

CHAPTER XVI

CONCLUSION



HERE was at least one day when College Springs deserved its old name, Amity. On that day a somewhat larger form of patriotism prevailed over and quieted the narrow controversy between two factions so long divided by a highway and a fostered sentiment of disagreement. On July Fourth, 1876, when there was a national out-pouring and in-gathering farther East, Page County celebrated the Centennial in its own way on the bank of the Nodaway River.

Early on that morning Janet Loring

JANET AND HER DEAR PHEBE

engaged a seat in a long wagon specially fitted up for carrying passengers from College Springs to the picnic grounds.

The wagon was laden with youths and maidens who knew each other. They filled the air with a melody of light laughter and gay words, but Janet scarcely heard them. She was living again that memorable day when she and Phebe had wandered over the prairie together, glad to be lost, glad of anything that excused their blessed comradeship.

When the wagon reached the long hill down which fortune had sent a dinner-basket fifteen years before, Janet surprised the driver by asking him to stop and permit her to alight. With

CONCLUSION

lunch on one arm and a big sun-umbrella resting over one shoulder, she walked lightly to the Happy Hollow of her childhood.

There was the tiny runlet, reduced by July heats to a mere thread; there was the spring that fed it; and there, still standing on its edge, was the immutable stone that had served for a blackboard.

Janet drank from the spring—not for want of water—she drank to the memory of Phebe. Then she found a bit of soap-stone and advanced to the blackboard. What had they written upon it that day? Janet examined its surface with care, half expecting to find some dim remnants of those childish trceries. A long time she stood thus, dimly regardful of the present

through a reverie of the past. Then, smiling dreamily, she dropped her umbrella, set her basket on the ground, stooped and wrote:

“The love of Phebe and Janet was written upon this stone.”

While Janet stood facing the hill, another pilgrim fared toward the hollow from the bank of Nodaway River, a tall young woman, stately as a pine tree, with hair brown and shining, like autumnal cones.

Nearer she came, until the swish of her skirts whispered loudly among the July grasses, causing Janet to turn about.

Was it a vision that Janet saw? She rubbed her eyes and looked again. Was she losing her mind? Or, did she

CONCLUSION

really see before her in the flesh, Phebe, unchanged of eye and of step, as stanchly real as the hill and the stone?

Janet wavered forward hopefully. The other paused in sudden panic—joyful yet doubting. Like two poisoning birds they waited thus one swift moment, then the tall woman saw the writing upon the stone. With a little shriek of gladness touched with terror, as one fearful of mistaking the unreal for the real, she cried:

“No one but Janet would have written that!”

“Phebe!”

With no more words they were in each other's arms, sobbing and laughing like mad-women.

After a time they spoke—in ejacula-

JANET AND HER DEAR PHEBE

tions—irrational as the first syllables of an infant. Then, grown calmer, they sat on the grass and talked more sanely.

“Where have you been, Phebe? Why could I never find you? The letters I have written—the directories I have had searched in American cities——”

“I have been in England.”

“So far away! Tell me, why did you go to England?”

“My mother——”

“Your mother?”

“Of course you did not know; we lost her when I was still quite young; then father took me to his relatives in England.”

“Tell me of your life—all—everything.”

CONCLUSION

“First, My White Flower—you are still that in my mind——”

“And you are still my Tall Red Poppy.” Both laughed, not merrily, but a soft, reminiscent laugh that was driving out the hysterical emotions first aroused.

“Answer me this, then: Are you—that is—you are not married?”

A pretty tint of pink flashed over Janet's face. She replied hesitatingly, —“N-o, but——”

Phebe pinched her cheek, smiled knowingly and began her own answer:

“There isn't much to tell. Father wasn't strong. We lived with Uncle Amos and Aunt Fanny, who did everything for both of us—educated me, of course—helped me to help myself.”

JANET AND HER DEAR PHEBE

“I am sure you chose to be a teacher.”

“Do I bear the marks of an autocrat of the school-room?”

“Not an autocrat, Phebe darling, but—how shall I say it? You could bring such power, such inspiration to the work—Oh, I am sure you could.”

“But I *am* an autocrat. Do you remember when I promised quite seriously to answer all questions right? I suppose I haven’t changed a great deal.”

“Yes, indeed I remember.” Janet laughed merrily enough this time. “I asked all sorts of questions and you felt in your heart for the answers. I suppose it is the business of your life to solve problems, now, only you get the solutions out of books.”

CONCLUSION

“I find that my White Flower has become a Seer. I am a teacher, and I do place great reliance upon my books, but, after all, I am not sure that the new way is better than the old.”

“Both ways are right if they are your ways,” Janet answered loyally. “I feel again the strong spirit my childhood hung upon in secure faith. I believed in you then; I believe in you now. You are Phebe; your words were always true.” The sweet light of love and trust shone in Janet’s eyes as brightly as ever.

