

CHAPTER V. THE ADVENT OF MARY VANCE

"This is just the sort of day you feel as if things might happen," said Faith, responsive to the lure of crystal air and blue hills. She hugged herself with delight and danced a hornpipe on old Hezekiah Pollock's bench tombstone, much to the horror of two ancient maidens who happened to be driving past just as Faith hopped on one foot around the stone, waving the other and her arms in the air.

"And that," groaned one ancient maiden, "is our minister's daughter."

"What else could you expect of a widower's family?" groaned the other ancient maiden. And then they both shook their heads.

It was early on Saturday morning and the Merediths were out in the dew-drenched world with a delightful consciousness of the holiday. They had never had anything to do on a holiday. Even Nan and Di Blythe had certain household tasks for Saturday mornings, but the daughters of the manse were free to roam from blushing morn to dewy eve if so it pleased them. It DID please Faith, but Una felt a secret, bitter humiliation because they never learned to do anything. The other girls in her class at school could cook and sew and knit; she only was a little

ignoramus.

Jerry suggested that they go exploring; so they went lingeringly through the fir grove, picking up Carl on the way, who was on his knees in the dripping grass studying his darling ants. Beyond the grove they came out in Mr. Taylor's pasture field, sprinkled over with the white ghosts of dandelions; in a remote corner was an old tumbledown barn, where Mr. Taylor sometimes stored his surplus hay crop but which was never used for any other purpose. Thither the Meredith children trooped, and prowled about the ground floor for several minutes.

"What was that?" whispered Una suddenly.

They all listened. There was a faint but distinct rustle in the hayloft above. The Merediths looked at each other.

"There's something up there," breathed Faith.

"I'm going up to see what it is," said Jerry resolutely.

"Oh, don't," begged Una, catching his arm.

"I'm going."

"We'll all go, too, then," said Faith.

The whole four climbed the shaky ladder, Jerry and Faith quite dauntless, Una pale from fright, and Carl rather absent-mindedly speculating on the possibility of finding a bat up in the loft. He longed to see a bat in daylight.

When they stepped off the ladder they saw what had made the rustle and the sight struck them dumb for a few moments.

In a little nest in the hay a girl was curled up, looking as if she had just wakened from sleep. When she saw them she stood up, rather shakily, as it seemed, and in the bright sunlight that streamed through the cobwebbed window behind her, they saw that her thin, sunburned face was very pale under its tan. She had two braids of lank, thick, tow-coloured hair and very odd eyes--"white eyes," the manse children thought, as she stared at them half defiantly, half piteously. They were really of so pale a blue that they did seem almost white, especially when contrasted with the narrow black ring that circled the iris. She was barefooted and bareheaded, and was clad in a faded, ragged, old plaid dress, much too short and tight for her. As for years, she might have been almost any age, judging from her wizened little face, but her height seemed to be somewhere in the neighbourhood of twelve.

"Who are you?" asked Jerry.

The girl looked about her as if seeking a way of escape. Then she seemed to give in with a little shiver of despair.

"I'm Mary Vance," she said.

"Where'd you come from?" pursued Jerry.

Mary, instead of replying, suddenly sat, or fell, down on the hay and began to cry. Instantly Faith had flung herself down beside her and put her arm around the thin, shaking shoulders.

"You stop bothering her," she commanded Jerry. Then she hugged the waif. "Don't cry, dear. Just tell us what's the matter. WE'RE friends."

"I'm so--so--hungry," wailed Mary. "I--I hain't had a thing to eat since Thursday morning, 'cept a little water from the brook out there."

The manse children gazed at each other in horror. Faith sprang up.

"You come right up to the manse and get something to eat before you say another word."

Mary shrank.

"Oh--I can't. What will your pa and ma say? Besides, they'd send me back."

"We've no mother, and father won't bother about you. Neither will Aunt Martha. Come, I say." Faith stamped her foot impatiently. Was this queer girl going to insist on starving to death almost at their very door?

