

Chapter V - How the Great Wind Went from Beacon House

Mary was walking between Diana and Rosamund slowly up and down the garden; they were silent, and the sun had set. Such spaces of daylight as remained open in the west were of a warm-tinted white, which can be compared to nothing but a cream cheese; and the lines of plummy cloud that ran across them had a soft but vivid violet bloom, like a violet smoke. All the rest of the scene swept and faded away into a dove-like gray, and seemed to melt and mount into Mary's dark-gray figure until she seemed clothed with the garden and the skies. There was something in these last quiet colours that gave her a setting and a supremacy; and the twilight, which concealed Diana's statelier figure and Rosamund's braver array, exhibited and emphasized her, leaving her the lady of the garden, and alone.

When they spoke at last it was evident that a conversation long fallen silent was being revived.

"But where is your husband taking you?" asked Diana in her practical voice.

"To an aunt," said Mary; "that's just the joke. There really is an aunt, and we left the children with her when I arranged to be turned out of the other boarding-house down the road. We never take more than a week of this kind of holiday, but sometimes we take two of them together."

"Does the aunt mind much?" asked Rosamund innocently. "Of course, I dare say it's very narrow-minded and--what's that other word?-- you know, what Goliath was--but I've known many aunts who would think it--well, silly."

"Silly?" cried Mary with great heartiness. "Oh, my Sunday hat! I should think it was silly! But what do you expect? He really is a good man, and it might have been snakes or something."

"Snakes?" inquired Rosamund, with a slightly puzzled interest.

"Uncle Harry kept snakes, and said they loved him," replied Mary with perfect simplicity. "Auntie let him have them in his pockets, but not in the bedroom."

"And you--" began Diana, knitting her dark brows a little.

"Oh, I do as auntie did," said Mary; "as long as we're not away from the children more than a fortnight together I play the game. He calls me 'Manalive;' and you

must write it all one word, or he's quite flustered."

"But if men want things like that," began Diana.

"Oh, what's the good of talking about men?" cried Mary impatiently; "why, one might as well be a lady novelist or some horrid thing. There aren't any men. There are no such people. There's a man; and whoever he is he's quite different."

"So there is no safety," said Diana in a low voice.

"Oh, I don't know," answered Mary, lightly enough; "there's only two things generally true of them. At certain curious times they're just fit to take care of us, and they're never fit to take care of themselves."

"There is a gale getting up," said Rosamund suddenly. "Look at those trees over there, a long way off, and the clouds going quicker."

"I know what you're thinking about," said Mary; "and don't you be silly fools. Don't you listen to the lady novelists. You go down the king's highway; for God's truth, it is God's. Yes, my dear Michael will often be extremely untidy. Arthur Inglewood will be worse--he'll be untidy. But what else are all the trees and clouds for, you silly kittens?"

"The clouds and trees are all waving about," said Rosamund. "There is a storm coming, and it makes me feel quite excited, somehow. Michael is really rather like a storm: he frightens me and makes me happy."

"Don't you be frightened," said Mary. "All over, these men have one advantage; they are the sort that go out."

A sudden thrust of wind through the trees drifted the dying leaves along the path, and they could hear the far-off trees roaring faintly.

"I mean," said Mary, "they are the kind that look outwards and get interested in the world. It doesn't matter a bit whether it's arguing, or bicycling, or breaking down the ends of the earth as poor old Innocent does. Stick to the man who looks out of the window and tries to understand the world. Keep clear of the man who looks in at the window and tries to understand you. When poor old Adam had gone out gardening (Arthur will go out gardening), the other sort came along and wormed himself in, nasty old snake."

"You agree with your aunt," said Rosamund, smiling: "no snakes in the bedroom."

"I didn't agree with my aunt very much," replied Mary simply, "but I think she was right to let Uncle Harry collect dragons and griffins, so long as it got him out of the house."

Almost at the same moment lights sprang up inside the darkened house, turning the two glass doors into the garden into gates of beaten gold. The golden gates were burst open, and the enormous Smith, who had sat like a clumsy statue for so many hours, came flying and turning cart-wheels down the lawn and shouting, "Acquitted! acquitted!" Echoing the cry, Michael scampered across the lawn to Rosamund and wildly swung her into a few steps of what was supposed to be a waltz. But the company knew Innocent and Michael by this time, and their extravagances were gaily taken for granted; it was far more extraordinary that Arthur Inglewood walked straight up to Diana and kissed her as if it had been his sister's birthday. Even Dr. Pym, though he refrained from dancing, looked on with real benevolence; for indeed the whole of the absurd revelation had disturbed him less than the others; he half supposed that such irresponsible tribunals and insane discussions were part of the mediaeval mummeries of the Old Land.

While the tempest tore the sky as with trumpets, window after window was lighted up in the house within; and before the company, broken with laughter and the buffeting of the wind, had groped their way to the house again, they saw that the great apish figure of Innocent Smith had clambered out of his own attic window, and roaring again and again, "Beacon House!" whirled round his head a huge log or trunk from the wood fire below, of which the river of crimson flame and purple smoke drove out on the deafening air.

He was evident enough to have been seen from three counties; but when the wind died down, and the party, at the top of their evening's merriment, looked again for Mary and for him, they were not to be found.

The End