

CHAPTER IX. UNA INTERVENES

Miss Cornelia had an interview with Mr. Meredith which proved something of a shock to that abstracted gentleman. She pointed out to him, none too respectfully, his dereliction of duty in allowing a waif like Mary Vance to come into his family and associate with his children without knowing or learning anything about her.

"I don't say there is much harm done, of course," she concluded. "This Mary-creature isn't what you might call bad, when all is said and done. I've been questioning your children and the Blythes, and from what I can make out there's nothing much to be said against the child except that she's slangy and doesn't use very refined language. But think what might have happened if she'd been like some of those home children we know of. You know yourself what that poor little creature the Jim Flaggs' had, taught and told the Flagg children."

Mr. Meredith did know and was honestly shocked over his own carelessness in the matter.

"But what is to be done, Mrs. Elliott?" he asked helplessly. "We can't turn the poor child out. She must be cared for."

"Of course. We'd better write to the Hopetown authorities at

once. Meanwhile, I suppose she might as well stay here for a few more days till we hear from them. But keep your eyes and ears open, Mr. Meredith."

Susan would have died of horror on the spot if she had heard Miss Cornelia so admonishing a minister. But Miss Cornelia departed in a warm glow of satisfaction over duty done, and that night Mr. Meredith asked Mary to come into his study with him. Mary obeyed, looking literally ghastly with fright. But she got the surprise of her poor, battered little life. This man, of whom she had stood so terribly in awe, was the kindest, gentlest soul she had ever met. Before she knew what happened Mary found herself pouring all her troubles into his ear and receiving in return such sympathy and tender understanding as it had never occurred to her to imagine. Mary left the study with her face and eyes so softened that Una hardly knew her.

"Your father's all right, when he does wake up," she said with a sniff that just escaped being a sob. "It's a pity he doesn't wake up oftener. He said I wasn't to blame for Mrs. Wiley dying, but that I must try to think of her good points and not of her bad ones. I dunno what good points she had, unless it was keeping her house clean and making first-class butter. I know I 'most wore my arms out scrubbing her old kitchen floor with the knots in it. But anything your father says goes with me after this."

Mary proved a rather dull companion in the following days, however. She confided to Una that the more she thought of going back to the asylum the more she hated it. Una racked her small brains for some way of averting it, but it was Nan Blythe who came to the rescue with a somewhat startling suggestion.

"Mrs. Elliott might take Mary herself. She has a great big house and Mr. Elliott is always wanting her to have help. It would be just a splendid place for Mary. Only she'd have to behave herself."

"Oh, Nan, do you think Mrs. Elliott would take her?"

"It wouldn't do any harm if you asked her," said Nan. At first Una did not think she could. She was so shy that to ask a favour of anybody was agony to her. And she was very much in awe of the bustling, energetic Mrs. Elliott. She liked her very much and always enjoyed a visit to her house; but to go and ask her to adopt Mary Vance seemed such a height of presumption that Una's timid spirit quailed.

When the Hoptown authorities wrote to Mr. Meredith to send Mary to them without delay Mary cried herself to sleep in the manse attic that night and Una found a desperate courage. The next evening she slipped away from the manse to the harbour road. Far

down in Rainbow Valley she heard joyous laughter but her way lay not there. She was terribly pale and terribly in earnest--so much so that she took no notice of the people she met--and old Mrs. Stanley Flagg was quite huffed and said Una Meredith would be as absentminded as her father when she grew up.

Miss Cornelia lived half way between the Glen and Four Winds Point, in a house whose original glaring green hue had mellowed down to an agreeable greenish gray. Marshall Elliott had planted trees about it and set out a rose garden and a spruce hedge. It was quite a different place from what it had been in years ago. The manse children and the Ingleside children liked to go there. It was a beautiful walk down the old harbour road, and there was always a well-filled cooky jar at the end.

