

## CHAPTER IV. THE MANSE CHILDREN

Aunt Martha might be, and was, a very poor housekeeper; the Rev. John Knox Meredith might be, and was, a very absent-minded, indulgent man. But it could not be denied that there was something very homelike and lovable about the Glen St. Mary manse in spite of its untidiness. Even the critical housewives of the Glen felt it, and were unconsciously mellowed in judgment because of it. Perhaps its charm was in part due to accidental circumstances--the luxuriant vines clustering over its gray, clap-boarded walls, the friendly acacias and balm-of-gileads that crowded about it with the freedom of old acquaintance, and the beautiful views of harbour and sand-dunes from its front windows. But these things had been there in the reign of Mr. Meredith's predecessor, when the manse had been the primmest, neatest, and dreariest house in the Glen. So much of the credit must be given to the personality of its new inmates. There was an atmosphere of laughter and comradeship about it; the doors were always open; and inner and outer worlds joined hands. Love was the only law in Glen St. Mary manse.

The people of his congregation said that Mr. Meredith spoiled his children. Very likely he did. It is certain that he could not bear to scold them. "They have no mother," he used to say to himself, with a sigh, when some unusually glaring peccadillo forced itself upon his notice. But he did not know the half of

their goings-on. He belonged to the sect of dreamers. The windows of his study looked out on the graveyard but, as he paced up and down the room, reflecting deeply on the immortality of the soul, he was quite unaware that Jerry and Carl were playing leap-frog hilariously over the flat stones in that abode of dead Methodists. Mr. Meredith had occasional acute realizations that his children were not so well looked after, physically or morally, as they had been before his wife died, and he had always a dim sub-consciousness that house and meals were very different under Aunt Martha's management from what they had been under Cecilia's. For the rest, he lived in a world of books and abstractions; and, therefore, although his clothes were seldom brushed, and although the Glen housewives concluded, from the ivory-like pallor of his clear-cut features and slender hands, that he never got enough to eat, he was not an unhappy man.

If ever a graveyard could be called a cheerful place, the old Methodist graveyard at Glen St. Mary might be so called. The new graveyard, at the other side of the Methodist church, was a neat and proper and doleful spot; but the old one had been left so long to Nature's kindly and gracious ministries that it had become very pleasant.

It was surrounded on three sides by a dyke of stones and sod, topped by a gray and uncertain paling. Outside the dyke grew a row of tall fir trees with thick, balsamic boughs. The dyke,

which had been built by the first settlers of the Glen, was old enough to be beautiful, with mosses and green things growing out of its crevices, violets purpling at its base in the early spring days, and asters and golden-rod making an autumnal glory in its corners. Little ferns clustered companionably between its stones, and here and there a big bracken grew.

On the eastern side there was neither fence nor dyke. The graveyard there straggled off into a young fir plantation, ever pushing nearer to the graves and deepening eastward into a thick wood. The air was always full of the harp-like voices of the sea, and the music of gray old trees, and in the spring mornings the choruses of birds in the elms around the two churches sang of life and not of death. The Meredith children loved the old graveyard.

Blue-eyed ivy, "garden-spruce," and mint ran riot over the sunken graves. Blueberry bushes grew lavishly in the sandy corner next to the fir wood. The varying fashions of tombstones for three generations were to be found there, from the flat, oblong, red sandstone slabs of old settlers, down through the days of weeping willows and clasped hands, to the latest monstrosities of tall "monuments" and draped urns. One of the latter, the biggest and ugliest in the graveyard, was sacred to the memory of a certain Alec Davis who had been born a Methodist but had taken to himself a Presbyterian bride of the Douglas clan. She had made him turn

Presbyterian and kept him toeing the Presbyterian mark all his life. But when he died she did not dare to doom him to a lonely grave in the Presbyterian graveyard over-harbour. His people were all buried in the Methodist cemetery; so Alec Davis went back to his own in death and his widow consoled herself by erecting a monument which cost more than any of the Methodists could afford. The Meredith children hated it, without just knowing why, but they loved the old, flat, bench-like stones with the tall grasses growing rankly about them. They made jolly seats for one thing. They were all sitting on one now. Jerry, tired of leap frog, was playing on a jew's-harp. Carl was lovingly poring over a strange beetle he had found; Una was trying to make a doll's dress, and Faith, leaning back on her slender brown wrists, was swinging her bare feet in lively time to the jew's-harp.

Jerry had his father's black hair and large black eyes, but in him the latter were flashing instead of dreamy. Faith, who came next to him, wore her beauty like a rose, careless and glowing. She had golden-brown eyes, golden-brown curls and crimson cheeks. She laughed too much to please her father's congregation and had shocked old Mrs. Taylor, the disconsolate spouse of several departed husbands, by saucily declaring--in the church-porch at that--"The world ISN'T a vale of tears, Mrs. Taylor. It's a world of laughter."

