

CHAPTER VII. A FISHY EPISODE

Rilla Blythe walked proudly, and perhaps a little primly, through the main "street" of the Glen and up the manse hill, carefully carrying a small basketful of early strawberries, which Susan had coaxed into lusciousness in one of the sunny nooks of Ingleside. Susan had charged Rilla to give the basket to nobody except Aunt Martha or Mr. Meredith, and Rilla, very proud of being entrusted with such an errand, was resolved to carry out her instructions to the letter.

Susan had dressed her daintily in a white, starched, and embroidered dress, with sash of blue and beaded slippers. Her long ruddy curls were sleek and round, and Susan had let her put on her best hat, out of compliment to the manse. It was a somewhat elaborate affair, wherein Susan's taste had had more to say than Anne's, and Rilla's small soul gloried in its splendours of silk and lace and flowers. She was very conscious of her hat, and I am afraid she strutted up the manse hill. The strut, or the hat, or both, got on the nerves of Mary Vance, who was swinging on the lawn gate. Mary's temper was somewhat ruffled just then, into the bargain. Aunt Martha had refused to let her peel the potatoes and had ordered her out of the kitchen.

"Yah! You'll bring the potatoes to the table with strips of skin hanging to them and half boiled as usual! My, but it'll be nice

to go to your funeral," shrieked Mary. She went out of the kitchen, giving the door such a bang that even Aunt Martha heard it, and Mr. Meredith in his study felt the vibration and thought absently that there must have been a slight earthquake shock. Then he went on with his sermon.

Mary slipped from the gate and confronted the spick-and-span damsel of Ingleside.

"What you got there?" she demanded, trying to take the basket.

Rilla resisted. "It'th for Mithter Meredith," she lisped.

"Give it to me. I'LL give it to him," said Mary.

"No. Thuthan thaid that I wathn't to give it to anybody but Mithter Mer'dith or Aunt Martha," insisted Rilla.

Mary eyed her sourly.

"You think you're something, don't you, all dressed up like a doll! Look at me. My dress is all rags and I don't care! I'd rather be ragged than a doll baby. Go home and tell them to put you in a glass case. Look at me--look at me--look at me!"

Mary executed a wild dance around the dismayed and bewildered

Rilla, flirting her ragged skirt and vociferating "Look at me--look at me" until poor Rilla was dizzy. But as the latter tried to edge away towards the gate Mary pounced on her again.

"You give me that basket," she ordered with a grimace. Mary was past mistress in the art of "making faces." She could give her countenance a most grotesque and unearthly appearance out of which her strange, brilliant, white eyes gleamed with weird effect.

"I won't," gasped Rilla, frightened but staunch. "You let me go, Mary Vanth."

Mary let go for a minute and looked around here. Just inside the gate was a small "flake," on which a half a dozen large codfish were drying. One of Mr. Meredith's parishioners had presented him with them one day, perhaps in lieu of the subscription he was supposed to pay to the stipend and never did. Mr. Meredith had thanked him and then forgotten all about the fish, which would have promptly spoiled had not the indefatigable Mary prepared them for drying and rigged up the "flake" herself on which to dry them.

Mary had a diabolical inspiration. She flew to the "flake" and seized the largest fish there--a huge, flat thing, nearly as big as herself. With a whoop she swooped down on the terrified

Rilla, brandishing her weird missile. Rilla's courage gave way. To be lambasted with a dried codfish was such an unheard-of thing that Rilla could not face it. With a shriek she dropped her basket and fled. The beautiful berries, which Susan had so tenderly selected for the minister, rolled in a rosy torrent over the dusty road and were trodden on by the flying feet of pursuer and pursued. The basket and contents were no longer in Mary's mind. She thought only of the delight of giving Rilla Blythe the scare of her life. She would teach HER to come giving herself airs because of her fine clothes.

