

CHAPTER II. SHEER GOSSIP

"Where are the other children?" asked Miss Cornelia, when the first greetings--cordial on her side, rapturous on Anne's, and dignified on Susan's--were over.

"Shirley is in bed and Jem and Walter and the twins are down in their beloved Rainbow Valley," said Anne. "They just came home this afternoon, you know, and they could hardly wait until supper was over before rushing down to the valley. They love it above every spot on earth. Even the maple grove doesn't rival it in their affections."

"I am afraid they love it too well," said Susan gloomily.

"Little Jem said once he would rather go to Rainbow Valley than to heaven when he died, and that was not a proper remark."

"I suppose they had a great time in Avonlea?" said Miss Cornelia.

"Enormous. Marilla does spoil them terribly. Jem, in particular, can do no wrong in her eyes."

"Miss Cuthbert must be an old lady now," said Miss Cornelia, getting out her knitting, so that she could hold her own with Susan. Miss Cornelia held that the woman whose hands were employed always had the advantage over the woman whose hands were

not.

"Marilla is eighty-five," said Anne with a sigh. "Her hair is snow-white. But, strange to say, her eyesight is better than it was when she was sixty."

"Well, dearie, I'm real glad you're all back. I've been dreadful lonesome. But we haven't been dull in the Glen, believe ME. There hasn't been such an exciting spring in my time, as far as church matters go. We've got settled with a minister at last, Anne dearie."

"The Reverend John Knox Meredith, Mrs. Dr. dear," said Susan, resolved not to let Miss Cornelia tell all the news.

"Is he nice?" asked Anne interestedly.

Miss Cornelia sighed and Susan groaned.

"Yes, he's nice enough if that were all," said the former. "He is VERY nice--and very learned--and very spiritual. But, oh Anne dearie, he has no common sense!

"How was it you called him, then?"

"Well, there's no doubt he is by far the best preacher we ever

had in Glen St. Mary church," said Miss Cornelia, veering a tack or two. "I suppose it is because he is so moony and absent-minded that he never got a town call. His trial sermon was simply wonderful, believe ME. Every one went mad about it--and his looks."

"He is VERY comely, Mrs. Dr. dear, and when all is said and done, I DO like to see a well-looking man in the pulpit," broke in Susan, thinking it was time she asserted herself again.

"Besides," said Miss Cornelia, "we were anxious to get settled. And Mr. Meredith was the first candidate we were all agreed on. Somebody had some objection to all the others. There was some talk of calling Mr. Folsom. He was a good preacher, too, but somehow people didn't care for his appearance. He was too dark and sleek."

"He looked exactly like a great black tomcat, that he did, Mrs. Dr. dear," said Susan. "I never could abide such a man in the pulpit every Sunday."

"Then Mr. Rogers came and he was like a chip in porridge--neither harm nor good," resumed Miss Cornelia. "But if he had preached like Peter and Paul it would have profited him nothing, for that was the day old Caleb Ramsay's sheep strayed into church and gave a loud 'ba-a-a' just as he announced his text. Everybody

laughed, and poor Rogers had no chance after that. Some thought we ought to call Mr. Stewart, because he was so well educated. He could read the New Testament in five languages."

"But I do not think he was any surer than other men of getting to heaven because of that," interjected Susan.

"Most of us didn't like his delivery," said Miss Cornelia, ignoring Susan. "He talked in grunts, so to speak. And Mr. Arnett couldn't preach AT ALL. And he picked about the worst candidating text there is in the Bible--'Curse ye Meroz.'"

"Whenever he got stuck for an idea, he would bang the Bible and shout very bitterly, 'Curse ye Meroz.' Poor Meroz got thoroughly cursed that day, whoever he was, Mrs. Dr. dear," said Susan.

"The minister who is candidating can't be too careful what text he chooses," said Miss Cornelia solemnly. "I believe Mr. Pierson would have got the call if he had picked a different text. But when he announced 'I will lift my eyes to the hills' HE was done for. Every one grinned, for every one knew that those two Hill girls from the Harbour Head have been setting their caps for every single minister who came to the Glen for the last fifteen years. And Mr. Newman had too large a family."

