

CHAPTER X. THE MANSE GIRLS CLEAN HOUSE

"Ugh," said Faith, sitting up in bed with a shiver. "It's raining. I do hate a rainy Sunday. Sunday is dull enough even when it's fine."

"We oughtn't to find Sunday dull," said Una sleepily, trying to pull her drowsy wits together with an uneasy conviction that they had overslept.

"But we DO, you know," said Faith candidly. "Mary Vance says most Sundays are so dull she could hang herself."

"We ought to like Sunday better than Mary Vance," said Una remorsefully. "We're the minister's children."

"I wish we were a blacksmith's children," protested Faith angrily, hunting for her stockings. "THEN people wouldn't expect us to be better than other children. JUST look at the holes in my heels. Mary darned them all up before she went away, but they're as bad as ever now. Una, get up. I can't get the breakfast alone. Oh, dear. I wish father and Jerry were home. You wouldn't think we'd miss father much--we don't see much of him when he is home. And yet EVERYTHING seems gone. I must run

in and see how Aunt Martha is."

"Is she any better?" asked Una, when Faith returned.

"No, she isn't. She's groaning with the misery still. Maybe we ought to tell Dr. Blythe. But she says not--she never had a doctor in her life and she isn't going to begin now. She says doctors just live by poisoning people. Do you suppose they do?"

"No, of course not," said Una indignantly. "I'm sure Dr. Blythe wouldn't poison anybody."

"Well, we'll have to rub Aunt Martha's back again after breakfast. We'd better not make the flannels as hot as we did yesterday."

Faith giggled over the remembrance. They had nearly scalded the skin off poor Aunt Martha's back. Una sighed. Mary Vance would have known just what the precise temperature of flannels for a misery back should be. Mary knew everything. They knew nothing. And how could they learn, save by bitter experience for which, in this instance, unfortunate Aunt Martha had paid?

The preceding Monday Mr. Meredith had left for Nova Scotia to spend his short vacation, taking Jerry with him. On Wednesday Aunt Martha was suddenly seized with a recurring and mysterious

ailment which she always called "the misery," and which was tolerably certain to attack her at the most inconvenient times. She could not rise from her bed, any movement causing agony. A doctor she flatly refused to have. Faith and Una cooked the meals and waited on her. The less said about the meals the better--yet they were not much worse than Aunt Martha's had been. There were many women in the village who would have been glad to come and help, but Aunt Martha refused to let her plight be known.

"You must worry on till I kin git around," she groaned. "Thank goodness, John isn't here. There's a plenty o' cold biled meat and bread and you kin try your hand at making porridge."

The girls had tried their hand, but so far without much success. The first day it had been too thin. The next day so thick that you could cut it in slices. And both days it had been burned.

"I hate porridge," said Faith viciously. "When I have a house of my own I'm NEVER going to have a single bit of porridge in it."

"What'll your children do then?" asked Una. "Children have to have porridge or they won't grow. Everybody says so."

"They'll have to get along without it or stay runts," retorted Faith stubbornly. "Here, Una, you stir it while I set the table."

If I leave it for a minute the horrid stuff will burn. It's half past nine. We'll be late for Sunday School."

"I haven't seen anyone going past yet," said Una. "There won't likely be many out. Just see how it's pouring. And when there's no preaching the folks won't come from a distance to bring the children."

"Go and call Carl," said Faith.

Carl, it appeared, had a sore throat, induced by getting wet in the Rainbow Valley marsh the previous evening while pursuing dragon-flies. He had come home with dripping stockings and boots and had sat out the evening in them. He could not eat any breakfast and Faith made him go back to bed again. She and Una left the table as it was and went to Sunday School. There was no one in the school room when they got there and no one came. They waited until eleven and then went home.

"There doesn't seem to be anybody at the Methodist Sunday School either," said Una.

"I'm GLAD," said Faith. "I'd hate to think the Methodists were better at going to Sunday School on rainy Sundays than the Presbyterians. But there's no preaching in their Church to-day, either, so likely their Sunday School is in the afternoon."

Una washed the dishes, doing them quite nicely, for so much had she learned from Mary Vance. Faith swept the floor after a fashion and peeled the potatoes for dinner, cutting her finger in the process.

"I wish we had something for dinner besides ditto," sighed Una. "I'm so tired of it. The Blythe children don't know what ditto is. And we NEVER have any pudding. Nan says Susan would faint if they had no pudding on Sundays. Why aren't we like other people, Faith?"

"I don't want to be like other people," laughed Faith, tying up her bleeding finger. "I like being myself. It's more interesting. Jessie Drew is as good a housekeeper as her mother, but would you want to be as stupid as she is?"

"But our house isn't right. Mary Vance says so. She says people talk about it being so untidy."

Faith had an inspiration.

"We'll clean it all up," she cried. "We'll go right to work to-morrow. It's a real good chance when Aunt Martha is laid up and can't interfere with us. We'll have it all lovely and clean when father comes home, just like it was when Mary went away."

ANY ONE can sweep and dust and wash windows. People won't be able to talk about us any more. Jem Blythe says it's only old cats that talk, but their talk hurts just as much as anybody's."

"I hope it will be fine to-morrow," said Una, fired with enthusiasm. "Oh, Faith, it will be splendid to be all cleaned up and like other people."

"I hope Aunt Martha's misery will last over to-morrow," said Faith. "If it doesn't we won't get a single thing done."

