

CHAPTER XXXIII. CARL IS--NOT--WHIPPED

"There is something I think I ought to tell you," said Mary Vance mysteriously.

She and Faith and Una were walking arm in arm through the village, having foregathered at Mr. Flagg's store. Una and Faith exchanged looks which said, "NOW something disagreeable is coming." When Mary Vance thought she ought to tell them things there was seldom much pleasure in the hearing. They often wondered why they kept on liking Mary Vance--for like her they did, in spite of everything. To be sure, she was generally a stimulating and agreeable companion. If only she would not have those convictions that it was her duty to tell them things!

"Do you know that Rosemary West won't marry your pa because she thinks you are such a wild lot? She's afraid she couldn't bring you up right and so she turned him down."

Una's heart thrilled with secret exultation. She was very glad to hear that Miss West would not marry her father. But Faith was rather disappointed.

"How do you know?" she asked.

"Oh, everybody's saying it. I heard Mrs. Elliott talking it over

with Mrs. Doctor. They thought I was too far away to hear, but I've got ears like a cat's. Mrs. Elliott said she hadn't a doubt that Rosemary was afraid to try stepmothering you because you'd got such a reputation. Your pa never goes up the hill now. Neither does Norman Douglas. Folks say Ellen has jilted him just to get square with him for jilting her ages ago. But Norman is going about declaring he'll get her yet. And I think you ought to know you've spoiled your pa's match and I think it's a pity, for he's bound to marry somebody before long, and Rosemary West would have been the best wife I know of for him."

"You told me all stepmothers were cruel and wicked," said Una.

"Oh--well," said Mary rather confusedly, "they're mostly awful cranky, I know. But Rosemary West couldn't be very mean to any one. I tell you if your pa turns round and marries Emmeline Drew you'll wish you'd behaved yourselves better and not frightened Rosemary out of it. It's awful that you've got such a reputation that no decent woman'll marry your pa on account of you. Of course, I know that half the yarns that are told about you ain't true. But give a dog a bad name. Why, some folks are saying that it was Jerry and Carl that threw the stones through Mrs. Stimson's window the other night when it was really them two Boyd boys. But I'm afraid it was Carl that put the eel in old Mrs. Carr's buggy, though I said at first I wouldn't believe it until I'd better proof than old Kitty Alec's word. I told Mrs.

Elliott so right to her face."

"What did Carl do?" cried Faith.

"Well, they say--now, mind, I'm only telling you what people say--so there's no use in your blaming me for it--that Carl and a lot of other boys were fishing eels over the bridge one evening last week. Mrs. Carr drove past in that old rattletrap buggy of hers with the open back. And Carl he just up and threw a big eel into the back. When poor old Mrs. Carr was driving up the hill by Ingleside that eel came squirming out between her feet. She thought it was a snake and she just give one awful screech and stood up and jumped clean over the wheels. The horse bolted, but it went home and no damage was done. But Mrs. Carr jarred her legs most terrible, and has had nervous spasms ever since whenever she thinks of the eel. Say, it was a rotten trick to play on the poor old soul. She's a decent body, if she is as queer as Dick's hat band."

Faith and Una looked at each other again. This was a matter for the Good-Conduct Club. They would not talk it over with Mary.

"There goes your pa," said Mary as Mr. Meredith passed them, "and never seeing us no more'n if we weren't here. Well, I'm getting so's I don't mind it. But there are folks who do."

Mr. Meredith had not seen them, but he was not walking along in his usual dreamy and abstracted fashion. He strode up the hill in agitation and distress. Mrs. Alec Davis had just told him the story of Carl and the eel. She had been very indignant about it. Old Mrs. Carr was her third cousin. Mr. Meredith was more than indignant. He was hurt and shocked. He had not thought Carl would do anything like this. He was not inclined to be hard on pranks of heedlessness or forgetfulness, but THIS was different. THIS had a nasty tang in it. When he reached home he found Carl on the lawn, patiently studying the habits and customs of a colony of wasps. Calling him into the study Mr. Meredith confronted him, with a sterner face than any of his children had ever seen before, and asked him if the story were true.

"Yes," said Carl, flushing, but meeting his father's eyes bravely.

Mr. Meredith groaned. He had hoped that there had been at least exaggeration.

