LAURA RICHARDS

GRANDMOTHER

Laura Richards

Grandmother

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Laura E. Richards Grandmother / The Story of a Life That Never Was lived

CHAPTER I
HOW SHE CAME TO THE VILLAGE

She was a slip of a girl when first she came to the village; slender and delicate, with soft brown hair blowing about her soft face. Those who saw her coming down the street beside Grandfather Merion thought he had brought back one of his grandnieces with him from the west for a visit; it was known that he had been out there, and he had been away all summer.

Anne Peace and her mother looked up from their sewing as the pair went by; Grandfather Merion walking slow and stately with his ivory-headed stick and his great three-cornered hat, the last one left in the village, his kind wise smile greeting the neighbors as he met them; and beside him this tall slender maiden in her light print gown that the wind was tossing about, as it tossed the brown cloud of hair about her cheeks.

"Look, mother!" said Anne Peace. "She is for all the world like a windflower, so pretty and slim. Who is it, think?"

"Some of his western kin, I s'pose," said Widow Peace. "She is a pretty piece. See if she's got the new back, Anne; I was wishful some stranger would come to town to show us how it looked."

"Land, Mother," said Anne; "her gown's nothing but calico, and might have come out of the Ark, looks 's though; not but what 'tis pretty on her. Real graceful! There! see her look up at him, just as sweet! I expect she is his grandniece, likely. There they go in 't the gate, and he's left it open, and the hens'll get out. Rachel won't like that! She keeps her hens real careful."

"She fusses 'em most to death!" said Mrs. Peace. "If I was a hen I should go raving distracted if Rachel Merion had the rearin' of me. Why, Anne! why, look at Rachel this minute, runnin' down the garden path. She looks as if something was after her. My sakes! she's comin' in here. What in the – "

Rachel Merion, a tall handsome young woman with a general effect of black and red about her, came out of her door and down the path like an arrow shot from a bow. At one dash she reached the gate and paused to flash a furious look back at the house; with a second dash she was across the road, and in another instant she stood in Mrs. Peace's sitting-room, quivering like a bowstring.

"Mis' Peace!" she cried. "Anne! he's done it! he has! he has, I tell you! I'll go crazy or drown myself; I will! I will!"

She began beating the air with her hands and screaming in short breathless gasps. Mrs. Peace looked calmly at her over her spectacles.

"There, Rachel!" she said. "You are in a takin', aren't you? Set down a spell, till you feel quieter, and then tell us about it."

Anne, seeing the girl past speech, rose quietly, and taking her hand, forced her to sit down; then taking a bowl of water from the table, wet her brow and head repeatedly, speaking low and soothingly the while: "There, Rachel! there! You're better now, aren't you? Take a long breath, and count ten slowly; there! there!"

The angry girl took a deep breath and then another; soon the power of speech returned, and broke out in a torrent.

"I always knew he would!" she cried. "I've looked for it ever since Mother was cold in her grave and before, you know I have, Anne Peace. I looked for it with Aunt 'Melia till I routed her out of the

house, and I looked for it with Mis' Wiley till I sent *her* flying. I wish't now I'd let 'em alone, both of 'em. I'd sooner he'd married 'em both, and been a Turk and done with it, instead of this."

Mrs. Peace looked over her spectacles with mild severity.

"Rachel Merion," she said, "what are you talking about? If it's your grandfather, why then I tell you plain, that is no proper way for you to talk. What has happened? speak out plain!"

"He's married!" Rachel fairly shrieked. "Married to a girl of eighteen, and brought her back to sit over me and order me about in my own house. I'll teach 'em! I'll let 'em see if I'm going to be bossed round by a brown calico rag doll. They'll find me dead on the threshold first."

"*Married!*" cried Mrs. Peace and Anne. "Oh, Rachel! it can't be. You can't have understood him. It's one of his grandnieces, I expect, your Aunt Sophia's daughter. She settled out west, I've always heard."