Rilla flew down the hill and along the street. Terror lent wings to her feet, and she just managed to keep ahead of Mary, who was somewhat hampered by her own laughter, but who had breath enough to give occasional blood-curdling whoops as she ran, flourishing her codfish in the air. Through the Glen street they swept, while everybody ran to the windows and gates to see them. Mary felt she was making a tremendous sensation and enjoyed it. Rilla, blind with terror and spent of breath, felt that she could run no longer. In another instant that terrible girl would be on her with the codfish. At this point the poor mite stumbled and fell into the mud-puddle at the end of the street just as Miss Cornelia came out of Carter Flagg's store.

Miss Cornelia took the whole situation in at a glance. So did Mary. The latter stopped short in her mad career and before Miss

Cornelia could speak she had whirled around and was running up as fast as she had run down. Miss Cornelia's lips tightened ominously, but she knew it was no use to think of chasing her. So she picked up poor, sobbing, dishevelled Rilla instead and took her home. Rilla was heart-broken. Her dress and slippers and hat were ruined and her six year old pride had received terrible bruises.

Susan, white with indignation, heard Miss Cornelia's story of Mary Vance's exploit.

"Oh, the hussy--oh, the littly hussy!" she said, as she carried Rilla away for purification and comfort.

"This thing has gone far enough, Anne dearie," said Miss Cornelia resolutely. "Something must be done. WHO is this creature who is staying at the manse and where does she come from?"

"I understood she was a little girl from over-harbour who was visiting at the manse," answered Anne, who saw the comical side of the codfish chase and secretly thought Rilla was rather vain and needed a lesson or two.

"I know all the over-harbour families who come to our church and that imp doesn't belong to any of them," retorted Miss Cornelia.

"She is almost in rags and when she goes to church she wears

Faith Meredith's old clothes. There's some mystery here, and I'm going to investigate it, since it seems nobody else will. I believe she was at the bottom of their goings-on in Warren Mead's spruce bush the other day. Did you hear of their frightening his mother into a fit?"

"No. I knew Gilbert had been called to see her, but I did not hear what the trouble was."

"Well, you know she has a weak heart. And one day last week, when she was all alone on the veranda, she heard the most awful shrieks of 'murder' and 'help' coming from the bush--positively frightful sounds, Anne dearie. Her heart gave out at once. Warren heard them himself at the barn, and went straight to the bush to investigate, and there he found all the manse children sitting on a fallen tree and screaming 'murder' at the top of their lungs. They told him they were only in fun and didn't think anyone would hear them. They were just playing Indian ambush. Warren went back to the house and found his poor mother unconscious on the veranda."

Susan, who had returned, sniffed contemptuously.

"I think she was very far from being unconscious, Mrs. Marshall Elliott, and that you may tie to. I have been hearing of Amelia Warren's weak heart for forty years. She had it when she was

twenty. She enjoys making a fuss and having the doctor, and any excuse will do."

"I don't think Gilbert thought her attack very serious," said Anne.

"Oh, that may very well be," said Miss Cornelia. "But the matter has made an awful lot of talk and the Meads being Methodists makes it that much worse. What is going to become of those children? Sometimes I can't sleep at nights for thinking about them, Anne dearie. I really do question if they get enough to eat, even, for their father is so lost in dreams that he doesn't often remember he has a stomach, and that lazy old woman doesn't bother cooking what she ought. They are just running wild and now that school is closing they'll be worse than ever."

"They do have jolly times," said Anne, laughing over the recollections of some Rainbow Valley happenings that had come to her ears. "And they are all brave and frank and loyal and truthful."

"That's a true word, Anne dearie, and when you come to think of all the trouble in the church those two tattling, deceitful youngsters of the last minister's made, I'm inclined to overlook a good deal in the Merediths."

"When all is said and done, Mrs. Dr. dear, they are very nice children," said Susan. "They have got plenty of original sin in them and that I will admit, but maybe it is just as well, for if they had not they might spoil from over-sweetness. Only I do think it is not proper for them to play in a graveyard and that I will maintain."