“In a sense—yes,” Phebe answered, “because they were perfected by your way of understanding them. Your goodness would idealize anything what-

ever and turn it into something beautiful.”

There was a long pause, enriched by intimate study of each other's faces, and broken at length by both speaking at once, each in simple and honest admiration of the beauty of the other.

Then Janet said interrogatively:

“I expected to find you or hear from you ten years ago.”

“When I was eighteen—yes. I tried to reach you by post before then, but failed. My letters did not find you.”

“Your father—did he relent—toward me?”

“Yes—after long enough—it took time. There came a day when he rather leaned on me. He was ill so long it seemed to draw us near, and at last I

CONCLUSION

spoke my mind about you. I told him that the loveliness of your character was beyond words, that the angels in heaven were no whiter of soul than you."

"Phebe—Phebe—what a thing to say!"

"Truth—only truth. I rejoiced to tell him; I called myself a coward that I had not done so when we were children."

"He would not have listened."

"Perhaps not. I told him that you had helped me—made me ashamed to go very far wrong."

"Dear—because it was good for you to love so well."

"Yes—to love *you* so well."

"And then?"

JANET AND HER DEAR PHEBE

“He gave me full freedom to find you. It was too late. You had gone away from Amity. Five years ago I came back to America and began as a teacher in Baltimore. Some distant relatives helped me find a place to try my wings. I meant to spend my vacations in hunting for you, but the failing health of my father kept me beside him. I am glad I stayed—he joined my mother last winter. But now, I am here—we both are here. How wonderful! How like a fairy tale!”

“Tell me, Phebe, tell me of your coming. Did you plan it? Did you dream of it? Did you hug the thought of it to your heart, as I did?”

“Yes, indeed I did. I planned my

CONCLUSION

coming for to-day because it meant so much to me—to both of us. I had a faint spark of hope that I might hear news of you, but—to see you! Janet— Janet—I dared not let myself hope for such joy as this.”

“Yet it is the natural place for us to expect this blessedness,” Janet said, nestling deeper into the arms of her friend. “Every Fourth of July since our dear day together my thoughts have turned to this spot. Time after time I tried to come here; once I nearly arranged to camp here a month, but always something failed me until this year, when I felt that I *must* come. I came alone. One does not need a chaperon at twenty-seven.”

“Some need one all their lives, but

JANET AND HER DEAR PHEBE

you are protected by your goodness."

"Dear—how you love me."

"I do love you; I also know you."

"I, too, Phebe, have made a long pilgrimage to pass my Independence Day here. I have been a year and a half the nurse of a wealthy invalid in California. She thinks she will be very unhappy until I return, but——"

The glow of joy was fading from the face of Phebe. These words made her think of short meetings and long separations. Janet observed the change in her friend's face, yet a new light leaped into her own eyes; the pink flush again swept over her fair brow and she said softly:

"She must soon get used to doing

CONCLUSION

without me—the poor sufferer. For us, have no fear, my Phebe; we shall be near each other. I have promised to—to—I shall be in an Eastern city after next September.”

“You are going to be married? I thought so,” as the brightness increased upon the cheeks of Janet. “Will you be in New York?”

“Yes, I think so. Ralph graduated from—in medicine, you know—he is an M. D., and he is expecting to arrange a partnership with Dr. Moreton, his uncle in New York.”

“How glad I am!”

“I have told him of you. We planned to turn our wedding trip into a search for you.”

“Dear Janet! I am sure you made

him believe that I am a wonderful person. I shall have to try the rest of my life to live up to your representations.”

“It will be very easy—for you.”

“To think how the problems are being solved for us!”

“Yes. I used to marvel about my father and mother—born in different States, of different families and descent, why did they love each other better than they loved their own people? I could not put it into words, in those days; it was a vague thought, but a haunting one, and it followed me after I was old enough to give it definite form. Now, I understand.”

“Janet, I have great reason to be glad. I, too, shall soon be in our great

CONCLUSION

Eastern city—not as a teacher, but as a learner of life's sweetest lessons.”

“I might have known it! How happy he must be—to have won you!”

“I shall be in heaven—with him—with you near. The happiness we missed in childhood is to be ours yet.”

“Dear Phebe—dear friend—can this be real? Even yet, I doubt; I may be dreaming.”

“You are not dreaming, Janet.”

All day they sat on the grass and talked.

The heat of noon scorched their umbrellas and pelted their feet. The air was dry as a browned leaf, but they did not think of the spring a few feet away. The lunch-basket stood untouched be-

side them. They felt no hunger, no thirst.

At last Janet rose. "The sun is setting," she said. "It will soon be dark. How lovely if we could again get lost together!"

Phebe rose and clasped the waist of her friend, saying:

"Now that I have found you and you have found me, we could not be lost though we wandered through the whole universe. Our sun shall not set; we shall lose knowledge of darkness."

Slowly, with interwoven arms, they ascended together the long hill and awaited a coming passenger-wagon.

THE END