

CHAPTER XXV. ANOTHER SCANDAL AND ANOTHER "EXPLANATION"

Faith went early to Sunday School and was seated in the corner of her class pew before any one came. Therefore, the dreadful truth did not burst upon any one until Faith left the class pew near the door to walk up to the manse pew after Sunday School. The church was already half filled and all who were sitting near the aisle saw that the minister's daughter had boots on but no stockings!

Faith's new brown dress, which Aunt Martha had made from an ancient pattern, was absurdly long for her, but even so it did not meet her boot-tops. Two good inches of bare white leg showed plainly.

Faith and Carl sat alone in the manse pew. Jerry had gone into the gallery to sit with a chum and the Blythe girls had taken Una with them. The Meredith children were given to "sitting all over the church" in this fashion and a great many people thought it very improper. The gallery especially, where irresponsible lads congregated and were known to whisper and suspected of chewing tobacco during service, was no place, for a son of the manse. But Jerry hated the manse pew at the very top of the church, under the eyes of Elder Clow and his family. He escaped from it whenever he could.

Carl, absorbed in watching a spider spinning its web at the window, did not notice Faith's legs. She walked home with her father after church and he never noticed them. She got on the hated striped stockings before Jerry and Una arrived, so that for the time being none of the occupants of the manse knew what she had done. But nobody else in Glen St. Mary was ignorant of it. The few who had not seen soon heard. Nothing else was talked of on the way home from church. Mrs. Alec Davis said it was only what she expected, and the next thing you would see some of those young ones coming to church with no clothes on at all. The president of the Ladies' Aid decided that she would bring the matter up at the next Aid meeting, and suggest that they wait in a body on the minister and protest. Miss Cornelia said that she, for her part, gave up. There was no use worrying over the manse fry any longer. Even Mrs. Dr. Blythe felt a little shocked, though she attributed the occurrence solely to Faith's forgetfulness. Susan could not immediately begin knitting stockings for Faith because it was Sunday, but she had one set up before any one else was out of bed at Ingleside the next morning.

"You need not tell me anything but that it was old Martha's fault, Mrs. Dr. dear." she told Anne. "I suppose that poor little child had no decent stockings to wear. I suppose every stocking she had was in holes, as you know very well they generally are. And I think, Mrs. Dr. dear, that the Ladies'

Aid would be better employed in knitting some for them than in fighting over the new carpet for the pulpit platform. I am not a Ladies' Aider, but I shall knit Faith two pairs of stockings, out of this nice black yarn, as fast as my fingers can move and that you may tie to. Never shall I forget my sensations, Mrs. Dr. dear, when I saw a minister's child walking up the aisle of our church with no stockings on. I really did not know what way to look."

"And the church was just full of Methodists yesterday, too," groaned Miss Cornelia, who had come up to the Glen to do some shopping and run into Ingleside to talk the affair over. "I don't know how it is, but just as sure as those manse children do something especially awful the church is sure to be crowded with Methodists. I thought Mrs. Deacon Hazard's eyes would drop out of her head. When she came out of church she said, 'Well, that exhibition was no more than decent. I do pity the Presbyterians.' And we just had to TAKE it. There was nothing one could say."

"There was something I could have said, Mrs. Dr. dear, if I had heard her," said Susan grimly. "I would have said, for one thing, that in my opinion clean bare legs were quite as decent as holes. And I would have said, for another, that the Presbyterians did not feel greatly in need of pity seeing that they had a minister who could PREACH and the Methodists had NOT.

I could have squelched Mrs. Deacon Hazard, Mrs. Dr dear, and that you may tie to."

"I wish Mr. Meredith didn't preach quite so well and looked after his family a little better," retorted Miss Cornelia. "He could at least glance over his children before they went to church and see that they were quite properly clothed. I'm tired making excuses for him, believe ME."

Meanwhile, Faith's soul was being harrowed up in Rainbow Valley. Mary Vance was there and, as usual, in a lecturing mood. She gave Faith to understand that she had disgraced herself and her father beyond redemption and that she, Mary Vance, was done with her. "Everybody" was talking, and "everybody" said the same thing.

"I simply feel that I can't associate with you any longer," she concluded.

"WE are going to associate with her then," cried Nan Blythe. Nan secretly thought Faith HAD done a awful thing, but she wasn't going to let Mary Vance run matters in this high-handed fashion. "And if YOU are not you needn't come any more to Rainbow Valley, MISS Vance."

Nan and Di both put their arms around Faith and glared defiance

at Mary. The latter suddenly crumpled up, sat down on a stump and began to cry.

"It ain't that I don't want to," she wailed. "But if I keep in with Faith people'll be saying I put her up to doing things. Some are saying it now, true's you live. I can't afford to have such things said of me, now that I'm in a respectable place and trying to be a lady. And I never went bare-legged in church in my toughest days. I'd never have thought of doing such a thing. But that hateful old Kitty Alec says Faith has never been the same girl since that time I stayed in the manse. She says Cornelia Elliott will live to rue the day she took me in. It hurts my feelings, I tell you. But it's Mr. Meredith I'm really worried over."

"I think you needn't worry about him," said Di scornfully. "It isn't likely necessary. Now, Faith darling, stop crying and tell us why you did it."

Faith explained tearfully. The Blythe girls sympathized with her, and even Mary Vance agreed that it was a hard position to be in. But Jerry, on whom the thing came like a thunderbolt, refused to be placated. So THIS was what some mysterious hints he had got in school that day meant! He marched Faith and Una home without ceremony, and the Good-Conduct Club held an immediate session in the graveyard to sit in judgment on Faith's

case.

"I don't see that it was any harm," said Faith defiantly. "Not MUCH of my legs showed. It wasn't WRONG and it didn't hurt anybody."