"But they really play quite quietly there," excused Anne. "They don't run and yell as they do elsewhere. Such howls as drift up here from Rainbow Valley sometimes! Though I fancy my own small fry bear a valiant part in them. They had a sham battle there last night and had to 'roar' themselves, because they had no artillery to do it, so Jem says. Jem is passing through the stage where all boys hanker to be soldiers."

"Well, thank goodness, he'll never be a soldier," said Miss Cornelia. "I never approved of our boys going to that South African fracas. But it's over, and not likely anything of the kind will ever happen again. I think the world is getting more sensible. As for the Merediths, I've said many a time and I say it again, if Mr. Meredith had a wife all would be well."

"He called twice at the Kirks' last week, so I am told," said Susan.

"Well," said Miss Cornelia thoughtfully, "as a rule, I don't

approve of a minister marrying in his congregation. It generally spoils him. But in this case it would do no harm, for every one likes Elizabeth Kirk and nobody else is hankering for the job of stepmothering those youngsters. Even the Hill girls balk at that. They haven't been found laying traps for Mr. Meredith. Elizabeth would make him a good wife if he only thought so. But the trouble is, she really is homely and, Anne dearie, Mr. Meredith, abstracted as he is, has an eye for a good-looking woman, man-like. He isn't SO other-worldly when it comes to that, believe ME."

"Elizabeth Kirk is a very nice person, but they do say that people have nearly frozen to death in her mother's spare-room bed before now, Mrs. Dr. dear," said Susan darkly. "If I felt I had any right to express an opinion concerning such a solemn matter as a minister's marriage I would say that I think Elizabeth's cousin Sarah, over-harbour, would make Mr. Meredith a better wife."

"Why, Sarah Kirk is a Methodist," said Miss Cornelia, much as if Susan had suggested a Hottentot as a manse bride.

"She would likely turn Presbyterian if she married Mr. Meredith," retorted Susan.

Miss Cornelia shook her head. Evidently with her it was, once a

Methodist, always a Methodist.

"Sarah Kirk is entirely out of the question," she said positively. "And so is Emmeline Drew--though the Drews are all trying to make the match. They are literally throwing poor Emmeline at his head, and he hasn't the least idea of it."

"Emmeline Drew has no gumption, I must allow," said Susan. "She is the kind of woman, Mrs. Dr. dear, who would put a hot-water bottle in your bed on a dog-night and then have her feelings hurt because you were not grateful. And her mother was a very poor housekeeper. Did you ever hear the story of her dishcloth? She lost her dishcloth one day. But the next day she found it. Oh, yes, Mrs. Dr. dear, she found it, in the goose at the dinner-table, mixed up with the stuffing. Do you think a woman like that would do for a minister's mother-in-law? I do not. But no doubt I would be better employed in mending little Jem's trousers than in talking gossip about my neighbours. He tore them something scandalous last night in Rainbow Valley."

"Where is Walter?" asked Anne.

"He is up to no good, I fear, Mrs. Dr. dear. He is in the attic writing something in an exercise book. And he has not done as well in arithmetic this term as he should, so the teacher tells me. Too well I know the reason why. He has been writing silly

rhymes when he should have been doing his sums. I am afraid that boy is going to be a poet, Mrs. Dr. dear."

"He is a poet now, Susan."

"Well, you take it real calm, Mrs. Dr. dear. I suppose it is the best way, when a person has the strength. I had an uncle who began by being a poet and ended up by being a tramp. Our family were dreadfully ashamed of him."

"You don't seem to think very highly of poets, Susan," said Anne, laughing.

"Who does, Mrs. Dr. dear?" asked Susan in genuine astonishment.

"What about Milton and Shakespeare? And the poets of the Bible?"

"They tell me Milton could not get along with his wife, and Shakespeare was no more than respectable by times. As for the Bible, of course things were different in those sacred days-- although I never had a high opinion of King David, say what you will. I never knew any good to come of writing poetry, and I hope and pray that blessed boy will outgrow the tendency. If he does not--we must see what emulsion of cod-liver oil will do."