"Tell me the whole matter," he said.

"The boys were fishing for eels over the bridge," said Carl.

"Link Drew had caught a whopper--I mean an awful big one--the biggest eel I ever saw. He caught it right at the start and it had been lying in his basket a long time, still as still. I

thought it was dead, honest I did. Then old Mrs. Carr drove over the bridge and she called us all young varmints and told us to go home. And we hadn't said a word to her, father, truly. So when she drove back again, after going to the store, the boys dared me to put Link's eel in her buggy. I thought it was so dead it couldn't hurt her and I threw it in. Then the eel came to life on the hill and we heard her scream and saw her jump out. I was awful sorry. That's all, father."

It was not quite as bad as Mr. Meredith had feared, but it was quite bad enough. "I must punish you, Carl," he said sorrowfully.

"Yes, I know, father."

"I--I must whip you."

Carl winced. He had never been whipped. Then, seeing how badly his father felt, he said cheerfully,

"All right, father."

Mr. Meredith misunderstood his cheerfulness and thought him insensible. He told Carl to come to the study after supper, and when the boy had gone out he flung himself into his chair and groaned again. He dreaded the evening sevenfold more than Carl

did. The poor minister did not even know what he should whip his boy with. What was used to whip boys? Rods? Canes? No, that would be too brutal. A timber switch, then? And he, John Meredith, must hie him to the woods and cut one. It was an abominable thought. Then a picture presented itself unbidden to his mind. He saw Mrs. Carr's wizened, nut-cracker little face at the appearance of that reviving eel--he saw her sailing witch-like over the buggy wheels. Before he could prevent himself the minister laughed. Then he was angry with himself and angrier still with Carl. He would get that switch at once--and it must not be too limber, after all.

Carl was talking the matter over in the graveyard with Faith and Una, who had just come home. They were horrified at the idea of his being whipped--and by father, who had never done such a thing! But they agreed soberly that it was just.

"You know it was a dreadful thing to do," sighed Faith. "And you never owned up in the club."

"I forgot," said Carl. "Besides, I didn't think any harm came of it. I didn't know she jarred her legs. But I'm to be whipped and that will make things square."

"Will it hurt--very much?" said Una, slipping her hand into Carl's.

"Oh, not so much, I guess," said Carl gamely. "Anyhow, I'm not going to cry, no matter how much it hurts. It would make father feel so bad, if I did. He's all cut up now. I wish I could whip myself hard enough and save him doing it."

After supper, at which Carl had eaten little and Mr. Meredith nothing at all, both went silently into the study. The switch lay on the table. Mr. Meredith had had a bad time getting a switch to suit him. He cut one, then felt it was too slender. Carl had done a really indefensible thing. Then he cut another--it was far too thick. After all, Carl had thought the eel was dead. The third one suited him better; but as he picked it up from the table it seemed very thick and heavy--more like a stick than a switch.

"Hold out your hand," he said to Carl.

Carl threw back his head and held out his hand unflinchingly. But he was not very old and he could not quite keep a little fear out of his eyes. Mr. Meredith looked down into those eyes--why, they were Cecilia's eyes--her very eyes--and in them was the selfsame expression he had once seen in Cecilia's eyes when she had come to him to tell him something she had been a little afraid to tell him. Here were her eyes in Carl's little, white face--and six weeks ago he had thought, through one endless,

terrible night, that his little lad was dying.

John Meredith threw down the switch.

"Go," he said, "I cannot whip you."

Carl fled to the graveyard, feeling that the look on his father's face was worse than any whipping.

"Is it over so soon?" asked Faith. She and Una had been holding hands and setting teeth on the Pollock tombstone.

"He--he didn't whip me at all," said Carl with a sob, "and--I wish he had--and he's in there, feeling just awful."

Una slipped away. Her heart yearned to comfort her father. As noiselessly as a little gray mouse she opened the study door and crept in. The room was dark with twilight. Her father was sitting at his desk. His back was towards her--his head was in his hands. He was talking to himself--broken, anguished words--but Una heard--heard and understood, with the sudden illumination that comes to sensitive, unmothered children. As silently as she had come in she slipped out and closed the door. John Meredith went on talking out his pain in what he deemed his undisturbed solitude.