"I tell you he's married!" cried Rachel. "Didn't he tell me so? didn't he lead her in by the hand (she was scared, I'll say that for her; she'd better be!) and say 'Rachel, here's my wife! here's your little grandmother that's come to be a playmate for you.' Little grandmother! that's what I'll call her, I guess. Let her *be* a grandmother, and sit in the chimney corner and smoke a cob pipe and wear a cap tied under her chin. But if ever she dares to sit in my chair, I'll kill her and myself too. Oh, Mis' Peace, I wish I was dead! I wish everybody was dead."

So that was how Grandmother came by her name. It seems strange that it should have been first given as a taunt.

And while Rachel was raving and weeping, and the good Peaces, who tried to live up to their name, were soothing her with quiet and comfortable words, Grandmother was standing in the middle of the great Merion kitchen, with her hands folded before her in the light pretty way she had, listening to Grandfather; and while she listened she looked to and fro with shy startled glances, and seemed to sway lightly from side to side, as if a breath would move her; she was like a windflower, as Anne Peace said.

"You mustn't mind Rachel," Grandfather was saying, as he filled his long pipe and settled himself in his great chair. "She is like the wind that bloweth where it listeth; where it listeth. She has grown up motherless – like yourself, my dear, but with a difference; with a difference; neither your grandmother – I would say, neither my wife nor I have ever governed her enough. She has rather governed me, being of that disposition; of that disposition. Yes! But she is a fine girl, and I hope you will be good friends. This is the kitchen, where we mostly sit in summer, for coolness, you see; Rachel cooks mostly in the back kitchen in summer. That is the sitting-room beyond, which you will find pleasant in cooler weather. That is the pantry door, and that one opens on the cellar stairs. Comfortable, all very comfortable. I hope you will be happy, my dear. Do you think you will be happy?"

He looked at her with a shade of anxiety in his cheerful eyes, and waited for her reply.

"Oh – yes!" said Grandmother, with a flutter in her voice that told of a sob somewhere near. "Yes, sir, if – if she will not always be angry. Will she always, do you think?"

"No! No!" said Grandfather; "very soon, very soon, we'll all be comfortable, all be comfortable. Just don't mind her, my dear. Let her be, and she'll come round."

He nodded wisely with his kind grave smile. By and by he bade her go out in the garden and gather a posy for herself; and then he took his hat and stepped across the road to Widow Peace's.

Grandmother started obediently, but when she came to the garden door she stopped and looked out with wide startled eyes. Rachel in her scarlet dress was down on her knees in the poppy bed, the pride of her heart, and was plucking up the poppies in furious haste, dragging them up by the roots and trampling them under her feet.

"It seemed the only thing to do!" said Grandfather Merion, absently. "Wild parts, Susan; wild parts, ma'am! Her parents dead, as I told you, and the child left with the innkeeper's wife, who was not – not a person fitted to bring up a young girl; no other woman – at least none of suitable character

near. It seemed clearly my duty to bring the child away. Then – my search led me into mining camps, and often I had to be off alone among the mountains, as a rumor came from here or there – the marriage bond was a protection, you see; yes, I was clear as to my duty. But I confess I forgot about Rachel, Susan, and Rachel is so ungoverned! I fear she will not – a – not be subject to my wife – whose name is Pity, by the way, Susan; a quaint name; she is a very good child. I am sure you and little Annie will be good to her."

Good Widow Peace promised, and so did Anne, her soft brown eyes shining with good-will; but when he was gone back, the old woman shook her head. "No good can come of it!" she said. "I hadn't the heart to say so, Anne, for poor Grandfather must have a hard time, searching them cruel mountains for his graceless son; but no good can come of it."

"But we can try!" said Anne.

CHAPTER II
HOW THE FIRST LINE CAME IN HER FACE

Rachel did not kill herself, nor go crazy; nor did she even go away, as she threatened to do when she wearied of announcing her imminent death. She stayed and made things unpleasant for Grandmother. She was barely civil to her in Grandfather's presence, for she dared not be otherwise; but the moment his back was turned she was grimacing and threatening behind it, and when he left the room she would break out into open taunt and menace. There was no name too hateful for her to call the pale girl who never reviled her in turn; but Grandmother's very silence was turned against her.

