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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK GRACE HARLOWE'S PROBLEM ***



Their Dear, Too-brief Holiday was Drawing to a Close. *Frontispiece.*

Grace Harlowe's Problem

By
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Author of The High School Girls Series, The College Girls
Series, etc.

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GRACE HARLOWE'S PROBLEM

CHAPTER I

THEIR GREATEST, DEAREST DAY

"And at this time next week we'll all be back at work," sighed Arline Thayer. "Not that I love work less, but the Sempers more," she paraphrased half apologetically. "It's been so perfectly splendid to gather home, and Elfreda was a darling to plan and carry out such a——"

"Noble enterprise," drawled Emma Dean. "Behold in me a living witness to the truth of it. Before this time, when, oh, when, has this particular scion of the house of Dean had a chance to play in the nice clean sand and bathe in the nice green ocean? It is green, isn't it, Grace? Elfreda says it's blue, and those terrible, tiresome, troublesome twins say it's gray, but I say——"

A shower of small pebbles, cast with commendable accuracy, rained down on Emma. Raising herself on her elbows from her recumbent position in the sand, she looked reproachful surprise at the Emerson twins who, crouched in the sand and holding a fresh supply of pebbles in readiness, awaited her next remark.

"There," she declared calmly, "that simply proves the truth of my remark about terrible, tiresome, troublesome twins."

Two slim blue figures dropped their pebbles, descended upon the protesting Emma, and dragged her across the sand toward the water.

"Are we tiresome?" demanded Sara sternly, as she and Sue, still clutching Emma, paused for breath.

"Are we troublesome?" from Julia.

"Not a bit of it," Emma blandly assured them. "I said it only for the sake of alliteration. You are the most interesting persons I've ever met. I am so sorry I said you weren't, and I'm so nice and comfortable now. I hadn't thought of doing any further water stunts to-day." She struggled to a sitting posture and beamed with owlish significance upon her captors.

"All right, we'll excuse you this time, but, hereafter, keep away from alliteration," warned Sara.

"Until next time," chuckled Emma, scrambling to her feet. Graciously offering an arm to each twin, the trio strolled calmly back to the gay little party of girls on the sands.

9

It was a clear, sunshiny morning in early September and nine young women had taken advantage of the ocean's placid, dimpled mood for an early morning dip.

For two weeks the Semper Fidelis Club, or, rather, nine of that most delightful organization of Grace Harlowe's early college days, had been holding a reunion at the Briggs' cottage, which was situated on the New Jersey coast, not far from Wildwood, a well-known summer resort. It had all begun with Elfreda's undeniable yearning to see her friends. Being a young person of energy, she immediately wrote, and sent forth on their mission, funny invitations that were a virtual command to the Sempers to gather at the Briggs' cottage for a two weeks' reunion, and only three of the club had been unable to accept.

To those who have known Grace Harlowe from the beginning of her high-school life she has now, without doubt, become a personal friend. "GRACE HARLOWE'S PLEBE YEAR AT HIGH SCHOOL," "GRACE HARLOWE'S SOPHOMORE YEAR AT HIGH SCHOOL," "GRACE HARLOWE'S JUNIOR YEAR AT HIGH SCHOOL," "GRACE HARLOWE'S SENIOR YEAR AT HIGH SCHOOL" recorded her sayings and doings as well as those of her three friends, Nora O'Malley, Jessica Bright and Anne Pierson during their student days at Oakdale High School.

10

When the girl chums parted in the autumn following their high-school graduation, Nora and Jessica went together to an eastern conservatory of music, while Grace and Anne decided for Overton College and added to their number no less person than Miriam Nesbit, a schoolmate and friend. On their first day at Overton circumstance, or perhaps fate, had brought J. Elfreda Briggs, a somewhat officious freshman, to the trio, and from a hardly agreeable stranger J. Elfreda became their devoted friend. During "GRACE HARLOWE'S FIRST YEAR AT OVERTON COLLEGE," "GRACE HARLOWE'S SECOND YEAR AT OVERTON COLLEGE," "GRACE HARLOWE'S THIRD YEAR AT OVERTON COLLEGE," and "GRACE HARLOWE'S FOURTH YEAR AT OVERTON COLLEGE," the four girls passed through many new experiences, not always entirely pleasant, but which served only as a spur to their ambition to gain true college spirit, and were graduated from Overton at the end of their four years' course, more than ever the loyal children of Overton, their Alma Mater.

The building of a specially endowed home for self-supporting girls who were trying to gain a college education, presented to Overton College, by Mrs. Gray, in honor of Grace Harlowe, Anne Pierson and Miriam Nesbit, and named Harlowe House, decided Grace as to what her future work would be. In "GRACE HARLOWE'S RETURN TO OVERTON CAMPUS" appears the story of her first year at Harlowe House.

11

And now the dear, too brief holiday was drawing to a close. To-morrow would see the house party scattered to the four winds. This was the last frolic they would have in the water.

"Oh, dear," lamented Arline, her blue eyes mournful with regret, "why is it that perfectly lovely times go by like a flash, while horrid, disagreeable ones last forever?"

"'Tis the way of life, my child. 'It is not always May,'" quoted Emma sentimentally. "I might as well add, right here and now, that I'm glad of it. May is a dubious and disappointing month, dears. It always pours barrels on the first. It's a shame, too, when one stops to consider all the poems that have been composed about that weepy, fickle first day of May.

"Oh, radiant May day,
This is our play day.
Youth is in its hey day;
Hail we this gay day;
Park clouds away day.

"And then down comes the rain and spoils it all," finished the versifier, lapsing into prose.

12

Emma's improvisation was greeted with laughter.

"It sounds just about as sensible as a whole lot of those old English verses," declared Elfreda, who was not fond of poetry.

"It was a deadly insult to English verse," defended Anne Pierson with twinkling eyes. "You can't expect me to let it pass unnoticed."

"Having been fed as a babe on Shakespeare," agreed Emma, "I will admit that it gives you some room for criticism, but as a dutiful teacher of English I feel it entirely within my province to break forth occasionally into such English ditties as happen to come to my mind, regardless of

Shakespeare.”

“Oh, do say another,” begged the Emerson twins. They especially delighted in Emma’s poetical outbursts.

“Nothing comes to my mind,” averred Emma solemnly. “Wait until the spirit moves me.”

“I wish something would come to your minds about how we are to spend the rest of the day,” put in Elfreda, with her usual briskness. “It isn’t ten o’clock yet, and we’ve had our breakfast and our swim. Let’s get together and decide now. Remember this is our greatest, dearest day. We specially reserved it. So we ought to make the most of it.”

13

“I’m *so* glad we packed most of our things last night,” commented Arline, with satisfaction.

“Girls,” Grace was the first to make a suggestion, “it’s such a delightful day, wouldn’t you like to go picnicking at the edge of those woods we passed the other day when we were driving? Don’t you remember how pretty the country was? There was a brook and long green hills sloping down to it.”

“Grace Harlowe!” exclaimed Elfreda, her eyes very round. “You must be a mind reader, for that’s precisely what I’ve been thinking about all morning. I’m so glad you proposed it. What do you say, girls? How about a picnic?”

There was a ringing assent on the part of the others.

“I hardly thought you would care much about going down to Wildwood for a dance,” continued Elfreda. “Somehow when we go to hops we are sure to separate and not see much of each other until we’re going home. What’s the use in having a reunion if the reunionists don’t reunite. I guess I’m selfish, but I can’t help it.”

“No, you’re not, J. Elfreda,” laughed Miriam, laying her hand on her friend’s shoulder. “That’s the way I feel, too. We can go to plenty of hops after we have each gone our separate way, but we can’t have one another. Besides, what is *anything* in the way of amusement compared to a Semper reunion?”

14

“Now you’re talking,” commended Emma, with an encouraging flourish of her hand. She had been busily scooping up the white sand as she listened to her friends’ conversation. Now she took a fresh handful and let it fall gently into the open space between the back of Sara Emerson’s neck and her bathing suit. Sara, leaning interestedly forward, was an opportunity not to be disregarded.

“O-o-o-o,” wailed the wriggling twin.

“Why, Sara, whatever *is* the matter?” inquired Emma with such exaggerated solicitude that the victim laughed in spite of herself. “Some ill-natured persons threw pebbles at *me* a while ago, but I remained calm. That is, until I was dragged across the sand in a brutal manner, and had to beg for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Even then I was a credit to Overton and the Sempers. I neither writhed nor howled.”

“Well, we’re even now,” declared Sara. “I’ll foreswear pebbles if you’ll abolish the sand habit.”

“I have always liked to look at Emma from a distance,” said Julia Emerson, hastily sliding to the extreme edge of the group.

15

“Listen, ye babblers,” called Elfreda, “to the voice of the oracle. Let’s leave old Father Ocean to himself and get into our everyday clothes. If we are going on a picnic, we’d better start. We can be on our way in an hour from now, if we hurry. To-night after dinner we’ll all take a last melancholy stroll down here to find out what the wild waves are saying.”

“Wild waves,” jeered Emma Dean. “Did you ever see the ocean smile more sweetly, the deceitful old thing. When one stops to think of the ships and people it gobbles up every year one feels like cutting its acquaintance.”

“It is the greatest of all mysteries,” said Arline Thayer, her eyes fixed dreamily on the limitless expanse of water.

“And I, in my Sphinx costume, am next,” reminded Emma modestly.

Emma’s placid manner of classing together the ocean and a fancy costume she had worn at a Semper Fidelis bazaar was received with the delight that always attended her astonishing sallies.

“Come on, children,” Grace rose from the sand, looking slim, almost immature, in her dark blue bathing suit. With her fair skin, which neither tanned nor sunburned, and her radiant gray eyes, she fully carried out that look of extreme youth which her friends were wont frequently to comment on. In obedience to her call the girls scrambled to their feet and strolled toward the Briggs’ cottage, which was within a very short distance of the beach.

16

On their way they came face to face with a trio of girls who had approached from the opposite direction. One of them, a particularly pretty girl, with auburn curls and a sweet, laughing face, cried out in surprise, “Why, J. Elfreda Briggs, where did *you* come from?”

“Madge Morton!” exclaimed Elfreda, holding out her hand delightedly. “I didn’t know you were in this part of the country. Mr. Curtis told me you had found your father and gone on a trip around

the world, but that was ages ago. And if here isn't Phyllis Alden and Lillian Selden. Will wonders never cease? But where is Eleanor?"

"She and Mrs. Curtis went out sailing with Tom," answered Phyllis Alden, an attractive girl with honest, dark eyes.

"Oh, excuse me, girls." Elfreda turned to her party and a general introducing followed.

"Where are you staying, Madge?" asked Elfreda when the two groups of girls had finished exchanging bows and smiles.

"Mrs. Curtis has taken a cottage at Wildwood for the rest of the summer. She only arrived there last week, and Phyllis, Lillian, Eleanor and I met in New York and came on here yesterday." 17

"You don't say so. Ma will be delighted to see her. You know they've been friends for ages. We hadn't heard from her for some time, though. Sorry you didn't get here sooner. You could have become better acquainted with my friends," deplored Elfreda. "They are all going away tomorrow."

"I'm sorry, too," smiled the pretty girl. "I'm sure we'd love to know them better." She made a gracious little gesture toward the Sempers, whose eyes were fixed upon her in open admiration.

"Never mind, you are sure to meet some of us in New York this winter, if you are going to be there," promised Elfreda.

"Yes, Father is going to take a house in New York. He is anxious to look up his brother officers in the Navy who are stationed there. We are through traveling for a time."

"The Briggs' family are going to stay in the neighborhood of the sad sea waves until the first of October, so I'll see you often. Ma will run over to see Mrs. Curtis the minute she knows about her being here. Tell me where the cottage is and I'll try to remember the address. I wish I had a pencil, but they don't usually hang around with bathing suits and salt water." 18

After a few minutes' pleasant conversation the three girls said good-bye and walked on.

"What charming girls," remarked Arline Thayer.

"Did you ever see a sweeter face than Madge Morton's?" asked Elfreda.

"She is beautiful," agreed Grace; "not only that, but she has such a vivid personality. One loves her on sight."

"She is from the South, isn't she?" inquired Miriam. "She has a decided southern accent."

"Yes, she was born and brought up in Virginia. Her father was a naval officer and was court-martialed when she was a baby for something he didn't do," related Elfreda. "He left home in disgrace and her mother died soon afterward. He never came back to claim her, so her aunt and uncle brought her up. Every one believed her father was dead, and so did she until she grew up; then a perfectly hateful girl, whose father was a naval officer, told her the story of her father's disgrace while she was visiting Mrs. Curtis at Old Point Comfort. You see, Madge and her friends had a little houseboat that they fixed over from an old canal boat. They used to spend their vacations on it, and one of the teachers from the boarding school which Madge attended used to chaperon them. They called their boat the *Merry Maid*, and Madge, the 'Little Captain.' They had all sorts of adventures, and Madge always said that she knew her father wasn't dead and that some day she'd find him. The reason I know so much about her is because Ma has known Mrs. Curtis for years. Tom and I used to play together when we were youngsters. Tom is her son." 19

"Did Miss Morton ever find her father?" asked Ruth Denton eagerly. "I know just how she must have felt about him."

"Yes, she found him and proved his innocence. He lived for years under another name and supported himself by translating foreign books into English. He had a dear friend, an old sea captain, who lived with him in a funny little house at Cape May. This friend had lots of money, so when Madge found her father he bought a yacht and took them for a trip around the world."

"It sounds like 'Grimms' Fairy Tales,' doesn't it," smiled Miriam.

"It's gospel truth," assured Elfreda.

"But standing stock still in the middle of the beach to listen to the adventures of Madge Morton will never help us on our way to the picnic," slyly reminded Emma Dean.

"I should say it wouldn't," agreed Elfreda. "I beg your pardon. Lead on, my dear Emma." 20

The little procession moved on again. Elfreda and Miriam brought up the rear. The comradeship between them was most sincere.

"How I wish we could all see one another more frequently," sighed Miriam. "Wouldn't you like to live your college life over again, Elfreda?"

"Every hour of it, even the unpleasant ones," returned Elfreda fervently. "I'm just as sure as I'm sure of anything, Miriam, that we'll never again spend so many happy, carefree days together as we spent at Overton. Since I've been studying law I've learned a whole lot about human nature

that I never knew before. I've learned that it's a rare thing to be perfectly happy after one begins to look life in the face. Sorrow may not touch one directly, but one is constantly coming upon the trials and sorrows of others. There's only one great antidote for all ills, and that's work."

Miriam made a little gesture of despair. "And I have no work," was her rueful utterance. "So far, I've done nothing but travel about a lot, and study music a little. Long ago I planned to go to Leipsic to study, after I was graduated from Overton, but you see, Elfreda, Mother likes me to be with her. I thought seriously of going in for interior decorating, but when I saw how much Mother seemed to count on having me at home with her I gave it up. While I was studying music in New York, with Professor Lehmann, she was with me. I shall study again with him this fall. We intend to close our home and spend the winter in New York. David is going into business there. We shall take a house, I think."

21

"You don't mean it! Why didn't you tell me before?" Elfreda's eyes were wide with surprise. "And to think you've been carrying a jolly secret like that around without telling me, your lawfully established roommate."

"Don't be cross, J. Elfreda, dear. I didn't know it myself until this morning. The letter that I was so long reading after breakfast this morning was from Mother."

"Hurry along, you laggards," screamed Arline Thayer from a distance. In the earnestness of their conversation the two girls had dropped far behind the others.

"Coming, Daffydowndilly," called Elfreda promptly. Then to Miriam, "We'll see each other a lot this winter then, won't we?"

"I should rather think so," was Miriam's fervent response.

But Elfreda smiled to herself and wondered what Anne, and incidentally, Everett Southard would say when they heard the news.

CHAPTER II

THE LAST FROLIC

22

The Sempers could scarcely have chosen a more perfect day for their last frolic. The sky wore its most vivid blue dress, ornamented by little fluffy white clouds, and a jolly vagrant breeze played lightly about the picnickers, whispering in their ears the lively assurance that wind and sky and sun were all on their good behavior for that day at least. The party were to make the trip to "Picnic Hollow," as Arline had named their destination, in Elfreda's and Arline's automobiles. During the past year the latter had become greatly interested in automobiles, and drove her own high-powered car with the sureness of an expert.

"What is the pleasure of this organisation?" called Emma. It was an hour later, and nine young women stood grouped beside one of the automobiles. The other was stationed a short distance ahead. "Four beauteous damsels can ride with Chauffeur Thayer, the other five will have to trust themselves to the tender, but uncertain, mercy of J. Elfreda."

"If that's your opinion of me you are welcome to ride in Arline's car," declared Elfreda.

23

"Oh, my, no," retorted Emma blandly. "I couldn't think of it. I feel that my inspiring presence is due to ride on the front seat with you, J. Elfreda. To aid and sustain you, as it were."

"Yes, sustain me by making me laugh and running us all into the ditch. I know just how sustaining you can be. Never mind. I'll forgive your slighting remarks about me, and give you the vacant place on the front seat. Now, good people," she put on the business-like expression of an auctioneer, "who bids for the back seat of the Briggs' vehicle?"

"Every one is welcome to it except the Emerson twins," put in Emma. "I dislike having them sit behind me. I prefer to sit behind them, but as I can't sit on the front seat and the back seat at the same time, it would really be better to put the twins in the Thayer chariot."

"We are going to ride with J. Elfreda," was Sara Emerson's defiant ultimatum.

"I'll sit between you and preserve the peace," volunteered Miriam.

"And me at the same time," added Emma hopefully. "Twins, do your worst. Sit where you choose. Miriam will protect me." Emma tottered toward Miriam, looking abjectly grateful and supremely ludicrous.

24

"That leaves Grace, Anne and Ruth to me," declared Arline. "Now let's hurry, girls. The sooner we reach Picnic Hollow the longer we'll have to stay."

The ride to Picnic Hollow was not a long one, but the picnickers were highly alive to every

moment of it.

"We'll have to turn in here and take the road to the left," called Elfreda over her shoulder. They had reached a point where a narrower road crossed the highway and wound around the hills, sloping gradually at the lowest point, into the very heart of the little valley, which looked particularly cool and inviting.

"All right," caroled Arline. "Lead the way and we'll follow."

Slowly the two cars, propelled by two extremely careful chauffeurs, wound their way down the country road which, according to Elfreda, was just wide enough and no wider.

"Bumpity bump, even to the bottom of the hollow, and no bones broken," announced Emma Dean, with a cheerful wave of her hand, as she hopped out of the car, and proceeded to assist the Emerson twins to alight with a great show of ceremony.

"What a perfectly darling spot!" was Arline's joyous exclamation. "Just see that cunning brook! It's so pretty where it ripples past that old tree. It doesn't look deep, either. I'm going in wading. See if I don't."

25

"What shall we do first, girls?" Grace, who had been walking ahead with Arline, a luncheon hamper swinging between them, suddenly turned and faced the others, as, laden with rugs and cushions, they strolled along behind her.

"Let's just play around for awhile," proposed Miriam. "There's a field of daisies and golden rod if any one wants to go blossom gathering. Ruth spoke of taking some pictures, too. Then we can play in the brook, and go in wading if we like, only I don't like."

Arline and the Emerson twins elected to go in wading. Miriam and Anne drifted off to explore the brookside, while Ruth posed Grace, Emma and Elfreda for snapshots until they rebelled and begged for mercy. Later half the company stayed near their impromptu camp under the big elm tree that overhung the brook while the other half went on an exploring expedition, and when they returned the first half sallied forth.

"We shan't stay away long," warned Arline Thayer. "It's after one o'clock now, and I'm hungry as a hunter."

"Still we don't intend to let mere hunger conflict with our desire for exploration," was Emma Dean's firm reminder. "Given a chance, we may find something wonderful. We may dig the prehistoric mastodon from some snug corner where he burrowed several thousand years ago. We may——"

26

"I never knew that mastodons 'burrowed,'" scoffed Sara Emerson. "That's a new truth in natural history brought to light by Professor Dean."

"Which shall be proven when we return triumphantly with a few armfuls of bones," flung back Emma as she hurried to catch up with Grace, Arline, Ruth and Anne, who had already started.

"What would life be without Emma Dean?" eulogized Sue Emerson after Emma's vanishing back. "Sara and I are always quoting her at home. It seems so strange that until the Sempers organized we never knew her very well. It was through Grace we learned to know Emma."

"The longer I know Grace Harlowe the prouder I am to be her friend," said Elfreda slowly.

"That is the way we all think about Grace," was Sue Emerson's quick return. "You and Miriam are especially lucky in having her for a chum."

The four young women talked on until a long, clear trill announced the return of the other half of the exploring party. "Where, oh, where, are the mastodon's bones?" called out Sara Emerson jeeringly, as soon as Emma Dean came within hailing distance and empty-handed.

27

"Buried out of sight and as hard as stones," came Emma's rhymed rejoinder.

"How do you know how hard they are if they're buried out of sight!" scoffed Sara as Emma came up beside her.

"Mere supposition, my child, mere supposition."

The strollers had now reached the impromptu camp and were smiling over the exchange of words on the part of Emma and Sara.

"It was a delightful walk," declared Grace. "I'd like to spend two or three days in these woods."

"Stay over another week and do it," tempted Elfreda.

"I can't." Grace shook her head regretfully. "I must spend one week at home before I leave for Overton, and I simply must be at Overton, and in Harlowe House, at least a week before it opens. There are so many things to be done. Thank goodness, I'll have Emma to help me this year. Last fall I felt as lonely as a shipwrecked mariner when I landed on the station platform at Overton. Then I heard Emma Dean's voice behind me. I truly believe that was the pleasantest surprise of my life."

28

"There, twins! Now you hear what others think of me," exclaimed Emma in triumph. "Perhaps,

hereafter, you'll be more appreciative of my many lovely qualities."

"We never said you were the worst person in the world," conceded Julia.

"Neither did you ever refer to me as the 'pleasantest surprise' of your life," reminded Emma.

"You're a constant surprise, Emma, and always a funny one," was Sara's magnanimous tribute.

"Twins, you are forgiven. You may sit beside me, if you're good, while we eat luncheon. I can be magnanimous, too."

The big luncheon hampers were brought out by Elfreda and Miriam. A tablecloth was laid on the grass, and the luncheon was spread forth in all its glory. There were several kinds of toothsome sandwiches, salads, olives and pickles, fruit and plenty of sweets for dessert. There was coffee in two large thermos bottles, and there was also imported ginger ale. The hungry girls lost no time in seating themselves about this al fresco luncheon, making the quiet hollow ring with the merry talk and laughter of their last delightful frolic together.

CHAPTER III

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

After the picnickers had finished luncheon they still sat about the remains of the feast, talking busily of what they hoped to accomplish during the coming year.

Elfreda was full of plans as to what she intended to do when she had finished her course in the law school and passed the bar. "When I'm a full-fledged lawyer——" she began.

"You mean a lawyeress," corrected Emma. "Don't contradict me. Let me explain. True the word's not in the dictionary. I just coined it. I'm going to teach it and its uses in my classes this fall. I shall begin by referring to my friend, Miss J. Elfreda Briggs, the distinguished lawyeress. That will excite the curiosity of my classes. Then instead of satisfying that curiosity as to Lawyeress Briggs' personal and private history I shall gently lead them to a serious contemplation of the word itself. Once in use, I'll have it put in a revised edition of the dictionary. It's high time there were a few new words introduced into the English language. I can make up beautiful ones and not half try. It's so easy."

"And the faculty trusted her to teach English," murmured Miriam.

There was a chorus of giggles at this observation, in which even Emma joined.

"Make up some new words now," challenged Julia Emerson.

"Not when I'm on a picnic," refused Emma firmly. "'Work while you work and play while you play.' I came out to play."

"Our play days end to-night," smiled Grace. "At least mine do."

"Mine, too," echoed Arline. "Really, girls, you haven't any idea of how busy settlement work keeps one. I spend several hours each day at the rooms which Father let me have fitted up for a Girls' Club, and I visit the very poor people, and almost every evening I have a class or a meeting. One evening I go to a little chapel on the East Side to tell stories to children, and I teach classes two other nights. There's always something extra coming up, too. Father isn't exactly pleased over it. He thinks I work too hard. Now that Ruth is going to spend the winter with me I'll make her help. She is the laziest person. She hasn't accomplished a single thing since she found her father."

"He wouldn't let me," defended Ruth. "It has been hard labor to persuade him to allow me to stay in New York this winter. Besides I believe that my business of life, for the present, at least, is to try to make up for some of the years we spent apart."

"Good for you, Ruth," applauded Miriam. "You and I are of the same mind. Only I'm enlisted in the cause of a mother instead of a father. But all this leads up to what I intended to tell you girls before we separated. We are going to New York City for the winter. David is going into business there."

"To New York!" came simultaneously from Arline and Grace. There were murmurs of surprise from the other girls. J. Elfreda Briggs alone smiled knowingly.

"What are we to do in Oakdale without you, at Christmas time, Miriam?" asked Grace mournfully. "The Eight Originals Plus Two can't celebrate unless you are with them. Somehow every year we've all managed to gather home at Christmas. Now if you go to New York to live next winter perhaps David won't be able to leave his business, and your mother will need you and——"

"And do I live to hear Grace Harlowe borrowing trouble?" broke in Emma Dean. "Our intrepid,

dauntless, invincible Grace!”

“I’m afraid you do,” admitted Grace. “I couldn’t help mourning a little. It was all so sudden. Anne, aren’t you astonished?”

32

“Anne looks as though she’d known it a long while,” observed Elfreda shrewdly.

“I knew David was going into business in New York,” confessed Anne, her face flushing, “but I didn’t know the rest.”

“Neither did I, until this morning,” smiled Miriam.

“It seems as though we are the only persons in this august body that haven’t any plans,” declared Julia Emerson wistfully. “Here are Grace, Anne and Emma, regular salaried individuals. Arline is a busy little worker. Miriam and Ruth are at least useful members of society, and Elfreda is an aspiring professional. Sara and I are just the Emerson twins, with no lofty aims in view, or deeds of glory to perform.”

“You and Sara are not quite useless,” comforted Emma. “Just think what a continual source of inspiration you are to me. Some of my finest observations on life have been prompted by my acquaintance with you.”

“I’m glad we are of some account in the world,” grinned Sara. “I’d really quite forgotten about you, Emma. Thank you so much for reminding me.”

“Oh, not at all,” Emma beamed patronizingly upon her. “No matter how much others may malign you, I am still your friend.”

“Emma Dean, you ridiculous creature, why won’t you take us seriously?” laughed Julia, but her voice still held an undercurrent of wistfulness. “Does the fact that we are twins have this hilarious effect upon you?”

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“I wonder if that’s the reason,” murmured Emma. Then dropping her usual bantering tone, she fixed earnest eyes on the black-eyed twins. “Seriously, Julia and Sara, I know just the way you feel about having no particular life work picked out. When I went home after I was graduated from Overton I hadn’t the least idea of where I’d fit in in life. Then I found that Father needed my help, and I’ve been head over ears in work ever since. One never knows what may happen, or how quickly one’s work may find one. It may not be what one would like it to be, but it will undoubtedly be the best thing in life for one, and one is likely to see it coming around the corner at almost any minute.”

“That’s very, very true.” It was Grace who spoke. “Don’t you remember how I worried about finding my work, and it walked directly up to me and introduced itself on Commencement day?”

“I never dreamed that the stage would put me through college and be my work afterward,” broke in Anne. “When first I went to Oakdale I supposed I had left it behind forever. But it must have been my destiny after all.”

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“I guess it’s just about as well in the long run not to worry about what your work is going to be until it knocks at your door,” observed Elfreda. “Children are always planning and talking about what they’re going to do and be when they grow up; then they always do something different. What do you suppose I used to say I was going to be when I grew up?”

“Some perfectly absurd thing,” anticipated Miriam. Eight pairs of amused eyes fixed themselves expectantly on Elfreda.

“Well,” Elfreda chuckled reminiscently, “my aim and ambition was to be a cook. Not because I was so deeply in love with cooking, but because I liked to eat. No wonder I was fat. I used to haunt the kitchen on baking days and shriek with an outraged stomach afterward. The shrieking occurred most frequently in the middle of the night. Then Ma would come to my rescue, and I’d be forbidden to sample the baking again. So to console myself in my banishment I’d resolve that when I grew up I’d be a cook and live in a kitchen all the time. I reasoned that if I *was* a cook I’d know how to make everything in the world to eat and could have what I pleased. Besides no one would dare tell me I couldn’t have this or that. This was all very consoling during the times I had to keep out of the kitchen. Generally in about a week’s time Ma would relent, and, as our cook was fond of me, I’d be reinstated in my beloved realm of eats. But it was during these periods of exile that my ambition always rose to fever heat. Then our old cook got married, and I didn’t like our new one. She didn’t appreciate my companionship on baking days. Our old cook had always encouraged me in my ambition. She used to tell me long tales about the places where she had worked and the cooking feats she had performed. The new cook said I was a nuisance, and complained to Ma. So my ambition died for lack of encouragement, but my appetite didn’t. I became an outlaw instead and made raids on the baking. So that particular cook and I were always at war. About that time Ma began giving me a regular allowance, so I haunted the baker and candy shops instead of the kitchen, and the cook idea declined. In fact all I know about cooking now, I learned at Wayne Hall, in the interest of my friends,” she finished.

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Elfreda’s reminiscence awoke a train of sleeping memories in the minds of the others, and for the next hour the quiet woodland echoed with their mirth over the curious, quaint and ridiculous aims and fancies of their childhood. The talk gradually drifted back to serious things and went on so earnestly that it was well after four o’clock before the party began to make reluctant

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preparations to return to the cottage.

"It has been a perfect day and a perfect picnic," declared Grace as she smiled lovingly at her friends. "We'll never forget Elfreda's house party."

"I'm going to have you with me at this time every year if it is possible," planned Elfreda. "So when September comes next year just mark off the last two weeks on the calendar as set aside for the Briggs' reunion and arrange your affairs accordingly. Is it a go?"

"Hurrah for the Briggs' reunion," cheered Arline.

The cheers were given and the picnickers started up the hill to where their automobiles were stationed. Grace and Elfreda brought up the rear with the luncheon hamper.

"That's dear in you to ask us here every year, Elfreda," said Grace. "It's a splendid way for us always to keep in touch with one another. You are forever doing nice things for others."

