

CHAPTER VI. MARY STAYS AT THE MANSE

The manse children took Mary Vance to church with them the next day. At first Mary objected to the idea.

"Didn't you go to church over-harbour?" asked Una.

"You bet. Mrs. Wiley never troubled church much, but I went every Sunday I could get off. I was mighty thankful to go to some place where I could sit down for a spell. But I can't go to church in this old ragged dress."

This difficulty was removed by Faith offering the loan of her second best dress.

"It's faded a little and two of the buttons are off, but I guess it'll do."

"I'll sew the buttons on in a jiffy," said Mary.

"Not on Sunday," said Una, shocked.

"Sure. The better the day the better the deed. You just gimme a needle and thread and look the other way if you're squeamish."

Faith's school boots, and an old black velvet cap that had once

been Cecilia Meredith's, completed Mary's costume, and to church she went. Her behaviour was quite conventional, and though some wondered who the shabby little girl with the manse children was she did not attract much attention. She listened to the sermon with outward decorum and joined lustily in the singing. She had, it appeared, a clear, strong voice and a good ear.

"His blood can make the VIOLETS clean," carolled Mary blithely. Mrs. Jimmy Milgrave, whose pew was just in front of the manse pew, turned suddenly and looked the child over from top to toe. Mary, in a mere superfluity of naughtiness, stuck out her tongue at Mrs. Milgrave, much to Una's horror.

"I couldn't help it," she declared after church. "What'd she want to stare at me like that for? Such manners! I'm GLAD stuck my tongue out at her. I wish I'd stuck it farther out. Say, I saw Rob MacAllister from over-harbour there. Wonder if he'll tell Mrs. Wiley on me."

No Mrs. Wiley appeared, however, and in a few day the children forgot to look for her. Mary was apparently a fixture at the manse. But she refused to go to school with the others.

"Nope. I've finished my education," she said, when Faith urged her to go. "I went to school four winters since I come to Mrs. Wiley's and I've had all I want of THAT. I'm sick and tired of

being everlastingly jawed at 'cause I didn't get my home-lessons done. I'D no time to do home-lessons."

"Our teacher won't jaw you. He is awfully nice," said Faith.

"Well, I ain't going. I can read and write and cipher up to fractions. That's all I want. You fellows go and I'll stay home. You needn't be scared I'll steal anything. I swear I'm honest."

Mary employed herself while the others were at school in cleaning up the manse. In a few days it was a different place. Floors were swept, furniture dusted, everything straightened out. She mended the spare-room bed-tick, she sewed on missing buttons, she patched clothes neatly, she even invaded the study with broom and dustpan and ordered Mr. Meredith out while she put it to rights. But there was one department with which Aunt Martha refused to let her interfere. Aunt Martha might be deaf and half blind and very childish, but she was resolved to keep the commissariat in her own hands, in spite of all Mary's wiles and stratagems.

"I can tell you if old Martha'd let ME cook you'd have some decent meals," she told the manse children indignantly. "There'd be no more 'ditto'--and no more lumpy porridge and blue milk either. What DOES she do with all the cream?"

"She gives it to the cat. He's hers, you know," said Faith.

"I'd like to CAT her," exclaimed Mary bitterly. "I've no use for cats anyhow. They belong to the old Nick. You can tell that by their eyes. Well, if old Martha won't, she won't, I s'pose. But it gits on my nerves to see good vittles spoiled."

When school came out they always went to Rainbow Valley. Mary refused to play in the graveyard. She declared she was afraid of ghosts.

"There's no such thing as ghosts," declared Jem Blythe.

"Oh, ain't there?"

"Did you ever see any?"

"Hundreds of 'em," said Mary promptly.

"What are they like?" said Carl.

"Awful-looking. Dressed all in white with skellington hands and heads," said Mary.

"What did you do?" asked Una.

"Run like the devil," said Mary. Then she caught Walter's eyes and blushed. Mary was a good deal in awe of Walter. She declared to the manse girls that his eyes made her nervous.