Mary yielded. She was so weak that she could hardly climb down the ladder, but somehow they got her down and over the field and into the manse kitchen. Aunt Martha, muddling through her Saturday cooking, took no notice of her. Faith and Una flew to the pantry and ransacked it for such eatables as it contained--some "ditto," bread, butter, milk and a doubtful pie. Mary Vance attacked the food ravenously and uncritically, while the manse children stood around and watched her. Jerry noticed that she had a pretty mouth and very nice, even, white teeth. Faith decided, with secret horror, that Mary had not one stitch on her except that ragged, faded dress. Una was full of pure pity, Carl of amused wonder, and all of them of curiosity.

"Now come out to the graveyard and tell us about yourself," ordered Faith, when Mary's appetite showed signs of failing her. Mary was now nothing loath. Food had restored her natural

vivacity and unloosed her by no means reluctant tongue.

"You won't tell your pa or anybody if I tell you?" she stipulated, when she was enthroned on Mr. Pollock's tombstone. Opposite her the manse children lined up on another. Here was spice and mystery and adventure. Something HAD happened.

"No, we won't."

"Cross your hearts?"

"Cross our hearts."

"Well, I've run away. I was living with Mrs. Wiley over-harbour. Do you know Mrs. Wiley?"

"No."

"Well, you don't want to know her. She's an awful woman. My, how I hate her! She worked me to death and wouldn't give me half enough to eat, and she used to larrup me 'most every day. Look a-here."

Mary rolled up her ragged sleeves, and held up her scrawny arms and thin hands, chapped almost to rawness. They were black with bruises. The manse children shivered. Faith flushed crimson

with indignation. Una's blue eyes filled with tears.

"She licked me Wednesday night with a stick," said Mary, indifferently. "It was 'cause I let the cow kick over a pail of milk. How'd I know the darn old cow was going to kick?"

A not unpleasant thrill ran over her listeners. They would never dream of using such dubious words, but it was rather titivating to hear someone else use them--and a girl, at that. Certainly this Mary Vance was an interesting creature.

"I don't blame you for running away," said Faith.

"Oh, I didn't run away 'cause she licked me. A licking was all in the day's work with me. I was darn well used to it. Nope, I'd meant to run away for a week 'cause I'd found out that Mrs. Wiley was going to rent her farm and go to Lowbridge to live and give me to a cousin of hers up Charlottetown way. I wasn't going to stand for THAT. She was a worse sort than Mrs. Wiley even. Mrs. Wiley lent me to her for a month last summer and I'd rather live with the devil himself."

Sensation number two. But Una looked doubtful.

"So I made up my mind I'd beat it. I had seventy cents saved up that Mrs. John Crawford give me in the spring for planting

potatoes for her. Mrs. Wiley didn't know about it. She was away visiting her cousin when I planted them. I thought I'd sneak up here to the Glen and buy a ticket to Charlottetown and try to get work there. I'm a hustler, let me tell you. There ain't a lazy bone in MY body. So I lit out Thursday morning 'fore Mrs. Wiley was up and walked to the Glen--six miles. And when I got to the station I found I'd lost my money. Dunno how--dunno where. Anyhow, it was gone. I didn't know what to do. If I went back to old Lady Wiley she'd take the hide off me. So I went and hid in that old barn."

"And what will you do now?" asked Jerry.

"Dunno. I s'pose I'll have to go back and take my medicine. Now that I've got some grub in my stomach I guess I can stand it."

But there was fear behind the bravado in Mary's eyes. Una suddenly slipped from the one tombstone to the other and put her arm about Mary.

"Don't go back. Just stay here with us."

"Oh, Mrs. Wiley'll hunt me up," said Mary. "It's likely she's on my trail before this. I might stay here till she finds me, I s'pose, if your folks don't mind. I was a darn fool ever to think of skipping out. She'd run a weasel to earth. But I was

so misrebul."

Mary's voice quivered, but she was ashamed of showing her weakness.

"I hain't had the life of a dog for these four years," she explained defiantly.

"You've been four years with Mrs. Wiley?"

"Yip. She took me out of the asylum over in Hopetown when I was eight."

"That's the same place Mrs. Blythe came from," exclaimed Faith.

