

CHAPTER XVII. A DOUBLE VICTORY

Norman Douglas came to church the first Sunday in November and made all the sensation he desired. Mr. Meredith shook hands with him absently on the church steps and hoped dreamily that Mrs. Douglas was well.

"She wasn't very well just before I buried her ten years ago, but I reckon she has better health now," boomed Norman, to the horror and amusement of every one except Mr. Meredith, who was absorbed in wondering if he had made the last head of his sermon as clear as he might have, and hadn't the least idea what Norman had said to him or he to Norman.

Norman intercepted Faith at the gate.

"Kept my word, you see--kept my word, Red Rose. I'm free now till the first Sunday in December. Fine sermon, girl--fine sermon. Your father has more in his head than he carries on his face. But he contradicted himself once--tell him he contradicted himself. And tell him I want that brimstone sermon in December. Great way to wind up the old year--with a taste of hell, you know. And what's the matter with a nice tasty discourse on heaven for New Year's? Though it wouldn't be half as interesting as hell, girl--not half. Only I'd like to know what your father thinks about heaven--he CAN think--rarest thing in the world--a

person who can think. But he DID contradict himself. Ha, ha!
Here's a question you might ask him sometime when he's awake,
girl. 'Can God make a stone so big He couldn't lift it Himself?'
Don't forget now. I want to hear his opinion on it. I've
stumped many a minister with that, girl."

Faith was glad to escape him and run home. Dan Reese, standing
among the crowd of boys at the gate,

looked at her and shaped his mouth into "pig-girl," but dared not
utter it aloud just there. Next day in school was a different
matter. At noon recess Faith encountered Dan in the little
spruce plantation behind the school and Dan shouted once more,

"Pig-girl! Pig-girl! ROOSTER-GIRL!"

Walter Blythe suddenly rose from a mossy cushion behind a little
clump of firs where he had been reading. He was very pale, but
his eyes blazed.

"You hold your tongue, Dan Reese!" he said.

"Oh, hello, Miss Walter," retorted Dan, not at all abashed. He
vaulted airily to the top of the rail fence and chanted
insultingly,

"Cowardy, cowardy-custard
Stole a pot of mustard,
Cowardy, cowardy-custard!"

"You are a coincidence!" said Walter scornfully, turning still whiter. He had only a very hazy idea what a coincidence was, but Dan had none at all and thought it must be something peculiarly opprobrious.

"Yah! Cowardy!" he yelled again. "Your mother writes lies--lies--lies! And Faith Meredith is a pig-girl--a--pig-girl--a pig-girl! And she's a rooster-girl--a rooster-girl--a rooster-girl! Yah! Cowardy--cowardy--cust--"

Dan got no further. Walter had hurled himself across the intervening space and knocked Dan off the fence backward with one well-directed blow. Dan's sudden inglorious sprawl was greeted with a burst of laughter and a clapping of hands from Faith. Dan sprang up, purple with rage, and began to climb the fence. But just then the school-bell rang and Dan knew what happened to boys who were late during Mr. Hazard's regime.

"We'll fight this out," he howled. "Cowardy!"

"Any time you like," said Walter.

"Oh, no, no, Walter," protested Faith. "Don't fight him. I don't mind what he says--I wouldn't condescend to mind the like of HIM."

"He insulted you and he insulted my mother," said Walter, with the same deadly calm. "Tonight after school, Dan."

"I've got to go right home from school to pick taters after the harrows, dad says," answered Dan sulkily. "But to-morrow night'll do."

"All right--here to-morrow night," agreed Walter.

"And I'll smash your sissy-face for you," promised Dan.

Walter shuddered--not so much from fear of the threat as from repulsion over the ugliness and vulgarity of it. But he held his head high and marched into school. Faith followed in a conflict of emotions. She hated to think of Walter fighting that little sneak, but oh, he had been splendid! And he was going to fight for HER--Faith Meredith--to punish her insulter! Of course he would win--such eyes spelled victory.

