

CHAPTER XXIII. THE GOOD-CONDUCT CLUB

A light rain had been falling all day--a little, delicate, beautiful spring rain, that somehow seemed to hint and whisper of mayflowers and wakening violets. The harbour and the gulf and the low-lying shore fields had been dim with pearl-gray mists. But now in the evening the rain had ceased and the mists had blown out to sea. Clouds sprinkled the sky over the harbour like little fiery roses. Beyond it the hills were dark against a spendthrift splendour of daffodil and crimson. A great silvery evening star was watching over the bar. A brisk, dancing, new-sprung wind was blowing up from Rainbow Valley, resinous with the odours of fir and damp mosses. It crooned in the old spruces around the graveyard and ruffled Faith's splendid curls as she sat on Hezekiah Pollock's tombstone with her arms round Mary Vance and Una. Carl and Jerry were sitting opposite them on another tombstone and all were rather full of mischief after being cooped up all day.

"The air just SHINES to-night, doesn't it? It's been washed so clean, you see," said Faith happily.

Mary Vance eyed her gloomily. Knowing what she knew, or fancied she knew, Mary considered that Faith was far too light-hearted. Mary had something on her mind to say and she meant to say it before she went home. Mrs. Elliott had sent her up to the manse

with some new-laid eggs, and had told her not to stay longer than half an hour. The half hour was nearly up, so Mary uncurled her cramped legs from under her and said abruptly,

"Never mind about the air. Just you listen to me. You manse young ones have just got to behave yourselves better than you've been doing this spring--that's all there is to it. I just come up to-night a-purpose to tell you so. The way people are talking about you is awful."

"What have we been doing now?" cried Faith in amazement, pulling her arm away from Mary. Una's lips trembled and her sensitive little soul shrank within her. Mary was always so brutally frank. Jerry began to whistle out of bravado. He meant to let Mary see he didn't care for HER tirades. Their behaviour was no business of HERS anyway. What right had SHE to lecture them on their conduct?

"Doing now! You're doing ALL the time," retorted Mary. "Just as soon as the talk about one of your didos fades away you do something else to start it up again. It seems to me you haven't any idea of how manse children ought to behave!"

"Maybe YOU can tell us," said Jerry, killingly sarcastic.

Sarcasm was quite thrown away on Mary.

"I can tell you what will happen if you don't learn to behave yourselves. The session will ask your father to resign. There now, Master Jerry-know-it-all. Mrs. Alec Davis said so to Mrs. Elliott. I heard her. I always have my ears pricked up when Mrs. Alec Davis comes to tea. She said you were all going from bad to worse and that though it was only what was to be expected when you had nobody to bring you up, still the congregation couldn't be expected to put up with it much longer, and something would have to be done. The Methodists just laugh and laugh at you, and that hurts the Presbyterian feelings. SHE says you all need a good dose of birch tonic. Lor', if that would make folks good I oughter be a young saint. I'm not telling you this because I want to hurt YOUR feelings. I'm sorry for you"--Mary was past mistress of the gentle art of condescension." I understand that you haven't much chance, the way things are. But other people don't make as much allowance as I do. Miss Drew says Carl had a frog in his pocket in Sunday School last Sunday and it hopped out while she was hearing the lesson. She says she's going to give up the class. Why don't you keep your insecs home?"

"I popped it right back in again," said Carl. "It didn't hurt anybody--a poor little frog! And I wish old Jane Drew WOULD give up our class. I hate her. Her own nephew had a dirty plug of tobacco in his pocket and offered us fellows a chew when Elder

Clow was praying. I guess that's worse than a frog."

"No, 'cause frogs are more unexpected-like. They make more of a sensation. 'Sides, he wasn't caught at it. And then that praying competition you had last week has made a fearful scandal. Everybody is talking about it."

"Why, the Blythes were in that as well as us," cried Faith, indignantly. "It was Nan Blythe who suggested it in the first place. And Walter took the prize."

"Well, you get the credit of it any way. It wouldn't have been so bad if you hadn't had it in the graveyard."

"I should think a graveyard was a very good place to pray in," retorted Jerry.

"Deacon Hazard drove past when YOU were praying," said Mary, "and he saw and heard you, with your hands folded over your stomach, and groaning after every sentence. He thought you were making fun of HIM."

