

The Vindication

JUST where the rumor originated, no one seemed to know. It was exceedingly vague in the beginning. Enjoying a multiplicity of homes, the identity of its parents meanwhile became shrouded in increasingly deepening mystery. However, by the time the school year was well advanced, the rumor had assumed such proportions that Mary McLeod found herself isolated, skillfully shunned by those who should have been her friends, and an object of suspicion more or less covert to those who had a less intimate acquaintance with her.

The singular thing about the whole affair was the fact that she was innocent of any of the things implied in the aforesaid rumor, and owed her ostracism to two characteristics. For one thing, her nature was inwardly Puritanical. This was cleverly concealed by a deceptive surface gaiety, a certain freedom of manner, that, sparkling like the sunlit ripples on a highland lake, made you forget the depths beneath. This would not, perhaps, have militated against her popularity in the least, but she was prone to set herself in judgment against her friends. The rigidity of her own standards, coupled with her readiness to criticise, set into motion the forces which culminated in her withdrawal from college before the year was out.

"What's become of Mary McLeod," said Edward Blair to "Bob" Ford one day.

Edward was one of the men who permitted studies to interfere with his college career to such an extent that he was usually ignorant of the epoch-making events of the college social world.

"Where you been, man?" interrogated Bob. "Didn't you know she had to leave school a month or so ago? I don't know the details myself, but it was rumored that she wasn't altogether straight. The talk started after a bunch of them had some sort of canoe party down the river one day. Anyhow, she got unpopular and left."

Into the memories of four at least of the members of the canoeing party to which Bob referred, the events of the trip were vividly burned.

"Charley" Dexter, seemingly careless, bon vivant, had still continuity enough in his nature to harbor a definite design. Deceived by the breezy freedom of Mary's manner, he had been "rushing" her for some time past, and she in turn found in his irresponsible