"You needn't think that I don't know why you're dumb as a fish!" raved the frantic girl. "You know what I say is true, and you darsn't speak! you darsn't! you darsn't! – " She stopped short; for Grandmother had come and taken her by both wrists, and stood gazing at her.

"Stop!" she said quietly. "That is enough. Stop!"

They stood for some minutes, looking into each other's eyes; then Rachel turned her head away with a sullen gesture. "Let me go!" she said. "I don't want to say anything more. I've said enough. Let me go!"

These were bad hours, but there were good ones too for little Grandmother. She loved her housework, and did it with a pretty grace and quickness; she loved to sit by Grandfather with her sewing, or read the paper to him. She could not be doing enough for the old man. She told Anne Peace that he had saved her life. "I should not have gone on living out there," she said, "it was not good to live after my father died. I had one friend, but he left me, and there were only strangers when Grandfather came and saved me. It is a little thing to let her scold" – it was after one of Rachel's tantrums – "if only she will be quiet before him, and not make him grieve."

But her happiest hours were in the garden. It was a lovely place, the Merion garden; not large, only a hundred feet from the house to the street; but this space was so set and packed with flowers that from a little distance it looked like a gay carpet stretched before the old red brick house. Small lozenge-shaped beds, each a mass of brilliant color; sweet-william, iris, pansies, poppies, forget-me-nots, and twenty other lovely things. Between the beds, round and round like a slender green ribbon, ran a little grassy path, just wide enough for one person. Grandmother would spend her best hours following this path; pacing slowly along, stopping here to look and there to smell, and everywhere to love. She was like a flower herself, as she drifted softly along in her light dress, her soft hair blowing about her sweet pale face; a windflower, as Anne Peace said.

One day she had followed the path till she came to where it ran along by the old vine-covered brick wall that stood between the garden and the road. You could hardly see the wall for the grapevines that were piled thick upon it; and inside the vines tumbled about, overrunning the long bed of yellow iris that was the rearguard of the garden.

Grandmother was talking as she drifted slowly along; it was a way she had, bred by her lonely life in the western cabin; talking half to herself, half to the long white lily that she held, putting it delicately to her cheek now and then, as if to feel which was the smoother.

"But Manuel never came back!" she was saying. "I never knew, white lily, I never knew whether he was alive or dead. That made it hard to come away, do you see, dear? Whether he was lost in the great snow up on the mountains, or whether the Indians caught him, – I can never know now, lily dear; and he was my only friend till Grandfather came, and I loved him – I loved Manuel, white lily! Ah! what is that?"

There was a smothered exclamation; a rustle on the other side of the wall. The next moment a figure that had been lying under the wall rose up and confronted Grandmother; the figure of a young man, tall and graceful, with the look of a foreigner.

"Pitia!" cried the young man. "It is you? You call me? – see, I come! I am here, Manuel Santos."

Yes, things happen so, sometimes, more strangely than in stories.

He stretched out his arms across the wall in greeting.

"Are you alive, Manuel?" asked Grandmother, making the sign of the cross, as her Spanish nurse had taught her. "Are you alive, or a spirit? Either way I am glad, oh, glad to see you, Manuel!"

She drew near timidly, and timidly reached out her hand and touched his; he grasped it with a cry, and then with one motion had leaped the wall and caught her in his arms. "Pitia!" he cried. "To me! mine, forever!"

He lifted her face to his, but in breathless haste little Grandmother put him from her and leaned back against the wall, with hands outstretched keeping him off.

"Manuel," she said. "I have a great deal to tell you. I thought – you did not come back. I thought you were dead."

