Peter is no relation either, but he is going to be here when we open it, so why shouldn't Sara?"

"Peter ain't a member of the family YET, but maybe he will be some day. Hey, Felicity?" said Dan.

"You're awful smart, aren't you, Dan King?" said Felicity, reddening. "Perhaps you'd like to send for Kitty Marr, too--though she DOES laugh at your big mouth."

"It seems as if ten o'clock would never come," sighed the Story Girl. "The work is all done, and Aunt Olivia and Uncle Roger are here, and the chest might just as well be opened right away."

"Mother SAID ten o'clock and she'll stick to it," said Felicity crossly. "It's only nine now."

"Let us put the clock on half an hour," said the Story Girl. "The clock in the hall isn't going, so no one will know the difference."

We all looked at each other.

"I wouldn't dare," said Felicity irresolutely.

"Oh, if that's all, I'll do it," said the Story Girl.

When ten o'clock struck Aunt Janet came into the kitchen, remarking innocently that it hadn't seemed anytime since nine.

We must have looked horribly guilty, but none of the grown-ups suspected anything. Uncle Alec brought in the axe, and pried off the cover of the old blue chest, while everybody stood around in silence.

Then came the unpacking. It was certainly an interesting performance. Aunt Janet and Aunt Olivia took everything out and laid it on the kitchen table. We children were forbidden to touch anything, but fortunately we were not forbidden the use of our eyes and tongues.

"There are the pink and gold vases Grandmother King gave her," said Felicity, as Aunt Olivia unwrapped from their tissue paper swathings a pair of slender, old-fashioned, twisted vases of pink glass, over which little gold leaves were scattered. "Aren't they handsome?"

"And oh," exclaimed Cecily in delight, "there's the china fruit basket with the apple on the handle. Doesn't it look real? I've thought so much about it. Oh, mother, please let me hold it for a minute. I'll be as careful as careful."

"There comes the china set Grandfather King gave her," said the Story Girl wistfully. "Oh, it makes me feel sad. Think of all the hopes that Rachel Ward must have put away in this chest with all her pretty things."

Following these, came a quaint little candlestick of blue china, and the two jugs which were to be sent to James' wife.

"They ARE handsome," said Aunt Janet rather enviously. "They must be a hundred years old. Aunt Sara Ward gave them to Rachel, and she had them for at least fifty years. I should have thought one would have been enough for James' wife. But of course we must do just as Rachel wished. I declare, here's a dozen tin patty pans!"

"Tin patty pans aren't very romantic," said the Story Girl discontentedly.

"I notice that you are as fond as any one of what is baked in them," said Aunt Janet. "I've heard of those patty pans. An old servant Grandmother King had gave them to Rachel. Now we are coming to the linen. That was Uncle Edward Ward's present. How yellow it has grown."

We children were not greatly interested in the sheets and tablecloths and pillow-cases which now came out of the capacious depths of the old blue chest. But Aunt Olivia was quite enraptured over them.

"What sewing!" she said. "Look, Janet, you'd almost need a

magnifying glass to see the stitches. And the dear, old-fashioned pillow-slips with buttons on them!"

"Here are a dozen handkerchiefs," said Aunt Janet. "Look at the initial in the corner of each. Rachel learned that stitch from a nun in Montreal. It looks as if it was woven into the material."

"Here are her quilts," said Aunt Olivia. "Yes, there is the blue and white counterpane Grandmother Ward gave her--and the Rising Sun quilt her Aunt Nancy made for her--and the braided rug. The colours are not faded one bit. I want that rug, Janet."

Underneath the linen were Rachel Ward's wedding clothes. The excitement of the girls waxed red hot over these. There was a Paisley shawl in the wrappings in which it had come from the store, and a wide scarf of some yellowed lace. There was the embroidered petticoat which had cost Felicity such painful blushes, and a dozen beautifully worked sets of the fine muslin "undersleeves" which had been the fashion in Rachel Ward's youth.

"This was to have been her appearing out dress," said Aunt Olivia, lifting out a shot green silk. "It is all cut to pieces--but what a pretty soft shade it was! Look at the skirt, Janet. How many yards must it measure around?"

"Hoopskirts were in then," said Aunt Janet. "I don't see her

wedding hat here. I was always told that she packed it away, too."

"So was I. But she couldn't have. It certainly isn't here. I have heard that the white plume on it cost a small fortune. Here is her black silk mantle. It seems like sacrilege to meddle with these clothes."

"Don't be foolish, Olivia. They must be unpacked at least. And they must all be burned since they have cut so badly. This purple cloth dress is quite good, however. It can be made over nicely, and it would become you very well, Olivia."

"No, thank you," said Aunt Olivia, with a little shudder. "I should feel like a ghost. Make it over for yourself, Janet."

"Well, I will, if you don't want it. I am not troubled with fancies. That seems to be all except this box. I suppose the wedding dress is in it."

