

## CHAPTER XXXIV. UNA VISITS THE HILL

Una went upstairs. Carl and Faith were already on their way through the early moonlight to Rainbow Valley, having heard therefrom the elfin lilt of Jerry's jews-harp and having guessed that the Blythes were there and fun afoot. Una had no wish to go. She sought her own room first where she sat down on her bed and had a little cry. She did not want anybody to come in her dear mother's place. She did not want a stepmother who would hate her and make her father hate her. But father was so desperately unhappy--and if she could do any anything to make him happier she MUST do it. There was only one thing she could do--and she had known the moment she had left the study that she must do it. But it was a very hard thing to do.

After Una cried her heart out she wiped her eyes and went to the spare room. It was dark and rather musty, for the blind had not been drawn up nor the window opened for a long time. Aunt Martha was no fresh-air fiend. But as nobody ever thought of shutting a door in the manse this did not matter so much, save when some unfortunate minister came to stay all night and was compelled to breathe the spare room atmosphere.

There was a closet in the spare room and far back in the closet a gray silk dress was hanging. Una went into the closet and shut the door, went down on her knees and pressed her face against the

soft silken folds. It had been her mother's wedding-dress. It was still full of a sweet, faint, haunting perfume, like lingering love. Una always felt very close to her mother there--as if she were kneeling at her feet with head in her lap. She went there once in a long while when life was TOO hard.

"Mother," she whispered to the gray silk gown, "I will never forget you, mother, and I'll ALWAYS love you best. But I have to do it, mother, because father is so very unhappy. I know you wouldn't want him to be unhappy. And I will be very good to her, mother, and try to love her, even if she is like Mary Vance said stepmothers always were."

Una carried some fine, spiritual strength away from her secret shrine. She slept peacefully that night with the tear stains still glistening on her sweet, serious, little face.

The next afternoon she put on her best dress and hat. They were shabby enough. Every other little girl in the Glen had new clothes that summer except Faith and Una. Mary Vance had a lovely dress of white embroidered lawn, with scarlet silk sash and shoulder bows. But to-day Una did not mind her shabbiness. She only wanted to be very neat. She washed her face carefully. She brushed her black hair until it was as smooth as satin. She tied her shoelaces carefully, having first sewed up two runs in her one pair of good stockings. She would have liked to black

her shoes, but she could not find any blacking. Finally, she slipped away from the manse, down through Rainbow Valley, up through the whispering woods, and out to the road that ran past the house on the hill. It was quite a long walk and Una was tired and warm when she got there.

She saw Rosemary West sitting under a tree in the garden and stole past the dahlia beds to her. Rosemary had a book in her lap, but she was gazing afar across the harbour and her thoughts were sorrowful enough. Life had not been pleasant lately in the house on the hill. Ellen had not sulked--Ellen had been a brick. But things can be felt that are never said and at times the silence between the two women was intolerably eloquent. All the many familiar things that had once made life sweet had a flavour of bitterness now. Norman Douglas made periodical irruptions also, bullying and coaxing Ellen by turns. It would end, Rosemary believed, by his dragging Ellen off with him some day, and Rosemary felt that she would be almost glad when it happened. Existence would be horribly lonely then, but it would be no longer charged with dynamite.

She was roused from her unpleasant reverie by a timid little touch on her shoulder. Turning, she saw Una Meredith.

"Why, Una, dear, did you walk up here in all this heat?"

"Yes," said Una, "I came to--I came to--"

But she found it very hard to say what she had come to do. Her voice failed--her eyes filled with tears.

"Why, Una, little girl, what is the trouble? Don't be afraid to tell me."

Rosemary put her arm around the thin little form and drew the child close to her. Her eyes were very beautiful--her touch so tender that Una found courage.

"I came--to ask you--to marry father," she gasped.

Rosemary was silent for a moment from sheer dumbfounderment. She stared at Una blankly.

"Oh, don't be angry, please, dear Miss West," said Una, pleadingly. "You see, everybody is saying that you wouldn't marry father because we are so bad. He is VERY unhappy about it. So I thought I would come and tell you that we are never bad ON PURPOSE. And if you will only marry father we will all try to be good and do just what you tell us. I'm SURE you won't have any trouble with us. PLEASE, Miss West."

Rosemary had been thinking rapidly. Gossiping surmise, she saw,

had put this mistaken idea into Una's mind. She must be perfectly frank and sincere with the child.