"So I was," declared unabashed Jerry. "Only I didn't know he was going by, of course. That was just a mean accident. I wasn't praying in real earnest--I knew I had no chance of winning the prize. So I was just getting what fun I could out of it. Walter

Blythe can pray bully. Why, he can pray as well as dad."

"Una is the only one of US who really likes praying," said Faith pensively.

"Well, if praying scandalizes people so much we mustn't do it any more," sighed Una.

"Shucks, you can pray all you want to, only not in the graveyard--and don't make a game of it. That was what made it so bad--that, and having a tea-party on the tombstones."

"We hadn't."

"Well, a soap-bubble party then. You had SOMETHING. The over-harbour people swear you had a tea-party, but I'm willing to take your word. And you used this tombstone as a table."

"Well, Martha wouldn't let us blow bubbles in the house. She was awful cross that day," explained Jerry. "And this old slab made such a jolly table."

"Weren't they pretty?" cried Faith, her eyes sparkling over the remembrance. "They reflected the trees and the hills and the harbour like little fairy worlds, and when we shook them loose they floated away down to Rainbow Valley."

"All but one and it went over and bust up on the Methodist spire," said Carl.

"I'm glad we did it once, anyhow, before we found out it was wrong," said Faith.

"It wouldn't have been wrong to blow them on the lawn," said Mary impatiently. "Seems like I can't knock any sense into your heads. You've been told often enough you shouldn't play in the graveyard. The Methodists are sensitive about it."

"We forget," said Faith dolefully. "And the lawn is so small--and so caterpillary--and so full of shrubs and things. We can't be in Rainbow Valley all the time--and where are we to go?"

"It's the things you DO in the graveyard. It wouldn't matter if you just sat here and talked quiet, same as we're doing now. Well, I don't know what is going to come of it all, but I DO know that Elder Warren is going to speak to your pa about it. Deacon Hazard is his cousin."

"I wish they wouldn't bother father about us," said Una.

"Well, people think he ought to bother himself about you a little more. I don't--I understand him. He's a child in some ways

himself--that's what he is, and needs some one to look after him as bad as you do. Well, perhaps he'll have some one before long, if all tales is true."

"What do you mean?" asked Faith.

"Haven't you got any idea--honest?" demanded Mary.

"No, no. What DO you mean?"

"Well, you are a lot of innocents, upon my word. Why, EVERYbody is talking of it. Your pa goes to see Rosemary West. SHE is going to be your step-ma."

"I don't believe it," cried Una, flushing crimson.

"Well, I dunno. I just go by what folks say. I don't give it for a fact. But it would be a good thing. Rosemary West'd make you toe the mark if she came here, I'll bet a cent, for all she's so sweet and smiley on the face of her. They're always that way till they've caught them. But you need some one to bring you up. You're disgracing your pa and I feel for him. I've always thought an awful lot of your pa ever since that night he talked to me so nice. I've never said a single swear word since, or told a lie. And I'd like to see him happy and comfortable, with his buttons on and his meals decent, and you

young ones licked into shape, and that old cat of a Martha put in HER proper place. The way she looked at the eggs I brought her to-night. 'I hope they're fresh,' says she. I just wished they WAS rotten. But you just mind that she gives you all one for breakfast, including your pa. Make a fuss if she doesn't. That was what they was sent up for--but I don't trust old Martha. She's quite capable of feeding 'em to her cat."

Mary's tongue being temporarily tired, a brief silence fell over the graveyard. The manse children did not feel like talking. They were digesting the new and not altogether palatable ideas Mary had suggested to them. Jerry and Carl were somewhat startled. But, after all, what did it matter? And it wasn't likely there was a word of truth in it. Faith, on the whole, was pleased. Only Una was seriously upset. She felt that she would like to get away and cry.

"Will there be any stars in my crown?" sang the Methodist choir, beginning to practise in the Methodist church.

"I want just three," said Mary, whose theological knowledge had increased notably since her residence with Mrs. Elliott. "Just three--setting up on my head, like a coronnet, a big one in the middle and a small one each side."

"Are there different sizes in souls?" asked Carl.