The misty sea was lapping softly far down on the sands. Three big boats were skimming down the harbour like great white sea-birds. A schooner was coming up the channel. The world of Four Winds was steeped in glowing colour, and subtle music, and strange glamour, and everybody should have been happy in it. But when Una turned in at Miss Cornelia's gate her very legs had almost refused to carry her.

Miss Cornelia was alone on the veranda. Una had hoped Mr. Elliott would be there. He was so big and hearty and twinkly that there would be encouragement in his presence. She sat on

the little stool Miss Cornelia brought out and tried to eat the doughnut Miss Cornelia gave her. It stuck in her throat, but she swallowed desperately lest Miss Cornelia be offended. She could not talk; she was still pale; and her big, dark-blue eyes looked so piteous that Miss Cornelia concluded the child was in some trouble.

"What's on your mind, dearie?" she asked. "There's something, that's plain to be seen."

Una swallowed the last twist of doughnut with a desperate gulp.

"Mrs. Elliott, won't you take Mary Vance?" she said beseechingly.

Miss Cornelia stared blankly.

"Me! Take Mary Vance! Do you mean keep her?"

"Yes--keep her--adopt her," said Una eagerly, gaining courage now that the ice was broken. "Oh, Mrs. Elliott, PLEASE do. She doesn't want to go back to the asylum--she cries every night about it. She's so afraid of being sent to another hard place. And she's SO smart--there isn't anything she can't do. I know you wouldn't be sorry if you took her."

"I never thought of such a thing," said Miss Cornelia rather helplessly.

"WON'T you think of it?" implored Una.

"But, dearie, I don't want help. I'm quite able to do all the work here. And I never thought I'd like to have a home girl if I did need help."

The light went out of Una's eyes. Her lips trembled. She sat down on her stool again, a pathetic little figure of disappointment, and began to cry.

"Don't--dearie--don't," exclaimed Miss Cornelia in distress. She could never bear to hurt a child. "I don't say I WON'T take her--but the idea is so new it has just kerflummuxed me. I must think it over."

"Mary is SO smart," said Una again.

"Humph! So I've heard. I've heard she swears, too. Is that true?"

"I've never heard her swear EXACTLY," faltered Una uncomfortably.

"But I'm afraid she COULD."

"I believe you! Does she always tell the truth?"

"I think she does, except when she's afraid of a whipping."

"And yet you want me to take her!"

"SOME ONE has to take her," sobbed Una. "SOME ONE has to look after her, Mrs. Elliott."

"That's true. Perhaps it IS my duty to do it," said Miss Cornelia with a sigh. "Well, I'll have to talk it over with Mr. Elliott. So don't say anything about it just yet. Take another doughnut, dearie."

Una took it and ate it with a better appetite.

"I'm very fond of doughnuts," she confessed "Aunt Martha never makes any. But Miss Susan at Ingleside does, and sometimes she lets us have a plateful in Rainbow Valley. Do you know what I do when I'm hungry for doughnuts and can't get any, Mrs. Elliott?"

"No, dearie. What?"

"I get out mother's old cook book and read the doughnut recipe--and the other recipes. They sound SO nice. I always do that when I'm hungry--especially after we've had ditto for

dinner. THEN I read the fried chicken and the roast goose recipes. Mother could make all those nice things."

"Those manse children will starve to death yet if Mr. Meredith doesn't get married," Miss Cornelia told her husband indignantly after Una had gone. "And he won't--and what's to be done? And SHALL we take this Mary-creature, Marshall?"

"Yes, take her," said Marshall laconically.

"Just like a man," said his wife, despairingly. "Take her"--as if that was all. There are a hundred things to be considered, believe ME."

"Take her--and we'll consider them afterwards, Cornelia," said her husband.

In the end Miss Cornelia did take her and went up to announce her decision to the Ingleside people first.

"Splendid!" said Anne delightedly. "I've been hoping you would do that very thing, Miss Cornelia. I want that poor child to get a good home. I was a homeless little orphan just like her once."

"I don't think this Mary-creature is or ever will be much like you," retorted Miss Cornelia gloomily. "She's a cat of another

colour. But she's also a human being with an immortal soul to save. I've got a shorter catechism and a small tooth comb and I'm going to do my duty by her, now that I've set my hand to the plough, believe me."