"He stayed with my brother-in-law, James Clow," said Susan. "'How

many children have you got?' I asked him. 'Nine boys and a sister for each of them,' he said. 'Eighteen!' said I. 'Dear me, what a family!' And then he laughed and laughed. But I do not know why, Mrs. Dr. dear, and I am certain that eighteen children would be too many for any manse."

"He had only ten children, Susan," explained Miss Cornelia, with contemptuous patience. "And ten good children would not be much worse for the manse and congregation than the four who are there now. Though I wouldn't say, Anne dearie, that they are so bad, either. I like them--everybody likes them. It's impossible to help liking them. They would be real nice little souls if there was anyone to look after their manners and teach them what is right and proper. For instance, at school the teacher says they are model children. But at home they simply run wild."

"What about Mrs. Meredith?" asked Anne.

"There's NO Mrs. Meredith. That is just the trouble. Mr. Meredith is a widower. His wife died four years ago. If we had known that I don't suppose we would have called him, for a widower is even worse in a congregation than a single man. But he was heard to speak of his children and we all supposed there was a mother, too. And when they came there was nobody but old Aunt Martha, as they call her. She's a cousin of Mr. Meredith's mother, I believe, and he took her in to save her from the

poorhouse. She is seventy-five years old, half blind, and very deaf and very cranky."

"And a very poor cook, Mrs. Dr. dear."

"The worst possible manager for a manse," said Miss Cornelia bitterly. "Mr. Meredith won't get any other housekeeper because he says it would hurt Aunt Martha's feelings. Anne dearie, believe me, the state of that manse is something terrible. Everything is thick with dust and nothing is ever in its place. And we had painted and papered it all so nice before they came."

"There are four children, you say?" asked Anne, beginning to mother them already in her heart.

"Yes. They run up just like the steps of a stair. Gerald's the oldest. He's twelve and they call him Jerry. He's a clever boy. Faith is eleven. She is a regular tomboy but pretty as a picture, I must say."

"She looks like an angel but she is a holy terror for mischief, Mrs. Dr. dear," said Susan solemnly. "I was at the manse one night last week and Mrs. James Millison was there, too. She had brought them up a dozen eggs and a little pail of milk--a VERY little pail, Mrs. Dr. dear. Faith took them and whisked down the cellar with them. Near the bottom of the stairs she caught her

toe and fell the rest of the way, milk and eggs and all. You can imagine the result, Mrs. Dr. dear. But that child came up laughing. 'I don't know whether I'm myself or a custard pie,' she said. And Mrs. James Millison was very angry. She said she would never take another thing to the manse if it was to be wasted and destroyed in that fashion."

"Maria Millison never hurt herself taking things to the manse," sniffed Miss Cornelia. "She just took them that night as an excuse for curiosity. But poor Faith is always getting into scrapes. She is so heedless and impulsive."

"Just like me. I'm going to like your Faith," said Anne decidedly.

"She is full of spunk--and I do like spunk, Mrs. Dr. dear," admitted Susan.

"There's something taking about her," conceded Miss Cornelia. "You never see her but she's laughing, and somehow it always makes you want to laugh too. She can't even keep a straight face in church. Una is ten--she's a sweet little thing--not pretty, but sweet. And Thomas Carlyle is nine. They call him Carl, and he has a regular mania for collecting toads and bugs and frogs and bringing them into the house."

"I suppose he was responsible for the dead rat that was lying on a chair in the parlour the afternoon Mrs. Grant called. It gave her a turn," said Susan, "and I do not wonder, for manse parlours are no places for dead rats. To be sure it may have been the cat who left it, there. HE is as full of the old Nick as he can be stuffed, Mrs. Dr. dear. A manse cat should at least LOOK respectable, in my opinion, whatever he really is. But I never saw such a rakish-looking beast. And he walks along the ridgepole of the manse almost every evening at sunset, Mrs. Dr. dear, and waves his tail, and that is not becoming."

"The worst of it is, they are NEVER decently dressed," sighed Miss Cornelia. "And since the snow went they go to school barefooted. Now, you know Anne dearie, that isn't the right thing for manse children--especially when the Methodist minister's little girl always wears such nice buttoned boots. And I DO wish they wouldn't play in the old Methodist graveyard."