"Of course. Why, little babies must have smaller ones than big men. Well, it's getting dark and I must scoot home. Mrs. Elliott doesn't like me to be out after dark. Laws, when I lived with Mrs. Wiley the dark was just the same as the daylight to me. I didn't mind it no more'n a gray cat. Them days seem a hundred years ago. Now, you mind what I've said and try to behave yourselves, for you pa's sake. I'LL always back you up and defend you--you can be dead sure of that. Mrs. Elliott says she never saw the like of me for sticking up for my friends. I was real sassy to Mrs. Alec Davis about you and Mrs. Elliott combed me down for it afterwards. The fair Cornelia has a tongue of her own and no mistake. But she was pleased underneath for all, 'cause she hates old Kitty Alec and she's real fond of you. I can see through folks."

Mary sailed off, excellently well pleased with herself, leaving a rather depressed little group behind her.

"Mary Vance always says something that makes us feel bad when she comes up," said Una resentfully.

"I wish we'd left her to starve in the old barn," said Jerry vindictively.

"Oh, that's wicked, Jerry," rebuked Una.

"May as well have the game as the name," retorted unrepentant Jerry. "If people say we're so bad let's BE bad."

"But not if it hurts father," pleaded Faith.

Jerry squirmed uncomfortably. He adored his father. Through the unshaded study window they could see Mr. Meredith at his desk. He did not seem to be either reading or writing. His head was in his hands and there was something in his whole attitude that spoke of weariness and dejection. The children suddenly felt it.

"I dare say somebody's been worrying him about us to-day," said Faith. "I wish we COULD get along without making people talk. Oh--Jem Blythe! How you scared me!"

Jem Blythe had slipped into the graveyard and sat down beside the girls. He had been prowling about Rainbow Valley and had succeeded in finding the first little star-white cluster of arbutus for his mother. The manse children were rather silent after his coming. Jem was beginning to grow away from them somewhat this spring. He was studying for the entrance examination of Queen's Academy and stayed after school with the older pupils for extra lessons. Also, his evenings were so full of work that he seldom joined the others in Rainbow Valley now. He seemed to be drifting away into grown-up land.

"What is the matter with you all to-night?" he asked. "There's no fun in you."

"Not much," agreed Faith dolefully. "There wouldn't be much fun in you either if YOU knew you were disgracing your father and making people talk about you."

"Who's been talking about you now?"

"Everybody--so Mary Vance says." And Faith poured out her troubles to sympathetic Jem. "You see," she concluded dolefully, "we've nobody to bring us up. And so we get into scrapes and people think we're bad."

"Why don't you bring yourselves up?" suggested Jem. "I'll tell you what to do. Form a Good-Conduct Club and punish yourselves every time you do anything that's not right."

"That's a good idea," said Faith, struck by it. "But," she added doubtfully, "things that don't seem a bit of harm to US seem simply dreadful to other people. How can we tell? We can't be bothering father all the time--and he has to be away a lot, anyhow."

"You could mostly tell if you stopped to think a thing over

before doing it and ask yourselves what the congregation would say about it," said Jem. "The trouble is you just rush into things and don't think them over at all. Mother says you're all too impulsive, just as she used to be. The Good-Conduct Club would help you to think, if you were fair and honest about punishing yourselves when you broke the rules. You'd have to punish in some way that really HURT, or it wouldn't do any good."

"Whip each other?"

"Not exactly. You'd have to think up different ways of punishment to suit the person. You wouldn't punish each other--you'd punish YOURSELVES. I read all about such a club in a story-book. You try it and see how it works."

"Let's," said Faith; and when Jem was gone they agreed they would. "If things aren't right we've just got to make them right," said Faith, resolutely.

"We've got to be fair and square, as Jem says," said Jerry.

"This is a club to bring ourselves up, seeing there's nobody else to do it. There's no use in having many rules. Let's just have one and any of us that breaks it has got to be punished hard."

"But HOW."

"We'll think that up as we go along. We'll hold a session of the club here in the graveyard every night and talk over what we've done through the day, and if we think we've done anything that isn't right or that would disgrace dad the one that does it, or is responsible for it, must be punished. That's the rule. We'll all decide on the kind of punishment--it must be made to fit the crime, as Mr. Flagg says. And the one that's, guilty will be bound to carry it out and no shirking. There's going to be fun in this," concluded Jerry, with a relish.

"You suggested the soap-bubble party," said Faith.

"But that was before we'd formed the club," said Jerry hastily.

"Everything starts from to-night."

"But what if we can't agree on what's right, or what the punishment ought to be? S'pose two of us thought of one thing and two another. There ought to be five in a club like this."