"Others," retorted Elfreda, gruffly. "I'm the most selfish person that ever lived. I'm not planning half so much to make you girls happy as I am to be happy myself. Every time I think that I might have gone to some other college and never have known you and Miriam and Anne, it nearly gives me nervous prostration. By the way, Grace, I have an idea Miriam is going to find her work pretty suddenly. I could see at commencement that Mr. Southard was in love with her. She didn't know it then. She knows it now though, and she likes him."

"You certainly *can* see what is hidden from the eyes of the rest of us. How do you know she knows it?"

"Oh, she was talking to me the other day about Anne, and she mentioned Mr. Southard's name in a kind of self-conscious way, not in the least like her usual self. I could almost swear she blushed, but I couldn't quite see that," grinned Elfreda.

"I'm surprised," laughed Grace; then she added slowly, "I've known for a long time that Mr. Southard was in love with Miriam. Anne discovered it at commencement, too. I hope Miriam *does* love him. Somehow they seem so perfectly suited to each other. I never could quite fancy she and Arnold Evans as being in love."

"It looks as though you'd soon be the only unengaged member of the Originals," remarked Elfreda innocently.

Grace's face clouded. Elfreda had touched upon a sore subject. Just before leaving Oakdale on her visit to Elfreda she had seen Tom. He had not renewed his old plea, but Grace knew that he was still waiting and hoping for the words that would make him happy.

"Elfreda," her voice trembled a little, "you know, I think, that Tom wishes me to marry him. I'm sorry, but I can't. I just can't. I suppose I'll be the odd member of the feminine half of the Originals, but I can't help it. My work still means more to me than life with Tom, and I'm never going to give it up. So there."

Elfreda nodded. Her nod expressed more than words, but secretly she had a curious presentiment that Grace would one day wake up to the fact that she had made a mistake. Still there was no use in telling her so. It might make her still more stubborn in her resolve. Elfreda greatly admired Tom, and, with her usually quick perception, had estimated him at his true worth. "He's worthy of her, and she's worthy of him," was her mental summing up, "and it strikes me that '*never*' is a pretty long time. Whether she can shut love out of her life forever, just for the sake of her work, is a problem that nobody but Grace Harlowe can solve."

CHAPTER IV

MILESTONES

"Sh-h-h! No giggles. If you don't creep along as still as mice she'll hear you," warned a sibilant whisper.

Five young women, headed by Emma Dean, smoothed the laughter from their faces and stole, cat-like, up the green lawn to the wide veranda at the rear of Harlowe House. One by one they noiselessly mounted the steps. Emma, finger on her lips, cast a comical glance at the maid, who tittered faintly; then the stealthy procession crept down the hall in the direction of Grace Harlowe's little office. There was an instant's silent rallying of forces of which the young woman at the desk, who sat writing busily, was totally unconscious, then, of a sudden, she heard a ringing call of "Three cheers for Loyalheart!" and sprang to her feet only to be completely hemmed in by friendly arms.

"You wicked girls! I mean, you dear things," she laughed. "How nice of you to descend upon me

in a body. I must kiss every one of you. Patience and Kathleen, when did you set foot in Overton? I've been watching and waiting for you. Mary Reynolds, this *is* a surprise. I didn't expect you until next week, and Evelyn, too, looking lovelier than ever. As for Emma, she's a continual surprise and pleasure." Grace embraced one after another of the five girls.

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"I'm so glad I thought of this nice surprise," beamed Emma, craning her neck, and pluming herself vaingloriously. "I have another beautiful thought, too, seething in my fertile brain. Let's go down to Vinton's and celebrate."

"I knew some one was sure to propose that," laughed Patience. "I intended to be that some one, but Emma forestalled me."

"I'm as busy as can be, but I can't resist the call to my old haunts," laughed Grace. "Besides, it's such a perfect day. Leave your bags in the living room, girls. I feel highly honored to know that you and Kathleen came straight to me, Patience."

"The old case of the needle and the magnet," explained Patience with a careless wave of her hand.

"Oh, Miss Harlowe I'm so glad to see you," was Mary Reynolds' fervent tribute.

"So am I," declared Evelyn Ward, with an emphatic nod of her golden head. "I've had a perfectly wonderful summer, Miss Harlowe. I loved my part. It hasn't been very hot in New York City, either, and I spent my Sundays and some of my week days with the Southards at their Long Island summer home. I have thought of you many times. I hope you'll forgive me for not writing you oftener. Kathleen and I came down on the same train." She poured forth all this information almost in a breath.

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"Of course I'll forgive you," returned Grace. "I'm a very lax correspondent, too. I'm so glad you've been well, and that you liked your part."

"You should have seen her in it, Grace," put in Kathleen. "She made an adorable Constance Devon, and her gowns were beautiful. The girl who understudied her, and who will play the part on the road, isn't half so stunning. Patience saw her, too."

"She was a credit to herself and Overton," verified Patience.

"I thank you, most grave and reverend seniors." Evelyn, her eyes shining with the pleasure of well-earned praise, made a low bow to Patience and Kathleen.

"Most grave and reverend seniors," repeated Grace, slipping in between her two friends, her hand on an arm of each.

Kathleen's sharp black eyes grew tender with the love she bore Grace. "Yes," came her soft answer, "Patience and I are seniors at last. We've reached Senior Lane, and I hope to leave some milestones as we pass through it. Dear as the others have been, I'd like to rise to greater heights this year. I don't know just what I'd like to do," she flushed and laughed at her own enthusiasm, "but I'd like to do something worth while."

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"So would I," murmured Evelyn Ward.

"I want to be friends with every one, and not be conditioned," was Mary Reynolds' modest petition.

"I don't know just what sort of milestones I'd like to leave. Only decorative ones, of course. I wish to keep my lane free from weeds and ugly, jagged rocks." This from Patience.

"You might begin at once and leave a milestone at Vinton's, for being a willing, little reveler," suggested Emma with meaning.

"Come on, girls," rallied Kathleen. "We must show Emma just how willing we are. Allow me, my dear Miss Dean," she offered her arm to Emma, and they paraded down the hall, out the door and down the steps with great ceremony. Mary, Grace, Patience and Evelyn followed. Patience walked with Evelyn, while Grace and Mary brought up the rear.

"Oh, Miss Harlowe," began Mary, with intense earnestness, "you haven't any idea of how much Kathleen—she likes me to call her Kathleen—has done for me this summer. I knew last spring that I must earn my living through the summer, in some way, but I never dreamed that it would be in such a nice way."

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"I am anxious to hear all about it," returned Grace. "When you wrote me that Kathleen had secured work for you on her paper I was so pleased."

"Yes, I was the assistant on the woman's page," related Mary. "Of course my work wasn't so very important. It was mostly clipping things from other papers, but I used to write the paragraph under the fashion drawings, and sometimes I went out to the big department stores to look for interesting new fads and fashions for women. Three times I wrote short articles, so you see I actually appeared in print. Kathleen made me take half of her room, and so my board wasn't very expensive. My salary was fifteen dollars a week. I have enough new clothes to last me all winter, and I've saved eighty-five dollars. That will help pay my tuition this year, and Kathleen is sure she can sell some children's stories I've written. Wouldn't it be glorious, Miss Harlowe, if some day I'd become a writer?" Mary's eyes shone with the distant prospect of future honors.

"It looks to me as though you were on the right road," encouraged Grace. "The only thing to do is to keep on writing. The more you write the easier it will become—that is, if you are really gifted. Kathleen has great faith in you. You must show her that it is well founded."

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"How inspiring you are, Miss Harlowe." Mary looked her gratitude at Grace's hopeful words; then she added in a slightly lower tone: "I'm so glad everything went so beautifully for Evelyn. I saw her twice in 'The Reckoning.' She looked *beautiful*, and her acting was so clever. She—she told me of her own accord about"—Mary hesitated—"things. It would have hurt me dreadfully if Evelyn had not come back to Overton. I love her dearly."

Grace nodded sympathetically. She understood the remarkable effect of Evelyn's beauty upon Mary. Still, she reflected, it had not been potent enough to lure Mary from standing by her colors at the crucial moment. Grace realized that this poor orphan girl, whose only home was Harlowe House, possessed a steadfast, upright nature that must in time win her not only scores of loyal friends, but the respect of all who knew her, as well.

A sudden trill from Kathleen caused them to quicken their steps. The others were standing in front of Vinton's, waiting for them. Once inside the pretty tea room that had been the scene of so many of their revels, with one accord they made for the alcove table.

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"Shades of Arline Thayer," laughed Emma. "I am haunted by her. I can see her sitting in that chair, her little hands folded on the table, saying, 'What are we going to eat, girls?' She loved this alcove and every stick and stone of Vinton's. She never cared so much for Martell's."

By this time they had seated themselves at the round table and begun to order their luncheon. Vinton's was productive of reminiscences, and they were soon deep in the discussion of past events, grave and gay, that had dotted their college life. Evelyn and Mary were for the most part listeners, but Grace, Patience, Emma and Kathleen fairly bubbled over with by-gone college history.

"I love to hear about the things that happened to Miss Harlowe and Miss Dean when they were students," confided Mary to Evelyn under cover of a general laugh over one of Emma Dean's ridiculous reminiscences.

"So do I," nodded Mary, then she added in a still lower tone, "Have you noticed the girl at the table near the door, Evelyn. She came in about ten minutes ago, and she's watched this table every second since she came."

"Yes, I noticed her. She's pretty, isn't she? That's a stunning suit she is wearing. Her hat is miles above reproach, too." Evelyn could not repress her admiration for beautiful clothes.

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At that moment Kathleen spoke to her and she turned to answer the latter's question. When next her eyes turned toward the pretty girl it was just as they were leaving the tea shop. Evelyn was the last member of the sextette to pass the table. She glanced at the girl only to note that she was searching a small leather bag frantically, a look of indescribable alarm in her eyes. "It's gone," she said, half aloud.

Something prompted Evelyn to halt. "Good afternoon," she said. "I heard—that is—can I help you?"

A shade of annoyance darkened the stranger's face. It was replaced by an expression of fright. "I've lost my money," she said in a dazed voice. "It was all I had. I can't pay for my luncheon. I don't know what to do." Her voice rose to an anxious note.

"Give me your check," said Evelyn quietly. "I'll pay the cashier. You can pay me later."

"Oh, thank you," breathed the girl. "You don't know how I hated the idea of going to the cashier and telling her I had no money. I'm *so* worried about my purse. I had over a hundred dollars in it. I haven't seen it since I left the train. Just before we reached Overton I went into the lavatory to fix my hair. I laid my bag down. There was another woman there at the mirror. She must have slipped her fingers into my bag and taken my purse, for when I picked up the bag it was open. I snapped it shut and paid no attention to it then. I didn't think of it until I reached for my purse to count out the money for my luncheon."

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"What a shame!" exclaimed Evelyn, sympathetically. "I know just how worried you must feel. Just wait a second." She picked up the check, which was for a small amount, went over to the desk, and paid the bill. Then she hurried back to her companion. "Everything is all right now," she declared, "but if you have no money you had better come with me. I will introduce you to Miss Harlowe. My name is Evelyn Ward."

"Miss Harlowe, of Harlowe House?" interrupted the girl.

"Yes, do you know her?"

"I don't know her yet, but I'm going to live at Harlowe House. So I expect to know her. My name is Jean Brent. Perhaps you've heard of me. A friend of mine helped me to get the chance to live at Harlowe House."

"Have I heard of you?" laughed Evelyn. "I should say I had. Isn't it funny how things happen? Why, you are to be my roommate."

CHAPTER V

THE LOCKED DOOR

When Evelyn and Jean Brent reached the street it was to find the other young women grouped together in conversation, and not at all alarmed at Evelyn's non-appearance.

"We weren't worried," Emma Dean assured her. "We've all been known to lag and loiter."

"I lagged and loitered to some purpose," defended Evelyn. "Miss Harlowe, this is Miss Brent, my roommate." She introduced the stranger to the others.

Grace's hand was extended in surprised welcome. "We have been looking for you since Monday," she said. "You are the girl who sat at the end table at Vinton's. If I had known you were Miss Brent I would have asked you to join us. I am so glad Miss Ward broke the ice. How did it happen?"

"I had lost my purse," returned the girl, rather shyly, in spite of her air of self-possession. Then reassured by Grace's charming manner, she told her story.

"You must come with us to Harlowe House at once. It is such a pity that you met with misfortune." Grace's gray eyes were full of sympathy. "Have you much luggage?"

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"Four trunks," was the rueful answer. "You see I have so many clothes that—" She stopped abruptly, a deep flush dying her fair skin, "I had no place—I did not like to leave them, so I had to bring them with me," she finished, rather lamely.

Grace did not ask further questions. She noted that the girl was ill at ease. "I received Miss Lipton's letter regarding you a week ago," she hastened to say. "I wrote her, as you know, that we could place you. She answered saying we might expect you at almost any time. After you have had a chance to rest and make yourself comfortable I will tell you of Harlowe House and the girls who live there."

One after the other the girls spoke friendly, encouraging words to the unfortunate freshman. Kathleen and Patience possessed themselves of her heavy bag, carrying it between them. Grace walked with the newcomer, pointing out the various interesting features of the little college town, in an attempt to put the stranger entirely at her ease after her disquieting experience. So far she had had slight opportunity to observe this latest freshman arrival. She had a vague idea that Jean Brent was an unusually attractive girl, but the side view she obtained of her, as they walked along, was far from satisfactory. The newcomer said little, and only once during the short walk to Harlowe House did she turn a pair of very blue eyes directly upon Grace.

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It fell to Evelyn Ward to show her to her room, as she was to be Evelyn's roommate. The girl had exclaimed a little, after the manner of girls, at the attractiveness of Harlowe House, but in spite of her brief flare of enthusiasm over the house and grounds, the tasteful living room and the daintiness of the room she and Evelyn occupied, she encased herself in a curious, impenetrable shell of mystery that Evelyn's natural curiosity could find no excuse to penetrate. She listened gravely and attentively to all that Evelyn told her of Harlowe House and its lucky household, but she volunteered no information concerning herself except a reluctant, "I came from the West," in answer to her roommate's question as to where she lived.

The more Evelyn observed her the more attractive she appeared. She was of medium height, and, although plump, could not be called stout. Her face was rather round, with no suggestion of fatness, while her features were small and regular. Her eyes were not large, but their intense blueness made them a significant feature of her face. Her hair was light brown and had a burnished look in the sun. It grew thickly upon her well-shaped head, and she wore it in a graceful knot at the back of her head. When she smiled, which had been but once since Evelyn first encountered her, she displayed unusually white, even teeth. It dawned upon Evelyn as she watched her unpacking her bag that Jean Brent had not only her share of good looks but a curious power of attraction as well that would carry her far toward college popularity if she chose to exert it. She wondered if she and Jean would get along well together. Although the new Evelyn had made great progress in ruling her own spirit she was well aware of her failings. She was quite sure, in her own mind, that never again would the love of beautiful clothes tempt her to dishonesty, but of herself, in other respects, she was not so positive. Still she had resolved to live up to the traditions of Overton College, to emulate the splendid example Grace Harlowe had already set.

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She glanced speculatively at her roommate, but the latter's calm, impassive expression told her nothing. Suddenly, as though impelled by Evelyn's gaze, the other girl glanced up and met Evelyn's eyes squarely. "Well, what do you think of me?" she inquired. "I think *you* are the prettiest girl I ever saw."

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Evelyn flushed at both the question and the compliment. Jean Brent was nothing if not frank. "I

know I'm going to like you. I was just wondering if we would fit into each other's lives."

"I have a frightful temper," admitted Jean Brent somberly. "Sometimes I'm glad of it. If I hadn't —" She paused.

Evelyn waited for her to continue, but she gave a quick sigh, and, springing to her feet, walked to the window. From there she could look out at the campus, still green and velvety. For at least five minutes she stood staring out. Then, with the air of one who casts aside a disagreeable memory, she turned from the window, saying: "I'm going to forget everything except the fact that I'm actually an Overton girl."

"Were you anxious to come to Overton?" asked Evelyn.

"No. I came here because of the advantages Harlowe House offers. I heard of it through a friend. I wanted to go to Smith, but—oh, well, here I am at Overton. Let's talk about you. I know you are interesting. You look just like the picture of a girl I saw in a magazine I was reading on the train. She is an actress. I didn't stop to read her name, but I loved her picture. I think I brought the magazine along. Oh, yes, there it is." She reached for the magazine, which lay on the table, and turned the leaves energetically. "Here is the picture," she declared. Evelyn found herself gazing at her own likeness. She began to laugh.

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"What's the matter?" demanded Jean. Her color rose in instant resentment of Evelyn's laughter.

Evelyn pointed to the printed name under the picture. "I am Evelyn Ward, you know."

"But not the *actress*?" Jean's blue eyes were wide with amazement.

Evelyn nodded laughingly. "That's my way of earning my tuition money and my clothes," she explained. "I was never on the stage until last summer." She went on to tell the astonished Jean of her meeting with the Southards and her final stage debut.

"How interesting!" exclaimed Jean. "I suppose all the Harlowe House girls earn their college fees. I wonder how I can earn mine. I had quite a sum toward them when I left—" again came the abrupt stop. "Oh, dear," she sighed the next moment, "I wish I'd been more careful of my money. I had no business to lay my bag down. What's the use of regretting? I'll have to think of some way to raise that money. If I can't find it any other way I can sell my clothes. I have perfectly *beautiful* things. Four trunks full. Lots more than I can wear. It is lucky for me that—" She checked herself guiltily.

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"That what?" asked Evelyn. She was beginning to feel a vague impatience at the strange way in which Jean Brent chopped off her sentences. And how recklessly she talked about selling her clothes.

"That I have you for a roommate," smiled the mysterious freshman. "I wonder how much the expressman will charge to bring my trunks from the station. Then, too, I wonder where I can put them. I wouldn't think of spoiling the looks of our room with them."

"You can put one of them over in that corner," planned Evelyn, "and we could get one into the closet. It's large and quite light. The other two Miss Harlowe will allow you to leave in the trunk room."

"I suppose it will cost a small fortune to have them delivered," demurred Jean. "I can't have the sale, either, until I know some of the girls who would be interested in my wares. I'll have to telegraph my friend to send me some money. Will you go with me to the telegraph office. I don't know the way. I'll ask Miss Harlowe to pay the expressman. Then I'll pay her when my money comes. Frenzied finance, isn't it? But if you knew—" Again that maddening break.

55

"I'll pay the expressman," volunteered Evelyn. "If I were you I'd talk things over with Miss Harlowe. She knows that you lost your purse. Very likely she has already thought of something you can do. I don't think she would like to have you sell your clothes."

"I don't see why she should object," declared Jean, with quick impatience. "However, I'll do my hair over again, and wash my face and hands, then I'll go down stairs and have a talk with her. She said she'd be in her office."

"Run down and talk with her now, then we'll go to the telegraph office," said Evelyn.

Twenty minutes later Jean entered the little office where Grace sat engaged in the work she had been doing when interrupted by her friends earlier in the afternoon. Like Evelyn, she was keenly alive to her latest charge's good looks. "How attractive she is," was her thought as she invited Jean to take the chair opposite hers.

"I suppose you would like to know something of our household, Miss Brent," began Grace. "We are not only a household, but we are members of a social club as well. You are the thirty-fourth girl. Last year Miss Thirty-four never materialized, so Miss Ward roomed alone. There isn't so much to tell you regarding the rules and regulations of Harlowe House. The club takes care of most of them with its constitution and by-laws." Opening a drawer of her desk, Grace took out a paper-covered booklet and handed it to the freshman. "This will give you nearly all the necessary information," she said. "If I were in your place I would go to the registrar's office reasonably early to-morrow morning. You can then learn whether you will be obliged to take the entrance examinations. Having been graduated from a preparatory school you may be exempt. When did

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Miss Lipton's school close?"

"Last June," returned Jean briefly.

"But you have seen her since then, have you not? Her letter gave me the impression that you had been with her recently. Do you live in Grafton, or were you visiting Miss Lipton?"

The fair face opposite her own was suddenly flooded with red. "I—I—was—on—a visit recently to Miss Lipton," she answered, with reluctance. She did not volunteer the name of her home town.

For the first time Grace became aware of the curious reticence that had vaguely annoyed Evelyn. "Where do you live, Miss Brent!" she asked with the sudden directness so characteristic of her.

For a moment the girl did not reply, then her color receded, leaving her face very white. "My home is in Chicago," she said slowly. "My father and mother are dead. I have always lived with"—she hesitated—"friends. Miss Lipton was a friend of my mother's. Surely her word will not be questioned by the faculty." She glanced at Grace with a half challenging air.

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Something in her tone brought the color to Grace's cheeks. Why could not this girl be perfectly frank in her replies? Now that Evelyn Ward had turned out so beautifully, Grace had been looking forward to a year of open comradeship with her girls, yet here she was face to face with what promised to be one of those baffling natures that required especially tactful handling to bring out the best that lay within it.

"I have no doubt that Miss Sheldon will place the utmost dependence in Miss Lipton's word," returned Grace gravely.

"If she doesn't, I—oh, well, to-morrow will tell the tale. I wish you would tell me more of Harlowe House. It is a wonderful place. I wanted to go to Smith, but I believe this will be nicer after all. Only I—shall—have to earn my college fees. Miss Ward said perhaps you would help me think of a way to earn money. I have nothing in the world except clothes, clothes, clothes. After I've been here for awhile I'd like to have a sale of them. I have loads of lovely things. If I could only sell enough of them to pay my fees."

58

"But you will need your clothing for your own use, will you not?" Jean Brent was momentarily growing more inexplicable.

Jean shook her head energetically. "I don't care for clothes," she said eagerly. "I could live in a coat suit and plenty of blouses all year. I *do* care for college, though. If I hadn't cared, I would never—" She suddenly checked herself. "Do you think the girls would buy my things?" she asked in the next instant. "They are nearly all new and fresh."

"I am sure they would be interested," was Grace's honest reply, "but I cannot allow you to hold a sale of your wardrobe. I think such a proceeding would be unwise. Why—"

"Please don't ask me why, Miss Harlowe, for I can't tell you." Jean had risen to her feet, two pleading eyes fixed on Grace. "I can only say that if I had not lost my money everything would be different. There are strong reasons why I can't explain to you about my being without money, yet having so many clothes, but I assure you that I have done nothing wrong or dishonorable. If you are not satisfied with my explanation and wish to send me away, of course I can only go, but if you are willing to trust me and let me stay I'll try to do my best for you and Harlowe House. I'm sorry you disapprove of my having a sale of my things."

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Grace looked long at the earnest young face. Mystifying as were her statements, Jean Brent had the appearance of honesty. Taking one of the girl's hands in both her own, she said, "I don't in the least understand you, Miss Brent, but I will respect your secret."

"Thank you so much for your kindness to me, Miss Harlowe." With an almost distant nod the prospective freshman rose and left the office with almost rude abruptness.

"What a strange girl," mused Grace.

Her musing was interrupted by the breezy entrance of Emma Dean. "Hello, Gracious," she hailed. "Why so pensive?"

"I'm not pensive. I'm puzzled, and a little worried," returned Grace. "Our latest arrival is a most complex study."

"I suspected it," was Emma's cheerful rejoinder. "One of the 'There was the Door to which I found no Key' variety, so to speak."

"I'm going to tell you all about it," decided Grace, "for I need your advice." She related her interview with Jean Brent.

"Miss Lipton, the head of the Lipton Preparatory School, at Grafton, writes beautifully of Miss Brent," went on Grace. "I know the faculty would consider her word sufficient to enroll this girl, but I feel that I ought to be doubly careful to keep my household irreproachable. I don't like mysteries when it comes to admitting a new girl to the fold. Still, Miss Brent impresses me as being honest and sincere. Besides, I've promised to help her."

60

"Don't worry, Gracious," advised Emma, "you may be harboring a princess unawares. The Riddle may turn out to be the Shahess of Persia, or the Grand Vizieress of Bagdad or some other royal

person. She may be the moving feature of a real Graustark plot."

"Stop being ridiculous, Emma, and tell me what I ought to do." Grace's smooth forehead puckered in a frown which her laughing lips denied.

Emma was instantly serious. "We do not know just how much college may mean to her," was her quick response. "If she chooses to shroud herself in mystery, I believe it is because of something which concerns herself alone."

There was a brief silence, then Grace said: "You are right. To be an Overton girl may mean more to Jean Brent than we can possibly know. I'm going to take her on faith. Perhaps she'll find college the key that will unlock the door to perfect understanding."

CHAPTER VI

A CLUB MEETING AND A MYSTERY

"There!" exclaimed Louise Sampson as she succeeded in firmly establishing at the top of the bulletin board a large white card, bearing the significant legend, "Regular Meeting of the Harlowe House Club. 8.00 P.M. Living Room. *Full Attendance, Please.*"

A small, fair-haired girl came down the stairs and joined Louise at the bulletin-board. She read the notice aloud. "Oh, dear, I've an engagement with a girl at Wayne Hall to-night. I don't care to miss the meeting, and I don't like to break my engagement," she mourned.

"I wish you would break it just this once, Hilda," said Louise seriously. "I am anxious that every member of the club shall attend the meeting to-night. I have something of importance to say to the girls."

Hilda Moore opened her blue eyes very wide. "What are you going to say, Louise? Tell me, please. You see I made this engagement over a week ago. If you'd just tell me now what it's all about, I wouldn't really need to come to the club meeting. I could——"

"Keep your engagement," finished Louise, her eyes twinkling. "Really, Hilda Moore, if you knew a tidal wave, or a cyclone or any other calamity was due to demolish Overton I believe you'd go on making engagements in the face of it."

Hilda giggled good-naturedly. She was a pretty, sunshiny girl of a pure blonde type, and had been extremely popular during her freshman year at Overton, not only with her fellow companions at Harlowe House, but as a member of the freshman class as well. In spite of her round baby face, and a carefree, little-girl manner that went with it, she was a capable business woman and earned her college fees as stenographer to the dean. The daughter of parents who were not able to send her to college, she had not only prepared for college during her high-school days, but had taken the business course included in the curriculum of the high school which she attended, and had thus fitted herself to earn her way in the Land of College.

Hilda's unfailing good nature was appreciated to the extent of making her a welcome guest at the informal gatherings which were forever being held in the various students' rooms after recitations were over for the day. The consequence was that, as her studies and clerical duties left her limited time for amusements, her precious recreation moments were invariably promised to her friends many days in advance. In fact Hilda Moore's "engagements" had grown to be a standing joke among them.

"Promise me on your bright new sophomore honor that you'll offer your polite regrets to the other half of that important engagement of yours and attend my meeting," appealed Louise.

"Well," Hilda looked concerned, "I *could* see the girl this afternoon and change the date." She smiled engagingly at Louise.

"Of course you *will*," Louise agreed, answering the smile. "You see I know you, Hilda Moore."

"But I wouldn't do it for any one else except Miss Harlowe or Miss Dean," was Hilda's positive assertion. "Mercy, look at the time! I'll have to run for it if I expect to reach the office before Miss Wilder. Good-bye."

Hilda was gone like a flash, leaving Louise to stare contemplatively at the notice. As the president for the year of the Harlowe House Club she felt deeply her responsibility. She had been unanimously elected at the club's first meeting, greatly to her surprise.

Louise Sampson was perhaps better fitted to be president of the Harlowe House Club than any other member of that interesting household. Emma and Grace had agreed upon the point when, before the election, the former's name had been mentioned as a probable candidate. This thought sprang again to Grace's mind as she came from her office and saw Louise still standing before

the bulletin board, apparently deep in thought. She turned at the sound of Grace's step.

"Oh, Miss Harlowe!" she exclaimed. "I do hope our meeting to-night will be a success. Surely some one will have a real live idea for the club to act upon."

"Thirty-four heads are better than one," smiled Grace. "There is inspiration in numbers."

"We did wonderfully well with the caramels last year, and this year I believe they will be more popular than ever. We made twice as many as usual last Saturday, and sold them all. We were obliged to disappoint quite a number of girls, too. Our little bank account is growing slowly but surely. Still there are certainly other things we can do to earn money, collectively and individually. Really I mustn't get started on the subject. It is time I went to my chemistry recitation. You'll be at the meeting to-night, won't you, Miss Harlowe? We couldn't get along without you."

65

A faint flush rose to Grace's cheeks at Louise's parting remark. How wonderful it was to feel that one was really useful. Yes; the thirty-four girls under her care really needed her. They needed her far more than did Tom Gray. Grace frowned a trifle impatiently. She had not intended to allow herself to think of Tom, yet there was something in the expression of Louise Sampson's gray eyes that reminded her of him. Resolving to put him completely out of her mind, Grace went into the kitchen to consult with the cook concerning the day's marketing. The postman's ring, however, caused her to hurry back to her office where the maid was just depositing her morning mail on the slide of her desk.

Her letters were from Anne, Elfreda and her mother, and they filled her with unalloyed pleasure. Her mother's unselfish words, "I hope my little girl is finding all the happiness life has to offer in her work," thrilled her. How different was her mother's attitude from that of Tom Gray. Surely no one could miss her as her mother missed her, yet she had given her up without a murmur, while Tom had protested bitterly against her beloved work and prophesied that some day she would realize that work didn't mean everything in life.

All that day the inspiring effect of her mother's letter remained with Grace. Her already deep interest in her house and her charges received new impetus, and when evening came, she felt, as she entered the big living room where the thirty-four girls were assembled, that she would willingly do anything that lay within her power to forward the prosperity and success of Harlowe House.

66

After the usual preliminaries, Louise Sampson addressed the meeting in her bright direct fashion. "Ever since we came back to Harlowe House this year I've felt that we ought to do something to increase our treasury money. If the club had enough money of its own, then the Harlowe House girls wouldn't need to borrow of Semper Fidelis. That would leave the Semper Fidelis fund free for other girls who don't live here and who need financial help. Of course we couldn't do very much at first, but if we could get up some kind of play or entertainment that the whole college would be anxious to come to see, as they once did a bazaar that the Semper Fidelis Club gave, the money we would realize from it would be a fine start for us. Now I'm going to leave the subject open to informal discussion. Won't some one of you please express an opinion?"

"Don't you believe that some of the students might say we were selfish to try to make money for our own house instead of for the college? Semper Fidelis was organized for the benefit of the whole college, but this is different," remarked Cecil Ferris.

67

A blank silence followed Cecil's objection. What she had just said was, in a measure, true.

Louise Sampson looked appealingly at Grace. She had been so sure that her plan of conducting some special entertainment on a large scale would meet with approval. Cecil's view of the matter had never occurred to her.