Faith's confidence in her champion had dimmed a little by evening, however. Walter had seemed so very quiet and dull the rest of the day in school.

"If it were only Jem," she sighed to Una, as they sat on Hezekiah Pollock's tombstone in the graveyard. "HE is such a fighter--he could finish Dan off in no time. But Walter doesn't know much about fighting."

"I'm so afraid he'll be hurt," sighed Una, who hated fighting and couldn't understand the subtle, secret exultation she divined in Faith.

"He oughtn't to be," said Faith uncomfortably. "He's every bit as big as Dan."

"But Dan's so much older," said Una. "Why, he's nearly a year older."

"Dan hasn't done much fighting when you come to count up," said Faith. "I believe he's really a coward. He didn't think Walter would fight, or he wouldn't have called names before him. Oh, if you could just have seen Walter's face when he looked at him, Una! It made me shiver--with a nice shiver. He looked just like Sir Galahad in that poem father read us on Saturday."

"I hate the thought of them fighting and I wish it could be stopped," said Una.

"Oh, it's got to go on now," cried Faith. "It's a matter of honour. Don't you DARE tell anyone, Una. If you do I'll never tell you secrets again!"

"I won't tell," agreed Una. "But I won't stay to-morrow to watch the fight. I'm coming right home."

"Oh, all right. I have to be there--it would be mean not to, when Walter is fighting for me. I'm going to tie my colours on his arm--that's the thing to do when he's my knight. How lucky Mrs. Blythe gave me that pretty blue hair-ribbon for my birthday! I've only worn it twice so it will be almost new. But I wish I was sure Walter would win. It will be so--so HUMILIATING if he doesn't."

Faith would have been yet more dubious if she could have seen her champion just then. Walter had gone home from school with all his righteous anger at a low ebb and a very nasty feeling in its place. He had to fight Dan Reese the next night--and he didn't want to--he hated the thought of it. And he kept thinking of it all the time. Not for a minute could he get away from the thought. Would it hurt much? He was terribly afraid that it would hurt. And would he be defeated and shamed?

He could not eat any supper worth speaking of. Susan had made a big batch of his favourite monkey-faces, but he could choke only

one down. Jem ate four. Walter wondered how he could. How could ANYBODY eat? And how could they all talk gaily as they were doing? There was mother, with her shining eyes and pink cheeks. SHE didn't know her son had to fight next day. Would she be so gay if she knew, Walter wondered darkly. Jem had taken Susan's picture with his new camera and the result was passed around the table and Susan was terribly indignant over it.

"I am no beauty, Mrs. Dr. dear, and well I know it, and have always known it," she said in an aggrieved tone, "but that I am as ugly as that picture makes me out I will never, no, never believe."

Jem laughed over this and Anne laughed again with him. Walter couldn't endure it. He got up and fled to his room.

"That child has got something on his mind, Mrs. Dr. dear," said Susan. "He has et next to nothing. Do you suppose he is plotting another poem?"

Poor Walter was very far removed in spirit from the starry realms of poesy just then. He propped his elbow on his open window-sill and leaned his head drearily on his hands.

"Come on down to the shore, Walter," cried Jem, busting in. "The boys are going to burn the sand-hill grass to-night. Father says

we can go. Come on."

At any other time Walter would have been delighted. He gloried in the burning of the sand-hill grass. But now he flatly refused to go, and no arguments or entreaties could move him.

Disappointed Jem, who did not care for the long dark walk to Four Winds Point alone, retreated to his museum in the garret and buried himself in a book. He soon forgot his disappointment, revelling with the heroes of old romance, and pausing occasionally to picture himself a famous general, leading his troops to victory on some great battlefield.