"Yes," said the boy. "No wonder! The Apaches got me and kept me all winter with a broken leg. What matter? I got away. I found you had come east. I found the man's name who brought you – found where he lived. I followed. I come here an hour ago, and lie down, I think by chance, beneath the wall to rest. That chance was the finger of Heaven. You see, Pitia, it leads me to you. I take you, you are mine, you go back with me, as my wife."

The little windflower was very white as she leaned against the wall, still with outstretched pleading hands; whiter than the lily that lay at her feet.

"Manuel," she said; "listen! I was alone. Father died. There was no woman save old Emilia – " the lad uttered an oath, but she hurried on. "I could not – I could not stay. I meant to die; I thought you dead, and I – I was going up into the great snow to end it, when – a good old man came. Old, old, white as winter, but good as Heaven. He saved me, Manuel; he brought me here to his home, and it is mine too. I am his wife, Manuel."

"His wife!" The young man stared incredulous, his dark eyes full of pain and trouble. "His wife – an old man! You, my Pitia?" Suddenly his face broke into laughter.

"I see!" he cried. "You punish me, you try me – good! I take it all! Go on, Pitia! more penance, I desire it, because at the last I have you – so!"

Once more he sprang towards her with a passionate gesture; but the slender white arms never wavered.

"I am his wife," she repeated; "the good old man's wife. See – the ring on my finger. They – they call me Grandmother, Manuel dear."

She tried to smile. "And you are alive!" she said. "Manuel, that is all I will think of; my friend is alive, my only friend till Grandfather came."

Alas! poor little Grandmother, poor little windflower; for now burst forth a storm beside which Rachel's rages seemed the babble of a child. Cruel names the boy called her, in his wild passion of love and disappointment; cruel, cruel words he said; and she stood there white and quiet, looking at him with patient pleading eyes, but not trying to excuse or defend.

"Ah!" he cried at last. "You are not alive at all, I believe. You have never lived, you do not know what life is."

That was the first time she heard it, poor little Grandmother. She was to hear it so many times. Now she put her hand to her heart as if something had pierced it; a spasm crossed her smooth forehead, and when it passed a line remained, a little line of pain.

But she only nodded and tried to smile, and said, "Yes, sure, Manuel! yes, sure!"

Then they heard Grandfather's voice behind them, and there was the good old man standing, leaning on his stick and looking at them with wonder.

"What is this?" said Grandfather. "I heard loud and angry words. Who is this, my dear?"

"This is Manuel, Grandfather; my friend of whom I told you. He is angry because I am married to you!" said Grandmother simply; "but I am always so thankful to you, Grandfather dear!"

Grandfather looked kindly at the boy. “I see!” he said. “Yes, yes; I see! I see! But come into the house with us, sir, and let us try to be friends. Sorrow in youth is hard to bear, yet it can be borne, it can be borne, and we will help you if we may.”

And Grandmother said, “Yes, sure, Manuel dear; come in and eat with us; you must be hungry.”

A great sob burst from the boy’s throat, and turning away he flung his arm upon the vine-covered wall and wept there.

“Go you into the house, my dear,” said Grandfather; “and be getting supper. We will come presently.”

Grandmother looked at him for a moment; then she took his hand and put it to her heart, with a pretty gesture, looking into his face with clear patient eyes; he laid his other hand on her head, and they stood so for a moment quietly, with no words; then she went into the house.

And by and by Grandfather brought Manuel in to supper, and Rachel was wonderfully civil, and they were all quite cheerful together.

Manuel stayed, as we all know, and worked for Grandfather on the farm, and boarded with the Widow Peace across the way; and he and Grandfather were great friends, and he and Rachel quarrelled and made up and quarrelled again, over and over; and always from that time there was a little line on Grandmother’s smooth forehead.

CHAPTER III
HOW SHE PLAYED WITH THE CHILDREN

I asked Anne Peace once, when we were talking about Grandmother (it was not till the next year that we came to the village), how soon it was that the children found her out. Very soon, Anne said. It began with their trying to tease her by shouting "Grandmother!" over the wall and running away. She caught one of them and carried him into the garden screaming and kicking (she was strong, for all her slenderness), and soon she had him down in the grass listening to a story, eyes and mouth wide open, and all the rest of them hanging over the wall among the grapevines, "trying so hard to hear you could 'most see their ears grow!" said Anne, laughing.

