

## X. The Courting of Prissy Strong

I WASN'T able to go to prayer meeting that evening because I had neuralgia in my face; but Thomas went, and the minute he came home I knew by the twinkle in his eye that he had some news.

"Who do you s'pose Stephen Clark went home with from meeting to-night?" he said, chuckling.

"Jane Miranda Blair," I said promptly. Stephen Clark's wife had been dead for two years and he hadn't taken much notice of anybody, so far as was known. But Carmody had Jane Miranda all ready for him, and really I don't know why she didn't suit him, except for the reason that a man never does what he is expected to do when it comes to marrying.

Thomas chuckled again.

"Wrong. He stepped up to Prissy Strong and walked off with her. Cold soup warmed over."

"Prissy Strong!" I just held up my hands. Then I laughed. "He needn't try for Prissy," I said. "Emmeline nipped that in the bud twenty years ago, and she'll do it again."

"Em'line is an old crank," growled Thomas. He detested Emmeline Strong,

and always did.

"She's that, all right," I agreed, "and that is just the reason she can turn poor Prissy any way she likes. You mark my words, she'll put her foot right down on this as soon as she finds it out."

Thomas said that I was probably right. I lay awake for a long time after I went to bed that night, thinking of Prissy and Stephen. As a general rule, I don't concern my head about other people's affairs, but Prissy was such a helpless creature I couldn't get her off my mind.

Twenty years ago Stephen Clark had tried to go with Prissy Strong. That was pretty soon after Prissy's father had died. She and Emmeline were living alone together. Emmeline was thirty, ten years older than Prissy, and if ever there were two sisters totally different from each other in every way, those two were Emmeline and Prissy Strong.

Emmeline took after her father; she was big and dark and homely, and she was the most domineering creature that ever stepped on shoe leather. She simply ruled poor Prissy with a rod of iron.

Prissy herself was a pretty girl--at least most people thought so.

I can't honestly say I ever admired her style much myself. I like something with more vim and snap to it. Prissy was slim and pink, with soft, appealing blue eyes, and pale gold hair all clinging in baby rings around her face. She was just as meek and timid as she looked and there

wasn't a bit of harm in her. I always liked Prissy, even if I didn't admire her looks as much as some people did.

Anyway, it was plain her style suited Stephen Clark. He began to drive her, and there wasn't a speck of doubt that Prissy liked him. Then Emmeline just put a stopper on the affair. It was pure cantankerousness in her. Stephen was a good match and nothing could be said against him. But Emmeline was just determined that Prissy shouldn't marry. She couldn't get married herself, and she was sore enough about it.

Of course, if Prissy had had a spark of spirit she wouldn't have given in. But she hadn't a mite; I believe she would have cut off her nose if Emmeline had ordered her to do it. She was just her mother over again. If ever a girl belied her name, Prissy Strong did. There wasn't anything strong about her.

One night, when prayer meeting came out, Stephen stepped up to Prissy as usual and asked if he might see her home. Thomas and I were just behind--we weren't married ourselves then--and we heard it all. Prissy gave one scared, appealing look at Emmeline and then said, "No, thank you, not to-night."

Stephen just turned on his heel and went. He was a high-spirited fellow and I knew he would never overlook a public slight like that. If he had had as much sense as he ought to have had he would have known that Emmeline was at the bottom of it; but he didn't, and he began going to

see Althea Gillis, and they were married the next year. Althea was a rather nice girl, though giddy, and I think she and Stephen were happy enough together. In real life things are often like that.

Nobody ever tried to go with Prissy again. I suppose they were afraid of Emmeline. Prissy's beauty soon faded. She was always kind of sweet looking, but her bloom went, and she got shyer and limper every year of her life. She wouldn't have dared put on her second best dress without asking Emmeline's permission. She was real fond of cats and Emmeline wouldn't let her keep one. Emmeline even cut the serial out of the religious weekly she took before she would give it to Prissy, because she didn't believe in reading novels. It used to make me furious to see it all. They were my next door neighbours after I married Thomas, and I was often in and out. Sometimes I'd feel real vexed at Prissy for giving in the way she did; but, after all, she couldn't help it--she was born that way.

And now Stephen was going to try his luck again. It certainly did seem funny.

Stephen walked home with Prissy from prayer meeting four nights before Emmeline found it out. Emmeline hadn't been going to prayer meeting all that summer because she was mad at Mr. Leonard. She had expressed her disapproval to him because he had buried old Naomi Clark at the harbour "just as if she was a Christian," and Mr. Leonard had said something to her she couldn't get over for a while. I don't know what it was, but

I know that when Mr. Leonard WAS roused to rebuke anyone the person so rebuked remembered it for a spell.