Walter sat at his window until bedtime. Di crept in, hoping to be told what was wrong, but Walter could not talk of it, even to Di. Talking of it seemed to give it a reality from which he shrank. It was torture enough to think of it. The crisp, withered leaves rustled on the maple trees outside his window. The glow of rose and flame had died out of the hollow, silvery sky, and the full moon was rising gloriously over Rainbow Valley. Afar off, a ruddy woodfire was painting a page of glory on the horizon beyond the hills. It was a sharp, clear evening when far-away sounds were heard distinctly. A fox was barking across the pond; an engine was puffing down at the Glen station; a blue-jay was screaming madly in the maple grove; there was laughter over on the manse lawn. How could people laugh? How could foxes and blue-jays and engines behave as if nothing were

going to happen on the morrow?

"Oh, I wish it was over," groaned Walter.

He slept very little that night and had hard work choking down his porridge in the morning. Susan WAS rather lavish in her platefuls. Mr. Hazard found him an unsatisfactory pupil that day. Faith Meredith's wits seemed to be wool-gathering, too. Dan Reese kept drawing surreptitious pictures of girls, with pig or rooster heads, on his slate and holding them up for all to see. The news of the coming battle had leaked out and most of the boys and many of the girls were in the spruce plantation when Dan and Walter sought it after school. Una had gone home, but Faith was there, having tied her blue ribbon around Walter's arm. Walter was thankful that neither Jem nor Di nor Nan were among the crowd of spectators. Somehow they had not heard of what was in the wind and had gone home, too. Walter faced Dan quite undauntedly now. At the last moment all his fear had vanished, but he still felt disgust at the idea of fighting. Dan, it was noted, was really paler under his freckles than Walter was. One of the older boys gave the word and Dan struck Walter in the face.

Walter reeled a little. The pain of the blow tingled through all his sensitive frame for a moment. Then he felt pain no longer. Something, such as he had never experienced before, seemed to

roll over him like a flood. His face flushed crimson, his eyes burned like flame. The scholars of Glen St. Mary school had never dreamed that "Miss Walter" could look like that. He hurled himself forward and closed with Dan like a young wildcat.

There were no particular rules in the fights of the Glen school boys. It was catch-as-catch can, and get your blows in anyhow. Walter fought with a savage fury and a joy in the struggle against which Dan could not hold his ground. It was all over very speedily. Walter had no clear consciousness of what he was doing until suddenly the red mist cleared from his sight and he found himself kneeling on the body of the prostrate Dan whose nose--oh, horror!--was spouting blood.

"Have you had enough?" demanded Walter through his clenched teeth.

Dan sulkily admitted that he had.

"My mother doesn't write lies?"

"No."

"Faith Meredith isn't a pig-girl?"

"No."

"Nor a rooster-girl?"

"No."

"And I'm not a coward?"

"No."

Walter had intended to ask, "And you are a liar?" but pity intervened and he did not humiliate Dan further. Besides, that blood was so horrible.

"You can go, then," he said contemptuously.

There was a loud clapping from the boys who were perched on the rail fence, but some of the girls were crying. They were frightened. They had seen schoolboy fights before, but nothing like Walter as he had grappled with Dan. There had been something terrifying about him. They thought he would kill Dan. Now that all was over they sobbed hysterically--except Faith, who still stood tense and crimson cheeked.

Walter did not stay for any conqueror's meed. He sprang over the fence and rushed down the spruce hill to Rainbow Valley. He felt none of the victor's joy, but he felt a certain calm satisfaction

in duty done and honour avenged--mingled with a sickish qualm when he thought of Dan's gory nose. It had been so ugly, and Walter hated ugliness.

Also, he began to realize that he himself was somewhat sore and battered up. His lip was cut and swollen and one eye felt very strange. In Rainbow Valley he encountered Mr. Meredith, who was coming home from an afternoon call on the Miss Wests. That reverend gentleman looked gravely at him.

"It seems to me that you have been fighting, Walter?"

"Yes, sir," said Walter, expecting a scolding.

"What was it about?"

"Dan Reese said my mother wrote lies and that that Faith was a pig-girl," answered Walter bluntly.

