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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK TOM AND SOME OTHER GIRLS: A PUBLIC SCHOOL STORY \*\*\*

Mrs. George de Horne Vaizey

"Tom and some other Girls"

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### Chapter One.

#### A Change.

"Yes, she must go to school!" repeated Mr Chester.

A plaintive sob greeted his words from the neighbourhood of the sofa. For once in her life Mrs Chester's kindly, good-tempered face had lost its smiles, and was puckered up into lines of distress. She let one fat, be-ringed hand drop to her side and wander restlessly over the satin skirt in search of a pocket. Presently out came a handkerchief, which was applied to each eye in turn, and came away bedewed with tears.

"It will break my heart to part from her!" she faltered. Her husband laughed with masculine scepticism.

"Oh, nonsense, dear," he said; "hearts are not so easily broken. You are too sensible to grieve over what is for the child's good, and will get used to the separation, as other mothers have done before you. It will be the making of Rhoda to leave home for a few years, to mix with other girls, and find her level. She is getting an altogether exaggerated idea of her own importance!"

"Her level, indeed! Find her level! I should like to know the school where you could find another girl like her!" cried the mother, in a tone which showed plainly enough who was responsible for Miss Rhoda's conceit. The tears dried on her face for very indignation, and she sat upright in her seat, staring across the room.

It was a gorgeous apartment, this drawing-room of Erley Chase, the residence of Henry Chester, Esquire, and Marianne his wife; a gorgeous room in the literal acceptance of the term, for each separate article of furniture looked as if it had been chosen more from the fact of its intrinsic value than for its usefulness or beauty.

Mr Chester, the son of a country clergyman, had considered himself passing rich when a manufacturer uncle took him into his employ, at a salary of £400 a year. The first thing he did after this position was assured was to marry his old love, the daughter of the village doctor, with whom he had played since childhood; and the young couple spent the first dozen years of their married lives very happily and contentedly in a little house in a smoky manufacturing town. The bachelor uncle was proud of his clever nephew and fond of the cheery little wife, who was always kind and thoughtful even when gout and a naturally irritable temper goaded him into conduct the reverse of amiable. When Harold was born, and christened after himself, he presented the child with a silver mug, and remarked that he hoped he would turn out better than most young men, and not break his parents' hearts as a return for their goodness. When Jim followed, the mug was not forthcoming; but when little Rhoda made her appearance six years later he gave her a rattle, and trusted that she would improve in looks as she grew older, since he never remembered seeing an uglier baby. He was certainly neither a gracious nor a liberal old gentleman, but the young couple were blessed with contented minds and moderate ambitions, so they laughed good-naturedly at his crusty speeches, and considered themselves rich, inasmuch as they were able to pay their way and were spared anxiety for the future. And then an extraordinary thing happened! The old man died suddenly, and left to his beloved nephew a fortune which, even in these days of millionaires, might truthfully be called enormous. Henry Chester could not believe the lawyers when the amount of his new wealth was broken to him, for his uncle had lived so unostentatiously that he had had no idea of the magnitude of his savings. The little wife, who had never known what it was to spend sixpence carelessly in all her thirty-five years, grew quite hysterical with excitement when an arithmetical calculation proved to her the daily riches at her disposal; but she recovered her composure with wonderful celerity, and expressed her intention of enjoying the goods which the gods had sent her. No poking in gloomy town houses after this! No hoarding of riches as the poor old uncle had done, while denying himself the common comforts of life! She herself had been economical from a sense of duty only, for her instincts were all for lavishness and generosity—and now, now! Did not Henry feel

it a provision of Providence that Erley Chase was empty, and, as it were, waiting for their occupation?

Her husband gasped at the audacity of the idea. Erley Chase! the finest place around, one of the largest properties in the county, and Marianne suggested that he should take it! that he should remove from his fifty-pound house into that stately old pile! The suggestion appalled him, and yet why not? His lawyer assured him that he could afford it; his children were growing up, and he had their future to consider. He thought of his handsome boys, his curly-headed girl, and decided proudly that nothing was too good for them; he looked into the future, and saw his children's children reigning in his stead, and the name of Chester honoured in the land. So Erley Chase was bought, and little Mrs Chester furnished it, as we have seen, to her own great contentment and that of the tradespeople with whom she dealt; and in the course of a few months the family moved into their new abode.