All at once I knew she must have discovered about Stephen and Prissy, for Prissy stopped going to prayer meeting.

I felt real worried about it, someway, and although Thomas said for goodness' sake not to go poking my fingers into other people's pies, I felt as if I ought to do something. Stephen Clark was a good man and Prissy would have a beautiful home; and those two little boys of Althea's needed a mother if ever boys did. Besides, I knew quite well that Prissy, in her secret soul, was hankering to be married. So was Emmeline, too--but nobody wanted to help HER to a husband.

The upshot of my meditations was that I asked Stephen down to dinner with us from church one day. I had heard a rumour that he was going to see Lizzie Pye over at Avonlea, and I knew it was time to be stirring, if anything were to be done. If it had been Jane Miranda I don't know that I'd have bothered; but Lizzie Pye wouldn't have done for a stepmother for Althea's boys at all. She was too bad-tempered, and as mean as second skimmings besides.

Stephen came. He seemed dull and moody, and not much inclined to talk. After dinner I gave Thomas a hint. I said,

"You go to bed and have your nap. I want to talk to Stephen."

Thomas shrugged his shoulders and went. He probably thought I was brewing up lots of trouble for myself, but he didn't say anything. As soon as he was out of the way I casually remarked to Stephen that I understood that he was going to take one of my neighbours away and that I couldn't be sorry, though she was an excellent neighbour and I would miss her a great deal.

"You won't have to miss her much, I reckon," said Stephen grimly. "I've been told I'm not wanted there."

I was surprised to hear Stephen come out so plump and plain about it, for I hadn't expected to get at the root of the matter so easily.

Stephen wasn't the confidential kind. But it really seemed to be a relief to him to talk about it; I never saw a man feeling so sore about anything. He told me the whole story.

Prissy had written him a letter--he fished it out of his pocket and gave it to me to read. It was in Prissy's prim, pretty little writing, sure enough, and it just said that his attentions were "unwelcome," and would he be "kind enough to refrain from offering them." Not much wonder the poor man went to see Lizzie Pye!

"Stephen, I'm surprised at you for thinking that Prissy Strong wrote that letter," I said.

"It's in her handwriting," he said stubbornly.

"Of course it is. 'The hand is the hand of Esau, but the voice is the voice of Jacob,'" I said, though I wasn't sure whether the quotation was exactly appropriate. "Emmeline composed that letter and made Prissy copy it out. I know that as well as if I'd seen her do it, and you ought to have known it, too."

"If I thought that I'd show Emmeline I could get Prissy in spite of her," said Stephen savagely. "But if Prissy doesn't want me I'm not going to force my attentions on her."

Well, we talked it over a bit, and in the end I agreed to sound Prissy, and find out what she really thought about it. I didn't think it would be hard to do; and it wasn't. I went over the very next day because I saw Emmeline driving off to the store. I found Prissy alone, sewing carpet rags. Emmeline kept her constantly at that--because Prissy hated it I suppose. Prissy was crying when I went in, and in a few minutes I had the whole story.

Prissy wanted to get married--and she wanted to get married to Stephen--and Emmeline wouldn't let her.

"Prissy Strong," I said in exasperation, "you haven't the spirit of a mouse! Why on earth did you write him such a letter?"

"Why, Emmeline made me," said Prissy, as if there couldn't be any appeal from that; and I knew there couldn't--for Prissy. I also knew that if Stephen wanted to see Prissy again Emmeline must know nothing of it, and I told him so when he came down the next evening--to borrow a hoe, he said. It was a long way to come for a hoe.

"Then what am I to do?" he said. "It wouldn't be any use to write, for it would likely fall into Emmeline's hands. She won't let Prissy go anywhere alone after this, and how am I to know when the old cat is away?"

"Please don't insult cats," I said. "I'll tell you what we'll do. You can see the ventilator on our barn from your place, can't you? You'd be able to make out a flag or something tied to it, wouldn't you, through that spy-glass of yours?"

Stephen thought he could.

"Well, you take a squint at it every now and then," I said. "Just as soon as Emmeline leaves Prissy alone I'll hoist the signal."

The chance didn't come for a whole fortnight. Then, one evening, I saw Emmeline striding over the field below our house. As soon as she was out of sight I ran through the birch grove to Prissy.

"Yes, Em'line's gone to sit up with Jane Lawson to-night," said Prissy,

all fluttered and trembling.

"Then you put on your muslin dress and fix your hair," I said. "I'm going home to get Thomas to tie something to that ventilator."

