

Chapter 1

Eating Poisonous Laburnum Seeds

Amy looked across the elaborate table at her five cousins and thought, "This will be a splendid day."

Uncle William spoiled it, however, by saying, "Now children, I want you to behave. Remember this is Sunday. Follow the example of your cousins, who are always so good."

"Sure," Amy sputtered, "we are not really so good as we look." Then seeing the beginning of laughter, she corrected herself. "I mean, we look much better than we are."

Amy did not want to be a model. She knew her cousins would make life miserable.

Amy's throat grew dry as everyone laughed, especially Jack. Again she started to speak, but Mother interrupted. "Don't say anything." Amy heard Jack snicker.

Uncle William looked at her with disappointment in his voice. "I guess I was fooled by the polite manners of David Carmichael, age six."

"Our nice manners are mostly for grown-ups," Amy explained, setting off another gale of laughter.

After dinner Father ordered the children under eight years to stay with Bessie in the nursery.

"All you older children can play outside," he directed, as everyone left the table. Amy saw the mischief in her cousins' eyes.

She, along with her brothers, Ernest and Davy, joined three of the cousins on the veranda outside the French doors. Once out of earshot, Jack teased:

Amy thinks she looks good.

Oh good for Amy,

But certain she's not half as good

As she thinks she looks!

Jack and Jim doubled up with laughter. Amy, brown eyes steady, stared at Jack until he dropped his gaze. Then she coolly challenged, "Race you to the gate."

Off she flew, blue starched skirts flying, with the four boys close by and Jessica trotting behind. A long swing on the great iron front gates cleared the air.

“When we were in the dining room, I’d have died right there, if I could have.” Amy announced.

“You were that embarrassed?” Jack assumed a grave expression not matched by his dancing eyes. “You would like to die?”

“Yes, I said so, didn’t I?” Amy flashed an inquiring look at him, while Jessica and Jim exchanged warning glances.

“See that laburnum.” Jack pointed to a tree near the gates overlooking the village street.

“Yes, I heard the pods are poisonous.”

“They are!” Jack whispered. “You can die if you eat them.”

“We can all die; then they’ll be sorry they laughed!” said Amy, then whispered, “Let’s count how many pods we can eat before we die. Come on, I dare you.” Her voice was deep and daring.

Jim looked at Jack. Ernest yelled, “Come on. Let’s see who dies first. Count out loud!”

Amy had already stuffed three pods in her mouth. Ernest followed, calling loudly, “One, two, three...”

Davy and Jim called, “Two, three, four,” as they pulled the plentiful pods.

Not to be left out, Jack followed. He tore the pods from the tree and crammed them into his mouth, two at a time. “Two, four, six,” he counted.

Unnoticed by the eaters of pods, Jessica rushed back down the long, tree-lined pathway to the gray stone mansion. She returned in record time with four panting parents. They were dumbfounded at the sight before them.

“Whatever are you doing?” Uncle William cried.

“Eating laburnum pods!” Jack gurgled. “You said to do as Amy does.”

“Amy!” Mother screeched. “Ernest, Davy, all of you! Stop, stop at once! Lord save you. Don’t you know they are poison?”

Aunt Rebecca rushed toward Jim and wept. In a flash each father had two boys by an ear and dragged them down the driveway to the house.

Mother and Aunt Rebecca took Amy by the arms as though they were handles and propelled her forward. Aunt Rebecca hugged her and cried, while Mother scolded, “Whatever in this world gave you such an idea. God put you on this earth for a reason, certainly not to die of poison pods.”

Soon Mother had every child lined up beside the dining room wall. "Now stand there until I'm ready," she ordered.

For once Amy was silent. Nothing seemed funny now. Mrs. Carmichael scurried to the kitchen and returned to the dinner table with a tray. It contained a tall jug of hot water, a small pitcher of cold milk, tea cups, and a teaspoon. Beside the tray, she placed a bottle of odious pink powder, which the children called "Gregory," since they couldn't pronounce its name correctly.

Ernest began to beg, "I'm sorry. I'll never do it again. Please, Mother, please, not Gregory, not Gregory, Mother."

"You are fortunate we live in the 1870s," said Mother. "I don't know what people did before 'Gregory' was discovered, for that poison must come up." Mother's tone was firm, and Amy knew this was no time to try to evade the inevitable.

Mrs. Carmichael measured the abominable stuff and mixed five cups. "Amy first!" She held out the teacup. Amy stepped up and accepted her cup. "Thank you, Mother," she forced herself to say.