"I was two years in the asylum. I was put there when I was six. My ma had hung herself and my pa had cut his throat."

"Holy cats! Why?" said Jerry.

"Booze," said Mary laconically.

"And you've no relations?"

"Not a darn one that I know of. Must have had some once, though. I was called after half a dozen of them. My full name is Mary

Martha Lucilla Moore Ball Vance. Can you beat that? My grandfather was a rich man. I'll bet he was richer than YOUR grandfather. But pa drunk it all up and ma, she did her part. THEY used to beat me, too. Laws, I've been licked so much I kind of like it."

Mary tossed her head. She divined that the manse children were pitying her for her many stripes and she did not want pity. She wanted to be envied. She looked gaily about her. Her strange eyes, now that the dullness of famine was removed from them, were brilliant. She would show these youngsters what a personage she was.

"I've been sick an awful lot," she said proudly. "There's not many kids could have come through what I have. I've had scarlet fever and measles and ersipelas and mumps and whooping cough and pewmonia."

"Were you ever fatally sick?" asked Una.

"I don't know," said Mary doubtfully.

"Of course she wasn't," scoffed Jerry. "If you're fatally sick you die."

"Oh, well, I never died exactly," said Mary, "but I come blamed

near it once. They thought I was dead and they were getting ready to lay me out when I up and come to."

"What is it like to be half dead?" asked Jerry curiously.

"Like nothing. I didn't know it for days afterwards. It was when I had the pewmonia. Mrs. Wiley wouldn't have the doctor--said she wasn't going to no such expense for a home girl. Old Aunt Christina MacAllister nursed me with poultices. She brung me round. But sometimes I wish I'd just died the other half and done with it. I'd been better off."

"If you went to heaven I s'pose you would," said Faith, rather doubtfully.

"Well, what other place is there to go to?" demanded Mary in a puzzled voice.

"There's hell, you know," said Una, dropping her voice and hugging Mary to lessen the awfulness of the suggestion.

"Hell? What's that?"

"Why, it's where the devil lives," said Jerry. "You've heard of him--you spoke about him."

"Oh, yes, but I didn't know he lived anywhere. I thought he just roamed round. Mr. Wiley used to mention hell when he was alive. He was always telling folks to go there. I thought it was some place over in New Brunswick where he come from."

"Hell is an awful place," said Faith, with the dramatic enjoyment that is born of telling dreadful things. "Bad people go there when they die and burn in fire for ever and ever and ever."

"Who told you that?" demanded Mary incredulously.

"It's in the Bible. And Mr. Isaac Crothers at Maywater told us, too, in Sunday School. He was an elder and a pillar in the church and knew all about it. But you needn't worry. If you're good you'll go to heaven and if you're bad I guess you'd rather go to hell."

"I wouldn't," said Mary positively. "No matter how bad I was I wouldn't want to be burned and burned. I know what it's like. I picked up a red hot poker once by accident. What must you do to be good?"

"You must go to church and Sunday School and read your Bible and pray every night and give to missions," said Una.

"It sounds like a large order," said Mary. "Anything else?"

"You must ask God to forgive the sins you've committed.

"But I've never com--committed any," said Mary. "What's a sin any way?"

"Oh, Mary, you must have. Everybody does. Did you never tell a lie?"

"Heaps of 'em," said Mary.

"That's a dreadful sin," said Una solemnly.

"Do you mean to tell me," demanded Mary, "that I'd be sent to hell for telling a lie now and then? Why, I HAD to. Mr. Wiley would have broken every bone in my body one time if I hadn't told him a lie. Lies have saved me many a whack, I can tell you."

Una sighed. Here were too many difficulties for her to solve. She shuddered as she thought of being cruelly whipped. Very likely she would have lied too. She squeezed Mary's little calloused hand.

"Is that the only dress you've got?" asked Faith, whose joyous nature refused to dwell on disagreeable subjects.

"I just put on this dress because it was no good," cried Mary flushing. "Mrs. Wiley'd bought my clothes and I wasn't going to be beholden to her for anything. And I'm honest. If I was going to run away I wasn't going to take what belong to HER that was worth anything. When I grow up I'm going to have a blue sating dress. Your own clothes don't look so stylish. I thought ministers' children were always dressed up."