Mary received the news with chastened satisfaction.

"It's better luck than I expected," she said.

"You'll have to mind your p's and q's with Mrs. Elliott," said Nan.

"Well, I can do that," flashed Mary. "I know how to behave when I want to just as well as you, Nan Blythe."

"You mustn't use bad words, you know, Mary," said Una anxiously.

"I s'pose she'd die of horror if I did," grinned Mary, her white eyes shining with unholy glee over the idea. "But you needn't worry, Una. Butter won't melt in my mouth after this. I'll be all prunes and prisms."

"Nor tell lies," added Faith.

"Not even to get off from a whipping?" pleaded Mary.

"Mrs. Elliott will NEVER whip you--NEVER," exclaimed Di.

"Won't she?" said Mary skeptically. "If I ever find myself in a place where I ain't licked I'll think it's heaven all right. No fear of me telling lies then. I ain't fond of telling 'em--I'd ruther not, if it comes to that."

The day before Mary's departure from the manse they had a picnic in her honour in Rainbow Valley, and that evening all the manse children gave her something from their scanty store of treasured things for a keepsake. Carl gave her his Noah's ark and Jerry his second best jew's-harp. Faith gave her a little hairbrush with a mirror in the back of it, which Mary had always considered very wonderful. Una hesitated between an old beaded purse and a gay picture of Daniel in the lion's den, and finally offered Mary her choice. Mary really hankered after the beaded purse, but she knew Una loved it, so she said,

"Give me Daniel. I'd rusher have it 'cause I'm partial to lions. Only I wish they'd et Daniel up. It would have been more exciting."

At bedtime Mary coaxed Una to sleep with her.

"It's for the last time," she said, "and it's raining tonight, and I hate sleeping up there alone when it's raining on account

of that graveyard. I don't mind it on fine nights, but a night like this I can't see anything but the rain pouring down on them old white stones, and the wind round the window sounds as if them dead people were trying to get in and crying 'cause they couldn't."

"I like rainy nights," said Una, when they were cuddled down together in the little attic room, "and so do the Blythe girls."

"I don't mind 'em when I'm not handy to graveyards," said Mary. "If I was alone here I'd cry my eyes out I'd be so lonesome. I feel awful bad to be leaving you all."

"Mrs. Elliott will let you come up and play in Rainbow Valley quite often I'm sure," said Una. "And you WILL be a good girl, won't you, Mary?"

"Oh, I'll try," sighed Mary. "But it won't be as easy for me to be good--inside, I mean, as well as outside--as it is for you. You hadn't such scalawags of relations as I had."

"But your people must have had some good qualities as well as bad ones," argued Una. "You must live up to them and never mind their bad ones."

"I don't believe they had any good qualities," said Mary

gloomily. "I never heard of any. My grandfather had money, but they say he was a rascal. No, I'll just have to start out on my own hook and do the best I can."

"And God will help you, you know, Mary, if you ask Him."

"I don't know about that."

"Oh, Mary. You know we asked God to get a home for you and He did."

"I don't see what He had to do with it," retorted Mary. "It was you put it into Mrs. Elliott's head."

"But God put it into her HEART to take you. All my putting it into her HEAD wouldn't have done any good if He hadn't."

"Well, there may be something in that," admitted Mary. "Mind you, I haven't got anything against God, Una. I'm willing to give Him a chance. But, honest, I think He's an awful lot like your father--just absent-minded and never taking any notice of a body most of the time, but sometimes waking up all of a sudden and being awful good and kind and sensible."

"Oh, Mary, no!" exclaimed horrified Una. "God isn't a bit like father--I mean He's a thousand times better and kinder."

"If He's as good as your father He'll do for me," said Mary.

"When your father was talking to me I felt as if I never could be bad any more."

"I wish you'd talk to father about Him," sighed Una. "He can explain it all so much better than I can."

