

CHAPTER XIV. MRS. ALEC DAVIS MAKES A CALL

John Meredith walked slowly home. At first he thought a little about Rosemary, but by the time he reached Rainbow Valley he had forgotten all about her and was meditating on a point regarding German theology which Ellen had raised. He passed through Rainbow Valley and knew it not. The charm of Rainbow Valley had no potency against German theology. When he reached the manse he went to his study and took down a bulky volume in order to see which had been right, he or Ellen. He remained immersed in its mazes until dawn, struck a new trail of speculation and pursued it like a sleuth hound for the next week, utterly lost to the world, his parish and his family. He read day and night; he forgot to go to his meals when Una was not there to drag him to them; he never thought about Rosemary or Ellen again. Old Mrs. Marshall, over-harbour, was very ill and sent for him, but the message lay unheeded on his desk and gathered dust. Mrs. Marshall recovered but never forgave him. A young couple came to the manse to be married and Mr. Meredith, with unbrushed hair, in carpet slippers and faded dressing gown, married them. To be sure, he began by reading the funeral service to them and got along as far as "ashes to ashes and dust to dust" before he vaguely suspected that something was wrong.

"Dear me," he said absently, "that is strange--very strange."

The bride, who was very nervous, began to cry. The bridegroom, who was not in the least nervous, giggled.

"Please, sir, I think you're burying us instead of marrying us," he said.

"Excuse me," said Mr. Meredith, as it did not matter much. He turned up the marriage service and got through with it, but the bride never felt quite properly married for the rest of her life.

He forgot his prayer-meeting again--but that did not matter, for it was a wet night and nobody came. He might even have forgotten his Sunday service if it had not been for Mrs. Alec Davis. Aunt Martha came in on Saturday afternoon and told him that Mrs. Davis was in the parlour and wanted to see him. Mr. Meredith sighed. Mrs. Davis was the only woman in Glen St. Mary church whom he positively detested. Unfortunately, she was also the richest, and his board of managers had warned Mr. Meredith against offending her. Mr. Meredith seldom thought of such a worldly matter as his stipend; but the managers were more practical. Also, they were astute. Without mentioning money, they contrived to instil into Mr. Meredith's mind a conviction that he should not offend Mrs. Davis. Otherwise, he would likely have forgotten all about her as soon as Aunt Martha had gone out. As

it was, he turned down his Ewald with a feeling of annoyance and went across the hall to the parlour.

Mrs. Davis was sitting on the sofa, looking about her with an air of scornful disapproval.

What a scandalous room! There were no curtains on the window. Mrs. Davis did not know that Faith and Una had taken them down the day before to use as court trains in one of their plays and had forgotten to put them up again, but she could not have accused those windows more fiercely if she had known. The blinds were cracked and torn. The pictures on the walls were crooked; the rugs were awry; the vases were full of faded flowers; the dust lay in heaps--literally in heaps.

"What are we coming to?" Mrs. Davis asked herself, and then primmed up her unbeautiful mouth.

Jerry and Carl had been whooping and sliding down the banisters as she came through the hall. They did not see her and continued whooping and sliding, and Mrs. Davis was convinced they did it on purpose. Faith's pet rooster ambled through the hall, stood in the parlour doorway and looked at her. Not liking her looks, he did not venture in. Mrs. Davis gave a scornful sniff. A pretty manse, indeed, where roosters paraded the halls and stared people out of countenance.

"Shoo, there," commanded Mrs. Davis, poking her flounced, changeable-silk parasol at him.

Adam shooed. He was a wise rooster and Mrs. Davis had wrung the necks of so many roosters with her own fair hands in the course of her fifty years that an air of the executioner seemed to hang around her. Adam scuttled through the hall as the minister came in.

Mr. Meredith still wore slippers and dressing gown, and his dark hair still fell in uncared-for locks over his high brow. But he looked the gentleman he was; and Mrs. Alec Davis, in her silk dress and beplumed bonnet, and kid gloves and gold chain looked the vulgar, coarse-souled woman she was. Each felt the antagonism of the other's personality. Mr. Meredith shrank, but Mrs. Davis girded up her loins for the fray. She had come to the manse to propose a certain thing to the minister and she meant to lose no time in proposing it. She was going to do him a favour-- a great favour--and the sooner he was made aware of it the better. She had been thinking about it all summer and had come to a decision at last. This was all that mattered, Mrs. Davis thought. When she decided a thing it WAS decided. Nobody else had any say in the matter. That had always been her attitude. When she had made her mind up to marry Alec Davis she had married him and that was the end to it. Alec had never known how it

happened, but what odds? So in this case--Mrs. Davis had arranged everything to her own satisfaction. Now it only remained to inform Mr. Meredith.

"Will you please shut that door?" said Mrs. Davis, unpriming her mouth slightly to say it, but speaking with asperity. "I have something important to say, and I can't say it with that racket in the hall."