"I am afraid that Miss Ferris is right," Grace said slowly. "Much as I should like to see the Harlowe House Club in a position to take care of its members' wants I am afraid we might be criticized as selfish if we undertook to give a bazaar."

"Why couldn't we give one entertainment a month?" asked Mary Reynolds eagerly. "I am sure President Morton would let us have Greek Hall. We could give different kinds of entertainments. One month we could give a Shakespearean play and the next a Greek tragedy; then we could act a scenario, or have a musical revue or whatever we liked. We could make posters to advertise each one and state frankly on them that the proceeds were to go to the Harlowe House Club Reserve Fund. We wouldn't ask any one for anything. We wouldn't even ask them to come. We'd just have the tickets on sale as they do at a theatre. If the girls liked the first show, they'd come to the next one. We'd ask some of the popular girls of the college who do stunts to take part, and feature them. I think we'd have a standing-room-only audience every time."

68

Mary paused for breath after this long speech. The club, to a member, had eyed her with growing interest as she talked.

"I think that's a splendid plan," agreed Evelyn Ward. "I'm willing to do all I can toward it. I've had only a little stage experience, but I'd love to help coach the actors for their parts."

For the next half hour the plan for increasing the club's treasury was eagerly discussed. A play committee, consisting of Mary Reynolds, Evelyn Ward, Nettie Weyburn and Ethel Hilton, a tall, dark-haired girl, noted for making brilliant recitations, was chosen.

"Has any one else a suggestion?" asked Louise Sampson, when the first excitement regarding the new project had in a measure subsided.

"Why couldn't we have a Service Bureau?" asked Nettie Weyburn. "I mean we could post notices that any one who wishes a certain kind of work done, such as mending, sewing or tutoring, could apply to our bureau. Every one knows that the students of Harlowe House are self-supporting. We wouldn't be here if we weren't. Some of us have a very hard time earning our college fees. Some of us have been obliged to borrow money, and comparatively few of us ever have pocket money. If the girls who don't have to do things for themselves found that we could always be depended upon for services I imagine we would have all the work we could do."

69

"Hurrah for Nettie!" exclaimed Cecil Ferris. "I think that's a fine idea."

"So do I," echoed several voices.

"But we'd have to put some one in charge of the bureau, and no one of us could afford to spend much time looking after it," reminded Louise.

"Oh, we could take turns," was Nettie's prompt reply. "Then, too, we could have certain hours for business, say from four o'clock until six on every week day, except Saturday and from two o'clock until five on Saturday afternoons."

"But where would we receive the girls who came to see about having work done?" asked Alice Andrews, a business-like little person who roomed with Louise Sampson.

"I will see that the Service Bureau has a desk installed in one corner of the living room," offered Grace, who had, up to this point, listened to the various girls' remarks, a proud light in her eyes. She loved the sturdy self-reliance of the members of her household. "And there will also be times when I can do duty on the Bureau, too," she added.

70

"No, Miss Harlowe, you mustn't think of it," said Louise Sampson. "You do altogether too much for us now."

"I am here to take care of my household," smiled Grace. "Besides, it will be a pleasure to help a club of girls who are so willing to help themselves."

"Miss Harlowe is really and truly interested in the girls here, isn't she?" Jean Brent commented to Evelyn Ward in an undertone. Having passed her examinations Jean was now a full-fledged freshman.

"Yes, indeed," returned Evelyn, with emphasis. "She has done a great deal for me. More than I can ever hope to repay."

"What—" began Jean. Then she suddenly stopped and bent forward in a listening attitude. The electric bell on the front door had just shrilled forth the announcement of a visitor. A moment and the maid had entered the room with, "A lady to see you, Miss Harlowe. I didn't catch her name. It sounded like Brant."

71

Jean Brent grew very white. Turning to Evelyn she said unsteadily, "I don't feel well. I think I will go up stairs." Without waiting for Evelyn to reply, she rose and almost ran out of the living room ahead of Grace. As she stepped into the hall she darted one lightning glance toward the visitor, then she stumbled up the stairs, shaking with relief. She had never before seen Grace's caller.

"How do you feel?" was Evelyn's first question as she entered their room fully two hours later. "You missed a spread. We had sandwiches and cake and hot chocolate."

"I can't help it," muttered Jean uncivilly. Then she said apologetically, "I'm much better, thank you. Please forgive me for being so rude."

While in the next room Grace was saying to Emma, who, owing to an engagement, had not attended the meeting, "Really, Emma, the name 'Riddle' certainly applies to Miss Brent. She came to the meeting with the others, and when it was only half over she bolted from the living room and upstairs as though she were pursued by savages. I wouldn't have noticed her, perhaps, but I had been called to the door. Mrs. Brant came to see me about my sewing. Miss Brent hurried out of the living room ahead of me. I saw her give Mrs. Brant the strangest look, then up the stairs she ran as fast as she could go."

72

"Grace," Emma looked at her friend in a startled way. "You don't suppose Miss Brent has run away from home do you? The names Brant and Brent sound alike. She may have thought that some member of her family had followed her here."

It was Grace's turn to look startled. "I don't know," she said doubtfully. "I hope not. I should not like to harbor a runaway unless I knew the circumstances warranted it, as was the case with Mary Reynolds. I didn't think of Miss Brent's secret as being of that nature. Surely Miss Lipton would not countenance a runaway. Still I don't wish to try to force this girl's confidence. I prefer to let matters stand as they are, for the present, at least. I've promised to respect her secret, whatever it may be, and I am going to do so."

Emma shook her head disapprovingly.

"I don't like mysteries, Grace. When we talked Jean Brent over a few days ago I told you that I didn't think it mattered if she choose to wrap herself in mystery. But I've changed my mind. I

believe you owe it to yourself to insist on a complete explanation from her. Suppose later on you discovered that you had been deceived in her, that she was unworthy. Then, again, she might put you in a disagreeable position with President Morton or Miss Wilder. You remember the humiliation you endured at Evelyn's hands. I, who know you so well, understand that your motive in trusting Miss Brent unquestioningly is above reproach. But others might not understand. If she proved untrustworthy, *you* would be censured far more than she." Emma's tones vibrated with earnestness.

Grace sat silent. She realized the truth of her friend's words. Emma rarely spoke seriously. When she did so, it counted. Still, she had given her promise to this strange young girl, and she would keep her word. After all Jean Brent's secret might be of no more importance than that of the average school girl.

CHAPTER VII

HER OWN WAY

The Service Bureau lost no time in preparing and posting notices on the college bulletin board, and on those of the various campus houses, to the effect that they were prepared to take care of any requests for general services that might be made, and the immediate response with which their venture met was gratifying in the extreme. Certain of the club members found their spare time fully occupied in tutoring freshmen, while those who were skilled needlewomen were kept busy mending, making silk blouses, kimonos and even simple styles of gowns. Grace had thoughtfully placed a second sewing machine in the sewing room, and it never stood idle. There were requests for all sorts of services such as hair dressing, manicuring and countless small labors which affluent students were glad to turn over to their needy classmates.

Grace and Louise Sampson spent many hours of time and thought upon the new venture. It required tact and judgment to select the various girls for the various labors. First there was the customer to please. Second the fact that each member of the club was anxious to be given the opportunity to earn a little extra money. It was wonderful, too, the amount of hitherto undiscovered ability which came to light at the call for service, and it was not long before Nettie Weyburn had acquired considerable reputation as a manicurist, while Ethel Hilton gained lasting laurels as a hair dresser and Mary Reynolds proved herself a competent tutor. Hilda Moore became a fad among certain girls who loathed letter writing and willingly paid her for taking their dictation and typing their home letters, while Cecil Ferris stood alone as an expert mender of silk stockings. Louise Sampson made silk blouses. Several members specialized on kimonos. Two girls were kept constantly busy on hand-painted post cards, posters and cunning little luncheon favors. There were also occasional requests for a maid or companion for some special affair. In fact the high standard of excellence which the Service Bureau aimed for, and obtained, caused its popularity to increase rapidly.

There was but one member of this earnest and busy household to whom the Bureau meant nothing. That member was Jean Brent. So far she had discovered absolutely nothing she could do to earn money. She had not the patience to tutor, she loathed the bare idea of performing personal services for others, and she could not sew a stitch. Nevertheless the fact that she needed money perpetually stared her in the face. True she had written to Miss Lipton for a loan, and the money had been promptly sent her. She had repaid Grace and Evelyn the small sums they had advanced her, but the remainder of the money had dwindled away so rapidly she could hardly have given an account of the way in which it had been spent.

Now her thoughts turned to her trunks of unused finery. What possible objection could Miss Harlowe have to her selling what was rightfully hers? If she wished to dispose of certain of her own possessions it was surely no one's affair save her own. Althea Parker, who was Evelyn's friend, and the leader of a clique of the richest girls at Overton, had been given an opportunity to see the contents of one of the trunks and had gone into ecstasies over the dainty hats and frocks Jean had displayed for her benefit. "For goodness' sake *where* did you get such lovely things?" had been Althea's curious question. "They must have cost a lot of money."

"Do you think the girls in your set would be interested in them?" Jean had asked, ignoring the other girl's question. "I—I should like to sell them to any one who wants them. I must have some money. I need it at once."

"Sell them?" Althea's eye-brows had been elevated in surprise. "How funny." Then her natural selfishness coming strongly to the surface, she had said hastily. "I'd love to have that green chiffon evening gown. It's never been worn, has it?" She decided it was not her business if Miss Brent chose to sell her clothes. Jean had gravely assured her that everything in the trunk was perfectly new and fresh, and Althea had, then and there, bargained for almost a hundred dollars' worth of finery, and promised to interest the girls of her set in Jean's possessions.

It was not until after Althea had gone that Jean remembered Grace's objection to her proposed

sale. She decided that she could not have the sale after all. She would sell Althea the things she wished and tell her the circumstances. But when she laid the matter before Althea the latter had said lightly, "Oh, don't let a little thing like that worry you. It's none of Miss Harlowe's business. Besides, I've told my friends, and they are dying to see your things. Evelyn told me to-day that Miss Harlowe was going to New York City on Friday night. You can have the girls come up here on Saturday afternoon. I'll invite Evelyn to luncheon and keep her away until after six o'clock. She wouldn't like it if she knew. She's a regular goody-goody this year. What you must do is to get the things out of the other trunks. Then the girls can see them. I'll come to-morrow for these things I've selected; so have them wrapped up for me. If we manage it quietly no one need be the wiser, for the girls won't breathe a word of it to a soul."

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Actuated by her need of money, Jean swallowed her scruples and obeyed Althea's commands implicitly. Under the pretext of rearranging her wardrobe, she spent her spare time in the trunk room going over her effects and picking out those articles most likely to appeal to her customers, and by Saturday everything was in readiness for the sale. Evelyn, unsuspecting and jubilant over her luncheon engagement with Althea, who had so far this term held herself rather aloof from her, hurried off to keep her appointment, leaving Jean a clear field.

Locking the door, this strange girl began laying out her wares. There were exquisite evening gowns, with satin slippers and silk stockings to match, and there were afternoon and morning frocks, walking suits, separate coats, hats, gloves, fans, scarfs, everything in fact to delight the heart of a girl. Jean handled them all mechanically, and without interest. It was only when she heard the murmur of girls' voices outside her door that a deep flush mounted even to her smooth forehead. She drew a deep breath and braced herself as for an ordeal, then answered the peremptory knock on the door.

79

There were little delighted cries from the ten girls who came to the sale as they examined Jean's beautiful wardrobe. Being of medium height, her gowns fitted most of her customers, who exulted over the fact of their absolute freshness. They were indeed bargains, and, as each girl had come prepared to buy to the limit of her ample allowance, the money fairly poured into Jean's hands.

For the rest of the afternoon a great trying-on of gowns ensued, and in their eager appreciation of the pretty things before them they chattered like a flock of magpies, arousing not a little curiosity among a number of the Harlowe House girls who in passing through the hall heard the murmur of voices and subdued laughter. It was after six o'clock when the last girl, bearing a huge bundle and a suit case, had departed. Jean sat down amidst the wreck of her possessions and sighed wearily. She sprang up the next moment, however, and began feverishly to bundle the various garments lying about on the bed and chairs into the open trunk. She had sold many of her possessions. Those that were left would all go into the one trunk. She must hurry them in before Evelyn returned. She was likely to come in at almost any moment. Jean had saved a beautiful frock of yellow crêpe for Evelyn. She intended to give it to her for a Christmas present. There were shoes, stockings and scarf to match, along with a wonderful white evening coat, trimmed with wide bands of white fur and lined with palest pink brocade. In the short time she had known Evelyn she had become greatly attached to her, and although unlike in disposition, they had, so far, managed to get along together as roommates.

80

Jean knew, however, that Evelyn, who was devoted heart and soul to Grace Harlowe, could not fail to disapprove of her high-handed disregard of Grace's authority. She, therefore, determined to remove all traces of the sale and trust to luck and the honor of the girls who had taken part in it. If, later, Evelyn should recognize any of the various articles as Jean's, it would do no particular harm. She would, no doubt, be shocked, but still past lapses of good conduct never disturbed one as did those of the present. Feeling that, in her case, at least, the end justified the means, Jean bundled the last tell-tale effect into the trunk and banged down the lid, resolving to meet Evelyn as though nothing had happened, and let the future take care of itself.

81

CHAPTER VIII

ALL IN THE DAY'S WORK

With the approach of the Thanksgiving holidays a great pleasure and a great sorrow came to Grace. The "pleasure" was the joyful news that Mr. and Mrs. Harlowe had accepted an invitation to spend Thanksgiving in New York City with the Nesbits. This news meant that, for the first time since her entrance into college as a freshman, Grace would have the supreme satisfaction of being with her adored parents on Thanksgiving Day. Anne, Miriam and Elfreda would be with her, too, which made the anticipation of her four days' vacation doubly dear.

Then almost identical with this great joy had come the great sorrow. Miss Wilder was going away. For the past year she had not been well, and now she had been ordered West for her health. During Grace's first year at Harlowe House the regard which Miss Wilder had always felt

for her as a student had gradually deepened until the two were on terms of intimacy. Grace felt the same freedom in going to the dean with her difficulties as she had with Miss Thompson, her loved principal of high-school days.

82

It seemed to her as though this staunch friend, with her kindly tolerance, and her amazing knowledge of girl nature, could never be replaced. No matter how worthy of respect and admiration her successor might be, she could never quite equal Miss Wilder. The possibility of Overton without her had never occurred to Grace. True she had noted on several occasions that Miss Wilder looked very pale and tired. She was considerably thinner, too, than when Grace had entered college as a freshman, yet she had always given out the impression of tireless energy. Grace had never heard her complain of ill health, yet here she was, threatened with a nervous breakdown. The only remedy, a complete rest. As soon as her successor had been appointed she would start for an extended western trip in search of health, which only time, the open air and rest could restore. At the older woman's request Grace spent as much time as possible in her company. They had long talks over the subject that lay closest to the young house mother's heart, the welfare of her flock, and Grace derived untold benefit from the dean's counsel.

It now lacked only a little time until Overton College would lose one of its staunchest friends. Divided between the anticipation of meeting and the pain of parting, Grace hardly knew her own state of mind. It was with a very sober face that she hung the telephone on its receiver one gray November morning, and slipping into her wraps, set out for Overton Hall in obedience to Miss Wilder's telephoned request. The new dean, Miss Wharton, had arrived, and Miss Wilder was anxious that Grace should meet her. Miss Wharton had expressed herself as interested in Miss Wilder's account of Harlowe House and its unique system of management. She had also expressed her desire to meet Grace, and Miss Wilder, hopeful that this interest might prove helpful to Grace, had readily acceded to her wish.

83

Grace set forth for Overton Hall in good spirits, but whether it was the effect of the raw November morning or that the shadow of parting hung heavily over her, she suddenly felt her exhilaration vanish. A strange sense of gloomy foreboding bore down upon her. She found herself strangely reluctant to meet Miss Wharton. She had a strong desire to about-face and return to Harlowe House. "What is the matter with you, Grace Harlowe?" she said half aloud. With an impatient squaring of her shoulders she marched along determined to be cheerful and make the best of what she could not change.

As she entered Miss Wilder's office her quick glance took in the short, rather stout figure seated beside Miss Wilder. This, then, was Miss Wharton. What Grace saw in that quick glance was a round, red, satisfied face lit by two cold pale blue eyes, and surmounted by lifeless brown hair, plentifully streaked with gray. There was neither grace nor majesty in her short, dumpy figure, and Grace's first impression of her was decidedly unpleasant. An impression which she never had reason to change.

84

Miss Wilder rose to meet Grace with outstretched hand. "My dear, I am glad to see you this morning."

"And I to see you," responded Grace, her gray eyes full of affectionate regard. "How are you feeling to-day, Miss Wilder?"

"Very well, indeed, for me," smiled the dean. "Almost well enough to give up my western rest, but not quite. My heart is in my work here. It is hard to leave it even for a little while. But I am leaving it in good hands. I wish you to meet Miss Wharton, Grace."

She presented Grace to the other woman, who did not offer to take the hand Grace extended, but bowed rather distantly. The color stung Grace's cheeks at the slight. Still she forced herself to try to say honestly, "I am glad to know you, Miss Wharton."

"Thank you," was the cold response, "You are much younger than I was led to believe. It is rather difficult to imagine you as the head of a campus house. You give one the impression of being a student."

85

Grace's eyes were fixed on the new dean with grave regard. Was this salutary speech purely impersonal or did a spice of malicious meaning lurk within it? Not since those far-off days when Miss Leece, a disagreeable teacher of mathematics at Oakdale High School, had made her algebra path a thorny one had she encountered any instructor that reminded her in the least of the one teacher she had thoroughly despised. Yet, as she strove to fight back her growing dislike and reply impersonally, she was seized with the conviction that even as she and Miss Leece had been wholly opposed to each other, so surely would she and Miss Wharton find nothing in common. After what seemed an hour, but was in reality a minute, Grace forced herself to smile and say with quiet courtesy, "This is my second year as house mother at Harlowe House. I am frequently taken for a student. I really feel no older than my girls, and I hope I shall always feel so."

"It isn't years that count with Miss Harlowe," smiled Miss Wilder, coming to Grace's defense. "It is the ability to keep things moving successfully, and Miss Harlowe has shown that ability in a marked degree," she added.

86

"Has she, indeed?" returned Miss Wharton, with what Grace felt to be forced politeness. "I shall be interested in visiting Harlowe House and learning Miss Harlowe's successful methods of management." Then she turned to Miss Wilder and began a conversation from which it appeared

as though she deliberately sought to exclude Grace.

"I must go, Miss Wilder," said Grace, rising almost immediately. She decided that she could not and would not endure Miss Wharton's rudeness.

Miss Wilder looked distressed. She could not understand Miss Wharton's attitude, therefore there was nothing to do save ignore it.

"Very well, my dear. Run in and see me to-morrow. I shall be here from two o'clock until four in the afternoon." She took one of Grace's soft hands in both of hers. The brown eyes met the gray questioning ones with a look of love and trust. Grace's resentment died out. She said a formal good-bye to Miss Wharton and hurried from the room. She would go to see Miss Wilder the next day as she had requested. Perhaps Miss Wharton's rude reception of her was due merely to a brusque trait of character. Perhaps she belonged to the old school who believed that youth and responsibility could not go hand in hand. At any rate she would try hard not to judge. Although she usually found her first impressions to be correct, still there were always exceptions. Miss Wharton might prove to be the exception.

87

On her way home she stopped at Wayne Hall. To her it was a house of tender memories, and she never entered its hospitable doors without half expecting to see the dear, familiar faces of the girls long gone from there to the busy paths of the outside world.

"Why, how do you do, Miss Harlowe?" was Mrs. Elwood's delighted greeting. "It certainly is good to see you. I think you might run over oftener when you're so near, but I s'pose you have your hands full with all those thirty-four girls. Did you come to see Miss West and Miss Eliot? If you did, they're both at home, for a wonder. Miss West doesn't have a recitation at this hour, and Miss Eliot's sick."

"Sick!" Grace sprang to her feet. "Oh, I must run up and see her at once. To tell you the truth, Mrs. Elwood, I came to see you. I hadn't the least idea that either of the girls were in, but if you'll forgive me this time I'll run upstairs to see Patience and make you a special visit some other day."

"Oh, I'll forgive you, all right," laughed Mrs. Elwood. "I'm glad to see your bright face, if it's only for five minutes, Miss Harlowe."

88

"You're a dear." Grace dropped a soft kiss on Mrs. Elwood's cheek, then hurried up the stairs, two at a time. Pausing at the old familiar door at the end of the hall, she knocked. There was a quick, light step. The door opened and Kathleen West fairly pounced upon her.

"Look who's here! Look who's here!" she chanted triumphantly. The tall, fair girl in the lavender silk kimono, who reclined in the Morris chair, turned her head languidly, then gave a cry of delight.

"You poor girl!" Grace embraced Patience affectionately. "Whatever is the matter?"

"Oh, just a cold," croaked Patience. "In the words of J. Elfreda, 'I'm a little horse.'" Her blue eyes twinkled. "It's worth being sick to have you here, Grace."

"I've been intending to come over every night this week, but I'm so busy," sighed Grace. "The Service Bureau keeps me hustling."

"What a progressive lot of people you Harlowites are," praised Kathleen. "Did you know that Mary is doing a story about you and your family for our paper. Of course there are no names mentioned. I saw to that." Kathleen flushed. She recalled a time when she had used Grace's name without permission.

"Yes, I know about it," smiled Grace, "and I know that no names are mentioned."

89

Kathleen's color heightened. Then she remarked: "By the way, that Miss Brent must have realized a nice sum of money from her sale. When did she have it, Grace? We didn't hear a word of it. It must have been a very select affair. I'm sorry I didn't know of it, for I wanted to buy an evening dress. Rita Harris bought a beauty. Tell us about this latest acquisition to Harlowe House. How does she happen to have such wonderful clothes, and why didn't she go to work for the Service Bureau instead of selling them? I'm fairly buzzing with curiosity."

Grace viewed Kathleen in amazement. "I don't understand you, Kathleen," she said, in a perplexed tone. "I have heard nothing of a sale."

"But Miss Brent held it at Harlowe House a week ago last Saturday," persisted Kathleen. "It is evident she didn't wish you to know it or you would have been there, too."

Grace's amazed expression changed to one of vexed concern. She now understood. "One week ago last Saturday I was in New York City," she said soberly. "Until this moment I knew nothing of any such sale. In fact I had objected to the plan when Miss Brent proposed it to me. If she had wished to dispose of certain of her personal belongings to any one girl I should have said unhesitatingly that it was her own affair, but a general sale is a different matter. The eyes of the college are, to a great extent, directed toward Harlowe House. It's position among the other campus houses is unique. That the girls who live there are given a home free of charge makes them doubly liable to criticism. They must be worthy of their privileges."

90

Kathleen nodded in emphatic agreement. "Of course they must. I understand fully your position

in regard to them, Grace.”

“You mean the girl we met that day at Vinton’s, don’t you?” inquired Patience. “She had been robbed of her money in the train.”

“Yes; she is the very girl.”

“How do you reconcile her lack of means to pay her college expenses with this wonderful wardrobe that Kathleen has just told us of?”

“I don’t reconcile them. I can’t. That is just the trouble.” Grace looked worried. “Speaking in strict confidence, I have really taken Miss Brent on trust. I have asked her to explain certain things to me, and she has refused to do so. On the other hand she is warmly championed by the principal of one of the most select preparatory schools in the country. Then, too, she assures me that at some future day she will explain everything. Emma calls her the Riddle. It’s an appropriate name, too.” Grace made a little despairing gesture.

91

“You are the greatest advocate of the motto, ‘Live and let live’ that I have ever run across, Grace,” smiled Patience, “but,” her face grew serious, “I believe you ought to insist on Miss Brent’s full explanation of her mysterious ways. If the news of this sale happens to reach faculty ears *you* are likely to be criticized for allowing it.”

“But I didn’t allow it,” protested Grace. “I refused my consent to it.”

“Yet you are the last one to defend yourself at another’s expense,” reminded Kathleen. “You’d rather be misjudged than to see this girl, who hasn’t even trusted you, placed in an unpleasant position.”

Grace’s color deepened. “I promised to trust her,” she said at last. “At first I felt just as you do about this. Then I talked with her. She seemed honest and sincere. I decided that perhaps it would be better not to force her confidence. Young girls are often likely to make mountains of mole-hills. Still, Emma thinks just as you do,” she added. “She didn’t at first, but she does now. I’m sure *she* knows nothing of the sale. She would have told me.”

“I just happened to remember,” began Kathleen, her straight brows drawn together in a scowl, “that Evelyn Ward rooms with Miss Brent. Evelyn must have known of the sale. Do you mind, if I ask her about it?”

92

“Ask her if you like.” Grace spoke wearily. Everything was surely going wrong to-day. She had intended to tell Patience and Kathleen about her trip to New York. She had visited Anne and the Southards and spent two delightful days. After what she had heard she felt that there was nothing to say. “I must go,” she announced abruptly. “I’ll come again to-morrow to see you, Patience. A speedy recovery to you. Come and see me, both of you, whenever you can. By the way, I met Miss Wharton, the new dean, this morning.”

“What is she like?” asked Kathleen.

“I can hardly tell you. She is different from Miss Wilder. I saw her only for a moment. She seems distant. Still one can’t judge by first appearances. I must go. Good-bye, girls.”

Grace left her friends rather hurriedly. She was ready to cry. The revelations of the morning had been almost too much for her. It was hard indeed to be snubbed, but it was harder still to be deceived. “It’s all in the day’s work,” she whispered, over and over again, as she crossed the campus. “I must be brave and accept what comes. It’s all in the day’s work.”

CHAPTER IX

WHAT EVELYN HEARD ON THE CAMPUS

93

“Ha! Whom have we here?” declaimed Emma Dean, pointing dramatically, as Grace opened the door and stepped into their room. One look at Grace’s sensitive face was sufficient. Emma had lived close to her friend too long not to know the signs of dejection in the features that usually shone with hope and cheerfulness. “Advance and show your countersign,” she commanded.

“I haven’t any,” returned Grace soberly.

“Spoken like a brigadier general who doesn’t need one,” retorted Emma. “You are just in time to hear my terrible tale.

“Oh, a terrible tale I have to tell
Of the terrible fate that once befell
A teacher of English who once resided
In the same recitation room that I did,”

she rendered tunefully.

The shadow disappeared like magic from Grace's face. "Now what have you done, you funny girl?" she asked, her sad face breaking into smiles. Emma was irresistible. 94

"It is not what I have *done*, but what I *might* have done. What was it Whittier said in 'Maud Muller'?"

"There's really no one under the sun
Can blame you for what you might have done,"

paraphrased Emma briskly.

Grace giggled outright. "Poor Whittier," she sympathized.

"Don't pity him," objected Emma. "Pity me for what nearly happened to me. The illustrious name of Dean came within a little of traveling about Overton attached to a funny story, which I will now relate for your sole edification. You remember that pile of themes I brought home on Tuesday?"

Grace nodded.

"Well, I finished them last night and wrapped them up ready to take back to the classroom today. They made a good-sized bundle, because I had collected them from all my classes. This morning I was in a hurry, so I picked up my bundle and ran. I always like to be in my classroom in good season. But fate was against me, for I met Miss Dutton, that new assistant in Greek, and she stopped me to ask me numerous questions, as she is fain to do unless one sees her first, and from afar off enough to suddenly change one's course and miss her. Consequently I marched into my room to find my class assembled. I assumed a dignity which I didn't feel, for I hate being late, and laid my bundle of themes on my desk. Every eye was fixed reprovingly upon me. I had said so much against straggling into class late, yet here I had committed that very crime. I untied my bundle and was just going to open it when that black-eyed Miss Atherton asked me a question. I answered the question, my eyes on her, my fingers folding back the paper. I reached for my themes and my hand closed over cloth instead of paper. A positive chill went up and down my spine. I gave one horrified glance at the supposed theme and poked it out of sight in a hurry. Another second and I would have offered some one my white linen skirt in full view of my class. Instead of themes I had brought my clean laundry to English IV." 95

"Oh, Emma!" gasped Grace mirthfully.

"You're not a bit sympathetic," declared Emma with pretended severity.

How Elfreda would love that tale. She would revel in the vision of Emma Dean solemnly proffering her linen skirt to an unsuspecting class. "I declare, Emma, you have driven away the blues." 96

"Have I?" inquired Emma with guileful innocence. It was precisely what she had intended to do. "What is troubling you, Gracious?"

"I can't endure the thought of losing Miss Wilder. I went to see her this morning and met Miss Wharton. I—"

"Don't like her," finished Emma calmly.

"No, I don't," returned Grace, with sudden vigor, "but how did you know it?"

"Because I don't like her, either. I was introduced to her yesterday afternoon in Miss Wilder's office. I didn't tell you, because I wished you to form your own impression of her, first hand."

"She was positively rude to me, Emma. She made me feel like a little girl. She said I looked more like a student than a person in charge of a campus house."

"I agree with her," was Emma's bland reply. "You might easily be taken for a freshman."

"But she didn't mean it in the nice way that you do," said Grace. "I hope she never comes to inspect Harlowe House. She will be sure to find fault."

"She'll have to make a sharp search," predicted Emma. "We won't worry about it until she comes, will we? Now, what else is on your mind?" 97

"The Riddle," admitted Grace. She related what she had heard from Kathleen regarding the sale.

"H-m-m!" was Emma's dry response. "They took good care that I shouldn't hear of it."

"I'm so sorry Evelyn lent herself to something she knew would displease me," mourned Grace.

"Perhaps she didn't. I know for a certainty that she wasn't in the house Saturday afternoon, for I met her on the campus and she told me that she was going to take luncheon and spend the afternoon with Althea Parker."

"She must have *known* about it."

"I am afraid the news of this sale will travel rapidly," prophesied Emma. "Not only will Miss Brent be talked over, but you also will be criticized. You know I advised you, not long ago, to insist that Miss Brent make a full explanation of things. Take my advice and see her at once."

"I will," decided Grace. "I'll have a talk with her after dinner to-night."

Grace was not the only one, however, to whom the news of the sale came as a shock. Strangely enough Evelyn learned of it during the afternoon of the same day in which it had come to Grace's ears. Her attention had been attracted to a smart black and white check coat which Edna Correll, a very plain freshman who tried to make up in extreme dressing what she lacked in beauty, was wearing. In crossing the campus on her way to Harlowe House she had encountered Edna in company with another freshman. For an instant she had wondered why the sight of the black and white coat which Edna wore seemed so strangely familiar. Then it had dawned upon her that it was identical with a coat belonging to Jean.