"I think of all the lies I've ever told when I look into them," she said, "and I wish I hadn't."

Jem was Mary's favourite. When he took her to the attic at Ingleside and showed her the museum of curios that Captain Jim Boyd had bequeathed to him she was immensely pleased and flattered. She also won Carl's heart entirely by her interest in his beetles and ants. It could not be denied that Mary got on rather better with the boys than with the girls. She quarrelled bitterly with Nan Blythe the second day.

"Your mother is a witch," she told Nan scornfully. "Red-haired women are always witches." Then she and Faith fell out about the rooster. Mary said its tail was too short. Faith angrily retorted that she guessed God know what length to make a rooster's tail. They did not "speak" for a day over this. Mary treated Una's hairless, one-eyed doll with consideration; but when Una showed her other prized treasure--a picture of an angel carrying a baby, presumably to heaven, Mary declared that it looked too much like a ghost for her. Una crept away to her room and cried over this, but Mary hunted her out, hugged her repentantly and implored forgiveness. No one could keep up a

quarrel long with Mary--not even Nan, who was rather prone to hold grudges and never quite forgave the insult to her mother. Mary was jolly. She could and did tell the most thrilling ghost stories. Rainbow Valley seances were undeniably more exciting after Mary came. She learned to play on the jew's-harp and soon eclipsed Jerry.

"Never struck anything yet I couldn't do if I put my mind to it," she declared. Mary seldom lost a chance of tooting her own horn. She taught them how to make "blow-bags" out of the thick leaves of the "live-forever" that flourished in the old Bailey garden, she initiated them into the toothsome qualities of the "sours" that grew in the niches of the graveyard dyke, and she could make the most wonderful shadow pictures on the walls with her long, flexible fingers. And when they all went picking gum in Rainbow Valley Mary always got "the biggest chew" and bragged about it. There were times when they hated her and times when they loved her. But at all times they found her interesting. So they submitted quite meekly to her bossing, and by the end of a fortnight had come to feel that she must always have been with them.

"It's the queerest thing that Mrs. Wiley hain't been after me," said Mary. "I can't understand it."

"Maybe she isn't going to bother about you at all," said Una.

"Then you can just go on staying here."

"This house ain't hardly big enough for me and old Martha," said Mary darkly. "It's a very fine thing to have enough to eat--I've often wondered what it would be like--but I'm p'ticler about my cooking. And Mrs. Wiley'll be here yet. SHE'S got a rod in pickle for me all right. I don't think about it so much in daytime but say, girls, up there in that garret at night I git to thinking and thinking of it, till I just almost wish she'd come and have it over with. I dunno's one real good whipping would be much worse'n all the dozen I've lived through in my mind ever since I run away. Were any of you ever licked?"

"No, of course not," said Faith indignantly. "Father would never do such a thing."

"You don't know you're alive," said Mary with a sigh half of envy, half of superiority. "You don't know what I've come through. And I s'pose the Blythes were never licked either?"

"No-o-o, I guess not. But I THINK they were sometimes spanked when they were small."

"A spanking doesn't amount to anything," said Mary contemptuously. "If my folks had just spanked me I'd have thought they were petting me. Well, it ain't a fair world. I

wouldn't mind taking my share of wallopings but I've had a darn sight too many."

"It isn't right to say that word, Mary," said Una reproachfully.

"You promised me you wouldn't say it."

"G'way," responded Mary. "If you knew some of the words I COULD say if I liked you wouldn't make such a fuss over darn. And you know very well I hain't ever told any lies since I come here."

"What about all those ghosts you said you saw?" asked Faith.

Mary blushed.

"That was diff'runt," she said defiantly. "I knew you wouldn't believe them yarns and I didn't intend you to. And I really did see something queer one night when I was passing the over-harbour graveyard, true's you live. I dunno whether 'twas a ghost or Sandy Crawford's old white nag, but it looked blamed queer and I tell you I scooted at the rate of no man's business."