One by one the culprits accepted their share. None of the children could drink all the "Gregory" at once, but they all knew that every miserable drop must be swallowed. Thankfully they accepted the cups of milk that followed.

Aunt Rebecca had a washtub ready in the kitchen. Soon after the children drained the teacups, they felt sick at the stomach, and before long, pale and perspiring they disposed of the laburnum pods-together with their Sunday dinner-then they found places to sit drained and silent in the formal garden beside the house.

After a while Uncle William and Aunt Rebecca collected their children and bade the Carmichaels goodbye. On the way to the buggy, Uncle William remarked, "You two don't look good even now. I'll bet you'll remember this day for a long time."

Amy heard the carriage wheels crunching on the driveway, but felt no desire to follow her cousins. She stared at the well-kept flower beds and the neat hedges. She breathed deeply of the fresh sea air of the Irish coast and began to feel better.

Father finally appeared and said, "Ernest and Davy, come with me to the library. We must talk." Then looking at Amy, he remarked. "I'll leave you, young lady, to your mother."

Amy's heart sank. Not Mother! She would rather hear Father scold any day. "How can I face my mother?" she worried.

Sometime later she heard Mother say, “Amy, put on your shawl and bonnet. We are walking to the tea shop.” They usually took the carriage for such a journey, but this time they didn’t, and Amy concluded her mother intended to give her a lecture.

Lecture she did, but not as Amy expected. Amy couldn’t remember all of what she said, but one thing she never forgot: God gives life. We decide what to do with it. We can live for ourselves; we can destroy or disgrace ourselves; or, we can live for Jesus and be a blessing to others. So kind were Mother’s words, and so evident her love, that Amy slipped her arm around her Mother’s waist before they reached the tea shop.

After tea, as Amy ate dessert, she remarked, “I’m surprised the cakes and ices taste so good.”

“A walk always helps,” Mother suggested.

It began to drizzle as Amy and her mother were finishing. Just then Amy saw a thin, ragged street child peering into the shop. For a moment the little girl gazed hungrily at the cakes in the window, then hastened away. As she did, Amy noticed her bare feet on the cold sidewalk.

After Amy and her mother dashed home through the drizzle and changed into dry clothes, Amy settled down before the warm fire in her room and wrote a poem about the thin, ragged girl she had seen. It went like this:

When I grow up and money have,
I know what I will do.
I’ll build a great big lovely place
For little girls like you.

When it was time for bed, Mother found Amy asleep. She read her little poem, then half carried Amy to bed. As she did so, she prayed, “Oh God, take care of such a daughter as this. How can she be so good sometimes, and so bad sometimes?”

Chapter 2

Drenched by a Wave

Amy swooped into the Carmichael nursery looking for her mother and caught Ethel and Ava just getting ready to play with her dolls.

"You don't play with them anymore," said Ethel sternly.

"So why can't we?" Four-year-old Ava chimed in.

Ethel looked longingly at the forbidden toys. "And they are such lovely dolls too."

"Ach, you shall have the foolish dolls." Amy reached into the doll house and scooped up a handful of them and tossed them at Ethel.

"And the wee furniture too?" pleaded Ava.

"And the furniture too," Amy added, emptying out the small rooms. "Here, I'll put the dolls and furniture on the bay window seat, and you can play house."

"You could give us the doll house. You don't need it with no dolls," Ethel pointed out.

"Hold your tongue. I have plans for that house. You go play with the dolls and be satisfied."

Amy ran into Bessie, the Carmichael's elderly servant, as she charged out the nursery doorway.

"Slow down, Amy," said Bessie, catching Amy by the collar. "What are you up to being in such a hurry?"

"You'd better let me go. I just gave the girls my old dolls."

"How wonderful! The poor darlings have been hanging around that doll house for the longest time." Bessie shook her head as she ambled back across the hall to bathe the baby. "I never imagined you'd give them away. Well, anyway, the little girls be happy," she half muttered to herself.

Amy walked slowly until she was down the long winding stairway. Once out of Bessie's sight she dashed to the garden, dug up fresh moss, and was just topping off a pail with fresh worms, beetles, and earwigs, when Ernest and Davy discovered her.

"No wonder we couldn't find you. Out here digging in the garden. No telling what goes on in your head." Davy looked interested in Amy's pail of moss and bugs.

"If I have a mind to tell nobody what I do, that's my business," Amy retorted.

“Ah, come on. How about going with us to the beach. The weather is just right.”