At first the country people were inclined to look coldly on the new-comers, but it was impossible to keep up an unfriendly attitude towards Mr and Mrs Chester. They were utterly free from affectation, and, so far from apeing that indifference to wealth adopted by most *nouveaux riches*, were so frankly, transparently enchanted with their new possessions that they were more like a couple of children with a new toy than a steady-going, middle-aged couple. They won first respect, and then affection, and were felt to be a decided acquisition to the well-being of the neighbourhood, since they were never appealed to in vain in the cause of charity.

In the days of her own short means, when she had been obliged to look helplessly at the trials of her neighbours, Mrs Chester had solaced herself by dreaming of what she would do if she had money and to spare, and to her credit be it said, she did not forget to put those dreams into execution when the opportunity arose. The days are past when fairy godmothers flash suddenly before our raptured eyes, clad in spangled robes, with real, true wings growing out of their shoulders, but the race is not dead; they appear sometimes as stout little women, in satin gowns and be-feathered bonnets, and with the most prosaic of red, beaming faces. The Chester barouche was not manufactured out of a pumpkin, nor drawn by rats, but none the less had it spirited away many a Cinderella to the longed-for ball, and, when the Prince was found, the fairy godmother saw to it that there was no lack of satin gowns, or glassy slippers. Dick Whittingtons, too, sitting friendless by the roadside, were helped on to fortune; and the Sleeping Beauty was rescued from her dull little home, and taken about to see the world. It is wonderful what fairy deeds can be accomplished by a kind heart and a full purse, and the recipients of Mrs Chester's bounty were relieved from undue weight of obligation by the transparent evidence that her enjoyment was even greater than their own!

Harold went to Eton and Oxford, and Jim to Sandhurst; but Rhoda stayed at home and ruled supreme over her mother, her governesses, and the servants of the establishment. Her great-uncle's wish had been fulfilled, inasmuch as she grew up tall and straight, with a mane of reddish-gold hair and more than an average share of good looks. She was clever, too, and generous enough to have acknowledged her faults if it had for one moment occurred to her that she possessed any; which it had not. It was one of Mrs Chester's articles of faith that her daughter was the most beautiful, the most gifted, and the most perfect of created beings, and Rhoda agreeably acquiesced in the decision, and was pitiful of other girls who were not as herself. Every morning when she had not a headache, and did not feel "floppy" or "nervey," she did lessons with Fraulein, who adored her, and shed tears behind her spectacles when obliged to point out a fault. Then the two would repair together to the tennis courts and play a set, the pupil winning by six games to love; or go a bicycle ride, when Rhoda would practise fancy figures, while her good, but cumbersome, companion picked herself up from recumbent positions on the sidewalk, and shook the dust from her garments. At other times Rhoda would put on her riding habit and go a ride round the estate, taking care to emerge from the west gate at the moment when the village children were returning from school. The little girls would "bob" in old-fashioned style, and the boys would pull off their caps, and Rhoda would toss her flaxen mane and acknowledge their salutations with a gracious smile and a wave of the little gloved hand. The children thought she looked like a fairy princess, and no more dreamt that she was of the same flesh and blood as themselves than did Miss Rhoda herself. Then came lunch, and more often than not some excuse for getting off the hour's lessons with Fraulein before the "visiting professors" arrived. Music master, drawing master, French master—they each came in their turn, and Rhoda exerted herself to do her best, as she invariably did, given the stimulus of an audience, and was praised and flattered to her heart's desire. It was a happy life, and most satisfactory from the girl's point of view; so that it seemed most annoying that it should be interrupted, and by Fraulein too, who had always been so meek and tractable! Who could have imagined when she went home for the summer holidays that an old love would appear and insist upon marrying her out of hand?

"But what am I to do?" cried Rhoda, when the news was first received; and then, in stern disapproval, "I'm *surprised* at Fraulein! At her age she should know better. She always professed to be so devoted. I can't understand how she could make up her mind to leave me."

"It must have been a terrible trial to her, dearest," said Mrs Chester soothingly, and she meant what she said. How could any one prefer a fat, long-haired, spectacled lover (all Germans were fat, long-haired, and spectacled!) to her beautiful, clever daughter? She sighed, once for Rhoda's disappointment, and once again, and with an added stab, for herself.