But do you think Thomas would do it? Not he. He said he owed something to his position as elder in the church. In the end I had to do it myself, though I don't like climbing ladders. I tied Thomas' long red woollen scarf to the ventilator, and prayed that Stephen would see it. He did, for in less than an hour he drove down our lane and put his horse in our barn. He was all spruced up, and as nervous and excited as a schoolboy. He went right over to Prissy, and I began to tuft my new comfort with a clear conscience. I shall never know why it suddenly came into my head to go up to the garret and make sure that the moths hadn't got into my box of blankets; but I always believed that it was a special interposition of Providence. I went up and happened to look out of the east window; and there I saw Emmeline Strong coming home across our pond field.

I just flew down those garret stairs and out through the birches. I burst into the Strong kitchen, where Stephen and Prissy were sitting as cozy as you please.

"Stephen, come quick! Emmeline's nearly here," I cried.

Prissy looked out of the window and wrung her hands.

"Oh, she's in the lane now," she gasped. "He can't get out of the house without her seeing him. Oh, Rosanna, what shall we do?"

I really don't know what would have become of those two people if I hadn't been in existence to find ideas for them.

"Take Stephen up to the garret and hide him there, Prissy," I said firmly, "and take him quick."

Prissy took him quick, but she had barely time to get back to the kitchen before Emmeline marched in--mad as a wet hen because somebody had been ahead of her offering to sit up with Jane Lawson, and so she lost the chance of poking and prying into things while Jane was asleep. The minute she clapped eyes on Prissy she suspected something. It wasn't any wonder, for there was Prissy, all dressed up, with flushed cheeks and shining eyes. She was all in a quiver of excitement, and looked ten years younger.

"Priscilla Strong, you've been expecting Stephen Clark here this evening!" burst out Emmeline. "You wicked, deceitful, underhanded, ungrateful creature!"

And she went on storming at Prissy, who began to cry, and looked so weak and babyish that I was frightened she would betray the whole thing.

"This is between you and Prissy, Emmeline," I struck in, "and I'm not going to interfere. But I want to get you to come over and show me how to tuft my comfort that new pattern you learned in Avonlea, and as it had better be done before dark I wish you'd come right away."

"I s'pose I'll go," said Emmeline ungraciously, "but Priscilla shall come, too, for I see that she isn't to be trusted out of my sight after this."

I hoped Stephen would see us from the garret window and make good his escape. But I didn't dare trust to chance, so when I got Emmeline safely to work on my comfort I excused myself and slipped out. Luckily my kitchen was on the off side of the house, but I was a nervous woman as I rushed across to the Strong place and dashed up Emmeline's garret stairs to Stephen. It was fortunate I had come, for he didn't know we had gone. Prissy had hidden him behind the loom and he didn't dare move for fear Emmeline would hear him on that creaky floor. He was a sight with cobwebs.

I got him down and smuggled him into our barn, and he stayed there until it was dark and the Strong girls had gone home. Emmeline began to rage at Prissy the moment they were outside my door.

Then Stephen came in and we talked things over. He and Prissy had made good use of their time, short as it had been. Prissy had promised to

marry him, and all that remained was to get the ceremony performed.

"And that will be no easy matter," I warned him. "Now that Emmeline's suspicions are aroused she'll never let Prissy out of her sight until you're married to another woman, if it's years. I know Emmeline Strong. And I know Prissy. If it was any other girl in the world she'd run away, or manage it somehow, but Prissy never will. She's too much in the habit of obeying Emmeline. You'll have an obedient wife, Stephen--if you ever get her."

Stephen looked as if he thought that wouldn't be any drawback. Gossip said that Althea had been pretty bossy. I don't know. Maybe it was so.

"Can't you suggest something, Rosanna?" he implored. "You've helped us so far, and I'll never forget it."

"The only thing I can think of is for you to have the license ready, and speak to Mr. Leonard, and keep an eye on our ventilator," I said. "I'll watch here and signal whenever there's an opening."

Well, I watched and Stephen watched, and Mr. Leonard was in the plot, too. Prissy was always a favourite of his, and he would have been more than human, saint as he is, if he'd had any love for Emmeline, after the way she was always trying to brew up strife in the church.

But Emmeline was a match for us all. She never let Prissy out of her

sight. Everywhere she went she toted Prissy, too. When a month had gone by, I was almost in despair. Mr. Leonard had to leave for the Assembly in another week and Stephen's neighbours were beginning to talk about him. They said that a man who spent all his time hanging around the yard with a spyglass, and trusting everything to a hired boy, couldn't be altogether right in his mind.

I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw Emmeline driving away one day alone. As soon as she was out of sight I whisked over, and Anne Shirley and Diana Barry went with me.

They were visiting me that afternoon. Diana's mother was my second cousin, and, as we visited back and forth frequently, I'd often seen Diana. But I'd never seen her chum, Anne Shirley, although I'd heard enough about her to drive anyone frantic with curiosity. So when she came home from Redmond College that summer I asked Diana to take pity on me and bring her over some afternoon.