98

"How do you like my new coat?" had been Edna's salutation, and Evelyn had replied. "It's wonderfully smart. Miss Brent has one very much like it."

"She had one, you mean," Edna had corrected. "Why, weren't you at the sale last Saturday! I suppose you selected what you wanted beforehand. That is where you had the advantage."

"What sale?" Evelyn had asked, completely mystified. Then explanations had followed. White with suppressed anger, Evelyn had bade Edna a hasty good-bye and sped across the campus toward Harlowe House. Without a word she brushed by the maid who answered the bell, and rushed upstairs as fast as she could run. The temper which she had tried so hard to control was now at a high pitch. How dared Jean deliberately place her in such an unpleasant position when she was trying so hard to be worthy of Miss Harlowe's confidence? She flung open the door of her room. Then her eyes sought and found Jean standing before the wardrobe, her back to the door, a pair of black satin slippers in her hand.

99

"How could you do it?" burst forth Evelyn. "You know Miss Harlowe forbade it. Now she will think that I knew all about it. Just when I am trying to merit her confidence."

Jean Brent whirled about. Her blue eyes flashed. One of the slippers she held in her hand swished through the air and landed with a thud against the opposite wall. The wave of anger with which she faced Evelyn was like the sudden sweep of a gale of wind out of a clear sky. The other slipper followed the first one. Then the doors of the wardrobe were slammed shut with a force that caused it to shake. To Evelyn it was as though a strong current of air had blown upon her. Here, indeed was a temper that outranked her own.

"What right have you to speak to me in such a tone?" raged Jean. "You have nothing to say as to what I shall or shall not do. I won't pretend I don't know what you mean. I do know. I don't in the least care what you think about it, either. My clothes are mine to do with just whatever I please. If Miss Harlowe imagines I am going to be a servant to half the girls at Overton for the sake of earning my fees she is mistaken. Why should she or any one else object to my selling my things, if I like? I don't see how you found it out. The girls promised to keep the whole affair to themselves. I don't understand why you should be so concerned, or what it has to do with Miss Harlowe's opinion of you. From what you say I might almost assume that there had been a time when *you* were not to be trusted."

100

Evelyn's beautiful face was crimson with anger and humiliation. She longed to answer Jean's arraignment with a flood of words as bitter as her own, but her determined effort of months to rule her spirit now bore fruit.

"I'm sorry I spoke so abruptly," she said coldly. "I just heard about the sale from Miss Correll. You were quite right in what you said. There was a time when I could not be trusted. My trouble was about clothes, too. Miss Harlowe helped me find my self-respect again, and this year I am trying very hard to be an Overton girl in the truest sense of the word. I am telling you this in confidence because I wish you to understand why Miss Harlowe's good opinion is so dear to me."

"You can go and tell her that you knew nothing about the sale," muttered Jean sullenly. Something in Evelyn's frank confession had made her feel a trifle ashamed of herself.

101

Evelyn's violet eyes grew scornful. "How can you suggest such a thing?" she asked.

It was Jean's turn to blush. "Forgive me," she said penitently. "I know you aren't a tell-tale. If she asks me about the sale, be sure I'll exonerate you."

Evelyn shook her head. "I wish you'd go to her, Jean, and tell her what you have done. Sooner or later she is sure to find it out."

But Jean Brent was in no mood for this advice. It caused her anger to blaze afresh. "There you go again," she blustered, "with your goody-goody advice to me about running to Miss Harlowe with every little thing I do. I hope I'm not such a baby. If Miss Harlowe sends for me, don't think for a minute that I'll be afraid to face her, but until she *does* send for me I am not going to concern myself about it, and I would advise you not to trouble yourself, either."

With this succinct advice Jean made a fresh onslaught on the unoffending wardrobe. Opening it she seized her hat and coat. With a last reverberating slam of its long-suffering doors she turned her back on it and Evelyn, and switched defiantly out of the room and on out of the house.

LAYING THE CORNERSTONE OF A HOUSE OF TROUBLE

Jean did not return to Harlowe House for dinner that night. Instead she turned her steps toward Holland House, where Althea Parker lived, assured that in Althea she would find sympathy. In spite of the fact that Jean lived at Harlowe House, a plain acknowledgment of her lack of means, Althea shrewdly suspected that the mysterious freshman had come from a home of wealth, and was posing as a poor girl for some reason best known to herself. Jean's remarkable wardrobe had impressed her deeply, while Jean herself carried out the impression of having been brought up in luxury. She was self-willed, extravagant, careless of the future, and her flippant opinion, delivered to Althea, of the Service Bureau and work in general, was all that was needed to convince the shrewd junior of Jean's true position in life. Then, too, Jean was extremely likable, although Althea stood a little in awe of her remarkable poise and a certain imperiousness that occasionally crept into the girl's manner.

Jean rang the bell at Holland House with mingled feelings of resentment and defiance. Resentment against Evelyn for daring to take her to task; defiance of Grace and her commands.

103

"Is Miss Parker in?" she inquired of the maid who opened the door.

"She just came in, miss."

"Very well. I'll go on upstairs. She won't mind me."

Jean knocked on Althea's door. Althea called an indifferent "Come in," and she entered to find her engaged in reading a letter that had come by the afternoon mail.

"Oh, hello, Jean," she drawled at sight of the other girl. "You must have come in right behind me. What are you glowering about?"

"Evelyn is angry with me because I had the sale," began Jean. "That's what I came to tell you. I'm sorry I told her that Miss Harlowe had forbidden me to have it. Now she thinks I ought to go to Miss Harlowe and tell her that I disobeyed her before she hears of it from some other source."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Althea. "Don't be so silly. Ten chances to one she'll never hear of it. If ever she does, it will probably be as ancient history. I'll caution the girls again to keep still. Who told Evelyn?"

"That Miss Correll. Evelyn saw her wearing my black and white check coat and recognized it," returned Jean gloomily. "She came rushing into my room like a young tornado with the plea that Miss Harlowe would blame her for my misdeeds." Jean was tempted to add that which Evelyn had told her in confidence. Then her better nature stirred, and she was silent.

104

"Evelyn isn't nearly as good company this year as she was last," complained Althea. "Ever since the latter part of her freshman year, she's been so different. I've always had an idea," Althea lowered her voice, "that last spring she broke some rule of the college and ran away. One night, just before college closed—it was long after ten o'clock, too—Miss Harlowe telephoned me and asked if Evelyn were with me. I found out afterward that she had gone to New York all by herself. She'd never been there but once before when she spent a week-end with me, and she didn't know a soul. I never could find out anything else, though. Evelyn went to her classes on Monday, and not one word did she ever say about it. I didn't find out about the New York part of it until this fall, though. A Willston man whom we both know saw her in New York with that clever Miss West, who wrote 'Loyalheart.'"

Jean listened with attentive gravity. She guessed that Althea had perhaps hit upon the truth. Evelyn had confessed to her that there had been that in her freshman year of which she was ashamed. She had said it was about clothes, yet what had clothes to do with breaking the rules of Overton and running away to New York? Whatever it was, it should remain Evelyn's secret. She would tell Althea nothing.

105

"Let's go to Vinton's for dinner," she proposed, with an abrupt change of subject. "I've plenty of money now—while it lasts."

"All right," agreed Althea, "only I mustn't stay out late. I've a frightful lesson in physics to study for to-morrow."

Jean did not particularly enjoy her dinner. In spite of her defiant manner she had begun to feel slightly conscience-stricken. She almost wished she had not gone on with the sale. Still she could have obtained the necessary money in no other way. Now that the mischief was done she could hope only that Miss Harlowe would hear nothing of it—not for a long time, at any rate.

As she crossed the campus and ran lightly up the steps of Harlowe House she resolved to shake off her recent fear of the discovery, on Grace's part, of her disobedience and act as though nothing had happened.

Her resolution was destined to receive an unexpected jolt. "Miss Harlowe wants to see you, Miss Brent," were the words with which the maid greeted her as she stepped into the hall.

106

Jean's heart sank. So it had come already. She stopped for a moment in the hall to gather her forces. Her feeling of penitence vanished. She threw up her head with a defiant jerk and walked boldly into the little office where Grace sat making up her expense account for November.

"You wished to see me, Miss Harlowe?" Her tone was coldly interrogative, her eyes hostile, as she stared steadily at Grace.

Grace looked up from her work and calmly studied the pretty, belligerent girl standing before her. In that glance she realized what a difficult task lay before her.

"Yes, Miss Brent, I wished to talk with you," she answered. "Sit down, please."

Jean slid reluctantly into the chair opposite Grace, surveying her with an expression which said plainly, "Well, why don't you begin?"

"Did you have a sale of your clothes in your room one week ago last Saturday?"

The directness of Grace's question astonished Jean. She found herself answering, "Yes," with equal promptness.

"Why did you disobey me?" asked Grace.

"Because I needed the money," declared Jean boldly, "and I couldn't earn it, Miss Harlowe; I just couldn't."

Grace gazed reflectively at the flushed face opposite her own. "Miss Brent," she began, "when first you came to Harlowe House I believed that it was not necessary for me to know certain things which you did not wish to divulge. I might still be of that opinion if you had not disobeyed me. It is most peculiar for a girl to come to Overton utterly without funds, yet possessing quantities of the most expensive clothes. I have always felt assured of your right to be an Overton and a Harlowe House girl, yet others might not regard you so leniently. That is why I refused to allow you to have the sale. I feared you would bring down undue criticism upon you, and upon me as well. Once you became a subject for criticism you might be obliged to explain to the dean or the president of the Overton College what you have refused to explain to me. It was to protect you that I refused your request. Since you have seen fit to disregard my authority I can do but one thing. I must insist that you will tell me fully what you have, so far, kept a secret. In order to protect you I must know everything. I can no longer go on in the dark."

Jean stood staring at Grace. A look of stubborn resolve crept into her face. Grace, watching her intently, knew what the answer would be. The strange girl opened her lips to speak. Then, obeying her natural impulse to give the other person the greatest possible chance, Grace raised a protesting hand.

"Don't say you won't do as I ask, Miss Brent. Take a little time to think over the matter. I am going to give you until after Thanksgiving to decide whether or not you will trust me. Remember my sole desire is to help you."

For the first time Grace's sweet earnestness seemed to awaken a responsive chord in the heart of the obstinate freshman. The ready color dyed her cheeks crimson. The hard, defiant light left her eyes.

"If only she would tell me now and have it over with," thought Grace, noting the signs of softening on Jean's part. The girl appeared to be considering Grace's proposal in the spirit in which it had been made. Then, all in an instant, she changed. It was as though she had suddenly recalled something disagreeable.

"There is really no use in waiting until after Thanksgiving for my answer. I can't tell you. I suppose you will send me away because I won't tell you, but if I did tell you, you would send me away just the same. So you see it doesn't really make much difference. It was silly in me to come here. I might have known better," she ended with a mirthless smile.

Grace regarded Jean with growing annoyance. She had been offered a chance to explain herself and she had refused it. True, Grace could also refuse to allow her to remain a member of Harlowe House, but this she did not wish to do. Her pride whispered to her that among the girls who were enrolled as members of the household, made possible by Mrs. Gray's generosity, there had been no failures. Jean Brent should not be the first. She would bear with her a little longer.

"I repeat, Miss Brent," she said, "that I do not wish you to answer me until after Thanksgiving. Then, if you decide, as I hope you will, to be frank with me, I promise you that I will do my utmost to protect you."

Jean's only response was, "Good night, Miss Harlowe." Then she turned and left the office.

Grace sat poking holes in an unoffending sheet of paper with her lead pencil. She wondered what Jean Brent's secret could possibly be, and how she could best reach this stubborn, self-centered freshman. And in her wholehearted effort to be of service to the girl, who apparently needed her help, she did not dream that she was laying the cornerstone of a house of trouble for herself.

THANKSGIVING WITH THE NESBITS

"I am sure I never before had so much to be thankful for!" was Grace Harlowe's fervent declaration as she viewed with loving eyes the little circle of friends of which she was the center.

It was Thanksgiving eve, and the Nesbits had gathered under their hospitable roof a most congenial company to help them commemorate America's first holiday. Mr. and Mrs. Harlowe, in company with Mrs. Gray, had come from Oakdale. J. Elfreda Briggs had won a reluctant consent from her family, who invariably spent their Thanksgivings at Fairview, to make one of Miriam's house party. Anne, who was playing an extended engagement in New York City, was transplanted from the Southards' to Miriam's home for a week's stay. There were, of course, many loved faces missing, but this only made those who had assembled for a brief sojourn together more keenly alive to the joy of reunion.

"This is the first Thanksgiving since my senior year in high school that I've been given the chance to sit between Father and Mother and count my blessings," Grace continued, looking fondly from one to the other of her parents. She was occupying a low stool between them, her favorite seat at home when the day was done, and the devoted little family gathered in the living room to talk over its events. 111

"We are counting our blessings, too," smiled Mr. Harlowe. "One of them is very lively, and runs away almost as soon as it arrives." He pinched Grace's soft cheek.

"But it always runs back again," reminded Grace, "and it's always yours for the asking. I'd leave my work, everything, and come home on wings if you needed me."

"I used to hate Thanksgiving when I was a youngster," broke in J. Elfreda. "We always had a lot of company and I always behaved like a savage and spent Thanksgiving evening in solitary confinement. I'd wail like a disappointed coyote and make night generally hideous for the company. I've improved a lot since those days," she grinned boyishly at her friends. "I can see now that it was a pretty good thing the Pilgrim Fathers set aside a day for counting their blessings. If they thought they were lucky, I wonder what we are."

Elfreda had unconsciously gone from the comic to the serious.

"We are favored beyond understanding," Mrs. Harlowe said solemnly. "When one thinks of the poor and unfortunate, to whom Thanksgiving can bring nothing but sorrow and bitterness, it seems little short of marvelous that we should be so happy." 112

"I don't wish to be selfish and forget life's unfortunates, but I'd rather not think about them now," was Miriam's candid comment. "We mustn't be sad to-night. Grace must sparkle, and Elfreda be funny, and Anne must recite for us, and I'll play and David must sing. I've discovered that he has a really good tenor voice. We've been practising songs together this fall."

"Really?" asked Grace, with interest. "And all these years we never knew it. David, you can surely keep a secret."

"Oh, I can't sing," protested David, coloring. "Miriam only thinks I can. Our real singers are among the missing to-night."

"You mean Hippy and Nora?"

"Yes," nodded David. "Isn't it strange we didn't hear from them. I wrote Tom, Hippy and Reddy to come on here for Thanksgiving if they could. Reddy and Jessica couldn't make it. They are coming home for Christmas, though. Tom Gray is away up in the Michigan woods. Still he sent a telegram that he couldn't come. But Hippy didn't answer. This morning I sent him a telegram, and so far there's no answer to that, either." 113

"I hope neither of them is ill." Mrs. Gray's face took on a look of concern. "It is not like Hippy to neglect his friends."

"Nora is usually the soul of promptness, too," reminded Anne.

"If I don't hear anything to-night, I'll telegraph Hippy again to-morrow," announced David.

There was a pleasant silence in the room. Every one's thoughts were on the piquant-faced Irish girl, whose sprightly manner and charming personality made her a favorite, and her plump, loquacious husband, whose ready flow of funny sayings never seemed to diminish.

"There aren't any wishing rings nowadays," sighed Grace, "so there's no use in saying, 'I wish Nora and Hippy were here.' Come on, David, and sing for us. Miriam says you can, and you know it wouldn't be nice in you to contradict your sister."

"You can sing, 'Ah, Moon of My Delight,'" suggested Miriam to her brother. "It is Omar Khayyam set to music, you know"—she turned to Grace—"from the song cycle, 'In a Persian Garden.'"

"I love it," commented Anne, her eyes dreamy. "Do sing it, David." 114

As Miriam went to the piano the whirr of the electric bell came to their ears.

Grace glanced interrogatively at David. "Perhaps it's a telegram," she commented.

David, who had just risen from his chair to go to the piano, stopped short and listened. "False alarm. Must be the doctor. One of the maids is sick." He crossed to the piano where Miriam already stood, turning over a pile of music. Having found the song for which she was searching, she took her place before the piano and began the quatrain's throbbing accompaniment.

David's voice rang out tunefully. He sang with considerable feeling and expression. He had reached the exquisite line, "Through this same Garden—and for One in Vain!" when a clear high voice from the doorway took up the song with him.

With a startled cry of "Nora!" Grace ran to the door.

The song came to an abrupt end. Miriam whirled on the piano stool. One glance and she had joined the group that now surrounded a slender figure with a rosy, laughing face and a saucy turned-up nose.

"Nora O'Malley! You dear thing! No wonder David didn't hear from Hippy. But where is he? Not far away, I hope."

115

"Ah!" called a voice from behind the thin silk curtain of a small alcove at one end of the hall, and Hippy emerged, the picture of offended dignity. "Missed at last," was his sweeping rebuke. "I had begun to think I was doomed to languish behind that green silk curtain for life. It's all Nora's fault. If I had been immured there forever and always, it would be her fault just the same. She proposed that I should hide. 'Make them think I came alone. They will be so disappointed,' was her deceitful counsel. And I believed her and wrapped myself in the curtain to wait for you to be disappointed. I see it all now. It was merely a scheme to attract attention to herself. She is jealous of my popularity."

"Oh, hush, you wicked thing," giggled Nora. "You didn't give any one time even to ask for you."

"That sounds well," was Hippy's lofty retort, "but remember, all that prattles is not truth."

"Squabbling as usual," groaned David, shaking Hippy's hand with an energy that belied the groan.

"Just as usual," smirked Hippy. "Neither of us will ever outgrow it. You see we once lived in a town called Oakdale and associated daily with a number of very quarrelsome people. I wouldn't like to mention their names, but if some day you should happen to go to Oakdale just ask any one if David Nesbit and Reddy Brooks ever reformed. They'll understand what you mean."

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"Your Oakdale friends will have cause to inquire what awful fate has overtaken you if you don't reform speedily," warned David. "I'm obliged to stand your insults because you are company. Just wait until the newness of seeing you again wears off, and then see what happens."

"You don't have to show me," flung back Hippy hastily. "I'll take your word for it. I believe in words, not deeds. You know I used to be so fond of quoting that immortal stanza about doing noble deeds instead of dreaming them all day long. Well, I've altered that to fit any little occasion that might arise. I find it much more comforting to say it this way:

"Be wise, dear Hippy, from all violence sever,
Say noble words, then do folks all day long.
Avoid rash deeds, by sweet words e'er endeavor
To prove your friends are wrong."

A ripple of laughter followed Hippy's sadly altered quotation of the famous lines.

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"That's a most ignoble sentiment, Hippy," criticized Miriam. "I can't believe that you would practice it."

"I didn't say I would practice it," responded Hippy, with a wide grin. "I merely stated that it was comforting to have around. Must I repeat that I believe in words, and lots of them."

"We all knew that years ago," jeered David. "I believe in words, too. Sensible words from Nora explaining how you and she happened to drift in here at the eleventh hour. You haven't a sensible word in your vocabulary."

"I have," protested Hippy. "Nora, as your husband, I command you, don't give David Nesbit any information."

Nora dimpled. "I won't tell David," she capitulated. "I'll tell Miriam and Anne and Grace." The five Originals were still grouped together in the hall. "When David's letter came we were just wondering how we would spend Thanksgiving with not one of the old crowd at home. Hippy handed me the letter. It came while we were at luncheon. 'Let's go,' we both said at once. So we locked little fingers, wished and said 'Thumbs.' I said 'salt, pepper, vinegar,' but Hippy went on indefinitely with such pleasant reminders as 'death, famine, pestilence, murder.' He believes in words, you know." She shot a roguish glance at her broadly-smiling spouse. "Finally I reduced him to reason and we planned to surprise you. This morning found two lonely Originals hurrying to catch up with their pals." Nora surveyed her friends with a loving loyalty that brought her extra embracing from Grace, Anne and Miriam.

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"We mustn't be selfish," reminded Grace. "The folks in the living room are anxious to welcome you."

Hippy and Nora were escorted into the living room by a fond bodyguard, and were soon exchanging affectionate greetings with the older members of the house party. J. Elfreda Briggs had not gone into the hall on the arrival of Hippy and Nora. She could never be induced to intrude upon the more intimate moments of the Originals.

Hippy, with understanding tact, at once proceeded to draw her into the charmed circle. "Well, well!" he exclaimed. "Whom do I see? J. Elfreda, and in the clutches of the law, so I am told."

J. Elfreda's fear of intruding vanished at this sally. Her own sense of humor caused her to claim kinship with Hippy and his pranks and she answered him in kind.

"What I don't see is how *you* ever escaped those same clutches," put in David. "Don't you have a hard time, usually, to convince the jury that you are not the defendant?"

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"Not in the least," responded Hippy, with dignity. "The jury knows me for what I am. Just let me tell you that if I were to have *you* arrested for slander there wouldn't be the slightest chance of my being mistaken for the defendant."

Even David was obliged to join in the laugh against himself.

"All right, old man. We'll cry quits. I'll bring my law cases to you if ever I have any."

"And now that you are a broker I'll bring anything I want broken to *you*," promised Hippy glibly. "So far I've left all those little business details to the maid. She has successfully broken a number of our wedding presents, and we look for still greater results. She knows more about 'brokerage' or, rather 'breakerage,' than would fill a book."

"What a blessed thing it is to find you the same ridiculous Hippy we've always known," smiled Mrs. Gray, as Hippy seated himself beside her for a few minutes' sensible conversation. "You and Nora will never be staid and serious. I'm so glad of it."

She sighed. She was thinking of Tom Gray, her nephew, and of how grave, almost moody, he had become during the last year. Long ago she had deplored the fact that no engagement existed between Tom and Grace. Tom had grown strangely unlike his old cheery self, and in his changed bearing she read refusal of his love on Grace's part. It saddened her. Her heart ached for Tom. She had always looked forward to the day when Grace would give her life into Tom's keeping.

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She had never approached Grace on the subject of Tom and his love, but to-night, as she watched Hippy and Nora, serene in their mutual love and comradeship, and marked, too, the quiet devotion of Anne and David, who were to be married in Oakdale on New Year's night, her heart went out to her gray-eyed boy, far away in the great North woods, and she determined to say a word for him to Grace.

It was late in the evening before she found her opportunity. With the arrival of Hippy and Nora the interest soon centered about the piano. Grace, while not a performer, was an ardent lover of music, and her delight in Nora's singing was so patent that Mrs. Gray would not disturb her.

It was during the serving of a dainty little repast that Mrs. Gray called to Grace, "Come here, Grace, and sit by me."

Grace obeyed with alacrity, drawing her chair close to that of her old friend.

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"I thought I would ask you, my dear—what do you hear from Tom?" began the dainty old lady with apparent innocence.

Grace felt the color mount even to her forehead.

"I haven't heard from him lately," she confessed. "I—that is—I owe him a letter."

"I wish you would write to him. Poor boy. He is very lonely, away up there in the woods."

Grace did not answer for a moment. Then she said in a constrained voice, "I *will* write to him, Mrs. Gray. I know he is lonely."

There was an awkward pause in the conversation; then came the abrupt question, "Grace, do you love my boy?"

"No, Fairy Godmother," replied Grace in a low tone. "I'm sorry, but I don't. That is, not in the way he wishes me to love him."

"I am sorry, too, Grace. I feel almost as though I were responsible for his sorrow. For to him it is a deep sorrow. If I had not given Harlowe House to Overton College, you might have found that your work lay in being Tom's wife. He has never reproached me, but I wonder if he ever thinks that."

"I am sure he doesn't," Grace's clear eyes met sorrowfully the kind blue ones. "Please don't think that Harlowe House has anything to do with my not marrying Tom. It is only because I do not love him that I am firm in refusing him. My heart is bound up in my work. Really, dear Fairy Godmother, I am almost sure I shall never marry. For your sake and his, I'd rather marry Tom

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than any other man in the world, if I felt that marriage was best for me. But I don't. I glory in my work and freedom and I *couldn't* give them up. I've wanted to say this to you for a long time, but I didn't know just how to begin. Now that I have said it, I hope it hasn't wounded you."

"My dear Grace," Mrs. Gray's voice was not quite steady, "I would give much to welcome you as my niece, but not unless you love Tom with the tenderness of a truly great love. If that love ever comes to you, I shall indeed be happy. But my dear boy is worthy of the highest affection. If you cannot give him that affection, then it is far better that you two should spend your lives apart."

CHAPTER XII

MISSING—A FRIEND

Four days, spent in the society of those one loves best, pass almost with the rapidity of lightning. Unlike most of her visits to New York City, Grace gave little of her time to attending the theatres and seeing the metropolis. By common consent the members of the house party spent the greater share of their holiday together in the large, luxurious living room. Only one evening found them away from this temporary home. That was on Thanksgiving night, when Miriam gave a theatre party in honor of her guests to see Everett Southard and Anne in "King Lear," and after the play Mr. and Miss Southard entertained their friends at supper in one of New York's most exclusive restaurants. Thanksgiving morning they spent in the church of which Eric Burroughs the actor-minister was pastor, and in the afternoon they motored through Central Park and far out Riverside Drive. Aside from this, the rest of their stay found the thoroughly congenial household gathered about their borrowed fireside, treasuring the precious moments that flitted by all too fast.

There was but one drawback to Grace's pleasure. The thought that she had brought even a breath of sadness to her old friend, Mrs. Gray. There were moments, too, when she experienced a faint resentment against Tom. Must her reunions with her friends be forever haunted by the knowledge that she had made one of the Eight Originals unhappy? The approaching marriage of Anne to David meant, that of the four girls she, only, had chosen to walk alone. She knew that Anne, Nora and Jessica would hail joyfully the news of her engagement to Tom. Living in the tender atmosphere of requited love, their sympathies went out to the lover.

It was not until Sunday morning, after she had accompanied her father, mother and Mrs. Gray to the railway station and was driving back to the Nesbits' in David's car, that Anne ventured to broach the subject of Tom to Grace. Elfreda, Hippy, Miriam and Nora were in the automobile just ahead. Mr. and Mrs. Harlowe and Mrs. Gray had driven to the station in David's car, so, on the return, Grace and Anne had the tonneau of the automobile quite to themselves.

Both girls were unusually quiet, and David, fully occupied in driving his car through the crowded streets, said little.

"Anne," it was Grace who broke the silence, "if David insisted upon your giving up the stage entirely, would you marry him?"

"Yes," came Anne's unhesitating answer. "I love him so much that I could do even that. Only he hasn't asked me to make the sacrifice. He understands what my art means to me, and is willing to compromise. I am not going on any more road tours. I may play an occasional engagement in the large cities, but I have promised, so far as is possible, to remain in New York."

"But when you were at Overton he was opposed to your stage career," reminded Grace. "What made him change his mind?"

"Living in New York and being influenced by Mr. Southard, I think. You see the Southards knew all about me and my affairs. Long ago Mr. Southard began educating David to his point of view in regard to the stage. David is neither narrow-minded nor obstinate, so it has all come right for me," she ended happily. Then she added, as her hand found Grace's. "I wish you loved Tom, Grace."

"And you, too, Anne!" Grace's tones quivered with vexation. "Am I never to be free from that shadow?"

"Why, Grace!" Anne looked hurt. "I didn't dream you felt so strongly about poor Tom. I'm sorry I said anything to you of him."

"Forgive me, dear, for being so cross." Grace was instantly penitent. "But it seems as though the whole world, my world, I mean, was determined to marry me to Tom. You are all on his side—every one of you. It's the old case of all the world loving a lover. I know you think I'm hard-hearted. None of you stop to consider my side of it. Oh, yes; there is one person who does. Mother understands. She doesn't think I ought to marry Tom, just to please him. She realizes that my work means more to me than marriage." Grace's tone had again become unconsciously

petulant.

Anne regarded her in silence. Hitherto she had not realized how remote were Tom's chances of winning Grace's love. It was quite evident, too, that she had made a mistake in broaching the subject to Grace. It appeared as though too much had already been said on that score. Anne resolved to trespass no further. "Please forget what I said, Grace. I'm sure I understand. I'll never mention the subject to you again."

Grace eyed Anne quizzically. "I ought to be grateful to my friends for having my welfare at heart," she admitted, "and I do appreciate their solicitude. Don't think I've turned against Tom because they have tried to plead his cause. So far, it hasn't made any difference. I can't help the way I feel toward him. Still, I'd rather not talk about him. It doesn't help matters, and I am beginning to get cross over it."

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"You couldn't be cross if you tried," laughed Anne.

"Oh, yes I could," contradicted Grace. "I could be quite formidable."

At this juncture their talk ended. Their automobile had drawn up before the Nesbits' home and David stood at the open door of the car to help them out. During the few short hours that remained to Grace before time for her train to Overton she and Anne had no further opportunity for confidences.

It was twenty minutes past eleven o'clock that night when the train reached Overton, and Grace was not sorry to end her long ride. It had been an unusually lonely journey. For the first time in her experience she had made it alone, and without speaking to a person on the train. Then, too, the regret of parting with those she loved still weighed heavily upon her. "I do hope Emma is awake" was her first thought as she crossed the station yard and hailed the solitary taxicab that always met the late New York train, lamenting inwardly that the lateness of the hour and the weight of her luggage prevented her from walking home through the crisp, frosty night, under the stars.

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The vestibule light of Harlowe House shone out like a beacon across the still white campus. Grace thrilled with an excess of love and pride at sight of her beloved college home. How much it meant to her, and how sweet it was to feel that her business of life consisted in being of help to others. If she married Tom that meant selfish happiness for they two alone, but as house mother she was of use to seventeen times two persons. "The greatest good to the greatest number," she whispered, as she slid her latchkey into the lock.

The living room was dark. The girls had long since gone to their rooms. Grace's feet made no sound on the soft velvet carpet as she hurried up the stairs. A gleam of yellow light from under her door showed that Emma was indeed keeping vigil for her.

"Hooray, Gracious!" greeted Emma as the door closed behind her roommate. She flung her long arms affectionately about Grace and kissed her. "Is it four days or four weeks since I saw you off to New York and returned to my humble cot to wrestle with the job of managing that worthy aggregation known as the Harlowites?"