Several times lately Mr Chester had hinted that Rhoda was getting too much for Fraulein, and should be sent to school, while Harold had treacherously seconded his father with remarks of such brotherly candour as made his mother hot with indignation. Jim was mercifully away from home, but even so it was two against one, and she instinctively felt that Fraulein's defection would be seized upon by the enemy and the attack pressed home upon the first opportunity. And now it had come, and there sat the poor, dear soul, shedding tears of anguish on her lace-edged handkerchief, as she vainly tried to oppose the inevitable.

"I cannot, and will not, part from my child!"

"Nonsense, mother, you parted from me, and I shall take it as a personal insult if you insinuate that you would feel Rhoda's absence more than you did mine. Remember how delighted you were when I came back! Remember the holidays, how happy you were, how interested in all I had to tell!"

Harold Chester crossed the room, and laid his hand on his mother's shoulder with a kindly gesture. He looked as if he were made on the same principle as the other objects of *vertu* in the room, and if Mrs Chester had desired to possess "the most superfine specimen of sons and heirs," she had certainly got her wish, so far as appearances were concerned. Harold was tall and fair, with aquiline features and a manly carriage. His hair would have curled if it had not been cropped so close to his head; his clothes were of immaculate cut. At twenty-five he was known as one of the most daring sportsmen in the county, and if he had not distinguished himself at college, he had, at least, scrambled through with the crowd. His mother declared with pride that he had never given her an hour's anxiety since he had had the measles, and thanked Heaven for her mercies every time she saw him ride off to the hunt in his beautiful pink coat. Harold was her first-born darling, but Rhoda was the baby, and she could not bring herself to believe that her baby was growing up.

"The child will fret and break her heart. I don't care about myself, but I will not have her made unhappy. She has such a sensitive heart!" She sobbed as she spoke, and Harold laughed.

"You trust me, mater; Rhoda is as well able to take care of herself as any girl can be. You will regret it all your life long if you keep her at home now. School is what she needs, and school she must have, if she is to make a woman worth having. She is a jolly little soul, and I'm proud of her; but her eyes are so taken up admiring Miss Rhoda Chester that she has no attention left for anything else. Let her go, mother, and find out that there are other girls in the world beside herself!"

"But the other girls will b-b-bully her. They will make fun of her and laugh at her little ways—"

"And a good—" Harold checked himself and said cheerily: "Rhoda won't let herself be bullied without knowing the reason why, mother. Whatever faults she may have, no one can accuse her of lack of spirit. I believe she would like to go. She has very few girl friends, and would enjoy the new experience."

"We will tell her about it, and see what she says," said Mr Chester; and at that very moment the door opened and Rhoda walked into the room.

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## Chapter Two.

### What Rhoda Thought.

Father, mother, and brother looked at Rhoda, and felt a pardonable pride in her appearance. Her white evening frock showed off the fair complexion and golden locks, and she carried herself with an erect, fearless mien which made a pleasant contrast to the stooping backs and shambling gait of most growing girls. If she were not regularly pretty, her air of assurance forced onlookers to think her so, despite their better judgment, and there was about her a breezy atmosphere of health and youth. She looked from one to the other of the watching faces, and smiled in a good-humoured, tolerant manner, which showed a dimple in the round cheek.

"Hatching mischief!" she cried, nodding her head sagely. "The way in which your voices ceased as I entered the room was highly suspicious. Never mind—I'll go to bed soon, and then you can talk at your ease. It *is* awkward when birthdays are drawing near! ... Chain bracelets are very nice, with turquoises set here and there, and I rather like that new edition of Shakespeare with a lot of dear little books fitted into a case. I don't object to brooches either, or ornaments for my room—"

"But, strange to say, we were not thinking of giving you anything! We were talking of a much more serious consideration than a birthday. We were talking of your Future Education," said Mr Chester, solemnly. He spoke so impressively, and with such very large capitals to the last two words, that Rhoda was startled into attention, and turned her eyes upon him in wonder.

"My—future—education? Why, what do you—what am I going to do?"

"We have been considering the advisability of sending you to school. You are nearly sixteen, and have been educated at home all your life, and now that Fraulein cannot return I feel strongly that it would be for your good to spend a couple of years at school among girls of your own age. Your mother naturally dreads the parting, and fears that you would be unhappy, but Harold thinks that you would enjoy the experience. What is your own impression? Do you dislike the idea, or feel inclined towards it?"