“It certainly is the kind of a day to go swimming. You two go wait at the iron gates, and I’ll be there in a jiffy.” Amy took her pail and quietly entered the house by the back door. She crept up the servant’s staircase and into the nursery without passing Bessie’s door. To be safe from the eyes of her younger sisters, she pulled the doll house behind the door and covered the floors of the tiny rooms with moss. Next, she placed the bugs in their new home and quietly returned the pail to the garden.

Then rushing down the long driveway, she joined the boys at the iron gate. Together they skipped down the worn path to the seashore. Amy always thrilled at the greenness that stretched all the way to the misty mountains on the one side and to the mighty sea on the other.

“When the sun shines, we need to take the good of it,” Amy commented. “We’ve been having a wonderful summer and no rain since Sunday a week ago.”

“Let’s race!” the boys challenged.

“You race,” Amy answered. She was in a strange dreamy mood. Suddenly noticing the dirt from the garden on her hands, she spat on them and absent-mindedly wiped them on her blouse. The quiet surrounding her was broken only by the roar of the waves, and gradually Amy was lost in the beauty of the sea.

“Why didn’t we put on bathing suits?” Davy complained. “I’d like to go in the water.”

“It’s just as well we didn’t” Amy responded. “The water’s still cold. The sun fools you. I think it will be awhile before we can enjoy swimming.”

“Well, let’s walk out on the sea wall,” Davy challenged. Matching action to his words he placed one foot ahead of the other, slowly teetering farther and farther out on the narrow ledge.

Ernest looked at Amy. Since she didn’t say No, he followed his brother. Soon Amy, too, climbed the wall and kicked the water swirling close to their feet. Suddenly, a large wave crashed over them, drenching them with chilling salt water.

“How splendid!” Amy shrieked.

“Isn’t it great!” screamed Ernest, edging back toward the lower end.

“Don’t fall in,” Amy warned. “Be careful.” She cautiously positioned her feet until the ground grew close; then she jumped.

Davy fell as he jumped and rolled in the sand. Amy and Ernest picked him up and tried to brush him off.

"Father will have my hide for this," Davy wailed.

"Oh, come on, it washes off," Amy encouraged, pulling him along.

"But I'm going to get cold," Davy objected.

The three trudged along the way back to the house and finally slipped through the iron gate, down the path, and around the house.

"I think we had better wash the sand off Davy before he goes into the house," Amy observed.

Though Davy squealed and shrieked, Amy and Ernest managed to pour several pails of water over him in the garden.

"Hey!" Bessie shrieked, as she burst from the kitchen door. "What goes on here! What else goes wrong when your mother and father leave me in charge?"

"We didn't think you'd want him inside covered with sand," Amy explained.

"That's for sure, Miss Amy. Now all of you, wash your feet and take off your shoes."

"Is it all right if we take our shoes off before we wash our feet, Bessie?" Amy laughed.

"Of course, and when you rid yourselves of the sand, come up to the nursery. That's the only room with a fire, it being so warm today." Bessie again assumed her position of authority.

Once the three of them were in the nursery shivering in front of the fireplace, Amy asked, "May we have towels and some dry clothes?"

"You certainly can't!" Bessie exploded. "You got wet in those clothes, and you'll get dry in them. Next time, you'll think twice before you sneak off to the beach and get soaked."

"I'll tell Mother how you treated us!" Amy threatened.

"Go ahead, and while you're telling her, tell her I threw out that trash you put in the dollhouse too."

"You didn't, Bessie, not my living things!" exclaimed Amy. "You didn't throw them out!"

"I certainly did," Bessie countered. "I work hard to keep this house free of bugs."

Amy's lips formed a straight line. She remembered Mother's warnings, "Do as Bessie says." Amy was in the habit of saying the first thing that came into her head and worrying about it later, but this time she squelched her words. Bessie noticed it.

“Yes, you’d be better off holding your tongue, missie,” Bessie responded.

Just then the baby cried, and Bessie left, saying, “You can leave the fire when you’re dry.”

Not realizing this was a bad moment to approach Amy, Ava pleaded, “Now can we have the dollhouse?”

“Of course not!” Amy snapped. Ava fled back to Ethel, who had remained behind playing at the bay window.

As the three drenched figures slowly dried, a plan formed in Amy’s mind. “Psst,” she whispered to the boys so her sisters wouldn’t hear. “Let’s go up on the roof of the house. We can dry up there in the sun.”

Davy’s and Ernest’s eyes shone. “Oh, Amy, dare we?”

“Mother and Father aren’t home yet, and Bessie’s busy. Come on.”