"Oh--h! Then you were certainly justified, Walter."

"Do you think it's right to fight, sir?" asked Walter curiously.

"Not always--and not often--but sometimes--yes, sometimes," said John Meredith. "When womenkind are insulted for instance--as in your case. My motto, Walter, is, don't fight till you're sure

you ought to, and THEN put every ounce of you into it. In spite of sundry discolorations I infer that you came off best."

"Yes. I made him take it all back."

"Very good--very good, indeed. I didn't think you were such a fighter, Walter."

"I never fought before--and I didn't want to right up to the last--and then," said Walter, determined to make a clean breast of it, "I liked it while I was at it."

The Rev. John's eyes twinkled.

"You were--a little frightened--at first?"

"I was a whole lot frightened," said honest Walter. "But I'm not going to be frightened any more, sir. Being frightened of things is worse than the things themselves. I'm going to ask father to take me over to Lowbridge to-morrow to get my tooth out."

"Right again. 'Fear is more pain than is the pain it fears.' Do you know who wrote that, Walter? It was Shakespeare. Was there any feeling or emotion or experience of the human heart that that wonderful man did not know? When you go home tell your mother I am proud of you."

Walter did not tell her that, however; but he told her all the rest, and she sympathized with him and told him she was glad he had stood up for her and Faith, and she anointed his sore spots and rubbed cologne on his aching head.

"Are all mothers as nice as you?" asked Walter, hugging her.

"You're WORTH standing up for."

Miss Cornelia and Susan were in the living room when Anne came downstairs, and listened to the story with much enjoyment. Susan in particular was highly gratified.

"I am real glad to hear he has had a good fight, Mrs. Dr. dear.

Perhaps it may knock that poetry nonsense out of him. And I never, no, never could bear that little viper of a Dan Reese.

Will you not sit nearer to the fire, Mrs. Marshall Elliott?

These November evenings are very chilly."

"Thank you, Susan, I'm not cold. I called at the manse before I came here and got quite warm--though I had to go to the kitchen to do it, for there was no fire anywhere else. The kitchen looked as if it had been stirred up with a stick, believe ME.

Mr. Meredith wasn't home. I couldn't find out where he was, but I have an idea that he was up at the Wests'. Do you know, Anne dearie, they say he has been going there frequently all the fall

and people are beginning to think he is going to see Rosemary."

"He would get a very charming wife if he married Rosemary," said Anne, piling driftwood on the fire. "She is one of the most delightful girls I've ever known--truly one of the race of Joseph."

"Ye--s--only she is an Episcopalian," said Miss Cornelia doubtfully. "Of course, that is better than if she was a Methodist--but I do think Mr. Meredith could find a good enough wife in his own denomination. However, very likely there is nothing in it. It's only a month ago that I said to him, 'You ought to marry again, Mr. Meredith.' He looked as shocked as if I had suggested something improper. 'My wife is in her grave, Mrs. Elliott,' he said, in that gentle, saintly way of his. 'I suppose so,' I said, 'or I wouldn't be advising you to marry again.' Then he looked more shocked than ever. So I doubt if there is much in this Rosemary story. If a single minister calls twice at a house where there is a single woman all the gossips have it he is courting her."

"It seems to me--if I may presume to say so--that Mr. Meredith is too shy to go courting a second wife," said Susan solemnly.

"He ISN'T shy, believe ME," retorted Miss Cornelia.

"Absent-minded,--yes--but shy, no. And for all he is so

abstracted and dreamy he has a very good opinion of himself, man-like, and when he is really awake he wouldn't think it much of a chore to ask any woman to have him. No, the trouble is, he's deluding himself into believing that his heart is buried, while all the time it's beating away inside of him just like anybody else's. He may have a notion of Rosemary West and he may not. If he has, we must make the best of it. She is a sweet girl and a fine housekeeper, and would make a good mother for those poor, neglected children. And," concluded Miss Cornelia resignedly, "my own grandmother was an Episcopalian."