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"I should say it was four hours," corrected Grace. "Not that I didn't miss you, dear old comrade. We all missed you. Every last person wished you had come with me, and sent you their best wishes. It was splendid to spend Thanksgiving with Father and Mother, and to see Mrs. Gray and the others. Did you receive my postcard? I wrote you that Hippy and Nora were with us. They gave us a complete surprise." Grace related further details of her visit, walking about the room and putting away her personal effects as she talked.

As usual Emma had made chocolate and arranged on the center table a tempting little midnight luncheon for the traveler. It was not long until Grace had donned a pretty pale blue negligee and the two friends were seated opposite each other enjoying the spread.

"Now I've told you all my news, what about yours?" asked Grace at last.

"I've only one tale to tell," responded Emma dryly, "and that is not a pleasant one. The news of Miss Brent's sale has traveled about the campus like wildfire. We've had a perfect stream of girls coming here. They have conceived the fond idea that Harlowe House is a headquarters for second-hand clothing. I have labored with them to convince them that such is not the case, but still they yearn for the Brent finery. Judging from what I hear, it must have been 'some' wardrobe. Pardon my lapse into slang, O, Overton. A number of the teachers have commented on the affair. I've been asked several pointed questions."

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"How dreadful!" broke in Grace, her face clouding. "Still I was almost sure something would come of it. That was the reason I forbade Miss Brent to hold a sale when first she proposed it to me. Do you think that Miss Wilder and—Miss Wharton know it?" Grace hesitated before pronouncing the latter's name.

"Miss Wilder doesn't know, because she left for California last Saturday."

A cry of surprise and disappointment broke from Grace. "Miss Wilder gone, and I didn't say good-bye to her! Why did she leave so suddenly, Emma? She expected to be at Overton for another week, at least."

"Some friends of hers were going to the Pacific Coast in their private car, and knowing that she was ordered west for her health, they wrote and invited her to join them. They had arranged to leave New York City this morning, so she left Overton for New York yesterday morning. I am sure she wrote you. One of the letters that came for you while you were gone is addressed in her handwriting."

Emma reached down, opened the drawer of the table at which they were sitting, and drew out a pile of letters. "Here's your mail, Gracious. Go ahead and read it while I clear up the ghastly remains of the spread."

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"All right, I will." Grace went rapidly over the pile of envelopes which bore various postmarks. The majority of the letters were from friends scattered far and wide over the country. The thick white envelope, Miss Wilder's own particular stationery, lay almost at the bottom of the pile. Grace tore it open with eager fingers and read:

"MY DEAR GRACE:

"Just a line to let you know how much I regret leaving Overton without seeing you again. There were several matters of which I was anxious to speak with you at greater length. I had not contemplated leaving here for at least another week, but I cannot resist the invitation which a dear friend of mine has extended to me, to travel west in her private car, so I shall join her in New York City on Saturday evening, as she wishes to start on her tour at once.

"As soon as I reach my destination I will forward you my permanent address. I wish you to write me, Grace. I shall be anxious to know what is happening at Harlowe House and throughout the college. Remember distance can make no difference in my interest and affection for you. You have been, and always will be, a girl after my own heart. With my best wishes for your continued welfare and success.

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"Your sincere friend,
"KATHERINE WILDER."

Grace laid the letter down with a sigh and sat staring moodily at it, her elbows on the table, her chin in her hands.

Emma, who had finished clearing the table, regarded her with affectionate solicitude. Stepping over to her, she slid her arm over Grace's shoulders. Grace raised her head. Her eyes met Emma's. Then she pushed the letter into Emma's hand. "Read it," she commanded.

"Do you think she understood?" was Emma's question as she handed back the letter.

"About Miss Wharton not liking me?" counter-questioned Grace.

Emma nodded.

"I am afraid she didn't." Grace's gray eyes were full of sad concern. "And the most unfortunate thing about it is that I must never trouble her with Miss Wharton's shortcomings. It would worry her, and that would retard her recovery. If the year brings me battles to fight, I must fight them alone."

CHAPTER XIII

A DISTURBING CONFIDENCE

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Grace awoke the next morning with the weight of a disagreeable duty hanging over her. She had given Jean Brent until after Thanksgiving to decide upon her course of action. Jean's disregard for her wishes had already placed the freshman in an unenviable prominence in college. Conscientious to a fault, Grace believed herself to be partly to blame for what had occurred during her week-end absence from Harlowe House. She should have insisted, in the beginning, on absolute frankness on the part of Jean. She had respected the girl's secret and invested her with an honor which she did not possess. It now looked as though she, as well as Jean, might already be in a position to reap the folly of such a course.

With Miss Wilder as dean, Grace knew that Jean's indiscretion would be treated with leniency, but she was by no means sure of what Miss Wharton's attitude might be should the story reach her ears. Grace hoped devoutly that it would not. But whatever happened Jean Brent must impart to her what she had hitherto kept a secret. Grace was resolved upon that much, at least. She could not decide as to the wisest course to pursue until she had heard Jean's story. She decided to wait until the girls were at luncheon, then ask Jean to come to her office that afternoon before dinner. At luncheon, however, greatly to her surprise, Jean walked directly up to her table and said in a low tone, "I have decided to tell you my secret, Miss Harlowe. When may I talk with

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you?"

"I shall be in my office when you come from your classes this afternoon, or I can wait for you in my room, if you prefer." A great wave of relief swept over Grace as she answered the girl. She had feared that Jean would prove stubborn in her determination to keep her secret.

"Thank you. I will come to your office." Jean turned away abruptly.

Emma Dean had noted Jean's unusually meek manner. She had endeavored not to hear what was not intended for her ears, but low as were Jean's tones, the words reached her. She made no comment, after Jean had taken her place at one of the other tables, until Grace remarked, "Emma, you could hardly help hearing what Miss Brent said to me."

"Yes, I heard what she said," responded Emma unemotionally.

"I am so glad she has decided to trust me."

"It might be better for all concerned if she had trusted you in the beginning," was Emma's dry retort. "I can't help feeling a trifle out of patience with that girl, Grace. She had no business to commit an act, no matter how trivial, that would lay you open to criticism."

"Have you heard any one in particular criticizing me?" asked Grace with quick anxiety.

Emma did not answer for a moment. Grace watched her, her gray eyes troubled.

"I'll tell you precisely what I heard this morning. Before I left Overton Hall to come here for luncheon I stopped for a moment to see Miss Duncan. Miss Arthur, that new teacher of oratory, was with her. I walked into the room just in time to hear Miss Duncan say 'I can scarcely credit it. I am surprised that Miss Harlowe—' then she saw me, turned red and stopped short. Miss Arthur looked rather sheepishly at me. I pretended that I had heard nothing, asked the question I intended to ask, and went on my way, much perturbed in spirit. I can't bear to hear you criticized in the smallest degree, Grace," was Emma's vehement cry. "I am sure it was about this sale they were talking. It's all very well for Miss Brent to take the stand that she has the privilege of doing as she pleases with her own clothing, but there is something about the very idea of a sale of wearing apparel that quite upsets Overton traditions and causes Harlowe House to lose dignity. One can't imagine an enterprising clothes merchant living at Holland or Morton House or even at Wayne Hall. The students should have had the good taste to discourage it, but, from what I hear, Miss Palmer had expatiated on the glories of Miss Brent's wardrobe to the clique of girls she chums with, and they gathered like flies about a honey pot. You'll usually find the girls with the largest allowances are always eager to obtain much for the smallest possible outlay. I think, too, that Miss Palmer's influence is not wholesome. It led to Evelyn Ward's folly last year. Evelyn hasn't been unduly friendly with her so far this year. I've noticed that."

"I can't believe Evelyn had anything to do with this sale," asserted Grace. "She may have known of it, but she never sanctioned it."

"At least she didn't attend it," commented Emma, "but, come to think of it, neither did Althea Parker. Don't you remember, I mentioned to you that I met Evelyn on the campus that fateful Saturday and she said she was going to spend the afternoon with Miss Parker?"

"Then if Miss Parker was ringleader in the affair, why didn't she have the courage to attend the sale?" was Grace's quick question.

"For further information inquire of Miss Brent," advised Emma, shrugging her shoulders.

"I will," sighed Grace. "I seem fated to puzzle over hard questions, don't I?"

It was half-past four o'clock when Jean Brent entered the office where Grace sat idly turning the leaves of a magazine.

"Sit down, Miss Brent," invited Grace. Then in her usual direct fashion, "I am ready to listen to anything you wish to say."

Jean Brent flushed, then the color receded from her fair skin, leaving her very pale. In a low tone she began a recital that caused Grace Harlowe's eyes to become riveted on her in intense surprise, mingled with consternation. An expression of lively sympathy sprang into her face, however, as the story proceeded, and when Jean had finished with a half sob, Grace stretched out her hands impulsively with, "You poor little girl."

Jean clasped the outstretched hands and murmured, "You don't blame me so much, then, do you, Miss Harlowe?"

"No, I can't," Grace made honest answer, "but I am so sorry that you did not come to me with this in the beginning. I could have helped you arrange your affairs nicely. You could have borrowed money from the Semper Fidelis Fund and later, if you were desirous of selling your wardrobe you could have disposed of it in New York City for fully as much as you have received for it here. A dear friend of mine in New York who is an actress has often told me that the women of the various theatrical companies who play minor parts are only too glad to purchase attractive wearing apparel which society women sell after one wearing."

"I didn't know. I am sorry I didn't tell you long ago." Jean was thoroughly penitent. "Will it make so very much difference now?"

"I hope not. It is hard to say. Unfortunately the news of the sale has reached the ears of several members of the faculty. Not only you, but I, as well, have been criticized. We can do nothing except wait for the gossip about it to die a natural death." Grace's quiet acceptance of the unpleasantness which Jean's rash act had forced upon her stung the freshman far more sharply than reproof.

"I can go to the dean and tell her what I have told you," faltered Jean.

Grace shook her head. "No, I should not advise it. This affair belongs entirely to Harlowe House and should be settled here. I will write to Miss Lipton to-night. If Miss Wilder were here I should not hesitate to place matters before her, but I am not so sure of Miss Wharton, the woman who is filling Miss Wilder's position. For the present, at least, silence will be best. If Miss Wharton hears of it and sends for you, then you had better be frank and conceal nothing."

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"Do you mean that you intend to keep my secret, Miss Harlowe; that you will let me stay on at Harlowe House and finish my freshman year?"

"Yes; not only the freshman year, but your sophomore, junior and senior years as well, provided Miss Lipton approves and advises it. I shall write to her exactly what has occurred. She is nearest to you and therefore to her belongs the decision. But, while I am endeavoring to work for your interest I wish you to work for it, too. I would like to see you more self-reliant. You have been brought up in luxury, but you must forget that. As matters now stand you will one day be obliged to earn your own living. You must build your foundation for a useful life during your freshman year."

Grace's voice vibrated with an earnestness that visibly moved her listener.

"I will try. I *will* try," she declared fervently. "It is wonderful in you to care so much about me, when I have been so troublesome."

"We won't think of that any longer," smiled Grace. "However, there is one question which I must ask you. Did Miss Ward know of the sale?"

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"No," admitted Jean, looking ashamed. "I kept it a secret from her. Miss Parker purposely invited her to luncheon that afternoon. She picked out the things she wanted to buy beforehand and took them out afterward. Evelyn was very angry. We quarreled, and have not spoken to each other since. It was my fault."

"Then, to please me, will you try to be friends with Miss Ward again?"

"Yes."

"You must tell no one else what you have told me," stipulated Grace further. "It must be a secret between us."

"I will tell no one," promised Jean.

The ringing of the door bell and the entrance of the maid with a card, brought the confidential talk to an end. Grace rose and held out her hand. "I must go," she said. "I will talk with you again when I hear from Miss Lipton."

"Thank you over and over again, Miss Harlowe." Jean's eyes were lit with a strength of purpose rarely seen in them. As she left the office and thoughtfully climbed the stairs to her room she resolved anew to be worthy of Grace Harlowe's approval and respect.

CHAPTER XIV

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THE RETURN OF THE CHRISTMAS CHILDREN

"Holy night, peaceful and blest," rose Nora Wingate's clear voice, high and sweet on the still winter air. A chorus of fresh young voices took up the second line of the beautiful hymn, filling the calm of the snowy night with exquisite harmony.

A little old lady, with hair as white as the snow itself, her cheeks bright with color, her eyes very tender, appeared in the library window as the song ended. She had concealed herself in the folds of the curtain while the singing went on, fearing it might come to a sudden stop should she reveal herself.

Her appearance, however, inspired the singers to fresh effort, for, immediately they spied her, led by Nora, they burst into the old English carol, "God Rest You, Merry Gentlemen." They sang it with their rosy, eager faces raised to her, a world of fellowship in every note, while she stood motionless and listened, a smile of supreme love and content making her delicate features radiant.

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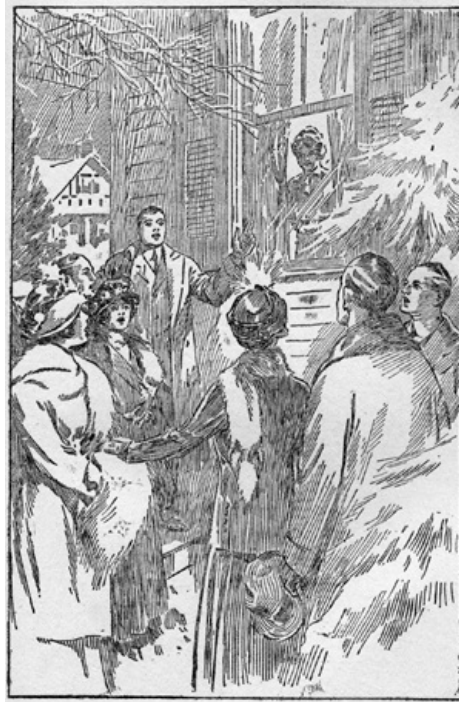
As they ended this second carol she raised the window. "Come in, this minute, every one of you blessed children. You can't possibly know how happy you have made me this Christmas Eve."

"Coming right in the window," declared Hippy, as he made an ineffectual spring and failed to land on the wide sill.

"Just as I expected," jeered Reddy Brooks, dragging him back. "You might know Hippy would spoil everything. We all start out, on our best behavior, to sing carols to our fairy godmother. Then at the most effective moment, when we are feeling almost inspired, he ruins the whole effect by trying to jump in the window."

"He might as well try to jump through a ten-inch hoop," seconded David. "He'd be just as successful."

"They are slandering me, Nora," whimpered Hippy, "and I am the sweetest carol singer of them all. Protect me, Nora. Tell Reddy Brooks it was his singing that nearly ruined that last carol. Tell him his voice is as loud and obnoxious as his hair. And tell David Nesbit that—" Hippy gave a sudden agile bound out of reach of Reddy's avenging hands, and tore across the lawn and around the corner of the house, shrieking a wild, "Good-bye, Nora. Remember I've always been a good, kind husband to you. Don't forget me, Nora."



"Holy Night, Peaceful and Blest."

"I'll pay him yet for that remark about my obnoxious hair," grinned Reddy, as the carol singers trooped across the lawn and into the house.

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Mrs. Gray met her Christmas children with welcoming arms. "I am going to kiss every one of you," she announced.

"We are willing," assured David, and she was passed from one pair of arms to another, emerging from this wholesale embrace, flushed and laughing.

"You didn't kiss me," observed a plaintive voice from behind the portieres that divided the library from the hall. Hippy's round face was thrust engagingly into view. He had slipped in the side door, unobserved.

"There he is, Reddy. How did he get in so quietly?" David took a vengeful step forward. The face disappeared.

"Just wait until I hang up my overcoat," threatened Reddy.

"Don't let him hang it up, Nora. If you value the safety of your husband, make him stand and hold it," pleaded the plaintive voice.

"Here, Reddy, give me your hat and coat," ordered Nora cruelly.

"Ha! I defy you." Hippy suddenly bounced from behind the curtain into the midst of the group in the hall. "I would defy forty David Nesbits and fifty Reddy Brooks for a kiss from my fair lady." He bowed before Mrs. Gray.

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"Bless you, Hippy," she said, as she kissed his fat cheek, "that was nicely said."

"I am always saying nice things," assured Hippy airily. "Better still they are always true things. There are some persons, though, who can't stand the white light of truth. May I rely upon you for

protection, Mrs. Gray? Alas, I am now alone in the world. The person who is supposed to have my welfare at heart is hob-nobbing with my traducers. Miriam Nesbit used to be a fairly good protector, but she hasn't done much along that line lately."

"Come on, Hippy. I'll take care of you. I'm sorry I've neglected you." Miriam held out her hand. Hippy hung his head and simpered. Then with his Cheshire cat grin he seized Miriam's hand and toddled beside her into the library. The others followed, laughing at the ridiculous spectacle he presented.

"Both our fairy godmother and I are disgusted with you," taunted Nora as she directed a glance of withering scorn at Hippy, now calmly seated beside Miriam on the big leather davenport, the picture of triumph. "You asked her to protect you; then you deserted her and deliberately went over to Miriam for help."

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"Wasn't that awful?" deplored Hippy. "Such inconstancy makes me blush."

"You couldn't blush if your life depended upon it," was David Nesbit's scathing comment.

"There are others," retorted Hippy.

David glared ferociously at the grinning Hippy.

"There are others," went on Hippy blandly, "who, I might venture to say, have even greater trouble in producing that much lauded rarity, a blush. But what does blushing mean? It means turning very red. It isn't always confined to one's face, either. I once knew a man, a rare creature, whose very hair blushed. That is, it turned red when he was an infant and blushed more deeply every year. In fact it never quit blushing."

"I once knew a person, a senseless creature, who didn't know when he was well off," began Reddy, in an ominous voice. "From the time he learned to talk he made ill-natured remarks about his friends. But at last he came to a terrible end. He——"

"I never knew him," interrupted Hippy. "I'm not interested in persons I don't know. I'd rather talk to Grace. I've known her for a long time, and we've always been on friendly terms. Come and sit beside me, Grace."

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"Jilted," declared Miriam tragically, as Grace accepted the invitation and seated herself on Hippy's other side.

"Not a bit of it. I believe in preparedness. The constant-reinforcements-arriving-every-minute idea appeals to me. You are both bulwarks of defense."

"I'm surprised that anything except eats appeals to you." This from Reddy.

"'Eats' did you say? What are eats? Or, better, *where* are eats?" demanded Hippy, beaming hopefully at Mrs. Gray.

"They will appear very soon, Hippy," assured Mrs. Gray. "I sent a dispatch to the kitchen the moment you finished singing."

"For goodness' sake, Grace and Miriam, keep Hippy quiet for a while. No one else has had a chance to say a word," complained David. "I'd like to hear a few remarks on 'Life in Chicago' by our estimable pals, Jessica and Reddy."

"Life in Chicago can't compare with life in dear old Oakdale," said Jessica. "In spite of the theatres, concerts and all the pleasures that a big city offers one, Reddy and I are always a little lonely."

"That is because you and Reddy miss me," observed Hippy with positive modesty.

"You're right, old man. We do miss you," agreed Reddy, with unmistakable sincerity. For once Hippy forgot to be funny. "You aren't the only ones who miss the old guard," he answered seriously; then he added in his usual humorous strain, "I hope some day the Eight Originals Plus Two and all their friends will emigrate to a happy island and colonize it. Then there won't be any missed faces or any letter writing to do, for that matter. David and Reddy can run the business of the colony and see that we aren't cheated when we trade glass beads and other little trinkets with the savages. Of course there will be a few moth-eaten old cannibals. Tom can classify the trees of the forest and make the obstreperous beasts and reptiles behave. I will represent the law. I will settle all disputes and administer justice. I'll be a regular old Father William, like the one in 'Through the Looking Glass,' I always did love that poem, especially this verse:

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"'In my youth,' said his father, 'I took to the law,
And argued each case with my wife.
And the muscular strength which it gave to my jaw,
Has lasted me all of my life.'"

Nora pretended to pay no attention to Hippy, who waited for her to protest, an expansive smile wreathing his fat face. "She didn't understand," he said sadly, after beaming at Nora in vain. "There's no use in trying to explain. I suppose I'll have to give her an appointment of some kind on my island. Nora, you may have charge of me. Isn't that a noble mission? Still she doesn't answer. Oh, well, never mind, I'll go right on appointing."

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"Mrs. Gray, you will be the queen, and Grace can be prime minister. Anne can have charge of the amusements, and Miriam can help her. Miriam has a decided leaning toward the drama."

The color in Miriam's cheeks suddenly deepened at this apparently innocent remark. "I don't think I like your island idea very well," she said lightly. "I'd much rather have the Originals live right here in Oakdale." She rose and strolled across the room to where Jessica sat.

"It's not the island idea. It's the dramatic idea that Miriam objects to discussing," confided Hippy in a low tone to Grace.

"How did you find it out?" asked Grace.

"First of all by observation, my child. Second, through David. He knows it, too. Southard told him. They have seen a good deal of each other since the Nesbits have lived in New York. David thinks him worthy of Miriam."

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"I knew he cared. I wonder if Miriam does? She never mentions Mr. Southard. I hope she loves him. It is so hard when one cares and the other doesn't." Grace's gray eyes grew sad. Conversation languished between Hippy and Grace for a little. Then with a half sigh Grace rose, "I am going to ask Nora to sing," she said.

Before she had time to carry out her intention John appeared pushing a small table on wheels ahead of him. Its shelves were laden with sandwiches, olives, salted nuts and delicious fancy cakes, while a maid followed him with a chocolate service.

Mrs. Gray poured the chocolate, and Anne, always her right-hand man, assisted her in serving it. Grace, with her ever-present youthfulness of spirit, found trundling the table about the room a most pleasing diversion. They were a very merry little company, entering into the joy of being together with all their hearts, and deeply thankful for the opportunity to gather once more in the same spirit of friendly affection that had characterized all their meetings.

It was well toward midnight when the party broke up.

"Mayn't I take you home in my car, Grace," pleaded Tom. Grace stood for the moment, a little detached from the others, arranging the veil over her hat.

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"Oh, no, Tom," she made quick answer. "It is late. You mustn't go to that trouble. David is going to take Anne and I in his car. Hippy, Nora, Reddy and Jessica are going home in Hippy's machine."

Tom's face fell. "May I come to see you to-morrow afternoon, then?"

"Yes, do. Miriam and David are coming over for a while," returned wily Grace. Her one idea was to avoid being alone with Tom. His sole idea was to be alone with her. His pride, however, would allow him to go no further. He had been rebuffed twice in rapid succession.

"Thank you. I'll drop in on you then," he said, trying to summon an indifference he did not feel.

After his aunt's guests had departed with much merriment and laughter, Tom turned to go upstairs. He was sure Grace did not intend to be unkind. It was not her fault if she did not love him. He had determined, however, to plead with her once more. Then, if she still remained obdurate, as he feared she might, he would give up all hope of her, forever, and go his lonely way in the world.

CHAPTER XV

THE NEW YEAR'S WEDDING

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It was New Year's, and Anne Pierson's wedding night. At half-past seven the ceremony linking her life forever to that of her school-day friend, David Nesbit, was to be performed in the beautiful old stone church on Chapel Hill which, in company with her chums, she had faithfully attended during her years spent in Oakdale.

Anne had, at first, steadily refused to countenance the idea of a church wedding. She was a quiet, demure little soul, who, aside from her work, detested publicity. It was Mrs. Gray's wish, however, to see the girl she had befriended married in the church which bore the memorial window to the other Anne, her daughter, who had died in her girlhood. So Anne had yielded to that wish.

Although Grace was Anne's dearest friend, she had insisted that Miriam should be her maid of honor. Privately she had said, "I'd rather be a bridesmaid with Nora and Jessica. You know there were only four of us in the beginning." It had also been decided that in spite of the fact that Jessica and Nora were really eligible to the position of matrons of honor, that phase of wedding etiquette should, for once, be disregarded, and the three friends who had welcomed Anne as a

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fourth to their little fold should serve as bridesmaids and be dressed precisely alike. "It was," declared Anne, who heartily despised form, "as though they were still three girls together, with husbands in the dim and distant future."

It was to be a yellow and white wedding, therefore the gowns they had chosen were of white silk net over pale yellow satin, and very youthful in effect. Miriam's gown was a wonderful gold tissue, which made her appear like the princess in some old fairy tale, while Anne, contrary to tradition, had not chosen white satin. Her wedding dress was of soft, exquisite white silk, clouded with white chiffon, and was much better suited to her quiet type of loveliness than satin could possibly have been.

Mrs. Gray, who was to give the bride away, wore a gown of her favorite lavender satin, and bustled cheerfully about the Piersons' living room, in which the feminine half of the bridal party had gathered until time to drive to the church, where Anne was to play the leading part in a new and infinitely wonderful drama. Anne's mother had insisted that it should be Mrs. Gray, rather than herself, who gave Anne into David Nesbit's keeping. Always a shy, retiring woman, she had shrunk from the idea of appearing prominently before a church full of persons, many of whom were strangers to her. Dearly as she loved her talented daughter, she preferred to sit quietly beside Mary, her older daughter, in the place of honor reserved for the members of the families of the bridal party. She and Mrs. Gray had discussed the matter at length, and she had been so insistent that the former, as Anne's friend and benefactor, should give away the bride that Mrs. Gray, secretly delighted, had consented to her request.

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"Anne makes a darling bride, doesn't she?" praised Nora, lifting a fold of the veil of exquisite lace, Mrs. Gray's wedding veil, by the way, and peering lovingly into her friend's faintly flushed face.

Anne smiled and reached out a slim little hand to Nora. She was occupying the center of the living room while her four friends, Mrs. Gray, her mother, Miss Southard and Mary Pierson hovered solicitously about her.

"How dear you all are to me." She held out her arms as though to clasp her friends in one loving embrace. "I am so glad now that I am going to have a real church wedding. I thought at first it would be nicer to be quietly married and slip away without fuss and feathers, but now I know that it is my sacred duty to my friends and to David to play my new part, as I've always played my other parts, in public."

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"I always knew that Anne and David would be married some day," declared Grace wisely. "I believe David fell in love with Anne the very first time he saw her. Don't you remember Anne, we met him outside the high school, and he asked us to come to his aeroplane exhibition?"

"I remember it as well as though it happened yesterday," Anne's musical voice vibrated with a tenderness called forth by the memory of that girlhood meeting with the man of men.

"Those days seem very far away to me now," remarked Miriam Nesbit. "I feel as though I'd been grown up for ages."

"I don't feel a bit grown up. It seems only yesterday since I ran races and tore about our garden with Captain, our good old collie," laughed Grace. "I'm like Peter Pan. I don't want to, and can't, grow up. And I shall never marry." She glanced about her circle of friends with an almost challenging air. She looked so radiantly young and pretty in her dainty frock that simultaneously the thought occurred to them all, "Poor Tom." Yet in their hearts, even to Mrs. Gray, they could find no fault with Grace's straightforward words. If she were almost cruelly indifferent to Tom as a lover, she had the virtue at least of being absolutely honest. Even Mrs. Gray admired and respected her candor.

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"Did you ever see anything more beautiful than Anne's and Miriam's bouquets?" broke in Miss Southard, with the intent of leading away from a not wholly happy subject.

Miriam held her bouquet at arm's length and eyed it with admiration. It was composed of pale yellow orchids and lilies of the valley, while Anne's was a shower of orange blossoms and the same delicate lilies.

"If you are determined never to marry, Grace, you won't try to catch Anne's bouquet," smiled Mrs. Gray.

"Oh, yes, I shall," nodded Grace. "I must do it because it's hers. I always try to catch the bouquets at weddings. It's good sport. So far, however, I've never secured one."

"I shall throw this one directly at you," promised Anne.

"Anne, child, the carriages are here," broke in her mother's gentle voice.

Anne laid her bouquet on the centre table. "Come and kiss Anne Pierson for the last time, girls." She opened her arms. One by one they folded her in the embrace of friendship. Her sister and mother came last. As the arms that had held her in babyhood closed about her, Anne drew nearer to her mother in this, her hour of supreme happiness, than ever before, if that were possible.

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It was not a long drive to the church. On the way there they stopped to pick up the two flower girls, Anna May and Elizabeth Angerell, two pretty and interesting children who lived next door to Grace, and of whom she and Anne had always been very fond. The little flower maidens were

dressed in white embroidered chiffon frocks with pale yellow satin sashes and hair ribbons. They wore white silk stockings and white kid slippers and carried overflowing baskets of yellow and white roses.

"Oh, Miss Harlowe," cried Anna May, when she and Elizabeth were safely settled in the carriage, one of them on the seat beside Grace, the other on the opposite side with Anne, "this is about the happiest day Elizabeth and I ever had. I do hope I won't be scared. Just think, we have to walk into that great big church, the very first ones, with all those people looking at us."

"I'm not the least bit scared," was Elizabeth's bold declaration. "Nobody is going to hurt us. Why, all the people are Miss Anne's *friends!* I'm going to think that when I walk up the aisle, and I shan't be a bit scared. I know I shan't."

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"Well, I'm not exactly *scared*," asserted Anna May, greatly impressed with Elizabeth's valiant declaration. "I guess I'll think that, too."

"Oh, Miss Anne, you look too sweet for anything." Elizabeth clasped her small hands in rapture. "When I grow up I shall certainly be married, and have a dress like yours, and just the same kind of a bouquet, and be married in the church where every one can see me."

"You can't get married unless some one asks you," informed Anna May wisely.

"Some one will," predicted Elizabeth. "Won't they, Miss Harlowe?"

"I haven't the least doubt of it," was Grace's laughing assurance. "Still I wouldn't worry about it for a good many years yet, if I were you. It's just as nice to be a little girl and play games and dress dolls."

Anne smiled faintly. Grace was again unconsciously voicing her views on the marriage question.

The two little flower girls kept up a lively conversation during the ride. They were divided between the fear of facing a church full of people and the rapture of being really, truly flower girls at the wedding of such a wonderful person as their Miss Anne.

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It was precisely half-past seven o'clock when two tiny flower maidens, their childish faces grave with the importance of their office, walked sedately down the broad church aisle toward the flower-wreathed altar. Following them came a dazzling vision in gold tissue that caused at least one's man's heart to beat faster. To Everett Southard Miriam was indeed the fabled fairy-tale princess. Then came the bride, feeling strangely humble and diffident in this new part she had essayed to play, while behind her, single file, in faithful attendance, walked the three girls who had kept perfect step with her through the eventful years of her school life.

Mrs. Gray, who had preceded the wedding party to the altar, was waiting there with the bridegroom and his best man, Tom Gray. There was a buzz of admiration went the round of the church at the beautiful spectacle the bridal party presented. Then followed an intense hush as the voice of the minister took up the solemn words of God's most holy ordinance.