"We can ask Jem Blythe to be umpire. He is the squarest boy in Glen St. Mary. But I guess we can settle our own affairs mostly. We want to keep this as much of a secret as we can. Don't breathe a word to Mary Vance. She'd want to join and do the bringing up."

"I think," said Faith, "that there's no use in spoiling every

day by dragging punishments in. Let's have a punishment day."

"We'd better choose Saturday because there is no school to interfere," suggested Una.

"And spoil the one holiday in the week," cried Faith. "Not much! No, let's take Friday. That's fish day, anyhow, and we all hate fish. We may as well have all the disagreeable things in one day. Then other days we can go ahead and have a good time."

"Nonsense," said Jerry authoritatively. "Such a scheme wouldn't work at all. We'll just punish ourselves as we go along and keep a clear slate. Now, we all understand, don't we? This is a Good-Conduct Club, for the purpose of bringing ourselves up. We agree to punish ourselves for bad conduct, and always to stop before we do anything, no matter what, and ask ourselves if it is likely to hurt dad in any way, and any one who shirks is to be cast out of the club and never allowed to play with the rest of us in Rainbow Valley again. Jem Blythe to be umpire in case of disputes. No more taking bugs to Sunday School, Carl, and no more chewing gum in public, if you please, Miss Faith."

"No more making fun of elders praying or going to the Methodist prayer meeting," retorted Faith.

"Why, it isn't any harm to go to the Methodist prayer meeting,"

protested Jerry in amazement.

"Mrs. Elliott says it is, She says manse children have no business to go anywhere but to Presbyterian things."

"Darn it, I won't give up going to the Methodist prayer meeting," cried Jerry. "It's ten times more fun than ours is."

"You said a naughty word," cried Faith. "NOW, you've got to punish yourself."

"Not till it's all down in black and white. We're only talking the club over. It isn't really formed until we've written it out and signed it. There's got to be a constitution and by-laws. And you KNOW there's nothing wrong in going to a prayer meeting."

"But it's not only the wrong things we're to punish ourselves for, but anything that might hurt father."

"It won't hurt anybody. You know Mrs. Elliott is cracked on the subject of Methodists. Nobody else makes any fuss about my going. I always behave myself. You ask Jem or Mrs. Blythe and see what they say. I'll abide by their opinion. I'm going for the paper now and I'll bring out the lantern and we'll all sign."

Fifteen minutes later the document was solemnly signed on

Hezekiah Pollock's tombstone, on the centre of which stood the smoky manse lantern, while the children knelt around it. Mrs. Elder Clow was going past at the moment and next day all the Glen heard that the manse children had been having another praying competition and had wound it up by chasing each other all over the graves with a lantern. This piece of embroidery was probably suggested by the fact that, after the signing and sealing was completed, Carl had taken the lantern and had walked circumspectly to the little hollow to examine his ant-hill. The others had gone quietly into the manse and to bed.

"Do you think it is true that father is going to marry Miss West?" Una had tremulously asked of Faith, after their prayers had been said.

"I don't know, but I'd like it," said Faith.

"Oh, I wouldn't," said Una, chokingly. "She is nice the way she is. But Mary Vance says it changes people ALTOGETHER to be made stepmothers. They get horrid cross and mean and hateful then, and turn your father against you. She says they're sure to do that. She never knew it to fail in a single case."

"I don't believe Miss West would EVER try to do that," cried Faith.

"Mary says ANYBODY would. She knows ALL about stepmothers, Faith--she says she's seen hundreds of them--and you've never seen one. Oh, Mary has told me blood-curdling things about them. She says she knew of one who whipped her husband's little girls on their bare shoulders till they bled, and then shut them up in a cold, dark coal cellar all night. She says they're ALL aching to do things like that."

"I don't believe Miss West would. You don't know her as well as I do, Una. Just think of that sweet little bird she sent me. I love it far more even than Adam."

"It's just being a stepmother changes them. Mary says they can't help it. I wouldn't mind the whippings so much as having father hate us."

"You know nothing could make father hate us. Don't be silly, Una. I dare say there's nothing to worry over. Likely if we run our club right and bring ourselves up properly father won't think of marrying any one. And if he does, I KNOW Miss West will be lovely to us."

But Una had no such conviction and she cried herself to sleep.