Little dreamy Una was not given to laughter. Her braids of straight, dead-black hair betrayed no lawless kinks, and her almond-shaped, dark-blue eyes had something wistful and sorrowful in them. Her mouth had a trick of falling open over her tiny white teeth, and a shy, meditative smile occasionally crept over her small face. She was much more sensitive to public opinion than Faith, and had an uneasy consciousness that there was something askew in their way of living. She longed to put it right, but did not know how. Now and then she dusted the furniture--but it was so seldom she could find the duster because it was never in the same place twice. And when the clothes-brush was to be found she tried to brush her father's best suit on Saturdays, and once sewed on a missing button with coarse white thread. When Mr. Meredith went to church next day every female eye saw that button and the peace of the Ladies' Aid was upset for weeks.

Carl had the clear, bright, dark-blue eyes, fearless and direct, of his dead mother, and her brown hair with its glints of gold. He knew the secrets of bugs and had a sort of freemasonry with bees and beetles. Una never liked to sit near him because she never knew what uncanny creature might be secreted about him. Jerry refused to sleep with him because Carl had once taken a young garter snake to bed with him; so Carl slept in his old cot, which was so short that he could never stretch out, and had strange bed-fellows. Perhaps it was just as well that Aunt

Martha was half blind when she made that bed. Altogether they were a jolly, lovable little crew, and Cecilia Meredith's heart must have ached bitterly when she faced the knowledge that she must leave them.

"Where would you like to be buried if you were a Methodist?" asked Faith cheerfully.

This opened up an interesting field of speculation.

"There isn't much choice. The place is full," said Jerry. "I'D like that corner near the road, I guess. I could hear the teams going past and the people talking."

"I'd like that little hollow under the weeping birch," said Una.

"That birch is such a place for birds and they sing like mad in the mornings."

"I'd take the Porter lot where there's so many children buried. I like lots of company," said Faith. "Carl, where'd you?"

"I'd rather not be buried at all," said Carl, "but if I had to be I'd like the ant-bed. Ants are AWF'LY int'resting."

"How very good all the people who are buried here must have been," said Una, who had been reading the laudatory old epitaphs.

"There doesn't seem to be a single bad person in the whole graveyard. Methodists must be better than Presbyterians after all."

"Maybe the Methodists bury their bad people just like they do cats," suggested Carl. "Maybe they don't bother bringing them to the graveyard at all."

"Nonsense," said Faith. "The people that are buried here weren't any better than other folks, Una. But when anyone is dead you mustn't say anything of him but good or he'll come back and ha'nt you. Aunt Martha told me that. I asked father if it was true and he just looked through me and muttered, 'True? True? What is truth? What IS truth, O jesting Pilate?' I concluded from that it must be true."

"I wonder if Mr. Alec Davis would come back and ha'nt me if I threw a stone at the urn on top of his tombstone," said Jerry.

"Mrs. Davis would," giggled Faith. "She just watches us in church like a cat watching mice. Last Sunday I made a face at her nephew and he made one back at me and you should have seen her glare. I'll bet she boxed HIS ears when they got out. Mrs. Marshall Elliott told me we mustn't offend her on any account or I'd have made a face at her, too!"

"They say Jem Blythe stuck out his tongue at her once and she would never have his father again, even when her husband was dying," said Jerry. "I wonder what the Blythe gang will be like."

"I liked their looks," said Faith. The manse children had been at the station that afternoon when the Blythe small fry had arrived. "I liked Jem's looks ESPECIALLY."

"They say in school that Walter's a sissy," said Jerry.

"I don't believe it," said Una, who had thought Walter very handsome.

"Well, he writes poetry, anyhow. He won the prize the teacher offered last year for writing a poem, Bertie Shakespeare Drew told me. Bertie's mother thought HE should have got the prize because of his name, but Bertie said he couldn't write poetry to save his soul, name or no name."

"I suppose we'll get acquainted with them as soon as they begin going to school," mused Faith. "I hope the girls are nice. I don't like most of the girls round here. Even the nice ones are poky. But the Blythe twins look jolly. I thought twins always looked alike, but they don't. I think the red-haired one is the nicest."



"I liked their mother's looks," said Una with a little sigh. Una envied all children their mothers. She had been only six when her mother died, but she had some very precious memories, treasured in her soul like jewels, of twilight cuddlings and morning frolics, of loving eyes, a tender voice, and the sweetest, gayest laugh.

"They say she isn't like other people," said Jerry.

"Mrs. Elliot says that is because she never really grew up," said Faith.

"She's taller than Mrs. Elliott."

"Yes, yes, but it is inside--Mrs. Elliot says Mrs. Blythe just stayed a little girl inside."

"What do I smell?" interrupted Carl, sniffing.

They all smelled it now. A most delectable odour came floating up on the still evening air from the direction of the little woodsy dell below the manse hill.

"That makes me hungry," said Jerry.