Mr. Meredith shut the door meekly. Then he sat down before Mrs. Davis. He was not wholly aware of her yet. His mind was still wrestling with Ewald's arguments. Mrs. Davis sensed this detachment and it annoyed her.

"I have come to tell you, Mr. Meredith," she said aggressively, "that I have decided to adopt Una."

"To--adopt--Una!" Mr. Meredith gazed at her blankly, not understanding in the least.

"Yes. I've been thinking it over for some time. I have often thought of adopting a child, since my husband's death. But it seemed so hard to get a suitable one. It is very few children I would want to take into MY home. I wouldn't think of taking a home child--some outcast of the slums in all probability. And there is hardly ever any other child to be got. One of the

fishermen down at the harbour died last fall and left six youngsters. They tried to get me to take one, but I soon gave them to understand that I had no idea of adopting trash like that. Their grandfather stole a horse. Besides, they were all boys and I wanted a girl--a quiet, obedient girl that I could train up to be a lady. Una will suit me exactly. She would be a nice little thing if she was properly looked after--so different from Faith. I would never dream of adopting Faith. But I'll take Una and I'll give her a good home, and up-bringing, Mr. Meredith, and if she behaves herself I'll leave her all my money when I die. Not one of my own relatives shall have a cent of it in any case, I'm determined on that. It was the idea of aggravating them that set me to thinking of adopting a child as much as anything in the first place. Una shall be well dressed and educated and trained, Mr. Meredith, and I shall give her music and painting lessons and treat her as if she was my own."

Mr. Meredith was wide enough awake by this time. There was a faint flush in his pale cheek and a dangerous light in his fine dark eyes. Was this woman, whose vulgarity and consciousness of money oozed out of her at every pore, actually asking him to give her Una--his dear little wistful Una with Cecilia's own dark-blue eyes--the child whom the dying mother had clasped to her heart after the other children had been led weeping from the room. Cecilia had clung to her baby until the gates of death had shut between them. She had looked over the little dark head to her

husband.

"Take good care of her, John," she had entreated. "She is so small--and sensitive. The others can fight their way--but the world will hurt HER. Oh, John, I don't know what you and she are going to do. You both need me so much. But keep her close to you--keep her close to you."

These had been almost her last words except a few unforgettable ones for him alone. And it was this child whom Mrs. Davis had coolly announced her intention of taking from him. He sat up straight and looked at Mrs. Davis. In spite of the worn dressing gown and the frayed slippers there was something about him that made Mrs. Davis feel a little of the old reverence for "the cloth" in which she had been brought up. After all, there WAS a certain divinity hedging a minister, even a poor, unworldly, abstracted one.

"I thank you for your kind intentions, Mrs. Davis," said Mr. Meredith with a gentle, final, quite awful courtesy, "but I cannot give you my child."

Mrs. Davis looked blank. She had never dreamed of his refusing.

"Why, Mr. Meredith," she said in astonishment. "You must be cr--you can't mean it. You must think it over--think of all the

advantages I can give her."

"There is no need to think it over, Mrs. Davis. It is entirely out of the question. All the worldly advantages it is in your power to bestow on her could not compensate for the loss of a father's love and care. I thank you again--but it is not to be thought of."

Disappointment angered Mrs. Davis beyond the power of old habit to control. Her broad red face turned purple and her voice trembled.

"I thought you'd be only too glad to let me have her," she sneered.

"Why did you think that?" asked Mr. Meredith quietly.

"Because nobody ever supposed you cared anything about any of your children," retorted Mrs. Davis contemptuously. "You neglect them scandalously. It is the talk of the place. They aren't fed and dressed properly, and they're not trained at all. They have no more manners than a pack of wild Indians. You never think of doing your duty as a father. You let a stray child come here among them for a fortnight and never took any notice of her--a child that swore like a trooper I'm told. YOU wouldn't have cared if they'd caught small-pox from her. And Faith made an

exhibition of herself getting up in preaching and making that speech! And she rid a pig down the street--under your very eyes I understand. The way they act is past belief and you never lift a finger to stop them or try to teach them anything. And now when I offer one of them a good home and good prospects you refuse it and insult me. A pretty father you, to talk of loving and caring for your children!"

"That will do, woman!" said Mr. Meredith. He stood up and looked at Mrs. Davis with eyes that made her quail. "That will do," he repeated. "I desire to hear no more, Mrs. Davis. You have said too much. It may be that I have been remiss in some respects in my duty as a parent, but it is not for you to remind me of it in such terms as you have used. Let us say good afternoon."