Perhaps no one person present at that impressive ceremony realized as did Tom Gray what the winning of Anne, for his wife, meant to David. On that June night, almost two years previous, when Hippy and Reddy had, in turn, made announcement of their betrothal to Nora and Jessica in the presence of Mrs. Gray and her Christmas children, David's fate as a lover had been uncertain. Now David had joined the ranks of happy benedicts. Tom alone was left.

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As the minister's voice rang out deeply, thrillingly, "I pronounce you man and wife," involuntarily Tom's glance rested on Grace, who was watching Anne with the rapt eyes of friendship. The words held no significance for her beyond the fact that two of her dearest friends had joined their lives. Her changeful face bore no sign of sentiment. As usual, her interest in love and marriage was purely impersonal.

The reception following the wedding was held at Anne's home, and long before it was over Anne and David had slipped away to take the night train for New York City. Anne's honeymoon was to be limited to one week which they had decided to spend at Old Point Comfort. Anne and Mr. Southard were to open a newly built New York theatre in Shakespearian repertoire the following week. Their real honeymoon was to be deferred until the theatrical season closed in the spring, and was to comprise an extended western trip.

True to her promise, Anne had aimed accurately, and Grace had received the bridal bouquet full in the face. It dropped to the floor. She picked it up and commented on her lack of skill in catching it. Tom's face had brightened as he saw the girl he loved holding the fragrant token to her breast. It was a good omen.

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"I'm going to take you home in my car, Grace," he said masterfully, as the guests were leaving that night.

"All right," returned Grace calmly. "We can take Anna May and Elizabeth with us. It's awfully late for them. I promised Mrs. Angerell I'd take good care of them. They absolutely refused to go when Father and Mother went."

Tom could not help looking his disappointment. Nevertheless the two little girls were favorites of his, so he forgave them for being the innocent means of frustrating his intention of having Grace to himself.

"I'm going back to Washington to-morrow night, Grace," he said, as he took her hand for a moment in parting. "May I come to see you to-morrow afternoon?"

"Yes, of course, Tom." Grace could not refuse the plea of his gray eyes.

"All right. I'll drop in about four o'clock."

"Very well. Good night, Tom." Grace could not repress a little impatient sigh. "He's going to ask me again," was her reflection, "but there is only one answer that I can ever give him."

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CHAPTER XVI

THE LAST WORD

While Anne Pierson's wedding day had dawned with a light snow on the ground, the weather underwent a considerable change during the night, and the next morning broke, gray and threatening. Heavy, sullen clouds dropped low in the sky, and by four o'clock that afternoon a raw, dispiriting winter rain had set in, accompanied by a moaning wind that made the day seem doubly dreary. Promptly at four o'clock Grace saw Tom swing up the walk without an umbrella. His black raincoat, buttoned up to his chin, was infinitely becoming to his fair Saxon type of good looks, and Grace could not repress a tiny thrill of satisfaction that this strong, handsome man cared for her. The next second she dismissed the thought as unworthy. She welcomed Tom, however, with a gentle friendliness, partly due to his good looks, that caused his eyes to flash with new hope. Perhaps Grace cared a little after all. He had rarely seen her so kind since their carefree days of boy and girl friendship, when there had been no barrier of unrequited love between them.

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"Come and sit by the fire, Tom," invited Grace. "I love an open fire on a dark, rainy day like this." She motioned him to a chair opposite her own at the other side of the fireplace. Tom seated himself, and the two began to talk of the wedding, Oakdale, their friends, everything in fact that led away from the thoughts that lay nearest the young man's heart. Grace skilfully kept the conversation on impersonal topics. By doing so she hoped to make Tom understand that she did not wish to discuss what had long been a sore subject between them. So the two young people talked on and on, while outside the rain fell in torrents, and the dark day began to merge into an early twilight.

With the coming of the dusk Grace began to feel the strain. Tom's pale face had taken on a set look in the fitful glow of the fire. Suddenly he leaned far forward in his chair. "It's no use, Grace. I know you've tried to keep me from saying what I came here to-day to say, but I'm going to tell you again. I love you, Grace, and I need you in my life. Why can't you love me as I love you?"

Grace's clean-cut profile was turned directly toward Tom. She reached forward for the poker and began nervously prodding the fire. Tom caught the hand that held the poker. Unclasping her limp fingers from about it, he set it impatiently in place. "Look at me, Grace, not at the fire," he commanded.

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Grace raised sorrowful eyes to him. Then she made a little gesture of appeal. "Why must we talk of this again, Tom? Why can't we be friends just as we used to be, back in our high-school days?"

"Because it's not in the nature of things," returned Tom, his eyes full of pain. "I am a man now, with a man's devoted love for you. The whole trouble lies in the sad fact that you are just a dreaming child, without the faintest idea of what life really means."

"You are mistaken, Tom." There was a hint of offended dignity in Grace's tones. "I *do* understand the meaning of life, only it doesn't mean *love* to me. It means *work*. The highest pleasure I have in life is my work."

"You think so now, but you won't always think so. There will come a time in your life when you'll realize how great a power for happiness love is. All our dearest friends have looked forward to seeing you my wife. Your parents wish it. Aunt Rose loves you already as a dear niece. Even Anne, your chum, thinks you are making a mistake in choosing work instead of love. Of course I know that what your friends think can make no difference in what *you* think. Still I believe if you would once put the idea away of being self-supporting you'd see matters in a different light. You aren't obliged to work for your living. Why not give Harlowe House into the care of some one who is, and marry me?"

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"But you don't understand me in the least, Tom." A petulant note crept into Grace's voice. "It's just because I'm not obliged to support myself that I'm happy in doing so. I feel so free and independent. It's my freedom I love. I don't love you. There are times when I'm sorry that I don't, and then again there are times when I'm glad. I shall always be fond of you, but my feeling toward you is just the same as it is for Hippy or David or Reddy. There! I've hurt you. Forgive me. Must we say anything more about it? Please, please don't look so hurt, Tom."

Grace's eyes were fastened on Tom with the sorrowing air of one who has inadvertently hurt a child. Usually so delicate in her respect for the feelings of others, she seemed fated continually to wound this loyal friend, whose only fault lay in the fact that his boyish affection for her had ripened into a man's love. Saddest of all, an unrequited love.



"Look at Me, Grace."

"Of course I forgive you, Grace." Tom rose. He looked long and searchingly into the face of the girl who had just hurt him so cruelly. "I—I think I'd better go now. I hope you'll find all the happiness in your work that you expect to find. I'm only sorry it had to come first. I don't know when I'll see you again. Not until next summer, I suppose. I can't come to Oakdale for Easter this year. I wish you'd write to me—that is, if you feel you'd like to. Remember, I am always your old friend Tom."

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"I *will* write to you, Tom." Grace's gray eyes were heavy with unshed tears. She winked desperately to keep them back. She would not cry. Luckily the dim light of the room prevented Tom from seeing how near she was to breaking down. It was all so sad. She had never before realized how much it hurt her to hurt Tom. She followed him into the hall and to the door in silence.

"Good-bye, Grace," he said again, holding out his hand.

"Good-bye, Tom," she faltered. He turned abruptly and hurried down the steps into the winter darkness. He did not look back.

Grace stood in the open door until the echo of his footsteps died out. Then she rushed into the living room and, throwing herself down on the big leather sofa, burst into bitter tears.

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CHAPTER XVII

THE SUMMONS

"There are Deans and *deans*," observed Emma Dean with savage emphasis, "but the Deans, of whom I am which, are, in my humble opinion, infinitely superior to the dean person stalking about the halls of dear old Overton."

"What do you mean, Emma?" asked Grace. The dry bitterness of her friend's outburst regarding deans in general was too significant to be allowed to pass unquestioned.

It was the evening of Grace Harlowe's return from the Christmas holiday she had spent with her dear ones at Oakdale. Grace and Emma were in their room. Despite the one sad memory which time alone could efface, Grace was experiencing a peace and comfort which always hovered about her for many days after her visits home. Next to home, however, Overton was, to her, the place of places, and she had returned to her work with fresh energy and enthusiasm. She believed that she had definitely put behind her forever all that unhappy part of her life regarding

Tom Gray. It had been hard indeed, and had brought tears to the eyes so unaccustomed to weeping. Still Grace was glad that she had faced the inevitable and seen clearly. Tom would, in time, forget her and perhaps marry some one else. She wished with all her heart that he might be happy, and her one regret was that she had caused him pain.

In reality Grace had exhibited toward her old friend a hardness of purpose quite at variance with her usually sweet nature. She wondered a little that she could have been so inexorable in her decision, yet she believed herself to be wholly justified in the course she had taken. Already she was beginning to commend herself inwardly for her loyalty to her work, and Emma's blunt arraignment of the dean of Overton College acted like a dash of cold water upon her half-fledged self-content.

"All day I've been tempted to tell you a few things, Gracious," began Emma, "but I hated to disturb you. I know just how you feel when you come back from that blessed little town of yours. So I've been keeping still while you told me all about Anne's wedding and the good times you had. It was one glorious succession of good times, wasn't it?"

"Yes." Grace was silent for a brief space of time. Then she said gravely, "There was only one flaw, Emma. I refused again, and for the last time, to marry Tom Gray. I was sorry, but I couldn't help it. I don't love him."

"I'm sorry, too, that you couldn't find it in your heart to care for him. I liked him best of those four young men."

"Every one likes him. My friends all hoped that we would marry." Grace sighed. "Still one's friends can't decide such matters for one. One must solve that particular problem alone."

"Just so," agreed Emma. "Although no one ever asked my hand in holy matrimony except a callow youth whom I tutored in algebra last summer. He had failed in his June examination and had to pass in September or be forever labeled a dunce by his fond family. Now you see why I can understand the psychology of saying 'no' to a proposal. This stripling, who was at least five years my junior, proposed to me out of sheer gratitude. I actually succeeded in drumming quadratic equations into his stupid head, and he offered me his hand by the way of reward."

Grace's sad expression had by this time vanished. She was regarding Emma with a smiling face. "Really and truly, Emma, did that happen to you?"

"It did, indeed," averred Emma solemnly. "You aren't half so amazed as I was. I felt as though one of my Sunday-school class of little boys had suddenly exhibited signs of the tender passion. I labored long and earnestly to convince him that I was not his fate, and in due season he passed his examination and promptly forgot me. I did not weep and wail at being forgotten, either. Still there was a grain of satisfaction in being sought. If I go down to my grave in single blessedness I shall at least have the satisfaction of knowing that some one yearned for my life-long society." She beamed owlshly at Grace, and laughter routed the sorrowful face she had turned to Emma only a moment before.

But Emma was only trying to prepare Grace for unpleasant news. Now that she had put her in a lighter frame of mind, she said: "I might as well tell you about Miss Wharton, Grace."

Grace's eyes were immediately fixed on her in mute question.

"The news of the sale traveled to Miss Wharton, as I was afraid it would," began Emma. "Miss Brent wasn't here when first the dean heard of it. She had gone home with Miss Parker for Christmas. Evelyn Ward wasn't here, either. She and Kathleen West and Mary Reynolds went to New York. Mary and Kathleen to work on the paper, and Evelyn to work for two weeks in that stock company of Mr. Forrest's. You knew about that, of course. It was the day after Christmas that Miss Wharton heard about the sale. She sent for Miss Brent and was greatly displeased to find her gone. However, she had had permission from the registrar, a fact that Miss Wharton couldn't overlook. Then Miss Wharton sent for me. She said the sale was a disgrace to Overton, and that she was amazed to think you allowed such a proceeding. I explained to her that you knew nothing of it, that you were away at the time it took place, and she said you had acted most unwisely in placing your responsibilities on the shoulders of others even for a day. Your place was at Harlowe House every day of the college year. You had no business to assume such a responsible position if you did not intend to live up to it."

"That's about the extent of all she said. I was so angry I could scarcely control myself, but I managed to say quietly that President Morton and Miss Wilder had never questioned your absences from Harlowe House, and that I was sure you would lose no time in taking up the matter with her when you returned. Now you know what you may expect. I don't know whether she has sent for Miss Brent since she came from New York. If she hasn't, then mark my words, the summons will come to-morrow."

Emma proved to be a true prophet. The nine o'clock mail next morning brought two letters written on the stationery used by the Overton faculty. One was addressed to Grace, the other to Jean Brent. If the two young women had compared them they would have discovered that each one contained the same curt summons to the dean's office. Both appointments were for half-past four o'clock that afternoon.

Grace stopped at Jean's table at luncheon that day and said softly. "Will you come to my office after you have finished your luncheon, Miss Brent?"

Jean turned very pale. She bowed her acquiescence, and Grace went on to her own place.

"I have been requested to call on Miss Wharton at half-past four o'clock this afternoon, Miss Brent," informed Grace as, later, Jean stood before her. "I noted that you also received a letter written on the business stationery of Overton. Am I right in guessing that you have received the same summons?"

For answer Jean opened the book she held under her arm and took from it an envelope. In silence she drew from it a letter, spread it open and handed it to Grace.

"Just as I thought." Grace returned the letter. "Miss Wharton has learned of your sale, Miss Brent. She is very indignant. Are you prepared to tell her what you confided to me?" Grace eyed the girl squarely.

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"Why should I, Miss Harlowe?" burst forth Jean. "No; I will tell Miss Wharton nothing."

"Nor will I," was Grace's quiet rejoinder. "Whatever she learns must come from you. I wrote to Miss Lipton and received a letter from her assuring me that you are not at fault in the matter that made your advent into Overton College a mystery to me. I need no further assurance. Miss Lipton's school is known to the public as being one of the finest preparatory schools in the United States. If it were Miss Wilder instead of Miss Wharton I should advise you to tell her all. I am so sorry you did not tell us in the beginning. You must do whatever your conscience dictates. If necessary I will show Miss Wharton my letter from Miss Lipton, but I shall not betray your confidence unless you sanction my speaking."

"Please don't tell her," begged Jean.

"It shall be as you ask," returned Grace, but she was secretly disappointed at what might be either Jean's selfishness or her pure inability to see the unpleasantness of the position in which she was placing the young woman who had befriended her.

When Grace entered the familiar office and saw Miss Wharton's dumpy figure occupying her dear Miss Wilder's place she felt a distinct sinking of the heart. The dean surveyed her out of cold blue eyes, that seemed to Grace to contain a spark of deliberate malice.

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"Good afternoon, Miss Harlowe," she said stiffly. As she spoke the door opened and Jean Brent walked calmly in. She bowed to Miss Wharton in a manner as chilly as her own and took a seat at one side of the room. The dean waved Grace to a chair. "Now, young women," she began in a severe tone, "I wish a full explanation of this disgraceful sale that recently took place at Harlowe House. I will first ask you, Miss Brent if you had Miss Harlowe's permission to conduct it?"

"No. She refused to permit it. I held it in her absence," answered Jean, defiance blazing in her blue eyes.

"I see; a clear case of disobedience. What was your object in holding it?"

"I needed money. I lost the greater part of my money on the train when I came to Overton."

"Why did you need money?" Miss Wharton exhibited a lawyer-like persistency.

"To pay my college fees," Jean made prompt answer.

"But how could a girl with a wardrobe as complete and expensive as yours—I have been informed that it was remarkable—be in need of money to pay her expenses, or obliged to live in a charitable institution, as I believe Harlowe House is?"

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"You are mistaken. Harlowe House is *not* a charitable institution!" Grace Harlowe's voice vibrated with indignation. "I beg your pardon," she apologized in the next instant.

Miss Wharton glared angrily at her for fully a minute. Then, ignoring the interruption and the protest, turned again to Jean.

"I cannot answer your question," Jean spoke with quiet composure.

"You mean you *will* not answer it," retorted the dean.

"I have nothing to say that you would care to hear." Jean's lips set in the stubborn line that signified no yielding.

Miss Wharton turned to Grace. "You have heard what this young woman says. Can you answer the question I asked Miss Brent?"

"The answer to the question must come from Miss Brent," replied Grace with gentle evasion.

"Miss Harlowe, you have not answered me." Miss Wharton was growing angrier. "I insist upon knowing the details of this affair from beginning to end. Miss Brent's conduct has been contrary to all the traditions of Overton."

"That is perfectly true," admitted Grace.

"Then if you know it to be true, why do you evade my question? It will be infinitely better for you to be frank with me. I am greatly displeased with you and the reports I hear of Harlowe House. I assured Miss Wilder, when first I met you, that I doubted President Morton's and her judgment in allowing you to hold a position of such great responsibility. You are too young, too frivolous. I am

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informed that Harlowe House is almost Bohemian in its character."

"Then you have been misinformed." Cut to the heart, Grace spoke with a dignity that was not to be denied. "Harlowe House is conducted on the strictest principles of law and order. We try to be a well-regulated household, upholding the high standard of Overton. If it had not been for two of my friends and I, Mrs. Gray would never have given it to the college, and thirty-four girls would have missed obtaining a college education. Miss Wilder believed in me. She trusted me. I regret that you do not. Regarding Miss Brent, I have received ample assurance of her honesty of purpose from Miss Lipton, the head of the Lipton Preparatory School for Girls. Miss Lipton and I are in possession of certain facts concerning Miss Brent which enable us to understand her peculiar position here. I regret, beyond all words, that Miss Brent did not confide in me before having the sale of her clothing. I do not condone her fault, but I am sure that in her anxiety to do what was best for herself she did not intend deliberately to defy me. Here is a letter from Miss Lipton which I wish you to read."

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In her vexation Miss Wharton almost snatched the letter from Grace's hand. There was a tense stillness in the room while she read it. Jean kept her gaze steadily turned from Grace. At last the dean looked up from the letter. "This letter is, by no means, an explanation, although I am well aware of the excellent reputation Miss Lipton's school bears. What I am determined to have are the *facts* of this affair. If I can prevail upon neither of you to speak them I shall place the matter before President Morton and the Board of Trustees of Overton College."

Her threat met with no response from either young woman.

"Before taking the matter up with President Morton, however, I shall give both of you an opportunity to reflect upon the folly of your present course. Within a few days I shall send for you again. If then you still continue to defy me I will take measures to have *you*, Miss Harlowe, removed from your charge of Harlowe House as being unfit for the responsibility, while *you*, Miss Brent, will be expelled from Overton College for disobedience and insubordination. That will do for this morning." Miss Wharton dismissed them with a peremptory gesture.

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The two young women passed out of the room in silence. Once outside Overton Hall, Jean turned impulsively to Grace: "I am sorry, Miss Harlowe, but I couldn't tell that horrid woman what I told you. She would neither understand me nor sympathize with me. I know you think I should have explained everything."

Grace could not trust herself to answer. Humiliated to the last degree by Miss Wharton's bald injustice, she felt as though she wished never to see or hear of Jean Brent again. It was not until they were half way across the campus that she found her voice. She was dimly surprised at the resentment in her tones. "You chose your own course, Miss Brent, regardless of what I thought. That course has not only involved you in serious difficulty, but me as well. If you had obeyed me in the beginning, I would not be leaving Miss Wharton's office this afternoon, under a cloud. I quite agree with you, however, that to tell Miss Wharton your secret now would not help matters. I must leave you here. I am going on to Wayne Hall."

With a curt inclination of her head, Grace walked away, leaving Jean standing in the middle of the campus, looking moodily after her.

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CHAPTER XVIII

THE BLOTTED ESCUTCHEON

But Grace was destined to receive another shock before the long day was done. The shadows of early twilight were beginning to blot out the short winter day when she let herself into Harlowe House. Stepping into her office she reached eagerly for the pile of mail lying on the sliding shelf of her desk. The handwriting on the first letter of the pile was Tom's. Grace eyed it gloomily. It was not warranted to lighten her present unhappy mood. She opened it slowly, almost hesitatingly. Unlike Tom's long, newsy letters, there was but one sheet of paper. Then she strained her eyes in the rapidly failing daylight and read:

"DEAR GRACE:

"When you receive this letter I shall be out at sea and on my way to South America. I have resigned my position with the Forestry Department to go on an expedition up the Amazon River with Burton Graham, the naturalist. He is the man who collected so many rare specimens of birds and mammals for the Smithsonian Institute while in Africa, two years ago. It is hard to say when I shall return, and, as it takes almost a month for a letter to reach the United States, you are not likely to hear often from me.

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"Aunt Rose is deeply grieved at my going. Still she understands that, for me, it is best. When last I saw you in Oakdale I had no idea of leaving civilization for

tropical wildernesses. Mr. Graham's invitation to join his expedition was wholly unexpected, and I was not slow to take advantage of it.

"I would ask you to write me, but, unfortunately, I can give you no forwarding address. Mr. Graham's plans as to location are a little uncertain. Perhaps, until I can bring myself to think of you in the way you wish me to think, silence between us will be happiest for us both. God bless you, Grace, and give you the greatest possible success in your work. With best wishes,

"Your friend,
"Tom."

Grace stared at the sheet of paper before her, with tear-blurred eyes. She hastily wiped her tears away, but they only fell the faster. Miss Wharton's injustice, Jean Brent's selfishness, together with the sudden shock of Tom's departure out of the country and out of her life, were too much for her high-strung, sensitive nature. Dropping into the chair before her desk, she bowed her head on the slide and wept unrestrainedly. 184

Her overflow of feelings was brief, however. Given little to tears, after her first outburst she exerted all her will power to control herself. The girls were dropping in by ones and twos from their classes, the maid would soon come into the living room to turn on the lights, and at almost any moment some one might ask for her. She would not care to be discovered in tears.

Grace picked up the rest of her mail, lying still unopened, and went upstairs to her room with the proud determination to cry no more. She was quite sure she would not have cried over Tom's letter had all else been well. It was her interview with Miss Wharton that had hurt her so cruelly. Yet, with the reading of Tom's farewell message, deep down in her heart lurked a curiously uncomfortable sense of loss. It was as though for the first time in her life she had actually began to miss Tom. She had not expected fate to cut him off so sharply from her. She knew that her refusal to marry him had been the primary cause of his going away. Mrs. Gray would perhaps blame her. These expeditions were dangerous to say the least. More than one naturalist had died of fever or snakebite, or had been killed by savages. Suppose Tom were never to come back. Grace shuddered at the bare idea of such a calamity. And he did not intend to write to her, so she could only wonder as the days, weeks and months went by what had befallen him. She would never know. 185

While she was sadly ruminating over Tom's unexpected exit from her little world, Emma Dean's brisk step sounded outside. The door swung open. Emma gave a soft exclamation as she saw the room in darkness. Pressing the button at the side of the door, she flooded the room with light, only to behold Grace standing in the middle of the floor, still wearing her outdoor wraps, an open letter in her hand.

"Good gracious, Gracious, how you startled me! What is going on? Tell your worthless dog of a servant, what means this studied pose in the middle of the room in the dark? Not to mention posing in your hat and coat. And, yes," Emma drew nearer and peered into her friend's face with her kind, near-sighted eyes, "you've been crying. This will never do. Tell me the base varlet that hath caused these tears," she rumbled in a deep voice, "and be he lord of fifty realms I'll have his blood. 'Sdeath! Odds bodkins! Let me smite the villain. I could slay and slay, and be a teacher still. Provided the faculty didn't object, and I wasn't arrested," she ended practically. 186

Grace's woe-be-gone face brightened at Emma's nonsense. "You always succeed in making me smile when I am the bluest of the blue," she said fondly.

"I can't see why such strongly dramatic language as I used should make you laugh. It was really quite Shakespearian. You see I have 'the bard' on the brain. We have been taking up Elizabethan English in one of my classes, and once I become thoroughly saturated with Shakespearian verse I am likely to quote it on all occasions. Don't be surprised if I burst forth into blank verse at the table or any other public place. But here I've been running along like a talking machine when you are 'full fathom five' in the blues. Can't you tell your aged and estimable friend, Emma, what is troubling you?"

"You were right, Emma. The summons came." Grace's voice was husky. "I've just had a session with Miss Wharton."

"About Miss Brent?"

"Yes. She sent for both of us. She asked Miss Brent to explain certain things which she could, but would not, explain. I was in Miss Brent's confidence. As you know, she told me about herself after I came back from the Thanksgiving holiday. It entirely changed my opinion of her. I wish I could tell you everything, but I can't. I gave her my word of honor that I would keep her secret. But, today, when she saw how unjustly Miss Wharton reprimanded me I thought she might have strained a point and told Miss Wharton her story. Still I don't know that it would have helped much." Grace sighed wearily. "Miss Wharton is not Miss Wilder. She is a hard, narrow-minded, cruel woman," Grace's dispirited tones gathered sudden vehemence, "and she would misjudge Miss Brent just as she misjudged me. She is going to send for us again in a few days, and she declares that, if I do not tell her everything, she will take measures to have me removed from my position here." Grace turned tragic eyes to her friend. 187

"The idea!" rang out Emma's indignant cry. "Just as though she could. Why, Harlowe House was

named for you. If Mrs. Gray knew she even hinted such thing she'd be so angry. I believe she'd turn Indian giver and take back her gift to Overton."

"Oh, no, she wouldn't do quite that, Emma." Heartsick though she was, Grace smiled faintly. "She would be angry, though. She must never know it. It made her so happy to give Harlowe House to Overton. She would be so hurt, for my sake, that she would never again take a particle of pleasure in it. When Miss Wharton sends for me I shall ask her point-blank if she really intends to try to have me removed from my position by the Board. If she says 'yes,' I'll resign, then and there."

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"Grace Harlowe, you don't mean it? You've always fought valiantly for other girls' rights, why won't you fight for your own? The whole affair is ridiculous and unjust. If worse comes to worst you can go before the Board and defend yourself. The members will believe you."

Grace shook her head sadly, but positively. "I'd never do that, Emma. If it comes to a point where I must fight to be house mother here, then I'd much rather resign. I couldn't bear to have the story creep about the college that I had even been criticized by the Board. I've loved my work so dearly, and I've tried so hard to do it wisely that I'd rather give it up and go quietly away, feeling in my heart that I have done my best, than to fight and win at last nothing but a blotted escutcheon. You understand how it is with me, dear old comrade."

"Grace, it breaks my heart to hear you say such things! You mustn't talk of going away." Emma sprang from the chair into which she had dropped and drew Grace into her protecting embrace. Grace's head was bowed for a moment on Emma's shoulder.

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"Don't cry, dear," soothed Emma.

"I'm not crying, Emma. See, I haven't shed a tear. I did all my crying a while ago." Grace raised her head and regarded Emma with two dry eyes that were wells of pain. "I have had another shock, too, since I came home. Tom Gray has resigned his position with the Forestry Department at Washington, and has sailed for South America. I—never—thought—he'd—go—away. He isn't even going to write to me, Emma, and I don't know when he will come back. Perhaps never. You know how dangerous those South American expeditions are?"

"Poor Gracious," comforted Emma, "you have had enough sorrows for one day. You need a little cheering up. You and I are not going to eat dinner at Harlowe House to-night. We are going to let Louise Sampson look after things while we go gallivanting down to Vinton's for a high tea. I'm going to telephone Kathleen and Patience. There will be just four of us, and no more of us to the tea party. They will have to come, engagements or no engagements."

"I don't care to see any one to-night, Emma," pleaded Grace.

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"You only think you don't. Seeing the girls will do you good. If you stay here you'll brood and grieve all evening."

"All right, I'll go; just to please you. I must see Louise and tell her we are going."

"You stay here. I'll do all the seeing. Take off your hat and bathe your face. You'll feel better." Emma hurried out of the room and up the next flight of stairs to Louise Sampson's room, thinking only of Grace and how she might best comfort her. She was more aroused than she cared to let Grace see over Miss Wharton's harsh edict. She made a secret vow that if Grace would not fight for her rights *she*, Emma Dean, would. Then she remembered Grace's words, "I'd rather give it up and go quietly away, feeling in my heart that I have done my best, than to fight and, at last, win nothing but a blotted escutcheon." No, she could not take upon herself Grace's wrongs, unless Grace bade her do so, and that would never happen.

Fortunately Kathleen and Patience were both at home. Better still, neither had an engagement for that evening, and at half-past six o'clock the four faithful friends were seated at their favorite mission alcove table at Vinton's, ordering their dinner, while Grace tried earnestly to put away her sorrow and be her usual sunny self.

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But while Grace had been passing through the Valley of Humiliation, there was another person under the same roof who was equally unhappy. That person was Jean Brent. On leaving Grace she had gone directly to Harlowe House. Ascending the stairs to her room with a dispirited step, she had tossed aside her wraps and seated herself before the window. She sat staring out with unseeing eyes, remorseful and sick at heart. Grace's bitter words, "If you had obeyed me I would not be leaving Miss Wharton's office this afternoon, under a cloud," still rang in her ears. How basely she had repaid Miss Harlowe, was her conscience-stricken thought. Miss Harlowe had advised and helped her in every possible way. She had taken her into Harlowe House on trust. She had sympathized with her when Jean had told her her secret, and she had brought upon herself the dean's disapproval, would perhaps leave Harlowe House, rather than betray the girl who had confided in her. Jean's conscience lashed her sharply for her stubbornness and selfish ingratitude. If only she had been frank in the beginning. Miss Harlowe would have explained all to Miss Wilder, and Miss Wilder would have been satisfied. Then she would have had no sale of her wardrobe, and Miss Harlowe would have been spared all this miserable trouble.

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What a failure she had made of her freshman year? She had made few friends except Althea and her chums. They were shallow and selfish to a fault. She had held herself aloof from the Harlowe House girls, who, notwithstanding their good nature, showed a slight resentment of her proud attitude toward them and her absolute refusal to join in the work of the club. Since the day when

Evelyn had taken her to task for disobeying Grace the two girls had exchanged no words other than those which necessity forced them to exchange. Evelyn had not forgiven Jean for her passionate advice to her to mind her own affairs. Jean, knowing Evelyn's resentment to be just, cloaked herself in defiance and ignored her roommate. Little by little, however, the cloak dropped away and Jean began to long for Evelyn's companionship. The yellow crêpe gown and the beautiful evening coat still lay in the bottom of Jean's trunk. In her own mind she knew that she had begun to hope for the time when she and Evelyn would settle their differences. She would then give Evelyn the belated Christmas gift. She grew daily more unhappy over their estrangement, and heartily wished for a reconciliation. Yet she was still too proud to make the first advances.