Rhoda meditated, and her mother watched her with wistful eyes. At the first mention of the word "school" the girl had started with surprise, and her eyes had looked wide and puzzled, but now as she stood deliberating, it was not dismay, but rather pleasure and excitement, that showed in her face. The eyes gleamed complacently, the dimple dipped, the fair head tilted itself, and Rhoda said slowly—

"I think I should—*like* it! It would be a—change!"

Alas for Mrs Chester, and alas for every mother in that sharp moment when she realises that the nestling which she has been keeping so safe and warm is already beginning to find the nest too narrow for its ambitions, and is longing to fly away into the big, wide world! Two salt tears splashed on to the satin gown, but no one saw them, for the girl was engrossed in her own feelings, while Mr Chester was saying brightly—

"That's my brave girl! I knew you would be no coward."

Harold watched his sister with mingled pity and amusement.

"They'll take it out of her! They'll take it out of her! Poor little Ro! Won't she hate it, and won't it do her good!" he

said to himself, shrewdly. "And, after the first, I shouldn't wonder if she became a prime favourite!"

Rhoda seated herself on a crimson plush chair, and folded her hands on her knees, in an attitude of expectation. She was an impetuous young person, and could brook no delay when once her interest was aroused. School having been mentioned as a possibility of the future, it became imperative to settle the matter off-hand.

Which school? When? Who would take her? What would she have to buy? What were the rules? When were the holidays? How long would they be? Where would she spend them?—One question succeeded another in breathless succession, making Mr Chester smile with indulgent amusement.

"My dear child, how can I tell? So far it is only a suggestion. Nothing is settled. We have not even thought of one school before another—"

"If she goes at all, I should like her to go to Miss Moorby's, at Bournemouth," said Mrs Chester quickly. "She only takes ten girls, and I'm told it is just like a home—hot bottles in all the beds, and beef-tea at eleven—"

"Mother!" cried Rhoda, in a tone of deep reproach. Her eyes flashed, and she drew herself up proudly. "No, indeed! If I go at all, I will do the thing properly, and go to a real school, and not a hot-house. I don't want their old beef-tea and bottles. I want to go to a nice, big, sporty school, where they treat you like boys, and not young ladies, and put you on your honour, and don't bind you down by a hundred sickening little rules. I want to go to,"—she drew a long breath, and glanced at her mother, as if bracing herself to meet opposition—"to Hurst Manor! There! I've read about it in magazines, and Ella Mason had a cousin who had been there, and she said it was—simply mag.! She was Head Girl, and ruled the house, and came out first in the games, and she said she never had such sport in her life, and found the holidays quite fearfully flat and stale in comparison."

"You don't become Head Girl all at once," interposed Harold, drily; while Mrs Chester gave another sob at the idea that home could ever be looked upon in so sad a light.

"Hurst Manor?" she repeated vaguely. "That's a strange name. I never heard of the place before. What do you know about it that makes you want to go, darling? Are you quite sure it is nice, and what is the Head Mistress like, and how many young la— girls does she take? Not too many, I hope, for I can't see how they can be properly looked after when there are more than twenty or thirty. I've heard terrible stories of delicacy for life arising from neglect. You remember poor, dear Evie Vane! Her glands swelled, and nobody noticed, and—"

"My glands never swell. They know better. Over two hundred girls, mother; but they are divided into different houses, with a staff of teachers in charge of each, so there's no fear of being neglected; and it's much more fun living in a crowd. I'm tired of talking to the same people over and over again, and should love a variety. Among the hundred girls, one would be sure to find one or two whom one could really like."

Harold laughed again, a sleepy laugh, which brought a flash into his sister's eyes. That was the worst of Harold; he was so superior! He never argued, nor contradicted, but he had a way of smiling to himself, of throwing back his head and half shutting his eyes, which made Rhoda feel as if throwing cushions at him would be the only adequate relief to her feelings. She glared at him for a moment, and then turned her back on him in a marked manner and addressed herself to her father.

"You will write to Miss Bruce at once, won't you, father, and arrange for me to go at the beginning of the term?"

"I will write for particulars, or, better still, your mother and I will go down to see the place for ourselves. I should like you to go to the school you fancy, if it can be arranged, and I suppose this is as good as any."