"It's very tempting, when it's right beside the manse," said Anne. "I've always thought graveyards must be delightful places to play in."

"Oh, no, you did not, Mrs. Dr. dear," said loyal Susan, determined to protect Anne from herself. "You have too much good sense and decorum."

"Why did they ever build that manse beside the graveyard in the first place?" asked Anne. "Their lawn is so small there is no place for them to play except in the graveyard."

"It WAS a mistake," admitted Miss Cornelia. "But they got the lot cheap. And no other manse children ever thought of playing there. Mr. Meredith shouldn't allow it. But he has always got his nose buried in a book, when he is home. He reads and reads, or walks about in his study in a day-dream. So far he hasn't forgotten to be in church on Sundays, but twice he has forgotten about the prayer-meeting and one of the elders had to go over to the manse and remind him. And he forgot about Fanny Cooper's wedding. They rang him up on the 'phone and then he rushed right over, just as he was, carpet slippers and all. One wouldn't mind if the Methodists didn't laugh so about it. But there's one comfort--they can't criticize his sermons. He wakes up when he's in the pulpit, believe ME. And the Methodist minister can't preach at all--so they tell me. I have never heard him, thank goodness."

Miss Cornelia's scorn of men had abated somewhat since her marriage, but her scorn of Methodists remained untinged of charity. Susan smiled slyly.

"They do say, Mrs. Marshall Elliott, that the Methodists and Presbyterians are talking of uniting," she said.

"Well, all I hope is that I'll be under the sod if that ever comes to pass," retorted Miss Cornelia. "I shall never have truck or trade with Methodists, and Mr. Meredith will find that he'd better steer clear of them, too. He is entirely too sociable with them, believe ME. Why, he went to the Jacob Drews' silver-wedding supper and got into a nice scrape as a result."

"What was it?"

"Mrs. Drew asked him to carve the roast goose--for Jacob Drew never did or could carve. Well, Mr. Meredith tackled it, and in the process he knocked it clean off the platter into Mrs. Reese's lap, who was sitting next him. And he just said dreamily. 'Mrs. Reese, will you kindly return me that goose?' Mrs. Reese 'returned' it, as meek as Moses, but she must have been furious, for she had on her new silk dress. The worst of it is, she was a Methodist."

"But I think that is better than if she was a Presbyterian," interjected Susan. "If she had been a Presbyterian she would mostly likely have left the church and we cannot afford to lose our members. And Mrs. Reese is not liked in her own church, because she gives herself such great airs, so that the Methodists would be rather pleased that Mr. Meredith spoiled her dress."

"The point is, he made himself ridiculous, and I, for one, do not like to see my minister made ridiculous in the eyes of the Methodists," said Miss Cornelia stiffly. "If he had had a wife it would not have happened."

"I do not see if he had a dozen wives how they could have prevented Mrs. Drew from using up her tough old gander for the wedding-feast," said Susan stubbornly.

"They say that was her husband's doing," said Miss Cornelia. "Jacob Drew is a conceited, stingy, domineering creature."

"And they do say he and his wife detest each other--which does not seem to me the proper way for married folks to get along. But then, of course, I have had no experience along that line," said Susan, tossing her head. "And I am not one to blame everything on the men. Mrs. Drew is mean enough herself. They say that the only thing she was ever known to give away was a crock of butter made out of cream a rat had fell into. She contributed it to a church social. Nobody found out about the rat until afterwards."

"Fortunately, all the people the Merediths have offended so far are Methodists," said Miss Cornelia. "That Jerry went to the Methodist prayer-meeting one night about a fortnight ago and sat beside old William Marsh who got up as usual and testified with

fearful groans. 'Do you feel any better now?' whispered Jerry when William sat down. Poor Jerry meant to be sympathetic, but Mr. Marsh thought he was impertinent and is furious at him. Of course, Jerry had no business to be in a Methodist prayer-meeting at all. But they go where they like."

"I hope they will not offend Mrs. Alec Davis of the Harbour Head," said Susan. "She is a very touchy woman, I understand, but she is very well off and pays the most of any one to the salary. I have heard that she says the Merediths are the worst brought up children she ever saw."

