

CHAPTER XXXI. CARL DOES PENANCE

"I don't see why we should be punished at all," said Faith, rather sulkily. "We didn't do anything wrong. We couldn't help being frightened. And it won't do father any harm. It was just an accident."

"You were cowards," said Jerry with judicial scorn, "and you gave way to your cowardice. That is why you should be punished. Everybody will laugh at you about this, and that is a disgrace to the family."

"If you knew how awful the whole thing was," said Faith with a shiver, "you would think we had been punished enough already. I wouldn't go through it again for anything in the whole world."

"I believe you'd have run yourself if you'd been there," muttered Carl.

"From an old woman in a cotton sheet," mocked Jerry. "Ho, ho, ho!"

"It didn't look a bit like an old woman," cried Faith. "It was just a great, big, white thing crawling about in the grass just as Mary Vance said Henry Warren did. It's all very fine for you to laugh, Jerry Meredith, but you'd have laughed on the other

side of your mouth if you'd been there. And how are we to be punished? I don't think it's fair, but let's know what we have to do, Judge Meredith!"

"The way I look at it," said Jerry, frowning, "is that Carl was the most to blame. He bolted first, as I understand it. Besides, he was a boy, so he should have stood his ground to protect you girls, whatever the danger was. You know that, Carl, don't you?"

"I s'pose so," growled Carl shamefacedly.

"Very well. This is to be your punishment. To-night you'll sit on Mr. Hezekiah Pollock's tombstone in the graveyard alone, until twelve o'clock."

Carl gave a little shudder. The graveyard was not so very far from the old Bailey garden. It would be a trying ordeal, but Carl was anxious to wipe out his disgrace and prove that he was not a coward after all.

"All right," he said sturdily. "But how'll I know when it is twelve?"

"The study windows are open and you'll hear the clock striking. And mind you that you are not to budge out of that graveyard

until the last stroke. As for you girls, you've got to go without jam at supper for a week."

Faith and Una looked rather blank. They were inclined to think that even Carl's comparatively short though sharp agony was lighter punishment than this long drawn-out ordeal. A whole week of soggy bread without the saving grace of jam! But no shirking was permitted in the club. The girls accepted their lot with such philosophy as they could summon up.

That night they all went to bed at nine, except Carl, who was already keeping vigil on the tombstone. Una slipped in to bid him good night. Her tender heart was wrung with sympathy.

"Oh, Carl, are you much scared?" she whispered.

"Not a bit," said Carl airily.

"I won't sleep a wink till after twelve," said Una. "If you get lonesome just look up at our window and remember that I'm inside, awake, and thinking about you. That will be a little company, won't it?"

"I'll be all right. Don't you worry about me," said Carl.

But in spite of his dauntless words Carl was a pretty lonely boy

when the lights went out in the manse. He had hoped his father would be in the study as he so often was. He would not feel alone then. But that night Mr. Meredith had been summoned to the fishing village at the harbour mouth to see a dying man. He would not likely be back until after midnight. Carl must dree his weird alone.

A Glen man went past carrying a lantern. The mysterious shadows caused by the lantern-light went hurtling madly over the graveyard like a dance of demons or witches. Then they passed and darkness fell again. One by one the lights in the Glen went out. It was a very dark night, with a cloudy sky, and a raw east wind that was cold in spite of the calendar. Far away on the horizon was the low dim lustre of the Charlottetown lights. The wind wailed and sighed in the old fir-trees. Mr. Alec Davis' tall monument gleamed whitely through the gloom. The willow beside it tossed long, writhing arms spectrally. At times, the gyrations of its boughs made it seem as if the monument were moving, too.

Carl curled himself up on the tombstone with his legs tucked under him. It wasn't precisely pleasant to hang them over the edge of the stone. Just suppose--just suppose--bony hands should reach up out of Mr. Pollock's grave under it and clutch him by the ankles. That had been one of Mary Vance's cheerful speculations one time when they had all been sitting there. It

returned to haunt Carl now. He didn't believe those things; he didn't even really believe in Henry Warren's ghost. As for Mr. Pollock, he had been dead sixty years, so it wasn't likely he cared who sat on his tombstone now. But there is something very strange and terrible in being awake when all the rest of the world is asleep. You are alone then with nothing but your own feeble personality to pit against the mighty principalities and powers of darkness. Carl was only ten and the dead were all around him--and he wished, oh, he wished that the clock would strike twelve. Would it NEVER strike twelve? Surely Aunt Martha must have forgotten to wind it.

And then it struck eleven--only eleven! He must stay yet another hour in that grim place. If only there were a few friendly stars to be seen! The darkness was so thick it seemed to press against his face. There was a sound as of stealthy passing footsteps all over the graveyard. Carl shivered, partly with prickling terror, partly with real cold.

Then it began to rain--a chill, penetrating drizzle. Carl's thin little cotton blouse and shirt were soon wet through. He felt chilled to the bone. He forgot mental terrors in his physical discomfort. But he must stay there till twelve--he was punishing himself and he was on his honour. Nothing had been said about rain--but it did not make any difference. When the study clock finally struck twelve a drenched little figure crept stiffly down

off Mr. Pollock's tombstone, made its way into the manse and upstairs to bed. Carl's teeth were chattering. He thought he would never get warm again.

He was warm enough when morning came. Jerry gave one startled look at his crimson face and then rushed to call his father. Mr. Meredith came hurriedly, his own face ivory white from the pallor of his long night vigil by a death bed. He had not got home until daylight. He bent over his little lad anxiously.

"Carl, are you sick?" he said.

"That--tombstone--over here," said Carl, "it's--moving--about--it's coming--at--me--keep it--away--please."

Mr. Meredith rushed to the telephone. In ten minutes Dr. Blythe was at the manse. Half an hour later a wire was sent to town for a trained nurse, and all the Glen knew that Carl Meredith was very ill with pneumonia and that Dr. Blythe had been seen to shake his head.

Gilbert shook his head more than once in the fortnight that followed. Carl developed double pneumonia. There was one night when Mr. Meredith paced his study floor, and Faith and Una huddled in their bedroom and cried, and Jerry, wild with remorse, refused to budge from the floor of the hall outside Carl's door.

Dr. Blythe and the nurse never left the bedside. They fought death gallantly until the red dawn and they won the victory. Carl rallied and passed the crisis in safety. The news was phoned about the waiting Glen and people found out how much they really loved their minister and his children.

"I haven't had one decent night's sleep since I heard the child was sick," Miss Cornelia told Anne, "and Mary Vance has cried until those queer eyes of hers looked like burnt holes in a blanket. Is it true that Carl got pneumonia from straying out in the graveyard that wet night for a dare?"

"No. He was staying there to punish himself for cowardice in that affair of the Warren ghost. It seems they have a club for bringing themselves up, and they punish themselves when they do wrong. Jerry told Mr. Meredith all about it."

"The poor little souls," said Miss Cornelia.

Carl got better rapidly, for the congregation took enough nourishing things to the manse to furnish forth a hospital. Norman Douglas drove up every evening with a dozen fresh eggs and a jar of Jersey cream. Sometimes he stayed an hour and belted arguments on predestination with Mr. Meredith in the study; oftener he drove on up to the hill that overlooked the Glen.

When Carl was able to go again to Rainbow Valley they had a special feast in his honour and the doctor came down and helped them with the fireworks. Mary Vance was there, too, but she did not tell any ghost stories. Miss Cornelia had given her a talking on that subject which Mary would not forget in a hurry.