"We had only bread and molasses for supper and cold ditto for dinner," said Una plaintively.

Aunt Martha's habit was to boil a large slab of mutton early in the week and serve it up every day, cold and greasy, as long as it lasted. To this Faith, in a moment of inspiration, had give the name of "ditto", and by this it was invariably known at the manse.

"Let's go and see where that smell is coming from," said Jerry.

They all sprang up, frolicked over the lawn with the abandon of young puppies, climbed a fence, and tore down the mossy slope, guided by the savory lure that ever grew stronger. A few minutes later they arrived breathlessly in the sanctum sanctorum of Rainbow Valley where the Blythe children were just about to give thanks and eat.

They halted shyly. Una wished they had not been so precipitate: but Di Blythe was equal to that and any occasion. She stepped forward, with a comrade's smile.

"I guess I know who you are," she said. "You belong to the manse, don't you?"

Faith nodded, her face creased by dimples.

"We smelled your trout cooking and wondered what it was."

"You must sit down and help us eat them," said Di.

"Maybe you haven't more than you want yourselves," said Jerry, looking hungrily at the tin platter.

"We've heaps--three apiece," said Jem. "Sit down."

No more ceremony was necessary. Down they all sat on mossy stones. Merry was that feast and long. Nan and Di would probably have died of horror had they known what Faith and Una knew perfectly well--that Carl had two young mice in his jacket pocket. But they never knew it, so it never hurt them. Where can folks get better acquainted than over a meal table? When the last trout had vanished, the manse children and the Ingleside children were sworn friends and allies. They had always known each other and always would. The race of Joseph recognized its own.

They poured out the history of their little pasts. The manse children heard of Avonlea and Green Gables, of Rainbow Valley traditions, and of the little house by the harbour shore where Jem had been born. The Ingleside children heard of Maywater, where the Merediths had lived before coming to the Glen, of Una's

beloved, one-eyed doll and Faith's pet rooster.

Faith was inclined to resent the fact that people laughed at her for petting a rooster. She liked the Blythes because they accepted it without question.

"A handsome rooster like Adam is just as nice a pet as a dog or cat, I think," she said. "If he was a canary nobody would wonder. And I brought him up from a little, wee, yellow chicken. Mrs. Johnson at Maywater gave him to me. A weasel had killed all his brothers and sisters. I called him after her husband. I never liked dolls or cats. Cats are too sneaky and dolls are DEAD."

"Who lives in that house away up there?" asked Jerry.

"The Miss Wests--Rosemary and Ellen," answered Nan. "Di and I are going to take music lessons from Miss Rosemary this summer."

Una gazed at the lucky twins with eyes whose longing was too gentle for envy. Oh, if she could only have music lessons! It was one of the dreams of her little hidden life. But nobody ever thought of such a thing.

"Miss Rosemary is so sweet and she always dresses so pretty," said Di. "Her hair is just the colour of new molasses taffy,"

she added wistfully--for Di, like her mother before her, was not resigned to her own ruddy tresses.

"I like Miss Ellen, too," said Nan. "She always used to give me candies when she came to church. But Di is afraid of her."

"Her brows are so black and she has such a great deep voice," said Di. "Oh, how scared of her Kenneth Ford used to be when he was little! Mother says the first Sunday Mrs. Ford brought him to church Miss Ellen happened to be there, sitting right behind them. And the minute Kenneth saw her he just screamed and screamed until Mrs. Ford had to carry him out."

"Who is Mrs. Ford?" asked Una wonderingly.

"Oh, the Fords don't live here. They only come here in the summer. And they're not coming this summer. They live in that little house 'way, 'way down on the harbour shore where father and mother used to lie. I wish you could see Persis Ford. She is just like a picture."

"I've heard of Mrs. Ford," broke in Faith. "Bertie Shakespeare Drew told me about her. She was married fourteen years to a dead man and then he came to life."

"Nonsense," said Nan. "That isn't the way it goes at all."

Bertie Shakespeare can never get anything straight. I know the whole story and I'll tell it to you some time, but not now, for it's too long and it's time for us to go home. Mother doesn't like us to be out late these damp evenings."

Nobody cared whether the manse children were out in the damp or not. Aunt Martha was already in bed and the minister was still too deeply lost in speculations concerning the immortality of the soul to remember the mortality of the body. But they went home, too, with visions of good times coming in their heads.

"I think Rainbow Valley is even nicer than the graveyard," said Una. "And I just love those dear Blythes. It's SO nice when you can love people because so often you CAN'T. Father said in his sermon last Sunday that we should love everybody. But how can we? How could we love Mrs. Alec Davis?"

"Oh, father only said that in the pulpit," said Faith airily.

"He has more sense than to really think it outside."

The Blythe children went up to Ingleside, except Jem, who slipped away for a few moments on a solitary expedition to a remote corner of Rainbow Valley. Mayflowers grew there and Jem never forgot to take his mother a bouquet as long as they lasted.