Mrs. Davis did not say anything half so amiable as good afternoon, but she took her departure. As she swept past the minister a large, plump toad, which Carl had secreted under the lounge, hopped out almost under her feet. Mrs. Davis gave a shriek and in trying to avoid treading on the awful thing, lost her balance and her parasol. She did not exactly fall, but she staggered and reeled across the room in a very undignified fashion and brought up against the door with a thud that jarred her from head to foot. Mr. Meredith, who had not seen the toad, wondered if she had been attacked with some kind of apoplectic or paralytic seizure, and ran in alarm to her assistance. But Mrs.

Davis, recovering her feet, waved him back furiously.

"Don't you dare to touch me," she almost shouted. "This is some more of your children's doings, I suppose. This is no fit place for a decent woman. Give me my umbrella and let me go. I'll never darken the doors of your manse or your church again."

Mr. Meredith picked up the gorgeous parasol meekly enough and gave it to her. Mrs. Davis seized it and marched out. Jerry and Carl had given up banister sliding and were sitting on the edge of the veranda with Faith. Unfortunately, all three were singing at the tops of their healthy young voices "There'll be a hot time in the old town to-night." Mrs. Davis believed the song was meant for her and her only. She stopped and shook her parasol at them.

"Your father is a fool," she said, "and you are three young varmints that ought to be whipped within an inch of your lives."

"He isn't," cried Faith. "We're not," cried the boys. But Mrs. Davis was gone.

"Goodness, isn't she mad!" said Jerry. "And what is a 'varmint' anyhow?"

John Meredith paced up and down the parlour for a few minutes;

then he went back to his study and sat down. But he did not return to his German theology. He was too grievously disturbed for that. Mrs. Davis had wakened him up with a vengeance. WAS he such a remiss, careless father as she had accused him of being? HAD he so scandalously neglected the bodily and spiritual welfare of the four little motherless creatures dependent on him? WERE his people talking of it as harshly as Mrs. Davis had declared? It must be so, since Mrs. Davis had come to ask for Una in the full and confident belief that he would hand the child over to her as unconcernedly and gladly as one might hand over a strayed, unwelcome kitten. And, if so, what then?

John Meredith groaned and resumed his pacing up and down the dusty, disordered room. What could he do? He loved his children as deeply as any father could and he knew, past the power of Mrs. Davis or any of her ilk, to disturb his conviction, that they loved him devotedly. But WAS he fit to have charge of them? He knew--none better--his weaknesses and limitations. What was needed was a good woman's presence and influence and common sense. But how could that be arranged? Even were he able to get such a housekeeper it would cut Aunt Martha to the quick. She believed she could still do all that was meet and necessary. He could not so hurt and insult the poor old woman who had been so kind to him and his. How devoted she had been to Cecilia! And Cecilia had asked him to be very considerate of Aunt Martha. To be sure, he suddenly remembered that Aunt Martha had once hinted

that he ought to marry again. He felt she would not resent a wife as she would a housekeeper. But that was out of the question. He did not wish to marry--he did not and could not care for anyone. Then what could he do? It suddenly occurred to him that he would go over to Ingleside and talk over his difficulties with Mrs. Blythe. Mrs. Blythe was one of the few women he never felt shy or tongue-tied with. She was always so sympathetic and refreshing. It might be that she could suggest some solution of his problems. And even if she could not Mr. Meredith felt that he needed a little decent human companionship after his dose of Mrs. Davis--something to take the taste of her out of his soul.

He dressed hurriedly and ate his supper less abstractedly than usual. It occurred to him that it was a poor meal. He looked at his children; they were rosy and healthy looking enough--except Una, and she had never been very strong even when her mother was alive. They were all laughing and talking--certainly they seemed happy. Carl was especially happy because he had two most beautiful spiders crawling around his supper plate. Their voices were pleasant, their manners did not seem bad, they were considerate of and gentle to one another. Yet Mrs. Davis had said their behaviour was the talk of the congregation.

As Mr. Meredith went through his gate Dr. Blythe and Mrs. Blythe drove past on the road that led to Lowbridge. The minister's

face fell. Mrs. Blythe was going away--there was no use in going to Ingleside. And he craved a little companionship more than ever. As he gazed rather hopelessly over the landscape the sunset light struck on a window of the old West homestead on the hill. It flared out rosily like a beacon of good hope. He suddenly remembered Rosemary and Ellen West. He thought that he would relish some of Ellen's pungent conversation. He thought it would be pleasant to see Rosemary's slow, sweet smile and calm, heavenly blue eyes again. What did that old poem of Sir Philip Sidney's say?--"continual comfort in a face"--that just suited her. And he needed comfort. Why not go and call? He remembered that Ellen had asked him to drop in sometimes and there was Rosemary's book to take back--he ought to take it back before he forgot. He had an uneasy suspicion that there were a great many books in his library which he had borrowed at sundry times and in divers places and had forgotten to take back. It was surely his duty to guard against that in this case. He went back into his study, got the book, and plunged downward into Rainbow Valley.