"Una, dear," she said softly. "It isn't because of you poor little souls that I cannot be your father's wife. I never thought of such a thing. You are not bad--I never supposed you were. There--there was another reason altogether, Una."

"Don't you like father?" asked Una, lifting reproachful eyes.

"Oh, Miss West, you don't know how nice he is. I'm sure he'd make you a GOOD husband."

Even in the midst of her perplexity and distress Rosemary couldn't help a twisted, little smile.

"Oh, don't laugh, Miss West," Una cried passionately. "Father feels DREADFUL about it."

"I think you're mistaken, dear," said Rosemary.

"I'm not. I'm SURE I'm not. Oh, Miss West, father was going to whip Carl yesterday--Carl had been naughty--and father couldn't do it because you see he had no PRACTICE in whipping. So when Carl came out and told us father felt so bad, I slipped into the study to see if I could help him--he LIKES me to comfort him, Miss West--and he didn't hear me come in and I heard what he was

saying. I'll tell you, Miss West, if you'll let me whisper it in your ear."

Una whispered earnestly. Rosemary's face turned crimson. So John Meredith still cared. HE hadn't changed his mind. And he must care intensely if he had said that--care more than she had ever supposed he did. She sat still for a moment, stroking Una's hair. Then she said,

"Will you take a little letter from me to your father, Una?"

"Oh, are you going to marry him, Miss West?" asked Una eagerly.

"Perhaps--if he really wants me to," said Rosemary, blushing again.

"I'm glad--I'm glad," said Una bravely. Then she looked up, with quivering lips. "Oh, Miss West, you won't turn father against us--you won't make him hate us, will you?" she said beseechingly.

Rosemary stared again.

"Una Meredith! Do you think I would do such a thing? Whatever put such an idea into your head?"

"Mary Vance said stepmothers were all like that--and that they

all hated their stepchildren and made their father hate them--she said they just couldn't help it--just being stepmothers made them like that"--

"You poor child! And yet you came up here and asked me to marry your father because you wanted to make him happy? You're a darling--a heroine--as Ellen would say, you're a brick. Now listen to me, very closely, dearest. Mary Vance is a silly little girl who doesn't know very much and she is dreadfully mistaken about some things. I would never dream of trying to turn your father against you. I would love you all dearly. I don't want to take your own mother's place--she must always have that in your hearts. But neither have I any intention of being a stepmother. I want to be your friend and helper and CHUM. Don't you think that would be nice, Una--if you and Faith and Carl and Jerry could just think of me as a good jolly chum--a big older sister?"

"Oh, it would be lovely," cried Una, with a transfigured face. She flung her arms impulsively round Rosemary's neck. She was so happy that she felt as if she could fly on wings.

"Do the others--do Faith and the boys have the same idea you had about stepmothers?"

"No. Faith never believed Mary Vance. I was dreadfully foolish

to believe her, either. Faith loves you already--she has loved you ever since poor Adam was eaten. And Jerry and Carl will think it is jolly. Oh, Miss West, when you come to live with us, will you--could you--teach me to cook--a little--and sew--and--and--and do things? I don't know anything. I won't be much trouble--I'll try to learn fast."

"Darling, I'll teach you and help you all I can. Now, you won't say a word to anybody about this, will you--not even to Faith, until your father himself tells you you may? And you'll stay and have tea with me?"

"Oh, thank you--but--but--I think I'd rather go right back and take the letter to father," faltered Una. "You see, he'll be glad that much SOONER, Miss West."

"I see," said Rosemary. She went to the house, wrote a note and gave it to Una. When that small damsel had run off, a palpitating bundle of happiness, Rosemary went to Ellen, who was shelling peas on the back porch.

"Ellen," she said, "Una Meredith has just been here to ask me to marry her father."

Ellen looked up and read her sister's face.



"And you're going to?" she said.

"It's quite likely."

Ellen went on shelling peas for a few minutes. Then she suddenly put her hands up to her own face. There were tears in her black-browed eyes.

"I--I hope we'll all be happy," she said between a sob and a laugh.

Down at the manse Una Meredith, warm, rosy, triumphant, marched boldly into her father's study and laid a letter on the desk before him. His pale face flushed as he saw the clear, fine handwriting he knew so well. He opened the letter. It was very short--but he shed twenty years as he read it. Rosemary asked him if he could meet her that evening at sunset by the spring in Rainbow Valley.