

CHAPTER 21

BARRIERS SWEEPED AWAY

"Anne," said Leslie, breaking abruptly a short silence, "you don't know how GOOD it is to be sitting here with you again--working--and talking--and being silent together."

They were sitting among the blue-eyed grasses on the bank of the brook in Anne's garden. The water sparkled and crooned past them; the birches threw dappled shadows over them; roses bloomed along the walks. The sun was beginning to be low, and the air was full of woven music. There was one music of the wind in the firs behind the house, and another of the waves on the bar, and still another from the distant bell of the church near which the wee, white lady slept. Anne loved that bell, though it brought sorrowful thoughts now.

She looked curiously at Leslie, who had thrown down her sewing and spoken with a lack of restraint that was very unusual with her.

"On that horrible night when you were so ill," Leslie went on, "I kept thinking that perhaps we'd have no more talks and walks and WORKS together. And I realised just what your friendship had come to mean to me--just what YOU meant--and just what a hateful little beast I had been."

"Leslie! Leslie! I never allow anyone to call my friends names."

"It's true. That's exactly what I am--a hateful little beast. There's something I've GOT to tell you, Anne. I suppose it will make you despise me, but I MUST confess it. Anne, there have been times this past winter and spring when I have HATED you."

"I KNEW it," said Anne calmly.

"You KNEW it?"

"Yes, I saw it in your eyes."

"And yet you went on liking me and being my friend."

"Well, it was only now and then you hated me, Leslie. Between times you loved me, I think."

"I certainly did. But that other horrid feeling was always there, spoiling it, back in my heart. I kept it down--sometimes I forgot it--but sometimes it would surge up and take possession of me. I hated you because I ENVIED you--oh, I was sick with envy of you at times. You had a dear little home--and love--and happiness--and glad dreams--everything I wanted--and never had--and never could have. Oh, never could have! THAT was what stung. I wouldn't have envied you, if I had had any HOPE that life would ever be different for me. But I

hadn't--I hadn't--and it didn't seem FAIR. It made me rebellious--and it hurt me--and so I hated you at times. Oh, I was so ashamed of it--I'm dying of shame now--but I couldn't conquer it.

"That night, when I was afraid you mightn't live--I thought I was going to be punished for my wickedness--and I loved you so then. Anne, Anne, I never had anything to love since my mother died, except Dick's old dog--and it's so dreadful to have nothing to love--life is so EMPTY--and there's NOTHING worse than emptiness--and I might have loved you so much--and that horrible thing had spoiled it--"

Leslie was trembling and growing almost incoherent with the violence of her emotion.

"Don't, Leslie," implored Anne, "oh, don't. I understand--don't talk of it any more."

"I must--I must. When I knew you were going to live I vowed that I would tell you as soon as you were well--that I wouldn't go on accepting your friendship and companionship without telling you how unworthy I was of it. And I've been so afraid--it would turn you against me."

"You needn't fear that, Leslie."

"Oh, I'm so glad--so glad, Anne." Leslie clasped her brown, work-hardened hands tightly together to still their shaking. "But I want to tell you everything, now I've begun. You don't remember the first time I saw you, I suppose--it wasn't that night on the shore--"

"No, it was the night Gilbert and I came home. You were driving your geese down the hill. I should think I DO remember it! I thought you were so beautiful--I longed for weeks after to find out who you were."

"I knew who YOU were, although I had never seen either of you before. I had heard of the new doctor and his bride who were coming to live in Miss Russell's little house. I--I hated you that very moment, Anne."

"I felt the resentment in your eyes--then I doubted--I thought I must be mistaken--because WHY should it be?"

"It was because you looked so happy. Oh, you'll agree with me now that I AM a hateful beast--to hate another woman just because she was happy,--and when her happiness didn't take anything from me! That was why I never went to see you. I knew quite well I ought to go--even our simple Four Winds customs demanded that. But I couldn't. I used to watch you from my window--I could see you and your husband strolling about your garden in the evening--or you running down the poplar lane to meet him. And it hurt me. And yet in another way I wanted to go over. I felt that, if I were not so miserable, I could have liked you and found in you what I've never had in my life--an intimate, REAL

friend of my own age. And then you remember that night at the shore? You were afraid I would think you crazy. You must have thought I was."

"No, but I couldn't understand you, Leslie. One moment you drew me to you--the next you pushed me back."

"I was very unhappy that evening. I had had a hard day. Dick had been very--very hard to manage that day. Generally he is quite good-natured and easily controlled, you know, Anne. But some days he is very different. I was so heartsick--I ran away to the shore as soon as he went to sleep. It was my only refuge. I sat there thinking of how my poor father had ended his life, and wondering if I wouldn't be driven to it some day. Oh, my heart was full of black thoughts! And then you came dancing along the cove like a glad, light-hearted child. I--I hated you more then than I've ever done since. And yet I craved your friendship. The one feeling swayed me one moment; the other feeling the next. When I got home that night I cried for shame of what you must think of me. But it's always been just the same when I came over here. Sometimes I'd be happy and enjoy my visit. And at other times that hideous feeling would mar it all. There were times when everything about you and your house hurt me. You had so many dear little things I couldn't have. Do you know--it's ridiculous--but I had an especial spite at those china dogs of yours. There were times when I wanted to catch up Gog and Magog and bang their pert black noses together! Oh, you smile, Anne--but it was never funny to me. I would

come here and see you and Gilbert with your books and your flowers, and your household goods, and your little family jokes--and your love for each other showing in every look and word, even when you didn't know it--and I would go home to--you know what I went home to! Oh, Anne, I don't believe I'm jealous and envious by nature. When I was a girl I lacked many things my schoolmates had, but I never cared--I never disliked them for it. But I seem to have grown so hateful--"

"Leslie, dearest, stop blaming yourself. You are NOT hateful or jealous or envious. The life you have to live has warped you a little, perhaps--but it would have ruined a nature less fine and noble than yours. I'm letting you tell me all this because I believe it's better for you to talk it out and rid your soul of it. But don't blame yourself any more."