"Oh," breathed the girls, crowding about Aunt Olivia, as she lifted out the box and cut the cord around it. Inside was lying a dress of soft silk, that had once been white but was now yellowed with age, and, enfolding it like a mist, a long, white bridal veil, redolent with some strange, old-time perfume that had kept its sweetness through all the years.

"Poor Rachel Ward," said Aunt Olivia softly. "Here is her point lace handkerchief. She made it herself. It is like a spider's web. Here are the letters Will Montague wrote her. And here," she added, taking up a crimson velvet case with a tarnished gilt clasp, "are their photographs--his and hers."

We looked eagerly at the daguerreotypes in the old case.

"Why, Rachel Ward wasn't a bit pretty!" exclaimed the Story Girl in poignant disappointment.

No, Rachel Ward was not pretty, that had to be admitted. The picture showed a fresh young face, with strongly marked, irregular features, large black eyes, and black curls hanging around the shoulders in old-time style.

"Rachel wasn't pretty," said Uncle Alec, "but she had a lovely colour, and a beautiful smile. She looks far too sober in that picture."

"She has a beautiful neck and bust," said Aunt Olivia critically.

"Anyhow, Will Montague was really handsome," said the Story Girl.

"A handsome rogue," growled Uncle Alec. "I never liked him. I

was only a little chap of ten but I saw through him. Rachel Ward was far too good for him."

We would dearly have liked to get a peep into the letters, too. But Aunt Olivia would not allow that. They must be burned unread, she declared. She took the wedding dress and veil, the picture case, and the letters away with her. The rest of the things were put back into the chest, pending their ultimate distribution. Aunt Janet gave each of us boys a handkerchief. The Story Girl got the blue candlestick, and Felicity and Cecily each got a pink and gold vase. Even Sara Ray was made happy by the gift of a little china plate, with a loudly coloured picture of Moses and Aaron before Pharaoh in the middle of it. Moses wore a scarlet cloak, while Aaron disported himself in bright blue. Pharaoh was arrayed in yellow. The plate had a scalloped border with a wreath of green leaves around it.

"I shall never use it to eat off," said Sara rapturously. "I'll put it up on the parlour mantelpiece."

"I don't see much use in having a plate just for ornament," said Felicity.

"It's nice to have something interesting to look at," retorted Sara, who felt that the soul must have food as well as the body.

"I'm going to get a candle for my candlestick, and use it every night to go to bed with," said the Story Girl. "And I'll never light it without thinking of poor Rachel Ward. But I DO wish she had been pretty."

"Well," said Felicity, with a glance at the clock, "it's all over, and it has been very interesting. But that clock has got to be put back to the right time some time through the day. I don't want bedtime coming a whole half-hour before it ought to."

In the afternoon, when Aunt Janet was over at Uncle Roger's, seeing him and Aunt Olivia off to town, the clock was righted. The Story Girl and Peter came over to stay all night with us, and we made taffy in the kitchen, which the grown-ups kindly gave over to us for that purpose.

"Of course it was very interesting to see the old chest unpacked," said the Story Girl as she stirred the contents of a saucepan vigorously. "But now that it is over I believe I am sorry that it is opened. It isn't mysterious any longer. We know all about it now, and we can never imagine what things are in it any more."

"It's better to know than to imagine," said Felicity.

"Oh, no, it isn't," said the Story Girl quickly. "When you know

things you have to go by facts. But when you just dream about things there's nothing to hold you down."

"You're letting the taffy scorch, and THAT'S a fact you'd better go by," said Felicity sniffing. "Haven't you got a nose?"

When we went to bed, that wonderful white enchantress, the moon, was making an elf-land of the snow-misted world outside. From where I lay I could see the sharp tops of the spruces against the silvery sky. The frost was abroad, and the winds were still and the land lay in glamour.

Across the hall, the Story Girl was telling Felicity and Cecily the old, old tale of Argive Helen and "evil-hearted Paris."

"But that's a bad story," said Felicity when the tale was ended.

"She left her husband and run away with another man."

"I suppose it was bad four thousand years ago," admitted the Story Girl. "But by this time the bad must have all gone out of it. It's only the good that could last so long."

Our summer was over. It had been a beautiful one. We had known the sweetness of common joys, the delight of dawns, the dream and glamour of noontides, the long, purple peace of carefree nights.

We had had the pleasure of bird song, of silver rain on greening fields, of storm among the trees, of blossoming meadows, and of the converse of whispering leaves. We had had brotherhood with wind and star, with books and tales, and hearth fires of autumn. Ours had been the little, loving tasks of every day, blithe companionship, shared thoughts, and adventuring. Rich were we in the memory of those opulent months that had gone from us--richer than we then knew or suspected. And before us was the dream of spring. It is always safe to dream of spring. For it is sure to come; and if it be not just as we have pictured it, it will be infinitely sweeter.

THE END.