"Better!" Rhoda declared rapturously, "a thousand times better! Ella Mason said so; and she knows, because her cousin's sisters have all been at different schools—one at Cheltenham, one at Saint Andrew's, one at Wycombe, and she declares that Hurst beats them all. It must be so, since it has adopted all the good ideas and abandoned the bad." She went on with a rambling statement which seemed to imply that Miss Bruce had been in turn sole proprietor of each of these well-known schools before abandoning them in favour of her new establishment; that Hurst Manor buildings had been recently erected, at vast expense, to provide every possible convenience for the pupils, and at the same time was a nobleman's seat of venerable interest; that sports and games formed the chief interest of the pupils, lessons being relegated to an appropriate secondary position; while, astonishing to relate, the honours in all University examinations fell to "Hurst girls," and every woman who had made a name for herself had graduated from its ranks! She detailed these interesting items of information with sublime assurance; and, when Harold mildly pointed out inconsistencies, retorted scornfully that she supposed she might be allowed to know, since Ella's cousin had *said* so, and she had been there, and seen for herself! Mrs Chester supported her by murmurs of assent, and little warning frowns to her son, which in dumb language signified that he was to be a good boy, and not aggravate his sister; and Mr Chester put his arm round her waist, and looked down at her, half smiling, half pitiful. The pitiful expression grew, and became so marked that the girl gazed at him in surprise. Why did he look so sorry? Was he already feeling the blank which her absence would leave? Did he fear that she would be home-sick, and regret her hasty decision? She stared into his face with her bright blue eyes, and her father gazed back, noting the firm chin, the arched brows, the characteristic tilt of the head. This overweening confidence of youth—he was asking himself earnestly—was it altogether a misfortune, or but raw material out of which great things were to be made in the future? Was it not better to go forth to meet life's battle with a light heart and fearless tread than trembling and full of doubt? Surely it was better, and yet his heart was sore for the girl, as the heart of a leader must be sore when he sends his soldiers to the front, knowing that no victory is won without a cost, no fight without a scar. Something very like a tear glittered in the father's eye, and at the sight Rhoda's face softened into a charming tenderness. She snuggled her head into his neck, and rubbed her soft cheeks against his, murmuring absurd little sentences of endearment, as to a child of two years old.

"Whose pet is it, then? Whose own precious? The nicest old sweet in the world."

Mr Chester pushed the girl aside, and put on a frown of portentous ferocity to conceal the delight with which her demonstration had, in reality, filled him. He loved to feel the sweep of the crisp locks, the touch of the soft cheek; he even appreciated, if the truth must be told, being addressed as a "precious," but wild horses would not have induced him to confess as much, and he made haste to leave the room with Harold lest perchance any sign of his real feelings might betray themselves to the sharp feminine eye.

Left alone with her mother, Rhoda clasped her hands behind her back, and paced slowly up and down. It was a relief, after all, to be rid of the men, and be able to talk things over with a feminine hearer who never brought forward inconvenient quibbles, who accepted statements as facts, as of course they were, and agreed to propositions in a quiet, reasonable manner. Rhoda thought out several important matters in that march to and fro, and announced the result in a decisive manner.

"I must have a complete new outfit! I don't believe in taking half-worn things. You can send them away to that poor clergyman in Ireland, with the five daughters. Geraldine, isn't it, who 'fits' my clothes? Well, Geraldine shall have my blue silk, and the fawn jacket, and the blouses, and the grey dress. If the arm-holes stick into her as much as they do into me, she will wish I had never been invented. She can have my best hat, too, if she wants it. I hate it, and at 'Hurst' you never wear anything but sailors', with the school colours. There is a blue house, and a pink, and a green, and a yellow, and a red; that's the way they arrange in all big schools, and I only hope and pray it won't be my fate to be yellow, or *what* an image I'll look! Other things being equal, Mum dear, kindly say you think the blue house would be best for my health and morals. I want to live *in*, you understand, not *out*—that's one point I have quite decided."

"In what, dearest? Out of what? I don't understand what you mean."

"In school itself. There are three houses in the school building and three in the grounds, and, of course, if you live 'out' you have ten minutes' walk over to classes, whatever the weather may be. I should object to shivering across the first thing in the morning in rain and snow and getting all splashed and blown. No one can call me a coddle, but I *do* like comfort, and it would be a dreadful fag—"

"I should think so, indeed; most risky! I wouldn't hear of it for you. If you go at all you must live in, and have a comfortable room, with a fire in cold weather."