It was plain that Mary had a temper and was sensitive on some points. But there was a queer, wild charm about her which captivated them all. She was taken to Rainbow Valley that afternoon and introduced to the Blythes as "a friend of ours from over-harbour who is visiting us." The Blythes accepted her unquestioningly, perhaps because she was fairly respectable now. After dinner--through which Aunt Martha had mumbled and Mr. Meredith had been in a state of semi-unconsciousness while brooding his Sunday sermon--Faith had prevailed on Mary to put on one of her dresses, as well as certain other articles of clothing. With her hair neatly braided Mary passed muster tolerably well. She was an acceptable playmate, for she knew several new and exciting games, and her conversation lacked not spice. In fact, some of her expressions made Nan and Di look at her rather askance. They were not quite sure what their mother would have thought of her, but they knew quite well what Susan would. However, she was a visitor at the manse, so she must be all right.

When bedtime came there was the problem of where Mary should sleep.

"We can't put her in the spare room, you know," said Faith perplexedly to Una.

"I haven't got anything in my head," cried Mary in an injured tone.

"Oh, I didn't mean THAT," protested Faith. "The spare room is all torn up. The mice have gnawed a big hole in the feather tick and made a nest in it. We never found it out till Aunt Martha put the Rev. Mr. Fisher from Charlottetown there to sleep last week. HE soon found it out. Then father had to give him his bed and sleep on the study lounge. Aunt Martha hasn't had time to fix the spare room bed up yet, so she says; so NOBODY can sleep there, no matter how clean their heads are. And our room is so small, and the bed so small you can't sleep with us."

"I can go back to the hay in the old barn for the night if you'll lend me a quilt," said Mary philosophically. "It was kind of chilly last night, but 'cept for that I've had worse beds."

"Oh, no, no, you mustn't do that," said Una. "I've thought of a plan, Faith. You know that little trestle bed in the garret

room, with the old mattress on it, that the last minister left there? Let's take up the spare room bedclothes and make Mary a bed there. You won't mind sleeping in the garret, will you, Mary? It's just above our room."

"Any place'll do me. Laws, I never had a decent place to sleep in my life. I slept in the loft over the kitchen at Mrs. Wiley's. The roof leaked rain in the summer and the snow druv in in winter. My bed was a straw tick on the floor. You won't find me a mite huffy about where I sleep."

The manse garret was a long, low, shadowy place, with one gable end partitioned off. Here a bed was made up for Mary of the dainty hemstitched sheets and embroidered spread which Cecilia Meredith had once so proudly made for her spare-room, and which still survived Aunt Martha's uncertain washings. The good nights were said and silence fell over the manse. Una was just falling asleep when she heard a sound in the room just above that made her sit up suddenly.

"Listen, Faith--Mary's crying," she whispered. Faith replied not, being already asleep. Una slipped out of bed, and made her way in her little white gown down the hall and up the garret stairs. The creaking floor gave ample notice of her coming, and when she reached the corner room all was moonlit silence and the trestle bed showed only a hump in the middle.

"Mary," whispered Una.

There was no response.

Una crept close to the bed and pulled at the spread. "Mary, I know you are crying. I heard you. Are you lonesome?"

Mary suddenly appeared to view but said nothing.

"Let me in beside you. I'm cold," said Una shivering in the chilly air, for the little garret window was open and the keen breath of the north shore at night blew in.

Mary moved over and Una snuggled down beside her.

"NOW you won't be lonesome. We shouldn't have left you here alone the first night."

"I wasn't lonesome," sniffed Mary.

"What were you crying for then?"

"Oh, I just got to thinking of things when I was here alone. I thought of having to go back to Mrs. Wiley--and of being licked for running away--and--and--and of going to hell for telling

lies. It all worried me something scandalous."

"Oh, Mary," said poor Una in distress. "I don't believe God will send you to hell for telling lies when you didn't know it was wrong. He COULDN'T. Why, He's kind and good. Of course, you mustn't tell any more now that you know it's wrong."