"Why, so I will, next time he wakes up," promised Mary. "That night he talked to me in the study he showed me real clear that my praying didn't kill Mrs. Wiley. My mind's been easy since, but I'm real cautious about praying. I guess the old rhyme is the safest. Say, Una, it seems to me if one has to pray to anybody it'd be better to pray to the devil than to God. God's good, anyhow so you say, so He won't do you any harm, but from all I can make out the devil needs to be pacified. I think the sensible way would be to say to HIM, 'Good devil, please don't tempt me. Just leave me alone, please.' Now, don't you?"

"Oh, no, no, Mary. I'm sure it couldn't be right to pray to the devil. And it wouldn't do any good because he's bad. It might aggravate him and he'd be worse than ever."

"Well, as to this God-matter," said Mary stubbornly, "since you and I can't settle it, there ain't no use in talking more about it until we've a chanct to find out the rights of it. I'll do

the best I can alone till then."

"If mother was alive she could tell us everything," said Una with a sigh.

"I wisht she was alive," said Mary. "I don't know what's going to become of you youngsters when I'm gone. Anyhow, DO try and keep the house a little tidy. The way people talks about it is scandalous. And the first thing you know your father will be getting married again and then your noses will be out of joint."

Una was startled. The idea of her father marrying again had never presented itself to her before. She did not like it and she lay silent under the chill of it.

"Stepmothers are AWFUL creatures," Mary went on. "I could make your blood run cold if I was to tell you all I know about 'em. The Wilson kids across the road from Wiley's had a stepmother. She was just as bad to 'em as Mrs. Wiley was to me. It'll be awful if you get a stepmother."

"I'm sure we won't," said Una tremulously. "Father won't marry anybody else."

"He'll be hounded into it, I expect," said Mary darkly. "All the old maids in the settlement are after him. There's no being up

to them. And the worst of stepmothers is, they always set your father against you. He'd never care anything about you again. He'd always take her part and her children's part. You see, she'd make him believe you were all bad."

"I wish you hadn't told me this, Mary," cried Una. "It makes me feel so unhappy."

"I only wanted to warn you," said Mary, rather repentantly. "Of course, your father's so absent-minded he mightn't happen to think of getting married again. But it's better to be prepared."

Long after Mary slept serenely little Una lay awake, her eyes smarting with tears. Oh, how dreadful it would be if her father should marry somebody who would make him hate her and Jerry and Faith and Carl! She couldn't bear it--she couldn't!

Mary had not instilled any poison of the kind Miss Cornelia had feared into the manse children's minds. Yet she had certainly contrived to do a little mischief with the best of intentions.

But she slept dreamlessly, while Una lay awake and the rain fell and the wind wailed around the old gray manse. And the Rev. John Meredith forgot to go to bed at all because he was absorbed in reading a life of St. Augustine. It was gray dawn when he finished it and went upstairs, wrestling with the problems of two thousand years ago. The door of the girls' room was open and he

saw Faith lying asleep, rosy and beautiful. He wondered where Una was. Perhaps she had gone over to "stay all night" with the Blythe girls. She did this occasionally, deeming it a great treat. John Meredith sighed. He felt that Una's whereabouts ought not to be a mystery to him. Cecelia would have looked after her better than that.

If only Cecelia were still with him! How pretty and gay she had been! How the old manse up at Maywater had echoed to her songs! And she had gone away so suddenly, taking her laughter and music and leaving silence--so suddenly that he had never quite got over his feeling of amazement. How could SHE, the beautiful and vivid, have died?

The idea of a second marriage had never presented itself seriously to John Meredith. He had loved his wife so deeply that he believed he could never care for any woman again. He had a vague idea that before very long Faith would be old enough to take her mother's place. Until then, he must do the best he could alone. He sighed and went to his room, where the bed was still unmade. Aunt Martha had forgotten it, and Mary had not dared to make it because Aunt Martha had forbidden her to meddle with anything in the minister's room. But Mr. Meredith did not notice that it was unmade. His last thoughts were of St. Augustine.