"Well, I won't. I just wanted you to know me as I am. That time you told me of your darling hope for the spring was the worst of all, Anne. I shall never forgive myself for the way I behaved then. I repented it with tears. And I DID put many a tender and loving thought of you into the little dress I made. But I might have known that anything I made could only be a shroud in the end."

"Now, Leslie, that IS bitter and morbid--put such thoughts away."

"I was so glad when you brought the little dress; and since I had to lose little Joyce I like to think that the dress she wore was the one

you made for her when you let yourself love me."

"Anne, do you know, I believe I shall always love you after this. I don't think I'll ever feel that dreadful way about you again. Talking it all out seems to have done away with it, somehow. It's very strange--and I thought it so real and bitter. It's like opening the door of a dark room to show some hideous creature you've believed to be there--and when the light streams in your monster turns out to have been just a shadow, vanishing when the light comes. It will never come between us again."

"No, we are real friends now, Leslie, and I am very glad."

"I hope you won't misunderstand me if I say something else. Anne, I was grieved to the core of my heart when you lost your baby; and if I could have saved her for you by cutting off one of my hands I would have done it. But your sorrow has brought us closer together. Your perfect happiness isn't a barrier any longer. Oh, don't misunderstand, dearest--I'm NOT glad that your happiness isn't perfect any longer--I can say that sincerely; but since it isn't, there isn't such a gulf between us."

"I DO understand that, too, Leslie. Now, we'll just shut up the past and forget what was unpleasant in it. It's all going to be different. We're both of the race of Joseph now. I think you've been wonderful--wonderful. And, Leslie, I can't help believing that life

has something good and beautiful for you yet."

Leslie shook her head.

"No," she said dully. "There isn't any hope. Dick will never be better--and even if his memory were to come back--oh, Anne, it would be worse, even worse, than it is now. This is something you can't understand, you happy bride. Anne, did Miss Cornelia ever tell you how I came to marry Dick?"

"Yes."

"I'm glad--I wanted you to know--but I couldn't bring myself to talk of it if you hadn't known. Anne, it seems to me that ever since I was twelve years old life has been bitter. Before that I had a happy childhood. We were very poor--but we didn't mind. Father was so splendid--so clever and loving and sympathetic. We were chums as far back as I can remember. And mother was so sweet. She was very, very beautiful. I look like her, but I am not so beautiful as she was."

"Miss Cornelia says you are far more beautiful."

"She is mistaken--or prejudiced. I think my figure IS better--mother was slight and bent by hard work--but she had the face of an angel. I used just to look up at her in worship. We all worshipped her,--father and Kenneth and I."

Anne remembered that Miss Cornelia had given her a very different impression of Leslie's mother. But had not love the truer vision? Still, it WAS selfish of Rose West to make her daughter marry Dick Moore.

"Kenneth was my brother," went on Leslie. "Oh, I can't tell you how I loved him. And he was cruelly killed. Do you know how?"

"Yes."

"Anne, I saw his little face as the wheel went over him. He fell on his back. Anne--Anne--I can see it now. I shall always see it. Anne, all I ask of heaven is that that recollection shall be blotted out of my memory. O my God!"

"Leslie, don't speak of it. I know the story--don't go into details that only harrow your soul up unavailingly. It WILL be blotted out."

After a moment's struggle, Leslie regained a measure of self-control.

"Then father's health got worse and he grew despondent--his mind became unbalanced--you've heard all that, too?"

"Yes."

"After that I had just mother to live for. But I was very ambitious. I meant to teach and earn my way through college. I meant to climb to the very top--oh, I won't talk of that either. It's no use. You know what happened. I couldn't see my dear little heart-broken mother, who had been such a slave all her life, turned out of her home. Of course, I could have earned enough for us to live on. But mother COULDN'T leave her home. She had come there as a bride--and she had loved father so--and all her memories were there. Even yet, Anne, when I think that I made her last year happy I'm not sorry for what I did. As for Dick--I didn't hate him when I married him--I just felt for him the indifferent, friendly feeling I had for most of my schoolmates. I knew he drank some--but I had never heard the story of the girl down at the fishing cove. If I had, I COULDN'T have married him, even for mother's sake. Afterwards--I DID hate him--but mother never knew. She died--and then I was alone. I was only seventeen and I was alone. Dick had gone off in the Four Sisters. I hoped he wouldn't be home very much more. The sea had always been in his blood. I had no other hope. Well, Captain Jim brought him home, as you know--and that's all there is to say. You know me now, Anne--the worst of me--the barriers are all down. And you still want to be my friend?"

Anne looked up through the birches, at the white paper-lantern of a half moon drifting downwards to the gulf of sunset. Her face was very sweet.

"I am your friend and you are mine, for always," she said. "Such a

friend as I never had before. I have had many dear and beloved friends--but there is a something in you, Leslie, that I never found in anyone else. You have more to offer me in that rich nature of yours, and I have more to give you than I had in my careless girlhood. We are both women--and friends forever."

They clasped hands and smiled at each other through the tears that filled the gray eyes and the blue.