"Oh, well; I don't know if you can expect that. We mustn't be too exacting. You will look after my clothes at once, mother, won't you? for there will be so much to get. I want things nice, you know! I should like the girls to see that I had decent belongings. I love having all the *little* things complete and dainty. I think girls ought to be particular about them. It's a sign of refinement. I can't endure shabby things round me."

"Of course not, darling; and there's no reason why you should. Write down a list of what you want, so that we shan't forget anything when we are in town. You shall have all you need; but, oh! dear me, I don't know how shall I live when you have gone. I shall break my heart without you!" And Mrs Chester's tears once more rolled down her cheeks. It seemed to her at this moment that the greatest trouble which her happy life had known was this projected parting from her beloved daughter.

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## Chapter Three.

### Anticipations.

Two days later Mr and Mrs Chester started on their tour of inspection, and Rhoda reflected that she could not employ herself better during their absence than by preparing, so far as might be, for the life ahead. She went upstairs to her own sitting-room, and made a sweeping survey of her treasures. The books in the hanging cases must, of course, be left behind, since they were too numerous to carry. She looked lovingly at their bright gold and leather backs, and took down a special favourite here and there, to dip into its contents. The Waverley novels ran in a long, yellow line across one shelf; Dickens, clad in red, came immediately beneath; and a whole row of poets on the bottom shelf. Wordsworth was a prize from Fraulein, but his pages were still stiff and unread; Longfellow opened of himself at "Hiawatha"; while Tennyson, most beloved of all, held half a dozen markers at favourite passages. His portrait hung close at hand, a copy of that wonderful portrait by Watts, which seems to have immortalised all the power and beauty of the strange, sad face. Rhoda nicked a grain of dust from the glass surface, and carefully straightened the frame against the wall, for this picture was one of her greatest treasures, and respected accordingly. Another case held books of stories, ranging from the fairy tales of childhood to the publications of last year; a third was devoted to bound volumes of magazines, and a fourth to the less showy and interesting school-books.

"It's no use taking *you!*" said Rhoda scornfully. "I expect you are quite out of date. You can stay here and rest, and when I come back I'll point out your errors, and send you into the lumber-room to make room for the new ones!" Then she turned her attention to the mantelpiece, on which reposed a quite extraordinary number of miniature jugs. Jugs, jugs everywhere, and nothing but jugs; blue jugs, yellow jugs, brown jugs, red jugs; Worcester jugs with delicate white figures against a background of blue; jugs worth a penny sterling at the village emporium; plain jugs, iridescent jugs; jugs with one handle, with two, with three, with none at all. Their variety was as puzzling as their number, but Rhoda gazed at them with all the pride of the collector. "Jugs"—unrivalled by postcards, stamps, or crests—had been her mania for a year on end, and the result was dear to her heart. To find a new jug to add to the collection had appeared one of the chief objects in travelling; an expedition to town had been a failure or success, according as it discovered jugs or no jugs.

In her anxiety for their safety she had even volunteered to dust her own mantelpiece, and now, alas! she must leave them to the tender mercies of Mary and her assistants! It was a painful reflection, and after a moment's consideration she determined not to risk it, but to store the darlings away in some safe hiding-place until her return.

No sooner said than done. Each little jug was wrapped in a separate roll of tissue paper, fitted into a drawer of the writing-table, and securely locked against invasion. The process of "putting away" thus begun extended itself indefinitely. The photographs in their various frames must be arranged and divided; nice relations and very dearest friends, to be taken to school, disagreeable or "middling" relations, and merely "dearest friends," to be laid aside in another drawer; fragile ornaments to be hidden, in case they were broken; silver and brass in case they tarnished; letters to be destroyed, to be tied up in packets, to be answered before leaving home; pieces of fancy work to be folded away, in case sacrilegious hands should dare to put them to any other use than that for which they were intended.

Rhoda set to work with the energy of ten women, and worked away until the once tidy room had become a scene of wildest confusion; until sofa, table, and chairs were alike piled high with bundles. Then of a sudden her energy flagged, she grew tired and discouraged, and wished she had left the stupid old things where she had found them. It occurred to her as a brilliant inspiration that there was no possible hurry, and that sitting under the trees reading a book, and drinking lemon squash, was a much more agreeable method of spending a hot summer's day than working like a charwoman. She carried her latest book into the garden forthwith, ordered the "squash," and spent an hour of contented idleness before lunch.