"It will hurt Dad. You KNOW it will. You know people blame him whenever we do anything queer."

"I didn't think of that," muttered Faith.

"That's just the trouble. You didn't think and you SHOULD have thought. That's what our Club is for--to bring us up and MAKE us think. We promised we'd always stop and think before doing things. You didn't and you've got to be punished, Faith--and real hard, too. You'll wear those striped stockings to school for a week for punishment."

"Oh, Jerry, won't a day do--two days? Not a whole week!"

"Yes, a whole week," said inexorable Jerry. "It is fair--ask Jem Blythe if it isn't."

Faith felt she would rather submit than ask Jem Blythe about such a matter. She was beginning to realize that her offence was a quite shameful one.

"I'll do it, then," she muttered, a little sulkily.

"You're getting off easy," said, Jerry severely. "And no matter how we punish you it won't help father. People will always think you just did it for mischief, and they'll blame father for not stopping it. We can never explain it to everybody."

This aspect of the case weighed on Faith's mind. Her own condemnation she could bear, but it tortured her that her father should be blamed. If people knew the true facts of the case they would not blame him. But how could she make them known to all the world? Getting up in church, as she had once done, and explaining the matter was out of the question. Faith had heard from Mary Vance how the congregation had looked upon that performance and realized that she must not repeat it. Faith worried over the problem for half a week. Then she had an inspiration and promptly acted upon it. She spent that evening in the garret, with a lamp and an exercise book, writing busily, with flushed cheeks and shining eyes. It was the very thing! How clever she was to have thought of it! It would put everything right and explain everything and yet cause no scandal. It was eleven o'clock when she had finished to her satisfaction and crept down to bed, dreadfully tired, but perfectly happy.

In a few days the little weekly published in the Glen under the

name of The Journal came out as usual, and the Glen had another sensation. A letter signed "Faith Meredith" occupied a prominent place on the front page and ran as follows:--

"TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

I want to explain to everybody how it was I came to go to church without stockings on, so that everybody will know that father was not to blame one bit for it, and the old gossips need not say he is, because it is not true. I gave my only pair of black stockings to Lida Marsh, because she hadn't any and her poor little feet were awful cold and I was so sorry for her. No child ought to have to go without shoes and stockings in a Christian community before the snow is all gone, and I think the W. F. M. S. ought to have given her stockings. Of course, I know they are sending things to the little heathen children, and that is all right and a kind thing to do. But the little heathen children have lots more warm weather than we have, and I think the women of our church ought to look after Lida and not leave it all to me. When I gave her my stockings I forgot they were the only black pair I had without holes, but I am glad I did give them to her, because my conscience would have been uncomfortable if I hadn't. When she had gone away, looking so proud and happy, the poor little thing, I remembered that all I had to wear were the horrid red and blue things Aunt Martha knit last winter for me out of some yarn that Mrs. Joseph Burr of Upper Glen sent us. It

was dreadfully coarse yarn and all knots, and I never saw any of Mrs. Burr's own children wearing things made of such yarn. But Mary Vance says Mrs. Burr gives the minister stuff that she can't use or eat herself, and thinks it ought to go as part of the salary her husband signed to pay, but never does.

I just couldn't bear to wear those hateful stockings. They were so ugly and rough and felt so scratchy. Everybody would have made fun of me. I thought at first I'd pretend to be sick and not go to church next day, but I decided I couldn't do that, because it would be acting a lie, and father told us after mother died that was something we must never, never do. It is just as bad to act a lie as to tell one, though I know some people, right here in the Glen, who act them, and never seem to feel a bit bad about it. I will not mention any names, but I know who they are and so does father.

Then I tried my best to catch cold and really be sick by standing on the snowbank in the Methodist graveyard with my bare feet until Jerry pulled me off. But it didn't hurt me a bit and so I couldn't get out of going to church. So I just decided I would put my boots on and go that way. I can't see why it was so wrong and I was so careful to wash my legs just as clean as my face, but, anyway, father wasn't to blame for it. He was in the study thinking of his sermon and other heavenly things, and I kept out of his way before I went to Sunday School. Father does not look

at people's legs in church, so of course he did not notice mine, but all the gossips did and talked about it, and that is why I am writing this letter to the Journal to explain. I suppose I did very wrong, since everybody says so, and I am sorry and I am wearing those awful stockings to punish myself, although father bought me two nice new black pairs as soon as Mr. Flagg's store opened on Monday morning. But it was all my fault, and if people blame father for it after they read this they are not Christians and so I do not mind what they say.

There is another thing I want to explain about before I stop.

Mary Vance told me that Mr. Evan Boyd is blaming the Lew Baxters for stealing potatoes out of his field last fall. They did not touch his potatoes. They are very poor, but they are honest. It was us did it--Jerry and Carl and I. Una was not with us at the time. We never thought it was stealing. We just wanted a few potatoes to cook over a fire in Rainbow Valley one evening to eat with our fried trout. Mr. Boyd's field was the nearest, just between the valley and the village, so we climbed over his fence and pulled up some stalks. The potatoes were awful small, because Mr. Boyd did not put enough fertilizer on them and we had to pull up a lot of stalks before we got enough, and then they were not much bigger than marbles. Walter and Di Blythe helped us eat them, but they did not come along until we had them cooked and did not know where we got them, so they were not to blame at all, only us. We didn't mean any harm, but if it was stealing we

are very sorry and we will pay Mr. Boyd for them if he will wait until we grow up. We never have any money now because we are not big enough to earn any, and Aunt Martha says it takes every cent of poor father's salary, even when it is paid up regularly--and it isn't often--to run this house. But Mr. Boyd must not blame the Lew Baxters any more, when they were quite innocent, and give them a bad name.

Yours respectfully,

FAITH MEREDITH."