I wasn't disappointed in her. I considered her a beauty, though some people couldn't see it. She had the most magnificent red hair and the biggest, shiningest eyes I ever saw in a girl's head. As for her laugh, it made me feel young again to hear it. She and Diana both laughed enough that afternoon, for I told them, under solemn promise of secrecy, all about poor Prissy's love affair. So nothing would do them but they must go over with me.

The appearance of the house amazed me. All the shutters were closed and the door locked. I knocked and knocked, but there was no answer. Then I walked around the house to the only window that hadn't shutters--a tiny one upstairs. I knew it was the window in the closet off the room where the girls slept. I stopped under it and called Prissy. Before long Prissy came and opened it. She was so pale and woe-begone looking that I pitied her with all my heart.

"Prissy, where has Emmeline gone?" I asked.

"Down to Avonlea to see the Roger Pyes. They're sick with measles, and Emmeline couldn't take me because I've never had measles."

Poor Prissy! She had never had anything a body ought to have.

"Then you just come and unfasten a shutter, and come right over to my house," I said exultantly. "We'll have Stephen and the minister here in no time."

"I can't--Em'line has locked me in here," said Prissy woefully.

I was posed. No living mortal bigger than a baby could have got in or out of that closet window.

"Well," I said finally, "I'll put the signal up for Stephen anyhow, and

we'll see what can be done when he gets here."

I didn't know how I was ever to get the signal up on that ventilator, for it was one of the days I take dizzy spells; and if I took one up on the ladder there'd probably be a funeral instead of a wedding. But Anne Shirley said she'd put it up for me, and she did. I had never seen that girl before, and I've never seen her since, but it's my opinion that there wasn't much she couldn't do if she made up her mind to do it.

Stephen wasn't long in getting there and he brought the minister with him. Then we all, including Thomas--who was beginning to get interested in the affair in spite of himself--went over and held council of war beneath the closet window.

Thomas suggested breaking in doors and carrying Prissy off boldly, but I could see that Mr. Leonard looked very dubious over that, and even Stephen said he thought it could only be done as a last resort. I agreed with him. I knew Emmeline Strong would bring an action against him for housebreaking as likely as not. She'd be so furious she'd stick at nothing if we gave her any excuse. Then Anne Shirley, who couldn't have been more excited if she was getting married herself, came to the rescue again.

"Couldn't you put a ladder up to the closet window," she said, "And Mr. Clark can go up it and they can be married there. Can't they, Mr. Leonard?"

Mr. Leonard agreed that they could. He was always the most saintly looking man, but I know I saw a twinkle in his eye.

"Thomas, go over and bring our little ladder over here," I said.

Thomas forgot he was an elder, and he brought the ladder as quick as it was possible for a fat man to do it. After all it was too short to reach the window, but there was no time to go for another. Stephen went up to the top of it, and he reached up and Prissy reached down, and they could just barely clasp hands so. I shall never forget the look of Prissy. The window was so small she could only get her head and one arm out of it. Besides, she was almost frightened to death.

Mr. Leonard stood at the foot of the ladder and married them. As a rule, he makes a very long and solemn thing of the marriage ceremony, but this time he cut out everything that wasn't absolutely necessary; and it was well that he did, for just as he pronounced them man and wife, Emmeline drove into the lane.

She knew perfectly well what had happened when she saw the minister with his blue book in his hand. Never a word said she. She marched to the front door, unlocked it, and strode upstairs. I've always been convinced it was a mercy that closet window was so small, or I believe that she would have thrown Prissy out of it. As it was, she walked her downstairs by the arm and actually flung her at Stephen.

"There, take your wife," she said, "and I'll pack up every stitch she owns and send it after her; and I never want to see her or you again as long as I live."

Then she turned to me and Thomas.

"As for you that have aided and abetted that weakminded fool in this, take yourselves out of my yard and never darken my door again."

"Goodness, who wants to, you old spitfire?" said Thomas.

It wasn't just the thing for him to say, perhaps, but we are all human, even elders.

The girls didn't escape. Emmeline looked daggers at them.

"This will be something for you to carry back to Avonlea," she said.

"You gossips down there will have enough to talk about for a spell.

That's all you ever go out of Avonlea for--just to fetch and carry tales."

Finally she finished up with the minister.

"I'm going to the Baptist church in Spencervale after this," she said.

Her tone and look said a hundred other things. She whirled into the

house and slammed the door.

Mr. Leonard looked around on us with a pitying smile as Stephen put poor, half-fainting Prissy into the buggy.

"I am very sorry," he said in that gently, saintly way of his, "for the Baptists."