The story, however, was not interesting enough to tempt a second reading during the afternoon, for the heroine was a girl of unimpeachable character, who pursued her studies at home under the charge of a daily governess, and such a poor-spirited creature could hardly be expected to commend herself to a girl who had decided for two whole days to go to the newest of all new schools, and already felt herself far removed from such narrow experiences. Rhoda cast about in her mind for the next diversion, and decided to bicycle across the park to call upon the Vicar's daughter the self-same Ella Mason who had been her informant on so many important points. Ella would be indeed overcome to hear that Rhoda herself was to be a "Hurst" girl, and there would be an increased interest in hearing afresh those odd pieces of information which had fallen from the cousin's lips.

She felt a thrill of relief on hearing that her friend was at home, and in finding her alone in the morning-room, which looked so bare and colourless to eyes accustomed to the splendours of the Chase. Something of the same contrast existed between the two girls themselves, for while Rhoda sat glowing pink and white after her ride, Ella's cheeks were as pale as her dress, and her eyes almost as colourless as the washed-out ribbon round her waist. She was not a beauty by any means, but unaffectedly loving and unselfish, rejoicing in her friend's news, though it would deprive her of a favourite companion, and she was all anxiety to help and encourage. She knitted her brow to remember all that the cousin had said of Hurst Manor, wishing only that she had listened with more attention to those pearls of wisdom.

"Yes, she said that they did a great deal of Latin. All the girls learn it, and it seems to be looked on as one of the most important subjects. They translate Horace and Livy and all kinds of learned books."

"Humph! I shan't!" declared Rhoda coolly. "I don't approve of Latin for girls. It's silly. Of course, if you intend to teach, or be a doctor, or anything like that, it may be useful, but for ordinary stop-at-home girls it's nonsense. What use would Latin be to *me*, I should like to know? I shall take modern languages instead. I can read and write French fluently, though it doesn't come quite so easy to speak it, and German, of course, is second nature after jabbering with Fraulein all these years. I should *think* in German if I would allow myself, but I won't. I don't think it is patriotic. There is not very much that any one can teach me of French or German!"

"Then what is the use of studying them any more?" inquired Ella, aptly enough; but Rhoda was not a whit discomposed.

"My dear, it is ever so much pleasanter doing things that you understand! The first stages are such a grind. Well, what next? What other subjects are important?"

"Mathematics. Some of the girls are awfully clever, and are ever so far on in Euclid. I did one book with father; but it worried me so, and I cried so much one day when he altered the letters and put the whole thing out, that he grew tired, and said I could give it up. You didn't do any with Fraulein, I think?"

"No; it's a nuisance. I wish I did now; but I'll have to begin at once, that's all! I'll get Harold's old books and cram up before I go, so that I can just bring in an expression now and then, as if I knew all about it. Girls are so patronising if they think you are a beginner... I'm pretty well up in history, and can say reams of poetry, and play, and draw, and paint in water colours—"

"Ye-es!" assented Ella feebly. She was afraid to say so much in words, but her conviction was that her friend's methods of work would seem strangely antiquated when contrasted with the vivid strength of the new *régime*. She recalled Rhoda's mild copies of village scenes, with cottages in the foreground, trees to the rear, and a well-regulated flight of swallows on the sky line, and mentally placed them beside her cousin's vigorous sketches on the Slade system, where two or three lines seemed to do the work of a dozen, and prettiness was a thing abhorred! She remembered the lessons in theory and harmony, and trembled for her friend's awakening. "Yes," she repeated. "Oh, of course; and then there are other things besides lessons—a girl can make herself popular by being pleasant and obliging, and the outdoor life is so fascinating. Games every day, just as if you were boys, and each one trying to get into a higher team, and as keen and enthusiastic as she can be. You *will* enjoy the games, Rhoda!"

"Now that's just one thing I wanted to talk to you about!" cried Rhoda earnestly. "I'm glad you reminded me. Of course, tennis and croquet are all right. I can play a *very* good set, and beat most ladies at croquet. One time this summer I made five hoops in one turn, and took my partner with me, but of course I don't do that *every* day of the week. I'm all right for summer games, but winter is coming on, and I shall have to play that horrid old hockey, and I haven't the remotest idea how it is done. I've never seen a match, but you have, and I want you to tell me all about it, so that I may know what to do, and not make an idiot of myself. You went to the Betham ground when you were

staying there, and saw the girls' team play. Go on! Describe it! Tell me all about it, and everything they did!"