It was hardly likely that Evelyn would make the first sign. Her pride was equal to, if not greater, than Jean's. She, who abhorred prying and inquisitiveness, had been accused by Jean of meddling in her affairs. Evelyn vowed inwardly never to forgive Jean. So these two young girls, each stiff-necked and implacable, dressed, studied and slept in the same room in stony silence, passing in and out like two offended shadows. Gradually this strained attitude became so intolerable to Jean that she longed for some pretext on which to make peace. As she sat at the window wondering what she could do to atone for her fault the door opened and Evelyn entered the room. A swift impulse seized Jean to lift the veil of resentment that hung between them. She half rose from her chair as though to address Evelyn. The latter turned her head in Jean's direction. Her blue eyes rested upon the other girl with the cold, impersonal gaze of a stranger. Beneath that maddening, ignoring glance Jean's good intentions curled up and withered like leaves that are touched by frost, and her aching desire for reconciliation was once more driven out of her heart by her pride.

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CHAPTER XIX

THE SWORD OF SUSPENSE

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When Miss Wharton sent Jean Brent and Grace Harlowe from her office with the threat of dismissal hanging over them she fully intended to keep her word. From the moment she had first beheld Grace Harlowe she had conceived for her a rooted dislike such as only persons of strong prejudices can entertain. Her whole life had been lived narrowly, and with repression, therefore she was not in sympathy with youth or its enthusiasm. According to her belief no young woman of Grace's age and appearance was competent to assume the responsibility of managing an establishment like Harlowe House. She had again delivered this opinion most forcefully in Miss Wilder's presence after Grace had left the office on the afternoon of their first meeting, and Miss Wilder's earnest assurances to the contrary served only to deepen Miss Wharton's disapproval of the bright-faced, clear-eyed girl whose quiet self-possession indicated a capability of managing her own affairs that was a distinct affront to the woman who hoped to discover in her such faults as would triumphantly bear out her unkind criticism.

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Miss Wharton had held the position of dean in an unimportant western college, and it was at the solicitation of a cousin, a member of the Board of Trustees, that she had applied for the office of dean at Overton, and had been appointed to it with the distinct understanding that it was to be for the present college year only. Should Miss Wilder be unable to resume her duties the following October, Miss Wharton would then be reappointed for the entire year. The importance of being the dean of Overton College, coupled with the generous salary attached to the office, were the motives which caused Miss Wharton to resign her more humble position, assured as it was, for an indefinite period of years, for the one of greater glory but uncertain length.

Possessed of a hard, unsympathetic nature, she secretly cherished the hope that Miss Wilder would not return to Overton the following year. She also resolved to prove her own worth above that of the kindly, efficient dean whom the Overton girls idolized, and began her campaign by criticizing and finding fault with Miss Wilder's methods whenever the slightest opportunity presented itself. At first her unfair tactics bade fair to meet with success. The various members of the Board, and even Dr. Morton, wondered vaguely if, after all, too much confidence had been reposed in Miss Wilder.

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Wholly intent on establishing herself as a fixture at Overton College, Miss Wharton allowed the matter concerning Jean Brent and Grace to rest while she attended to what she considered vastly more important affairs. The thought that she was keeping both young women in the most cruel suspense did not trouble her in the least. On the contrary she decided that they deserved to be kept in a state of uncertainty as to what she intended to do with them, and deliberately put over their case until such time as suited her convenience.

Both Jean and Grace went about, however, with the feeling that a sword was suspended over their heads and likely to descend at any moment. Grace expected, daily, to be summoned to Miss Wharton's office, there to refuse to divulge Jean Brent's secret and then ask the pertinent question, "Do you intend to lay this matter before the Board?" If she received an affirmative answer, then she planned to return to Harlowe House, write her formal resignation as manager

of it and mail it to President Morton. But day followed day, and week followed week, and still the dread summons did not come. Grace discussed frequently the possible cause of Miss Wharton's negligence in the matter with Emma, her one confidante. Emma was of the opinion that, in trying to fill Miss Wilder's position, Miss Wharton had her hands full. Although Emma was apt to clothe the most serious happenings in the cloak of humor, she was a shrewd judge of human nature.

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"Just let me tell you one thing, Gracious," she remarked one blustering March evening as the two young women fought their way across the campus against a howling wind. They were returning from an evening spent with Kathleen West and Patience Eliot. "Miss Wharton is no more fitted for the position of dean at Overton College than I am for the presidency of the United States. She may have been successful in some little, out-of-the-way academy in a jerkwater town, but she's sadly out of place here. She has about as much tact as a rhinoceros, and possesses the æsthetic perceptions of a coal shoveler. I'm just waiting for these simple truths to dawn upon the intellects of our august Board. I understand that cadaverous-looking man with the wall eyes and the spade-shaped beard, who walks about as though he cherished a grudge against the human race, and rejoices in the euphonious name of Darius Dutton, is responsible for this crime against Overton. He recommended her appointment to the Board. It seems that he is Miss Wharton's cousin. Thank goodness he isn't mine, or Miss Wharton either."

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Grace laughed at Emma's sweeping denunciation of Miss Wharton and the offending Daniel Dutton. Then her face grew sober. "You mustn't allow my grievances to embitter you, Emma, toward any member of the Board."

"Oh, my only grudge against Darius D. so far is his having such detestable relatives and foisting them upon an innocent, trusting college," retorted Emma with spirit, "but my grudge against Miss Wharton is a very different matter. It's an active, lively grudge. I'd like to write to Miss Wilder and Mrs. Gray, and interview Dr. Morton, and then see what happened. It would not be Grace Harlowe who resigned; but it might be a certain hateful person whose name begins with W. I won't say her name outright. Possibly you'll be able to guess it."

Grace's hand found Emma's in the dark as they came to the steps of Harlowe House. The two girls paused for an instant. Their hands clung loyally. "Remember, Emma, you've promised to let me have my own way in this," reminded Grace wistfully.

"I'll keep my promise," answered Emma, but her voice sounded husky.

"I know," continued Grace, "that Miss Wharton's attitude toward me is one of personal prejudice. From the moment she saw me she disliked me. I know of only one other similar case. When Anne Pierson and I were freshmen in Oakdale High School we recited algebra to a teacher named Miss Leece, who behaved toward Anne in precisely the same way that Miss Wharton has behaved toward me, simply because she disliked her. But come on, old comrade, we mustn't stand out here all night with the wind howling in our ears. Let us try and forget our troubles. What is to be, will be. I am nothing, if not a fatalist." Grace forced herself to smile with her usual brightness, and the two girls entered the house arm in arm, each endeavoring, for the sake of the other to stifle her unhappiness.

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It was not yet ten o'clock and the lights were still burning in the living room. Gathered about the library table were six girls, deep in conversation. One of them glanced toward the hall at the sound of the opening door.

"Oh, Miss Harlowe," she called, "You are the very person we have been wishing for." It was Cecil Ferris who spoke. Nettie Weyburn, Louise Sampson, Mary Reynolds, Evelyn Ward and Hilda Moore made up the rest of the sextette. "We are wondering if it wouldn't be a good plan to give our grand revue directly after the Easter vacation. It will be our last entertainment this year, because after Easter the weather begins to grow warm and the girls like to be outdoors. If you would help us plan it, then those of us who live here, and are going to take part in it, can be studying and rehearsing during the vacation. Of course, Evelyn won't be with us, but she will help us before she goes to New York. When she comes back she can give us the finishing touches. Here is the programme as far as we have planned it. We are awfully short of features."

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Cecil handed Grace a sheet of paper on which were jotted several items. There was a sketch written by Mary Reynolds, "The Freshman on the Top Floor," a pathetic little story of a lonely freshman. Gertrude Earle, a demure, dreamy-eyed girl, the daughter of a musician, was down for a piano solo. There was to be a sextette, a chorus and a troupe of dancing girls. Kathleen West had written a clever little playlet "In the Days of Shakespeare," and Hilda Moore, who could do all sorts of queer folk dances, was to busy her light feet in a series of quick change costume dances, while Amy Devery was to give an imitation of a funny motion-picture comedian who had made the whole country laugh at his antics.

"How would you like some imitations and baby songs?" asked Grace, forgetting for the moment the shadow that hung over her. "I have two friends who would be delighted to help you."

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"How lovely!" cried Louise Sampson. "Now if only we had some one who could sing serious songs exceptionally well."

"Miss Brent has a wonderful voice," said Evelyn rather reluctantly.

"Then we must ask her to sing," decided Louise. "You ask her to-night, Evelyn."

But Evelyn shook her head. "I'd rather you would ask her, Louise. Won't you, please?"

"All right, I will," said Louise good-naturedly, who had no idea of the strained relations existing between the two girls, and consequently thought nothing of Evelyn's request.

"Much as I regret tearing myself away from this representative company of beauty and brains, I have themes that cry out to be corrected," declared Emma Dean, who had been listening in interested silence to the plans for the coming revue.

"You can't hear them cry out clear down here, can you?" asked Mary Reynolds flippantly.

A general giggle went the round of the sextette.

"Not with my everyday ordinary ears, my child," answered Emma, quite undisturbed. "It is that inner voice of duty that is making all the commotion. I would much rather bask in the light of your collected countenances than listen to those frenzied shrieks. But what of my trusting classes, who delight in writing themes and passing them on to me to be corrected?"

"Oh, yes; we all delight in writing themes," jeered Nettie Weyburn, to whom theme writing was an irksome task. "My inner voice of duty is screaming at me this very minute to go and write one, but I'm so deaf I can't hear it."

"If you can't hear it, how do you know it is screaming?" questioned Emma very solemnly.

"My intuition tells me," retorted Nettie with triumphant promptness.

"Then I wish *all* my pupils in English had such marvelous intuitions," sighed Emma.

"My inner voice of duty is wailing at me to go upstairs and finish my letter to my mother," interposed Grace, rising. Her face had regained its usual brightness. She could not be sad in the presence of these light-hearted, capable girls, whose sturdy efforts to help themselves made them all so inexpressibly dear to her. She would help them all she could with their entertainment. She would write Arline and Elfreda to come to Overton for a few days and take part in the revue.

It was not until she had finished her letter to her mother and begun one to Elfreda that the sinister recollection again darkened her thoughts. She was living in the shadow of dismissal. Would it be wise to invite Arline and Elfreda to Harlowe House for a visit while she was so uncertain of what the immediate future held in store for her? If she tendered her resignation she intended it should take effect without delay. Once she had surrendered her precious charge she could not and would not remain at Harlowe House. Still she had promised her girls that she would help them. She had volunteered Arline's and Elfreda's services, knowing they would willingly leave their own affairs to journey back to Overton.

Grace laid down her pen. Resting her elbows on the table she cradled her chin in her hands, her vivid, changeful face overcast with moody thought. At last she raised her head with the air of one who has come to a decision, and, picking up her pen, went on with her letter to J. Elfreda Briggs. If worse came to worst and she resigned before the girls' entertainment she would courageously put aside her own feelings and remain, at least, until afterward. It should be her last act of devotion to Harlowe House and her work.

CHAPTER XX

THE AWAKENING

The sword which hung over poor Grace's head still dangled threateningly above her when she left Overton for Oakdale, on her Easter vacation. Miss Wharton had made no sign. Whether she had, for the time being, forgotten her words of that unhappy morning of several weeks past, or was coolly taking her own time in the matter, well aware of the discomfort of her victims, Grace could not know. She determined to lay aside all bitterness of spirit and lend herself to commemorate the anniversary of the first Easter with a reverent and open mind. But there was one ghost which she could not lay, and that was the the memory of Tom Gray's face as he said good-bye to her on that memorable rainy afternoon. Just when it began to haunt her Grace could scarcely tell. She knew only that Tom's farewell letter had awakened in her mind a curious sense of loss that made her wish he had not cut himself off from her so completely. When on their last afternoon together he had pleaded so earnestly for her love Grace had been proudly triumphant in the successful accomplishment of what she believed to be her life work. From the lofty pinnacle of achievement she had looked down on Tom pityingly, but with no adequate realization of what she had caused him to suffer.

It was not until she herself had been called upon to prepare to give up that which meant most to her in life that she began to appreciate dimly what it must have cost Tom Gray to put aside his hopes of years and go away to forget. A belated sympathy for her girlhood friend sprang to life in her heart, and in the weeks of suspense that preceded her return to Oakdale for Easter she found herself thinking of him frequently. She wondered if he were well, and tried to imagine him in his

new and dangerous environment. She began to cherish a secret hope that, despite his belief that silence between them was best, he would write to her.

Her holiday promised to be a little lonely as far as her friends were concerned. Mrs. Gray had gone to New York City to spend Easter with the Nesbits. Nora and Hippy had gone to visit Jessica and Reddy in their Chicago home. Anne and David were in New York. Eleanor Savelli was in Italy. Even Marian Barber, Eva Allen and Julia Crosby had married and gone their separate ways. Of the Eight Originals Plus Two, and of their old sorority, the Phi Sigma Tau, she was the only one left in Oakdale. To be sure she had plenty of invitations to spend Easter with her chums and her many friends, but it was a sacred obligation with her always to be at home during the Easter holidays. She was quite content to do this, and yet even her father's and mother's love could not quite still the longing for the gay voices of those dear ones with whom she had kept pace for so long.

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There was one source of consolation, however, which during the first days at home she had quite overlooked, and that source was none other than Anna May and Elizabeth Angerell. The two little girls had by no means overlooked the fact that their Miss Harlowe was "the very nicest person in the whole world except papa and mamma," and proceeded to monopolize her whenever the opportunity offered itself.

Grace went for long walks with them. She helped them dress their dolls, and ran races and played games with them in their big sunny garden. She initiated them into the mysteries of making fudge and penuchi, while they obligingly taught her the ten different ways they knew of skipping the rope, and how to make raffia baskets. They followed her about like two adoring, persistent little shadows, until imbued with their carefree spirit of childhood, Grace, in a measure, forgot her woes and joined in their innocent fun with hearty good will.

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"Really, Grace, I hardly know which is older, you or Anna May," smiled her mother one afternoon as Grace came bounding into the living room with, "Mother, do you know where my blue sweater is? Anna May and Elizabeth and I are going for a walk as far as the old Omnibus House."

"It is hanging in that closet off the sewing room," returned her mother.

"Thank you." Dropping a hasty kiss on her mother's cheek, Grace was off.

Mrs. Harlowe watched her go down the walk, holding a hand of each little girl, with wistful eyes. Grace had not been at home three days before her mother divined that all was not well with her beloved daughter. Yet to ask questions was not her way. Whatever Grace's cross might be, she knew that, in time, Grace would confide in her.

On the way to the Omnibus House Grace was as gay and buoyant as her two little friends. It was not until they had reached there and Anna May and Elizabeth had run off to the nearest tree to watch a pair of birds which were building a nest and keeping up a great chirping meanwhile, that a frightful feeling of loneliness swept over Grace. She sat down on the worn stone steps sadly thinking of Tom Gray and the good times the Eight Originals had had at this favorite haunt.

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But why did the memory of Tom Gray continue to haunt her? Grace gave her shoulders an impatient twitch. How foolish she was to allow herself to grow retrospective over Tom. She had deliberately sent him away because she did not, nor never could, love him. Still she wished that the memory of him would not intrude upon her thoughts so constantly. "It's only because he's associated with the good times the Eight Originals have had," she tried to tell herself, but deep in her heart was born a strange fear that she fought against naming or recognizing.

After having watched the noisy, but successful, builders to their hearts' content, the children ran over to where Grace sat and challenged her to a game of tag. But she was in no mood for play, and suggested they had better be starting home. She felt that she could not endure for another instant this house of memories. She tried to assume the joyous air with which she had started out, but even the two little girls were not slow to perceive that their dear Miss Harlowe didn't look as happy as when they had begun their walk.

"I think we'd better go and see her to-morrow morning and take her a present," decided Anna May, after Grace had left them at their own gate. "She laughed like everything when we started on our walk, but she looked pretty sad when we were coming back and didn't say hardly a thing. I'm going to give her my bottle of grape juice that Mother made specially for me."

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"I guess I'll give her that pen wiper I made. It's ever so pretty." Elizabeth was not to be outdone in generosity.

"We'll take Snowball's new white puppy to show her," planned Anna May. "She hasn't seen it yet. And a real French poodle puppy is too cute for anything."

"And we'll sing that new verse we learned in school for her," added Elizabeth.

True to their word, the next morning the two little girls marched up to the Harlowes' front door laden with their gifts. Anna May bore with proud carefulness the cherished bottle of grape juice while Elizabeth cuddled a fat white ball in her arms, the pen wiper lying like a little blanket on the puppy's back.

"We came to call as soon as we could this morning, because we thought you looked sad yesterday," was Anna May's salutation as Grace opened the door. "Here's a bottle of grape juice.

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Mother made it specially for me, but I want *you* to have it," the child said. Grace ushered her guests into the living room.

"I hope you'll like this pen wiper, too. I cut it out and sewed it and everything," burst forth Elizabeth, holding out her offering. "I hope you'll always use it when you write letters."

"Thank you, girls. You are both very good to me," smiled Grace, "and I'm so glad to see you this morning."

"We thought you would be," returned Anna May calmly. "We brought Snowball's puppy to show you. We named him this morning for a perfectly splendid person that we know. You know him, too. The puppy's name is Thomas."

"That's Mr. Gray's real name, isn't it?" put in Elizabeth anxiously. "Every one calls him Tom, but Thomas sounds nicer. Don't you think it does?"

"We like Mr. Gray better than any grown-up man we know," confided Anna May enthusiastically. "He's the handsomest, nicest person ever was. Do you think he'd be pleased to have us name our puppy for him?"

"I'm sure he would." Grace stifled her desire to laugh as she took the fluffy white ball in her arms and stroked the tiny head. Then the amused look left her eyes. Perhaps Tom would never know of his little white namesake. He might never come back from South America. Suppose she were never to hear of him again. In the past she had, during moments of vexation toward him, almost wished it, but of a sudden it dawned upon her that she would give much to look into his honest gray eyes again and feel the clasp of his strong, friendly hand.

"Miss Harlowe, shall we sing for you?" Anna May wisely noted that Miss Harlowe had begun to look "sad" again.

"We learned such a pretty new song in school," put in Elizabeth. "Anna May can play it on the piano, too. Would you like us to sing it, Miss Harlowe?"

"Yes, do sing it," urged Grace, but her thoughts were far from her obliging visitors.

The children trotted over to the piano, and after a false start or two, Anna May played the opening bars of the song. Then the two childish voices rang out:

"The year's at the spring
And day's at the morn:
Morning's at seven;
The hillside's dew-pearled;
The lark's on the wing;
The snail's on the thorn:
God's in his heaven—
All's right with the world!"

Grace listened with a sinking heart. The joy of Browning's exquisite lines from "Pippa Passes" cut into her very soul. All was not right with *her* world. Everything had gone wrong. She had chosen work instead of love, and what it brought her? She had believed that in rejecting Tom's love for her work she had definitely and forever solved her problem. Now it confronted her afresh. She understood too well the meaning of that strange fear which had obsessed her ever since her return home. Now she knew why the memory of Tom had so persistently haunted her, and why her friendly interest in his welfare had grown to be a heavy anxiety as to whether all was well with him. Wholly against her will she had done that which she had insisted she could never do. She had fallen in love with Tom. But her awakening had come too late. Tom had gone away to forget her. He would never know that she loved him, for she could never, never tell him. On the night of Jessica's wedding, when they had strolled up the walk to the house in the moonlight, he had said with an air of conviction, which then made her smile, that there would come a time when even work could not crowd out love. His prophecy had come true, but it meant nothing to either she or Tom now, for it had come true too late.

CHAPTER XXI

KATHLEEN WEST MAKES A PROMISE

On Grace's return to Overton and Harlowe House from her Easter vacation she plunged into her work with feverish energy. She wished, if possible, to free herself of this strange, unbidden love for Tom which seemed to grow and deepen with every passing day, and which made her utterly miserable. Then, too, she did not know when the dreaded summons might come from Miss Wharton, and she longed to do as much as she could for her girls while the opportunity was yet hers. It was with this spirit that she entered into the plans for their revue, which was to be given

in Greek Hall, and from the number of tickets already sold promised to be a sweeping success.

Arline and Elfreda had accepted their invitations with alacrity, promising to come to Overton several days beforehand for the purpose of making Grace a visit. The girls who were to take part in the revue were using every spare moment to perfect themselves in their parts and specialties, and every night the living room was the scene of much rehearsing.

According to information received from Emma, Miss Wharton was not filling Miss Wilder's place with signal success. She had shown herself to be not only extremely narrow-minded, but quarrelsome as well. She had antagonized more than one member of the faculty by either tactlessly criticising their methods of instruction, or seeking to force them into open dispute. Being only human, those whom she sought to humble retaliated by taking advantage of her recent assumption of the duties of dean to make her college path as thorny as circumstances would admit, and Miss Wharton was obliged to put aside all else, including the judgment she intended to pass upon Grace, in a powerful contention for supremacy over those who had worsted her in sundry college matters. 214

Grace did not flatter herself that this state of affairs could last; she was certain that, sooner or later, the blow would fall, but she wisely resolved to put the whole unhappy business from her mind and make hay while her brief college sun still shone.

The arrival of Elfreda Briggs and Arline Thayer three days before the date set for the entertainment made things seem like old times.

"It certainly does you a world of good to have Elfreda and Arline here, Gracious," observed Emma Dean as she stopped in the doorway of Grace's little office on her way to her room from her morning recitations. 215

"I can't bear to think of their leaving me," smiled Grace, looking up from the account book on her desk. Her face had partially regained its former light and sparkle. "They are coming here to luncheon to-day. Did you know it?"

"Yes, I saw J. Elfreda on my way across the campus this morning. They ought to be here soon now."

A ring of the bell, answered by the maid, and the sound of Arline's clear tones, mingled with Elfreda's deeper ones, proclaimed the arrival of the two Sempers. The luncheon bell rang almost directly afterward, so the four friends had time only to exchange salutations before going to the table.

"Do you know, girls, I can't get used to Overton without Miss Wilder," declared Arline Thayer as they seated themselves at Grace's table, which had been set for four. "I keep looking about me, expecting to meet her at any minute. You must miss her dreadfully, Grace."

"I do miss her more than I can say," replied Grace briefly. The haunting shadow lurked for an instant in her gray eyes, then she began to talk with forced vivacity of the coming revue.

But one pair of keen eyes had seen that shadow, and that pair of eyes belonged to J. Elfreda Briggs. "I wonder what ails Grace?" was her thought, "It's something about Miss Wilder's not being here, I'm pretty certain." She resolved to make inquiries concerning the new dean and made an excuse to accompany Emma across the campus after luncheon, leaving Arline and Grace together. 216

"What's the matter with Grace?" was her abrupt question the instant they had left Harlowe House behind them. "I could see that she wasn't quite her old self at luncheon to-day."

"I believe you 'could see' in the dark or with your eyes shut or even if you had no eyes," teased Emma.

"Then there *is* something bothering her," said Elfreda triumphantly. "I knew it."

"Yes, there is. I wish I might tell you," returned Emma slowly, "but I am in Grace's confidence. It wouldn't be a bad idea for you to ask her, though. If she would tell you, you might be able to suggest something helpful. I'll just say this much. It's very serious."

"All right, I'll ask her. If she tells me, I'll talk things over with you afterward. If she doesn't, then forget that I asked you about it."

It was not until late that afternoon that she found her opportunity to question Grace. Arline had left her to make a call upon Myra Stone, now a senior, and Elfreda and Grace sat side by side on Grace's favorite bench that stood under the giant elm at one end of the campus. 217

"Grace," Elfreda's matter-of-fact tones broke a brief silence that had fallen upon the two young women. "What has happened to hurt you?"

Grace started slightly. Her color receded, leaving her very pale. Then she said simply, "I suppose you 'could see,' Elfreda."

"Yes; I've been 'seeing' ever since I came. I wish you would tell me about it. Perhaps I can help you."

Grace shook her head. "No one can help me. I'll just say this. Don't be surprised at anything you

may hear a little later. But please remember one thing, Elfreda. Whatever I have done since I became the manager of Harlowe House I have done always with the highest interests of my girls at heart."

"I guess we all know that," retorted Elfreda. "I'll remember what you say, though. I'm sorry I can't help you. You didn't mind my asking, did you?"

"You know I didn't. It was affection that prompted the question." Grace reached out to pat her friend's hand. J. Elfreda caught Grace's hand in hers.

Again silence reigned. They sat gazing across the campus, their hands still joined. Grace was thinking that she could not endure telling even Elfreda of the cloud that hung over her, while J. Elfreda Briggs was registering a vow to find some means of helping Grace in spite of herself.

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"I must go, Elfreda," said Grace at last, rising from the seat. "I am anxious to have dinner over a little earlier to-night on account of the dress rehearsal in Greek Hall. Let me see, who is the person to be favored with your company at dinner?"

"I'm going to take dinner at Wayne Hall with Kathleen. We'll meet at the dress rehearsal." Elfreda rose, and the two sauntered across the campus to the point where their paths diverged.

After stopping for a little chat with Mrs. Elwood, Elfreda climbed the stairs to the room at the end of the hall, where she received a most vociferous welcome from Kathleen and Patience. But the moment they settled down to conversation Elfreda said solemnly, "Girls, something is breaking Grace Harlowe's proud heart. Emma knows, but she is Grace's only confidante. I asked Grace point blank, this afternoon, to tell me, but she wouldn't. It has something to do with that Miss Wharton, the new dean. Whatever it is, you know, as well as I, that Grace isn't likely to be in the wrong. If I were going to stay here at Overton, a little longer, I'd find out all about it."

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"You could see," murmured Patience.

"Yes, I could," declared Elfreda with a good-natured grin. "But so long as I can't be here to see, I'm going to pass the job along to you, Kathleen. I'm sure that if any one can find out the cause of poor Grace's woes it will be you. Go after it and run it down just as you would a big story, and if you can find and kill the wicked monster and make the princess happy again, well, there isn't anything that J. Elfreda Briggs won't do for you."

"I'll do it," vowed Kathleen, setting her sharp little chin at a resolute angle.

"You can't lose much time, either. College closes the second week in June," reminded Elfreda.

"Trust me to find out before that time."

Having disposed of this important matter, J. Elfreda's gravity vanished and she became her usual funny self again. The three girls had a merry time together and set off for the dress rehearsal in high spirits.

When they reached Greek Hall they found that Grace and Arline had already arrived and were sitting far back in the hall watching a sextette of girls in smart white linen skirts, blue serge coats and straw hats, banded with blue ribbon, who were down on the programme for a song entitled "Our Fraternity Friends," the number ending with a gay little dance taught them by Hilda Moore.

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"Aren't they clever?" asked Grace eagerly, turning to Kathleen. The three young women had made their way to where she was seated. "They only began practicing that dance last week. Miss Moore taught them. She dances beautifully."

The rehearsal proceeded without a hitch. Arline and Elfreda, being sure of themselves, did not take part in it. Kathleen West's clever one-act play, "In the Days of Shakespeare," was worthy of her genius. It presented the scene from the "Taming of the Shrew," where Petruchio ridicules Katherine's gown and berates the tailor. This scene was enacted in accordance with the Elizabethan age, when the nobility were permitted to take seats on the stage with the actors, the latter being obliged to step around and over that part of the audience in order to make their entrances and exits. These favored nobles had also the privilege of expressing freely their opinions of the merits of the long-suffering mummers, which they usually did in a loud voice. Kathleen had made a careful study of the conditions prevailing in the theatre at that period, and the little play was most mirth provoking from beginning to end.

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Mary Reynolds had also scored in the pathetic playlet, "The Freshman on the Top Floor," depicting a lonely little girl whose poverty and diffidence kept her out of the carefree college life that went on in the house where she lived. Cecil Ferris essayed the role of the freshman.

The last number on the programme was Jean Brent's solo. After considerable coaxing Louise had persuaded her to sing, and Gertrude Earle accompanied her on the piano. Grace felt her brief resentment against the girl vanish as she listened to her glorious voice which had a suspicion of tragedy in it.

There was a certain amount of lingering on the part of the performers to talk over the success of the dress rehearsal, but at last they all trooped across the campus to Harlowe House.

By curious chance Evelyn Ward found herself walking directly behind Jean Brent. She had been greatly affected by her singing. Obeying a sudden impulse, she leaned forward and touched

Jean's arm. "Can't we be friends again, Jean," she said wistfully. "I—I love your voice, and I care so much for you. There isn't much of the year left and—"

Jean's blue eyes grew strangely soft. "It was all my fault," she said huskily. "Let's begin over again, Evelyn." And under the stars they made a new and truer covenant.

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CHAPTER XXII

FIGHTING LOYALHEART'S BATTLE

The revue was an unqualified success. Greek Hall was filled to overflowing, and the money fairly poured into the box office for the Harlowe House fund. There was a general rejoicing the next day among the performers, and the same night a social session was held in the living room at Harlowe House. To Grace it seemed as though she had been wafted back once more to the dear dead days when the Sempers had held forth. The presence of Arline and Elfreda was the last touch needed to complete the illusion, and she went about her work feeling happier than she had for a long time. Even the shadow cast upon her heart by Tom's absence seemed less gloomy.

But on the heels of her brief elation trod disaster. Miss Wharton had chosen to become highly incensed because she had not been consulted in regard to the holding of the entertainment, and the long-suspended sword fell. The revue had been given on Wednesday evening, and on Friday morning Jean had received a note summoning her to Miss Wharton's office. This time Miss Wharton intended to interview the two young women separately. She believed that Jean would reveal what she had hitherto kept a secret if Grace were not present. With unreasonable prejudice she chose to place the brunt of Jean's refusal to speak upon Grace's shoulders.

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Jean obeyed the summons and came away from Overton Hall with a white, set face. Almost the first person she encountered on the campus was Evelyn, who was hurrying to one of her classes, and in her anguish of mind she poured forth the whole bitter story to her roommate.

"Oh, Jean, why didn't you tell me this before," cried Evelyn. "I never knew until the night of the dress rehearsal that things were not going smoothly for Miss Harlowe. Kathleen West told me in confidence that something was wrong, and asked me to find out anything I could concerning it and let her know. We must go straight to her and tell her everything. She can help us if any one can. Just for once I'll cut my English recitation. Come on. Oh, I do hope Kathleen is at home."

But Kathleen was not at Wayne Hall, and after some parleying the two girls concluded to wait until she returned from her classes to her luncheon. It was ten o'clock when they rang the bell of the college house where Grace had spent four happy years, and for the next hour and a half they waited in an agony of suspense. When Kathleen arrived they hurried her off to her room and proceeded to acquaint her with all the facts in their possession concerning the misfortune so soon to overtake Grace.