"It was wonderful the way she had with them. I used to wish she would keep a school, after she was left alone, but I don't know; maybe she couldn't have taught them so much in the book way; but where she learned all the things she did tell 'em – it passes me. I used to ask her: 'Grandmother,' I'd say, 'where do you get it all?' And she'd laugh her pretty way, and say:

"'Eye and ear,
See and hear;
Look and listen well, my dear!'

That was all there was to it, she'd say, but we knew better."

I can remember her stories now. Perhaps they were not so wonderful as we thought; perhaps it was the way she had with her that made them so enchanting. I never shall forget the story of the little Prince who would go a-wooing. His mother, the old Queen, said to him:

"Look she sweet or speak she fair,
Mark what she does when they curl her hair!"

"So the little Prince started off on his travels, and soon he met a beautiful Princess with lovely curls as white as flax. She looked sweet, and she spoke fair, and the little Prince thought 'Here is the bride for me!' But he minded him of what his mother said, and when the Princess went to have her hair curled he stood under the window and listened.

"And what did he hear, children? He heard the voice that had spoken him sweet as honey, but now it was sharp and thin as vinegar. 'Careless slut!' it said. 'If you pull my hair again I will have you beaten.'

"Then the little Prince shook his head and sighed, and started again on his travels. By and by he met another Princess, and she was red as a rose, with black curls shining like jet, and her eyes so bright and merry that the Prince thought, 'Sure, this is the bride for me!'

"The Princess thought so too, and she looked sweet and spoke fair; but the Prince minded him of what his mother had said, and when the Princess went to have her hair curled he listened again beneath the window. But oh, children, what did he hear? Angry words and stamping feet, and then a sharp stinging sound; and out came the maid flying and crying, with her hand to her cheek that had been slapped till it was red as fire. So when the Prince saw that he sighed again and shook his head, and started off on his travels.

"Before long he met a third Princess, and she was fair as a star, and her curls like brown gold, and falling to her knees. She looked so sweet that the Prince's heart went out to her more than to either of the others; but he was afraid after what had passed, and waited for the hour of the hair-

curling. When that came, he was going toward the window, when there passed him a young maiden running, with her face all in a glow of happiness.

"'Whither away so fast, pretty maid?' asked the Prince.

"'Do not stay me!' said the maid. 'I go to curl the Princess's hair, and I must not be late, for it is the happiest hour of my day.'

"'Is it so?' said the Prince. 'Then will you tell the Princess that when her hair is curled I pray that she will marry me?'

"And so she did, children, of course, and they had a happy day for every thread of her brown-gold hair, so I am told, and there were so many threads, I think they must be alive to this day."

And the bird stories! and the story of how the butterfly's wings were spotted! and the flower stories! I don't suppose there was a child in the village in those days who did not believe that at night all the flowers in Grandfather Merion's garden were dancing round the fairy ring in the home pasture.

"And Sweet William said to Clove Pink, 'How sweet the fringe on your gown is! Will you dance with me, pretty lady?' So they danced away and away, and they met Bachelor's Button waltzing with Cowslip, and young Larkspur kicking up his heels with Poppy Gay, and Prince's Feather bowing low before sweet white Lily in her satin gown, and Crown Imperial leading out Queen Rose – oh! but she was a queen indeed! And the music played – such music! the locust went tweedle, tweedle, tweedle, and the cricket went chirp, chirp, chirp, and the big green frog that played the bass viol said 'glum! glum! glum!' And they danced – oh, they danced!

"Whirl about, twirl about, hop, hop, hop! till – hush! something happened. Oh! children, come close while I whisper. The green turf of the Ring trembled and shook – and opened – and – oh! off go the flowers scampering back to bed as fast as they can go; and in their places – oh! hush! oh, hush! I must not tell.

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