"Every word you say convinces me more and more that the Merediths belong to the race that knows Joseph," said Mistress Anne decidedly.

"When all is said and done, they DO," admitted Miss Cornelia.

"And that balances everything. Anyway, we've got them now and we must just do the best we can by them and stick up for them to the Methodists. Well, I suppose I must be getting down harbour. Marshall will soon be home--he went over-harbour to-day--and wanting his super, man-like. I'm sorry I haven't seen the other children. And where's the doctor?"

"Up at the Harbour Head. We've only been home three days and in that time he has spent three hours in his own bed and eaten two

meals in his own house."

"Well, everybody who has been sick for the last six weeks has been waiting for him to come home--and I don't blame them. When that over-harbour doctor married the undertaker's daughter at Lowbridge people felt suspicious of him. It didn't look well. You and the doctor must come down soon and tell us all about your trip. I suppose you've had a splendid time."

"We had," agreed Anne. "It was the fulfilment of years of dreams. The old world is very lovely and very wonderful. But we have come back very well satisfied with our own land. Canada is the finest country in the world, Miss Cornelia."

"Nobody ever doubted that," said Miss Cornelia, complacently.

"And old P.E.I. is the loveliest province in it and Four Winds the loveliest spot in P.E.I.," laughed Anne, looking adoringly out over the sunset splendour of glen and harbour and gulf. She waved her hand at it. "I saw nothing more beautiful than that in Europe, Miss Cornelia. Must you go? The children will be sorry to have missed you."

"They must come and see me soon. Tell them the doughnut jar is always full."

"Oh, at supper they were planning a descent on you. They'll go soon; but they must settle down to school again now. And the twins are going to take music lessons."

"Not from the Methodist minister's wife, I hope?" said Miss Cornelia anxiously.

"No--from Rosemary West. I was up last evening to arrange it with her. What a pretty girl she is!"

"Rosemary holds her own well. She isn't as young as she once was."

"I thought her very charming. I've never had any real acquaintance with her, you know. Their house is so out of the way, and I've seldom ever seen her except at church."

"People always have liked Rosemary West, though they don't understand her," said Miss Cornelia, quite unconscious of the high tribute she was paying to Rosemary's charm. "Ellen has always kept her down, so to speak. She has tyrannized over her, and yet she has always indulged her in a good many ways. Rosemary was engaged once, you know--to young Martin Crawford. His ship was wrecked on the Magdalens and all the crew were drowned. Rosemary was just a child--only seventeen. But she was never the same afterwards. She and Ellen have stayed very close

at home since their mother's death. They don't often get to their own church at Lowbridge and I understand Ellen doesn't approve of going too often to a Presbyterian church. To the Methodist she NEVER goes, I'll say that much for her. That family of Wests have always been strong Episcopalians. Rosemary and Ellen are pretty well off. Rosemary doesn't really need to give music lessons. She does it because she likes to. They are distantly related to Leslie, you know. Are the Fords coming to the harbour this summer?"

"No. They are going on a trip to Japan and will probably be away for a year. Owen's new novel is to have a Japanese setting. This will be the first summer that the dear old House of Dreams will be empty since we left it."

"I should think Owen Ford might find enough to write about in Canada without dragging his wife and his innocent children off to a heathen country like Japan," grumbled Miss Cornelia. "The Life Book was the best book he's ever written and he got the material for that right here in Four Winds."

"Captain Jim gave him the most of that, you know. And he collected it all over the world. But Owen's books are all delightful, I think."

"Oh, they're well enough as far as they go. I make it a point to

read every one he writes, though I've always held, Anne dearie, that reading novels is a sinful waste of time. I shall write and tell him my opinion of this Japanese business, believe ME. Does he want Kenneth and Persis to be converted into pagans?"

With which unanswerable conundrum Miss Cornelia took her departure. Susan proceeded to put Rilla in bed and Anne sat on the veranda steps under the early stars and dreamed her incorrigible dreams and learned all over again for the hundredth happy time what a moonrise splendour and sheen could be on Four Winds Harbour.