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Kathleen listened to them without comment. When they had finished talking she asked one sharp question, "Do you know Miss Wilder's address?"

Neither girl knew it, but Evelyn was seized with a bright idea. "Hilda Moore knows it. I am sure she does."

"Then hurry to Overton Hall and get it from her," ordered Kathleen. "I'm going to send a telegram. Are you sure Miss Wharton hasn't sent for Grace yet?"

"Yes, yes. She said she intended to send for Miss Harlowe to-morrow morning. Evidently she has a reason of her own for not sending for her to-day," was Jean's eager response. "But she is going to report us to President Morton and the Board within the next day or so."

"Good-bye. I'll be back directly." Evelyn dashed out of the room and down the stairs on her errand.

Twenty minutes later she returned. "Here it is," she handed it to the newspaper girl.

Kathleen had not taken off her hat since her arrival at Wayne Hall. "Come on, girls," she said. "You must go home and have your luncheon. Just leave everything to me. I think I can promise Miss Wharton a surprise."

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"What did she say to you, Jean?" asked Evelyn as they left Kathleen at the corner, headed for the telegraph office, and went on to Harlowe House.

"What didn't she say. She is going to send me away if she can. I told her everything, but it only made matters worse. I said over and over again that Miss Harlowe was not to blame, but she grew harder every minute. How I despise her." Jean shuddered with disgust. "All this is merely an excuse to oust Miss Harlowe. Why she doesn't like her, goodness knows. What is Miss West going to do, I wonder?"

"Telegraph Miss Wilder for one thing. Still, she can't write or come here in time to save Miss Harlowe," declared Evelyn. "Hilda knows about it. She said Miss Wharton dictated a perfectly horrid letter to Mrs. Gray, too, about Miss Harlowe this morning."

"Oh, dear," half sobbed Jean. "It's dreadful, and it's all my fault."

Evelyn did not answer. She could not help feeling that Jean deserved this bitter moment.

"Shall you tell Miss Harlowe?" asked Evelyn as they hurriedly ascended the steps.

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Jean nodded.

When they entered the dining room, for luncheon they learned to their utter consternation that Grace had gone for the day to visit a classmate in Westbrook and would not return until after dinner that night. In the meantime Kathleen West had hurried to the telegraph office and despatched the following message to Miss Wilder. "Wire President Morton, delay action, charges made by Miss Wharton against Grace Harlowe, until word from you. Letter will follow. Answer. Kathleen West."

"There," she chuckled when she heard the tap of the operator's machine, "that will help a little. Never mind the expense."

She was late to luncheon, and therefore missed Patience, but toward the close of the afternoon they met, and Kathleen took her into her confidence. All evening the two girls remained in the living room listening intently for the ring of the bell that might mean an answer to Kathleen's urgent message. At ten minutes to nine Kathleen said wearily. "It's too late to hear to-night. The telegraph office closes at nine o'clock. The answer will come in the morning." Even as she spoke, the door bell rang loudly. Pale and trembling with suspense, she herself answered the door. Hastily signing the messenger boy's book she closed the door on his retreating back and returned to the living room, nervously tearing open the envelope as she walked. Then she cried out in surprise.

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"What is it?" questioned Patience in alarm.

Kathleen held out to her the disquieting bit of yellow paper. "Don't be frightened. It's good news. See." Patience read over her shoulder. "Start east to-day. Recovered. Don't write. Reach Overton Friday week. Keep secret. Telegraphed president. Katherine Wilder."

"Hurrah, we've saved the day," rejoiced Kathleen.

"And Kathleen West and Evelyn Ward have left milestones worth leaving along College Lane," reminded Patience with a smile that was very near to tears.

Grace returned to Harlowe House from Westbrook at a little after eight o'clock in the evening. She found Jean Brent anxiously awaiting her arrival, and at Jean's request they went at once to her room, where Jean acquainted her with the bad news.

Grace listened with compressed lips, saying nothing.

Jean wound up her narration with, "I know it is all my fault, Miss Harlowe, but truly I tried to make things come right for you. I told Miss Wharton all about myself and tried to make her understand that you weren't in the least to blame for my misdeeds. But I only made matters worse. She is contemptible." Jean's voice vibrated with bitter scorn.

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"I thank you for defending me." Grace spoke unemotionally. "I hope that President Morton will overlook the charge against you. I must go now. I wish to be alone. I must decide what I am to do. Good night." She had remained standing near the door during Jean's recital, now she opened it and walked slowly down the hall to her own door.

She entered her pretty room as one might enter a chamber of death. So the end had come. Well, she would meet it with a stout heart and a clear conscience. But she would not wait for Miss Wharton to charge her with being unfit for the trust Mrs. Gray had reposed in her. She stepped to the library table and, opening a drawer, took out a sheet of her own monogrammed stationery and an envelope. Seating herself at the table, she took her pen from its rack. After a little thought she began writing in the clear, strong hand that characterized her. Her letter consisted of not more than a dozen lines. When she had finished she sealed, stamped, and addressed it to President Morton with a firm, unflinching hand.

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Wrapping a light scarf about her shoulders, she stole softly downstairs and outdoors without being observed by the knot of girls in the living room. Crossing the campus, she dropped her letter into the post box at the farther side, nearest the street. Then she walked slowly back, stopping at her favorite bench under the giant elm. The moon, almost at the full, flooded the wide green stretch with her pale radiance. The fringed arms of the old elm waved her a gentle welcome.

Grace sank upon the rustic seat racked with many emotions. How often she had sat there and dreamed of what her work was to be, and now, just as she had begun to reap the glory of it, it was to be snatched from her.

The soft beauty of the spring night coupled with the ordeal through which she had just passed filled her with an unspeakable sadness. She bowed her head upon her hands, but her thoughts

lay too deep for tears. Yet even while she sat for the last time in the spot she loved so dearly, Kathleen West and Patience Eliot were standing side by side reading the telegram that was to bring light out of darkness.

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CHAPTER XXIII

GRACE SOLVES HER PROBLEM

Grace waited impatiently for an answer to her letter of resignation. She expected hourly a summons to President Morton's office, but it did not come. It was now six days since Jean Brent's interview with Miss Wharton. Surely the dean had long since executed her threat to humiliate and depose Grace from the position of which she had been so proud. Then why did not President Morton take action at once and end this torturing suspense? Grace could not answer this question. She could only wonder and wait.

But while she wondered and waited Kathleen West was leaving no stone unturned. In the championing of Grace's rights she did nothing by halves. The very next morning after receiving Miss Wilder's telegram she marched boldly into President Morton's office for a private interview with that dignified gentleman. Her newspaper experience had taught her how to gain an audience with the most difficult persons. She had little trouble in obtaining admittance to the president's private office. It was a long interview, lasting, at least, a half hour, and when Kathleen rose to go President Morton shook her hand and bowed her out in his most amiable manner.

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From Overton Hall she went directly to the telegraph office and sent another telegram. This time it was addressed to Mrs. Rose Gray, Oakdale, N.Y., and read: "Come to Overton, but fix arrival Friday. Grace needs you. Serious. Wire train. Meet you. Kathleen West."

By five o'clock that afternoon she had received this answer: "Arrive Friday, 9.20 P.M. Arrange for me, Tourraine. Rose Gray," and was triumphantly showing it to Patience Eliot and planning her work of vindication in Grace's behalf.

But while her friends were busying themselves in her cause Grace was engaged in packing her two trunks and arranging her affairs at Harlowe House. So far as she knew, Emma Dean and Jean Brent, alone, were aware of what was about to happen. Jean, whose fate still hung in the balance, went about looking pale and forlorn. Being in Kathleen's confidence, Evelyn had not informed her roommate of the secret work that was being done in behalf of Grace. She understood that Jean was suffering acutely, and longed to tell her that all promised well for Grace, but not for worlds would she have betrayed Kathleen's confidence.

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Emma Dean had learned of the mailing of Grace's resignation from Grace herself when she had returned to Harlowe House late that same evening. For once her flow of cheer had failed her, and she had broken down and cried disconsolately. For the next two days she had been unconsolable. Her bitterness against Miss Wharton was so great that it distressed Grace, who sought in vain to comfort her. But on Monday afternoon she returned from her classes in a lighter, more cheerful frame of mind. In fact as the week progressed she appeared to have thrown off her sorrow and was as funny as ever.

Grace tried to be honestly glad that Emma's sorrow had been so short-lived, but she could not help feeling a little hurt to think that Emma, of all persons, should forget so quickly. Once or twice Emma caught the half reproachful gaze of her gray eyes, and had hard work to refrain from telling Grace that the hateful shadow was soon to be lifted. For Emma and Kathleen West had had a private confab, during which both girls had laughed and cried and laughed again in a most irrational manner.

So the week wore away, and Friday came and went, leaving Grace still waiting and dreading. If she had happened to pass the Hotel Tourraine at twenty-five minutes to ten on Friday evening she would have seen a taxicab drive up to the entrance and a sprightly, little old lady step out of it, assisted by a keen-faced, black-eyed young woman, who took her by the arm and hurried her into the hotel. And if she had been on the station platform when the 11.40 train from the west pulled in she would have eagerly welcomed the stately dark-eyed woman who signaled a taxicab and drove off up College Avenue.

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Saturday morning dawned, clear and radiant. The glad light of early summer streamed in upon Grace. For a brief space she forgot her sorrows as she knelt at the open window and drank in the pure morning air. Then one by one they came back. She wondered whether the same sun were shining on Tom, far away in the jungle, and if he were well, and sometimes thought of her. How happy she might have made him and herself if only she had not been so blind. Through the bitterness of being found wanting she had come to realize what a wonderful thing it was to be truly loved. Never had the love of her parents and friends for her seemed so sacred. And how beautiful, how steadfast, Tom's affection for her had been! With a sigh she turned her thoughts

away from that lost happiness. Now came the old torturing question, "Would the summons come to-day?"

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She was still brooding over it when she went downstairs to breakfast. Stopping in her office, she hastily went over her mail. It was with a sense of desperate relief that she separated an envelope, bearing the letter head of Overton College from the little pile of letters on the slide of her desk, and opened it. It was from President Morton, and merely stated that he wished her to call at his office at eleven o'clock that morning.

With the letter in her hand, Grace entered the dining-room. She intended to show it to Emma, but the latter, who had risen early on account of some special work she wished to do, had eaten a hasty breakfast and departed. Grace slipped the letter into her blouse and made a pretense of eating breakfast. But she had lost all appetite for food. After sipping part of a cup of coffee she rose from the table and, returning to her office, opened the rest of her mail.

Under any circumstances but those of the present her letters would have delighted her. There was one from Eleanor Savelli, written from her father's villa in Italy, a long lively one from Nora, containing a breezy account of Oakdale doings, and a still longer letter from Anne. There was one from Julia Crosby, and an extremely funny note from J. Elfreda Briggs, describing a visit she had recently made to the night court.

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One by one she read them, then laid them aside with an indifference born of suffering. If only there had been one for her in Tom's clear, bold handwriting. But it was useless to linger, even for a moment, over what might have been. Grace gathered up her letters and, locking them in her desk, went upstairs, with slow, dragging steps, to dress for her call upon President Morton.

It was three minutes to eleven when a slim, erect figure walked up the steps of Overton Hall. Grace wore a smartly tailored suit of white serge, white buckskin shoes, white kid gloves and a white hemp hat trimmed with curved white quills. The lining of the hat bore the name of a famous maker. She had taken a kind of melancholy pride in her toilet that morning, and the result was all that she could have wished. Unconsciously the immaculate purity of her costume bespoke the pure, high, steadfast soul which looked out from her gray eyes. As she paused at the door for a moment, her hand on the knob, she experienced something of the thrill of a martyr, about to die for a sacred cause. Then she opened the door.

For an instant she stood as though transfixed. Was she dreaming, or could she actually believe her own eyes? A sudden faintness seized her. Everything turned dark. She swayed slightly, then with a little sobbing cry of, "Fairy Godmother! Miss Wilder!" she ran straight into Mrs. Gray's outstretched arms.

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That throbbing, wistful cry brought the tears to Miss Wilder's eyes, while President Morton took off his glasses and wiped them with his handkerchief. Great tears were rolling down Mrs. Gray's cheeks which she made no effort to hide. "My little girl," she said brokenly. "How dared that dreadful woman treat you so shabbily?"

It was at least ten minutes before the three women could settle down to the exchanging of questions and explanations. President Morton, the soul of old-fashioned courtesy, beamed his approval on them.

"Now my dear," said Miss Wilder at last, "I wish you to begin at the very beginning of this affair, and tell us just what has happened."

Grace began with the coming of Jean Brent to Overton and of her refusal to be frank concerning her affairs. Then she went on to the sale of her wardrobe which Jean had conducted in her absence and her final revelation of her secret to Grace after the latter had commanded it. Then she told of her promise to Jean not to betray her secret and of the summons sent them by Miss Wharton, to come to her office.

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"But what was this secret, Grace?" questioned Miss Wilder gravely. "We have the right to know."

The color flooded Grace's pale face. She hesitated, then with an impulsive, "Of course you have the right to know," she went on, "Jean Brent's father and mother died when she was a child. She was brought up by an aunt who is very rich. This aunt gave her everything in the world she wanted but one thing. She would not allow Jean to go to college. She did not believe in the higher education for girls. She believed that a young girl should learn French, music and deportment at a boarding school. Then when she was graduated she must marry and settle down. One of the friends of Jean's aunt had a son who was in love with Jean. He had been babied by his mother until he had grown to be a hateful, worthless young man, and Jean despised him. Her aunt told her that she could take her choice between marrying this young man or leaving her house forever. She gave Jean a week to decide. Then she went into the country to spend a week end with this young man's mother at their country place. She thought because Jean was utterly dependent upon her that she would not dare to defy her.

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"Jean had a little money of her own, so she packed her trunks while her aunt was away and went to Grafton to talk things over with Miss Lipton, who has known her since she was a baby. She was a dear friend of Jean's mother. As Jean was of age she had the right to choose her own way of life. Miss Lipton knew all about Overton College and Harlowe House, so she wrote me and applied for admission for Miss Brent. I had room for one more girl, and I considered Miss Lipton's recommendation sufficient to admit Miss Brent to Harlowe House. Naturally I was

displeased when she disobeyed me and held the sale. Still I do not consider that her offense warrants dismissal."

"Miss Brent will *not* be expelled from college," emphasized President Morton.

"What I cannot understand is Miss Wharton's unjust attitude toward you. Surely she could readily see that you were not at fault," cried Mrs. Gray in righteous indignation.

Miss Wilder, too, shook her head in disapproval of Miss Wharton's course of action. President Morton looked stern for a moment. Then his face relaxed. He turned to Grace with a reassuring smile that told its own story.

"Miss Harlowe," he said, looking kindly at Grace, "it has always been my principle to uphold the members of the faculty in their decisions for or against a student, if these decisions are fair and just. I am convinced, however, that you have received most unjust treatment at Miss Wharton's hands. Therefore I am going to tell you in strict confidence that Miss Wharton has not filled the requirements for dean demanded by the Overton College Board. On the day I received your letter of resignation I wrote Miss Wharton, asking for her resignation at the close of the college year. I had received a letter from Miss Wilder stating that she would be able to resume her position as dean of this college next October. I had determined to send for you to inquire into your reason for wishing to resign the position you have so ably filled, when I received Miss Wilder's telegram. At her request I delayed matters until her arrival. Miss West also called at my office in your behalf. I take great pleasure in assuring you that I was prepared to accept any explanation you might make of the charges which Miss Wharton made against you and Miss Brent. In all my experience as president of this institution of learning I have never known a young woman who has carried out so faithfully the traditions of Overton College."

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Grace listened to the president's words with a feeling of joy so deep as to be akin to pain. The shadow had indeed lifted. In the eyes of those whose good opinion she valued so greatly she was worthy of her trust. She never forgot that wonderful morning in President Morton's office.

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When at last she left the president and Miss Wilder, to accompany Mrs. Gray back to the Tourraine, she said with shining eyes, "Dear Fairy Godmother, would you mind if we stopped at Wayne Hall. I *must* see Kathleen West."

"Of course you must," agreed Mrs. Gray briskly. "I should like to see her myself. My opinion of that young woman is very high."

It seemed to Grace as though she could hardly wait until their taxicab drew up in front of Wayne Hall. Mrs. Elwood herself answered the bell.

"Oh, Mrs. Elwood," cried Grace, "is Kathleen in?"

"Yes; she came in only a little while ago."

"I'll wait for you in the living room, Grace. Bring that blessed little newspaper girl down stairs with you," directed Mrs. Gray.

As Grace hurried up the stairs and down the hall to the end room the memory of another day, when she had sought Kathleen West to do her honor, returned to her. Her face shone with a great tenderness as she turned the knob and walked straight into the room without knocking. An instant and she had folded in her arms the alert little figure that sprang to meet her. "Kathleen, dear girl," she cried. "How can I ever thank you?"

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"Don't try," smiled Kathleen, her black eyes looking unutterable loyalty at Grace. "I had to leave a milestone, you know, and I couldn't have left it in a better cause. I enlisted long ago under the banner of Loyalheart. So you see it was my duty to fight for her."

It was after three o'clock when Grace left Mrs. Gray at the Tourraine and went back to Harlowe House. At Mrs. Elwood's urgent invitation they had remained at Wayne Hall for luncheon, and with Patience added to their number had held a general rejoicing over the way things had turned out. Mrs. Gray's last words to Grace on saying good-bye to her at the hotel were, "Grace, I am coming over to see you this evening."

Grace walked home, her heart singing a song of thanksgiving and happiness. As she entered the house the maid met her with, "There's a lady to see you, Miss Harlowe. She just came."

Grace stepped into the living room. A tall, gray-haired woman of perhaps sixty, very smartly gowned, and of commanding appearance, rose to meet her. "Are you Miss Harlowe?" was her abrupt question. Then before Grace had time to do more than bow in the affirmative, she said with a brusqueness intended to hide emotion, "My name is Brent. Jean Brent is my niece. Tell me, is she with you still? I could not bring myself to ask the maid. I was afraid she might say that my niece was not here." In her anxiety, her voice trembled.

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Grace's hand was stretched forth impulsively. "I am so glad," she said eagerly. "Jean needs you. She will soon be home from her classes. Would you like to go to her room?"

The woman returned Grace's hand clasp with a fervor born of emotion. She was trying to hide her agitation, but Grace could see that she was deeply stirred. Once in Jean's room she gave one curious glance about her, then sank heavily into a chair and began to cry. "I have been a

stubborn, foolish woman," she sobbed. "I drove my little girl away from me because I was determined to make her marry a man whom I now know to be worthless. Oh, I am afraid she will never forgive me."

Grace was touched by the proud woman's tearful remorse, but she doubted if Jean Brent would forgive her aunt. She had spoken most bitterly against her. Grace tried to think of something comforting to say. But before she could put her thoughts into words the door was suddenly opened and Jean walked into the room. At sight of the familiar figure she turned very pale. Her blue eyes gleamed with anger. She took a step forward.

"What brought *you* here?" she asked tensely.

"Jean, my child, won't you forgive me?" pleaded the woman holding out her arms.

Grace waited to hear no more. But as she turned to leave the room she caught one look at Jean's face. The sudden anger in it had died out. Grace believed that all would be well, but whatever passed between aunt and niece was not for her ears. She went directly to her room to wait there until Emma came from her classes. She had so much to say to her faithful comrade.

In due season Emma appeared with a cheery, "Hello, Gracious. How is everything?"

"Everything is lovely. Emma Dean, you dear old humbug. No wonder you couldn't look sad when I talked about leaving Harlowe House. Now, confess. You were in the secret, weren't you?" Grace stood with her hands on Emma's shoulders, looking into her face.

"The Deans of whom I am which, have always been advocates of the truth," solemnly declared Emma, "therefore I will follow their illustrious example and answer 'I was.' You tied *my* hands and *my* tongue so I couldn't fight for you, Gracious, but you couldn't tie Kathleen's."

"Oh, Emma, I have so much to tell you. I hardly know where to begin. I'm so happy. It's wonderful to feel once more that I am considered worthy of my work. You and I will have many more seasons of it, together."

"I wish we might," returned Emma, but a curious wistfulness crept into her eyes that Grace failed to note.

The two friends talked on until dinner time and went downstairs together, arm in arm. After dinner Emma pleaded an engagement with Miss Duncan, Grace's former teacher of English, and left the house at a little after seven o'clock. Grace slipped into her little office and seated herself at her desk. How glad she was that all was well again. Yes, she and Emma would, indeed, spend many more seasons together. Yet, somehow, the thought of her work did not give her the same thrill of satisfaction that it once had. Try as she might she could not keep thoughts of Tom from creeping into her mind. Where was he to-night? Had he forgotten her? Mrs. Gray had not once mentioned his name to her, and she had not dared to ask for news of him. Her somber reflections were interrupted by Jean Brent and her aunt. A complete reconciliation had taken place. Miss Brent was now anxious to thank Grace for all she had done in her niece's behalf. They lingered briefly, then went on to the Hotel Tourraine, where Miss Brent had registered. They had not been gone long when the ringing of the door bell brought Grace to her feet. Mrs. Gray had arrived. She hurried to the door to open it for her Fairy Godmother. Then she drew back with a sharp exclamation. The tall, fair-haired young man who towered above her bore small resemblance to dainty little Mrs. Gray.



Tom's Strong Hands Closed Over Hers.

"Grace!" said a voice she knew only too well.

"Tom," she faltered. Then both her hands went out to him. His own strong hands closed over them. The two pairs of gray eyes met in a long level gaze.

"Come into my office, Tom." She found her voice at last. "I—I thought you were thousands of miles away in a South American jungle."

"So I was, but I didn't go very deeply into it. Professor Graham met with a serious accident and we had to turn back to civilization. He fell and hurt his spine and we had to carry him to the nearest village, two hundred miles, in a litter. Naturally that broke up the expedition, and when he became better we decided to sail for home. Reached New York City last week. I telegraphed Aunt Rose, and she wired me to meet her in Overton. I came in on that 5.30 train. Of course I was anxious to see you, so Aunt Rose told me to run along ahead. She'll be here in a little while."

Once seated opposite each other in the little office, an awkward silence fell upon the two young people.

"I am so glad nothing dreadful happened to you, Tom." Grace at last broke the silence. "Those expeditions are very hazardous. I thought of you often and wondered if you were well." There was a wistful note in her voice of which she was utterly unconscious, but it was not lost on Tom.

"Grace," he said tensely, "did you really miss me?" He leaned forward, his face very close to hers. His eager eyes forced the truth.

"More than I can say, Tom," she answered in a low tone.

Tom caught her hands in his. She did not draw them away. "How much does that mean, Grace? I know I vowed never to open the subject to you again, but I never saw that look in your eyes before, and you never let me hold your hands like this. Which is to be, dear; work or love?"

"Love," was the half-whispered answer. And the gate of happiness, so long barred to Tom Gray, was opened wide.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE BOND ETERNAL

The full moon shone down with its broadest smile on the group of young people who occupied Mrs. Gray's roomy, old-fashioned veranda. As on another June night that belonged to the past, Mrs. Gray's Christmas children had gathered home.

"We're here because we're here," caroled Hippy Wingate. "But allow me to make one observation."

"*One*," jeered Reddy Brooks. "You mean one hundred."

"That's very unkind in you, Reddy," returned Hippy in a grieved tone. "Just to show you how entirely off the track you are I will make that *one* observation and subside."

"I didn't know you had such a word as 'subside' in your vocabulary," derided David Nesbit.

"Nora, where art thou? Thy husband is calling," wailed Hippy.

"I would hardly call that an observation," laughed Grace.

"It sounds more like an anguished appeal for help," remarked Anne.

"Or a perpetration by a deaf man who hasn't the least idea of how it sounds," added Tom Gray cruelly.

"Nora," rebuked Hippy, fixing a disapproving eye on his wife, who was laughing immoderately, "how can you hear your husband thus derided and laugh at his suffering? Oh, if Miriam were only here to protect me. By the way," he went on innocently, "where *is* Miriam?"

"She will be here a little later," said Grace evasively.

"Ah, yes, I see," smirked Hippy. "I suppose she is looking up further information on the drama. Miriam is really well-informed on that subject. Did she go to the library or"—he paused and his smile grew wider—"to the train?"

Absolute silence followed this pertinent question. Then Jessica giggled. That giggle proved infectious. A ripple of mirth went the round of the porch party.

"Here comes Miriam now." Grace pointed down the drive. Two figures were seen strolling toward the house in leisurely fashion.

"Yes, here she comes. Better ask her what you just asked us," Reddy satirically advised Hippy.

"Why ask questions when my eyes tell me it *was* the train? Still, if you think it advisable I will ___"

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"Be good," ordered Nora. "Don't you dare say one word."

"But I haven't made my observation yet," reminded Hippy.

"It will keep."

"Ah, here they come! Now for a pretty little speech of welcome." Hippy rose and puffed out his chest, but before he could utter a word he was jerked back by the coat tails to the porch seat on which he and Nora had been sitting.

As Miriam and the man at her side neared the porch every one rose to greet them. Then the women of the party exchanged smiling glances. On Miriam's engagement finger shone the white fire of a diamond. The next instant Everett Southard was shaking hands with Mrs. Gray and the Eight Originals, while Miriam looked on, an expression of radiant happiness in her eyes. Then the actor turned to her with the beautiful smile, that Nora O'Malley had often declared was seraphic, and said: "Shall we tell them now, Miriam?"

Miriam's black eyes glowed with the soft light that love alone could lend to them. The pink in her cheeks deepened. "Yes," she acquiesced.

"Miriam and I are going the rest of our way together, dear friends," he said simply. Anne thought she had never heard his voice take on a more exquisitely tender tone. "I came from New York to tell you so."

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Immediately a flow of congratulations ensued. In the midst of them Tom Gray's eyes met Grace's. What he read there seemed to satisfy him. When every one was again seated he walked over to the porch swing where Grace and Anne sat idly rocking to and fro. Stopping directly in front of Grace, he held out his hands to her. As she looked up at him her face took on an expression of perfect love and trust. Placing her hands in Tom's, Grace rose to her feet. Their friends watched the pretty tableau with affectionately smiling faces. Then the two young people faced the expectant company.

"You know, all of you, what I am going to say, so you must know, too, how happy I am. Grace has promised to marry me." Tom's face was aglow with happiness.

"My dear, dear child." Mrs. Gray rose, her arms extended to Grace. "I have hoped for this ever since you were graduated from high school." Grace embraced the old lady tenderly. Then her chums hemmed her in, and congratulations began all over again.

"Talk about your surprises," beamed Reddy. "I hadn't any idea that Grace and Tom had fixed up this one. I can't tell you how glad I am, old fellow." He shook Tom's hand vigorously. David and Hippy followed suit. The faces of the three young men fairly shone with joy. They had long understood the depth of Tom's dejection over Grace's steadfast refusal to give up her work for his sake.

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"We saved it as a special feature of the occasion," laughed Tom, "but I'll tell you three fellows a secret." He lowered his voice and the laughter died out of his fine face, leaving it very serious. "I never expected this happiness was coming my way. Long ago I gave up all idea of ever being anything but a friend to Grace. I can't understand how it all came about, and I suppose I never shall."

"Maybe we aren't tickled over your good fortune," said Hippy warmly. "We've waited for this a long while. I always told Nora that it would happen some day. I knew there was just one Tom Gray and that it would only be a question of time until Grace found it out."

"No fair having secrets," called out Nora. "What and who are you boys talking about in such low, confidential voices?"

"Me," beamed Hippy. "Reddy was just telling me that he never fully appreciated me until cruel distance separated us. Of course I can't help feeling touched. It is so seldom that Reddy appreciates anything or any one. He is—"

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The confidential group suddenly dissolved in a hurry. Reddy took hold of Hippy's arm and rushed him down the steps and around the corner of the house in an anything but gentle manner. "There," he declared, as he returned to the porch alone. "That will teach him that he can't make pointed remarks about me. I guess he felt 'touched' that time."

"N-o-r-a," wailed a pathetic voice. "Come and get me. I want to sit on the veranda, too."

"Promise you'll be nice to Reddy, or I won't come after you," stipulated Nora, making no effort to rise.

"I won't promise," came the defiant answer. "I don't like Reddy. He is a hard-hearted ruffian."

"Thank you," sang out Reddy. "Now come back if you dare."

"I don't want to come back. I'd rather walk around by myself in the garden."

Nothing further was heard from Hippy for a time. Conversation on the veranda went on merrily. Apparently no one missed the stout young man. Suddenly a bland voice at Reddy's elbow said, "Why, good evening, Reddy." Hippy's fat face appeared between the lace curtains at the open parlor window. He beamed joyfully at the company, then favored Reddy with a smile so wide and ingratiating that the latter's fierce expression changed to a reluctant grin. At this hopeful sign Hippy clambered through the window and crowded himself into the swing between Jessica and Anne, who had resumed their seats there. They protested vigorously, then made room for him.

After announcing their engagement and receiving the congratulations of their friends, Tom and Grace had seated themselves on a rustic bench a little apart from the others. Grace's slim fingers lay within Tom's strong hand.

"Grace," he said, bending toward her so that he could look into her eyes, "are you perfectly sure that you love me? Are you quite content to give up your work? You don't think there will ever come a time when you will be sorry that you chose me instead? It still seems like a dream to me. I can't believe that you and I are going to spend the rest of our lives together. It's too much happiness. If you knew how black everything seemed that rainy day when you sent me out of your life——"

"Hush, you mustn't speak of it," Grace lightly laid the fingers of her free hand against Tom's lips. "I did not know how wonderful your love for me was. It took sorrow and separation to make me see it. But I'm *sure* now, Tom, perfectly sure. I used to think I could never give up being house mother at Harlowe House, but now I am entirely satisfied to have Emma Dean take my place. She will do the work even better than I. Harlowe House can spare me, but Tom Gray can't, and I can't spare him. What you said to me so long ago came true, dear. When love came to me, not even work could crowd it out. I have found my fairy prince at last."

"Then the prince is going to claim the princess and bind her to him forever with a jeweled circle of gold," said Tom softly. His hand reached into an inner pocket of his coat. Over Grace Harlowe's slender finger was slipped the magic circle of gold, a glittering pledge of eternal devotion, and as she touched the jeweled token with her lips the knowledge came to her that though Loyalheart's pilgrimage in the Land of College was ended, an infinitely more wonderful journey on the Highway of Life was soon to begin.

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