

CHAPTER VI

THE FOURTH OF JULY



It seemed to Janet that her father and mother had never before tried so hard to make everything pleasant for her. Mr. Loring bought a piece of blue lawn dotted with white roses, and Mrs. Loring toiled early and late to finish a new dress with a ruffle for Janet to wear on the Fourth.

The last stitch was put into the dress on the evening of the second. On the third, there was such a baking-day as seldom was known in their little household.

“Are we going to have a party?”

THE FOURTH OF JULY

Janet asked as she watched the filling of the pantry. There was a cottage-cheese pie, a sugar-crumble pie, a dried-wild-plum pie; there were three kinds of cakes, two kinds of biscuits, besides corn-pone, pickles, roast prairie-chicken and cracked black-walnuts.

"I'm hoping the Bradley's Mill Lornings will be with us to-morrow," Mrs. Loring explained.

Janet was attracted to the window by sounds of merry voices. She saw Phebe get into a wagon and drive away with several young persons, one of whom she recognized as Phebe's cousin from Clarinda.

"She's going away, I think; Phebe's going to Clarinda," Janet said, tears springing to her eyes.

JANET AND HER DEAR PHEBE

“That doesn’t matter,” Mrs. Loring said. “Perhaps it’s only for a few days, and, think! you may see your Cousin Kate and your Aunt Sarah, tomorrow. Please come and help me wash the dishes; I’m very tired.”

This was just the right appeal. Janet ceased, for the moment, to think of anything but helping her mother.

The next morning the Bradley’s Mill Lorings came very early in a big farm-wagon.

There was a rush and excitement of getting ready, the lunch-baskets were piled in, the house was locked, and away went cousins, aunts, uncles, a merry lot, to the Fourth of July celebration.

The picnic-grounds were eight miles

THE FOURTH OF JULY

from Amity, in a beautiful wood near the bank of the Nodaway, a tree-shaded little river that joins the Missouri some miles farther south. To reach it they passed over a grassy prairie with gently swelling hills or long stretches of nearly level land.

Janet was happier than she had been for a long time. Her cousins, all older than herself, jested, propounded riddles, sang folk-songs in solemn tones, then, with much laughter, improvised silly parodies upon them.

They were early upon the grounds, but not earlier than very many others. Page County had then been settled by white people only a few years, yet hundreds of people came together to rejoice over National Independence.

JANET AND HER DEAR PHEBE

The deep solemnity which formerly characterized these occasions still clung to the rather formal festivities, and every man, woman, and child of sound body and mind took some part in them, by attending the ceremonies.

A school trustee from Amity read The Declaration of Independence and a lawyer from Clarinda delivered an address. There was music by a quartet of lusty country voices, then groups of friends or relatives gathered about snowy, homespun linen tablecloths spread upon the ground here and there in shady, grassy spots.

The elder Lorings found seats near the platform when the ceremonies began, but the younger ones were rather grudgingly permitted to wander away

THE FOURTH OF JULY

in pursuit of more exciting pleasures. When the Lorings' noonday feast was spread and the younger members of the families came to sit around it on the grass, Janet was missing.

"Where's our baby?" asked the elders in a breath.

"Deserted us *hours* ago, for company more to her liking," Kate said. Then, in answer to further inquiries, she explained,—“A wagon came along, filled with a jolly crowd, and a little brown-and-pink girl—brown hair and pink dress—cried out,—‘There's Janet! There's Janet! Stop the horses! There's Janet!’ Then the driver pulled rein and said,—‘Jump in, little Janet Goldilocks,’ and with that what does Janet do but climb up by the side of the

JANET AND HER DEAR PHEBE

royal Miss Pink-and-Brown and they hugged each other like bears and spilled a river of tears on each other's Fourth o' July dresses.

“ ‘Don't be scared,’ the driver said to us. ‘We're going up river a little where there's shallow water and a rocky bottom—good wading for tots. I'll take care of 'them,’ and off they went.”

“ Phebe and her cousins; must have come over from Clarinda instead of 'tending the meeting there,” Mr. Loring said. “Don't worry, wife. She's safe enough with them.”

“ But——”

“It's queer, I know, but they'll have one happy day. May be Sear has changed his mind a bit.”

THE FOURTH OF JULY

“Not he,” Mrs. Loring declared with emphasis.

The Lorings stayed until the sun was only “one hand high,” but the young Sears did not appear and Janet was still missing. They went up the river-bank, searching and calling, and met a party of acquaintances who said that the Sears’ young folks had started home an hour or two before.

“Was Janet with them?”

“I’m sure I don’t know,” was the reply.

“Of course she is with them,” Mr. Loring said. “Where else could she be? You couldn’t pull those two girls apart with a three-inch rope and a span of horses, so long as Mr. Sear is not present.”

JANET AND HER DEAR PHEBE

“Then she’ll go to Clarinda,” Mrs. Loring returned with new anxiety. “I don’t think Phebe is expected home to-night, for I happened to hear to-day that her mother and father have gone to Hawleyville.”

“The Damon-and-Pythias pair’ll have a fine visit,” Mr. Loring said cheerily, but his wife looked gloomy.

“I’m not at all satisfied, not at all,” she said. “I won’t have a minute’s peace until our little girl is safely with us again.”

So the Loring party went home without Janet.

By a curious mistake, the Sear party, also, had gone home without either Janet or Phebe, supposing them to have gone with the Lorings.