Faith's amiable wish was fulfilled. The next day found Aunt Martha still unable to rise. Carl, too, was still sick and easily prevailed on to stay in bed. Neither Faith nor Una had any idea how sick the boy really was; a watchful mother would have had a doctor without delay; but there was no mother, and poor little Carl, with his sore throat and aching head and crimson cheeks, rolled himself up in his twisted bedclothes and suffered alone, somewhat comforted by the companionship of a small green lizard in the pocket of his ragged nighty.

The world was full of summer sunshine after the rain. It was a peerless day for house-cleaning and Faith and Una went gaily to work.

"We'll clean the dining-room and the parlour," said Faith. "It

wouldn't do to meddle with the study, and it doesn't matter much about the upstairs. The first thing is to take everything out."

Accordingly, everything was taken out. The furniture was piled on the veranda and lawn and the Methodist graveyard fence was gaily draped with rugs. An orgy of sweeping followed, with an attempt at dusting on Una's part, while Faith washed the windows of the dining-room, breaking one pane and cracking two in the process. Una surveyed the streaked result dubiously.

"They don't look right, somehow," she said. "Mrs. Elliott's and Susan's windows just shine and sparkle."

"Never mind. They let the sunshine through just as well," said Faith cheerfully. "They MUST be clean after all the soap and water I've used, and that's the main thing. Now, it's past eleven, so I'll wipe up this mess on the floor and we'll go outside. You dust the furniture and I'll shake the rugs. I'm going to do it in the graveyard. I don't want to send dust flying all over the lawn.

Faith enjoyed the rug shaking. To stand on Hezekiah Pollock's tombstone, flapping and shaking rugs, was real fun. To be sure, Elder Abraham Clow and his wife, driving past in their capacious double-seated buggy, seemed to gaze at her in grim disapproval.

"Isn't that a terrible sight?" said Elder Abraham solemnly.

"I would never have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes," said Mrs. Elder Abraham, more solemnly still.

Faith waved a door mat cheerily at the Clow party. It did not worry her that the elder and his wife did not return her greeting. Everybody knew that Elder Abraham had never been known to smile since he had been appointed Superintendent of the Sunday School fourteen years previously. But it hurt her that Minnie and Adella Clow did not wave back. Faith liked Minnie and Adella. Next to the Blythes, they were her best friends in school and she always helped Adella with her sums. This was gratitude for you. Her friends cut her because she was shaking rugs in an old graveyard where, as Mary Vance said, not a living soul had been buried for years. Faith flounced around to the veranda, where she found Una grieved in spirit because the Clow girls had not waved to her, either.

"I suppose they're mad over something," said Faith. "Perhaps they're jealous because we play so much in Rainbow Valley with the Blythes. Well, just wait till school opens and Adella wants me to show her how to do her sums! We'll get square then. Come on, let's put the things back in. I'm tired to death and I don't believe the rooms will look much better than before we started-- though I shook out pecks of dust in the graveyard. I HATE

house-cleaning."

It was two o'clock before the tired girls finished the two rooms. They got a dreary bite in the kitchen and intended to wash the dishes at once. But Faith happened to pick up a new story-book Di Blythe had lent her and was lost to the world until sunset. Una took a cup of rank tea up to Carl but found him asleep; so she curled herself up on Jerry's bed and went to sleep too. Meanwhile, a weird story flew through Glen St. Mary and folks asked each other seriously what was to be done with those manse youngsters.

"That is past laughing at, believe ME," said Miss Cornelia to her husband, with a heavy sigh. "I couldn't believe it at first. Miranda Drew brought the story home from the Methodist Sunday School this afternoon and I simply scoffed at it. But Mrs. Elder Abraham says she and the Elder saw it with their own eyes."

"Saw what?" asked Marshall.

"Faith and Una Meredith stayed home from Sunday School this morning and CLEANED HOUSE," said Miss Cornelia, in accents of despair. "When Elder Abraham went home from the church--he had stayed behind to straighten out the library books--he saw them shaking rugs in the Methodist graveyard. I can never look a Methodist in the face again. Just think what a scandal it will

make!"

A scandal it assuredly did make, growing more scandalous as it spread, until the over-harbour people heard that the manse children had not only cleaned house and put out a washing on Sunday, but had wound up with an afternoon picnic in the graveyard while the Methodist Sunday School was going on. The only household which remained in blissful ignorance of the terrible thing was the manse itself; on what Faith and Una fondly believed to be Tuesday it rained again; for the next three days it rained; nobody came near the manse; the manse folk went nowhere; they might have waded through the misty Rainbow Valley up to Ingleside, but all the Blythe family, save Susan and the doctor, were away on a visit to Avonlea.

"This is the last of our bread," said Faith, "and the ditto is done. If Aunt Martha doesn't get better soon WHAT will we do?"

"We can buy some bread in the village and there's the codfish Mary dried," said Una. "But we don't know how to cook it."

"Oh, that's easy," laughed Faith. "You just boil it."

Boil it they did; but as it did not occur to them to soak it beforehand it was too salty to eat. That night they were very hungry; but by the following day their troubles were over.

Sunshine returned to the world; Carl was well and Aunt Martha's misery left her as suddenly as it had come; the butcher called at the manse and chased famine away. To crown all, the Blythes returned home, and that evening they and the manse children and Mary Vance kept sunset tryst once more in Rainbow Valley, where the daisies were floating upon the grass like spirits of the dew and the bells on the Tree Lovers rang like fairy chimes in the scented twilight.