"If I can't tell lies what's to become of me?" said Mary with a sob. "YOU don't understand. You don't know anything about it. You've got a home and a kind father--though it does seem to me that he isn't more'n about half there. But anyway he doesn't lick you, and you get enough to eat such as it is--though that old aunt of yours doesn't know ANYTHING about cooking. Why, this is the first day I ever remember of feeling 'sif I'd enough to eat. I've been knocked about all of my life, 'cept for the two years I was at the asylum. They didn't lick me there and it wasn't too bad, though the matron was cross. She always looked ready to bite my head off a nail. But Mrs. Wiley is a holy terror, that's what SHE is, and I'm just scared stiff when I think of going back to her."

"Perhaps you won't have to. Perhaps we'll be able to think of a way out. Let's both ask God to keep you from having to go back to Mrs. Wiley. You say your prayers, don't you Mary?"

"Oh, yes, I always go over an old rhyme 'fore I get into bed,"

said Mary indifferently. "I never thought of asking for anything in particular though. Nobody in this world ever bothered themselves about me so I didn't s'pose God would. He MIGHT take more trouble for you, seeing you're a minister's daughter."

"He'd take every bit as much trouble for you, Mary, I'm sure," said Una. "It doesn't matter whose child you are. You just ask Him--and I will, too."

"All right," agreed Mary. "It won't do any harm if it doesn't do much good. If you knew Mrs. Wiley as well as I do you wouldn't think God would want to meddle with her. Anyhow, I won't cry any more about it. This is a big sight better'n last night down in that old barn, with the mice running about. Look at the Four Winds light. Ain't it pretty?"

"This is the only window we can see it from," said Una. "I love to watch it."

"Do you? So do I. I could see it from the Wiley loft and it was the only comfort I had. When I was all sore from being licked I'd watch it and forget about the places that hurt. I'd think of the ships sailing away and away from it and wish I was on one of them sailing far away too--away from everything. On winter nights when it didn't shine, I just felt real lonesome. Say, Una, what makes all you folks so kind to me when I'm just a

stranger?"

"Because it's right to be. The bible tells us to be kind to everybody."

"Does it? Well, I guess most folks don't mind it much then. I never remember of any one being kind to me before--true's you live I don't. Say, Una, ain't them shadows on the walls pretty? They look just like a flock of little dancing birds. And say, Una, I like all you folks and them Blythe boys and Di, but I don't like that Nan. She's a proud one."

"Oh, no, Mary, she isn't a bit proud," said Una eagerly. "Not a single bit."

"Don't tell me. Any one that holds her head like that IS proud. I don't like her."

"WE all like her very much."

"Oh, I s'pose you like her better'n me?" said Mary jealously.

"Do you?"

"Why, Mary--we've known her for weeks and we've only known you a few hours," stammered Una.

"So you do like her better then?" said Mary in a rage. "All right! Like her all you want to. I don't care. I can get along without you."

She flung herself over against the wall of the garret with a slam.

"Oh, Mary," said Una, pushing a tender arm over Mary's uncompromising back, "don't talk like that. I DO like you ever so much. And you make me feel so bad."

No answer. Presently Una gave a sob. Instantly Mary squirmed around again and engulfed Una in a bear's hug.

"Hush up," she ordered. "Don't go crying over what I said. I was as mean as the devil to talk that way. I order to be skinned alive--and you all so good to me. I should think you WOULD like any one better'n me. I deserve every licking I ever got. Hush, now. If you cry any more I'll go and walk right down to the harbour in this night-dress and drown myself."

This terrible threat made Una choke back her sobs. Her tears were wiped away by Mary with the lace frill of the spare-room pillow and forger and forgiven cuddled down together again, harmony restored, to watch the shadows of the vine leaves on the moonlit wall until they fell asleep.

And in the study below Rev. John Meredith walked the floor with rapt face and shining eyes, thinking out his message of the morrow, and knew not that under his own roof there was a little forlorn soul, stumbling in darkness and ignorance, beset by terror and compassed about with difficulties too great for it to grapple in its unequal struggle with a big indifferent world.