

CHAPTER XIII

THE CONSCIENCE OF PHEBE



EARLY a year of this dream - correspondence went by. The prairie grew dull-colored with frosts; the tumble-weeds rushed before the winds; the soft haze of autumn filled the earth and sky; the cold days of mid-November drove people indoors and kept them near their fires a good deal of the time for several months, during which "the post office" was visited irregularly.

Then came mid-March with blustering winds and pouring rains. The snow melted, the mud was hub-deep in the roads, but by-and-by Janet saw a blade

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of green grass peeping up cautiously, as if scared by its own daring. She knew that if she had been holding Phebe by the hand, she could have danced for joy. The winter had seemed so long, so dreary; it could offer no reason, no excuse for itself, she thought, but that it had made her so glad to find a blade of grass.

Both girls wrote a good deal, for a while. The spring-time entered their souls and made every day beautiful, fit to be lived without tears.

One morning in June Janet wrote this:

“ The sun shines. I want Phebe.

The grass makes the hills green. I
want Phebe.

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All the winter I wanted Phebe.

All the spring I wanted Phebe.

The summer and Phebe belong together.

How could the summer come without Phebe?"

As soon as it was finished she ran down the hill to leave it in the post office.

She was stooping to place it properly when a low call came softly to her ear. Did it drop out of the sky or rise from the waters of the spring? Surely it was Phebe's voice that she heard.

She stood upright and looked about.

There sat Phebe on a little hillock sheltered between two higher shoulders of the slope.

"Come to me, Janet."

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In a moment they were sitting side by side.

“My father has gone to Clarinda, Janet, and my mother has a visitor. I shall not be missed, I hope. I had to come and watch for you. I have waited about a half an hour. There is something to say, Janet, something to say—Oh—how can I tell you? It’s all no use.”

“What’s all no use?” Janet’s voice rang out sharply in her new alarm.

“We’ve got to stop writing things for each other.”

“Did he find out? Does your father know?”

“It isn’t that. It’s because it will—how can I say it?—we’ll get black in our souls—you’ll understand me, Janet.

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You've always been my little white flower; what if black spots should begin and grow bigger and bigger till there was no white left, and all because I coaxed you to do things not honest?"

"But—but, Phebe——"

"I never thought we were going wrong until yesterday. Before then, I wouldn't think about the right and the wrong of it—only a little—and that all about the right of it and not at all about the wrong of it. I wanted the thinking to make me sure we were right. I'm afraid, Janet, I meant to do as I liked first and then try afterward to make myself believe it was right.

"But something happened yesterday:

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“I was up in the attic reading. Mother came there to try on an apron she was making for me. The window was raised. When she opened the attic door, father opened another door somewhere down-stairs, and the sudden draught blew down a paste-board box that I had carelessly left too near the edge of a shelf; it turned over and your darling little writings that I have saved, every one, flew all over the floor.

“My mother asked,—‘Why, what are all these?’ and I said,—‘I sometimes copy bits of verse and other things when I am reading.’

“Janet, I hate a liar! If you become a liar, I shall hate you; if I become one I shall hate myself. What I told mother was true, but it deceived

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her and it was meant to deceive her, so it was almost the same as a real lie.

“That was how I came to understand what we are about, Janet, you and I. We are doing something that must be kept secret. It is not bad to love each other; it is not bad to write verses and stories; but it is bad to be sly and secret, hiding things, afraid of being found out. It'll make cowards and sneaks of us, Janet, and perhaps liars, too. We're sneaking right now to have this talk, but it'll be the last time, Janet, my dear, my dear, it'll be the very last time. We'd better do without each other than become such girls you can't find any good thing to love in me nor I in you.”

“Phebe—Phebe—I'd love you if—

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if you were shut up in a jail and nobody else'd ever speak to you again."

"You'd love me better if I wasn't like that—Oh, I'm sure!"

"Y-es, but I wouldn't be so sorry for you."

"Janet, say good-by; it's for a long time."

"Yes; till we're both women. Then we can love each other without hiding."

"Be brave; be brave, Little White Flower; keep white always. We'll never be sorry, Janet; sometime we'll be glad we said good-by. There's my mother, calling; hug tighter Janet."

"There—see—we are not crying. We'll study hard and grow quick into women; it won't be so long, Phebe—Phebe."