Ella drew a deep breath, and looked awed and important.

"Well! it was a county match, and one team wore white blouses and the other pink. They had on blue skirts, very short, and awful feet! Some had great pads on each ankle, and some had leggings, and some had nothing at all. I should have swathings of cotton wool a foot wide, for it made my ankles ache just to see the sticks swinging about! It was an icy day; the wind went through us like knives and scissors, and we stood on little planks of wood and shuddered, with furs up to our ears, but they wore no hats or jackets, and their sleeves went flap, flap, as thin as possible. There was only one pretty one among them, all the rest looked—hideous! There was a goal at one end, *here*, and another, *here*." Ella drew a rough map of the ground on the back of an envelope, and Rhoda looked on with breathless interest. "This team wanted to make a goal *here*, and the other side tried to prevent them. They whacked with their sticks, and off went the ball, and each side flew after it, trying to send it the way they wanted, and one poor, wretched girl stood before each goal to prevent the enemy's ball from entering. I expected they would both die of consumption the next day, but I met them out at tea, quite spry and lively, and they said they didn't feel cold a bit. I didn't believe them, but that's nothing. An umpire marched about in leggings, and blew a whistle, and called out 'Off side! Off side!'"

"And what did he mean by that?"

Ella hesitated, uncertainly. Her knowledge of the game was of the slightest, but she was anxious to help her friend, and gallantly tried to recall odd explanations.

"Oh, well, I think one of the wrong side hit, you know, and there is a rule that you may not send the ball straight forward to one of your own side, but must hit it back to some one behind you."

"But that's silly! If you want to get on as fast as you can, why on earth must you go *back*? If they never hit forward, how can they win. Do you mean to say they *never* send it forwards towards the goal?"

"Oh, yes, yes! One girl was splendid. She hit magnificently. She ran like a man, and sent it flying before her, and made three goals herself."

"Then how—why—what—what in the world did you mean by saying that you *mustn't* do it?" demanded Rhoda sternly, and Ella made a gesture as of tearing her hair in confusion.

"I don't know! It isn't easy to understand a game when you see only one match. I was confused myself, but I know each side tries for a different goal, and there are 'backs' and 'half-backs' and 'forwards,' just as at football, and, whatever you do, you must not raise your stick above your waist. It's a murderous-looking game, anyhow. I wondered that they weren't all killed; and one girl's hand was bleeding horribly. I asked her if it was very painful, and she stared and said, 'Oh, I hadn't noticed it!' and mopped it up with her handkerchief. Awfully callous, I call it."

"Oh, I don't know!" replied Rhoda, airily. "Those flesh wounds don't hurt. I should never think of taking any notice of a little thing like that. Well, I can't say I am very much wiser for your instructions, my dear, but I will pump Harold and see what I can get out of him. I have no doubt I could hit all right, for I have a quick eye, and if you can play one or two games it helps you with the rest. But I should be pretty mad if I made a hit and they whistled at me and made me come back. I like to know what I am about."

"You had better be a goal-keeper," advised Ella, wisely; "you have no running to do until the ball comes your way, and then at it you go, tooth and nail! Stop it somehow—anyhow—with your hands, your feet, your skirt, your stick. I believe there is an etiquette about it, don't you know, as there is about all those things, and that it's more swagger to stop it one way than another, but the main thing is to stop it *somehow*, and that you simply must do!"

"Humph! If you can! What happens if you can't?"

"Emigrate to Australia by the first boat! I should think so, at least, to judge by the faces of the other girls when one poor creature *did* let a ball in. Feerocious, my dear! there was no other word for it. My heart ached for her. But it was a stupid miss, for it looked so easy. I felt sure I could have stopped it."

"It's all a matter of nerve. If you lose your head you are sure to play the fool at a critical moment. Fraulein was like that. The moment the game went against her she began to hop about, and puff and pant, and work herself into such a fever that she couldn't even see a ball, much less hit it. I kept calm, and so of course I always won."

It did strike Ella that victory under such circumstances would be easily gained, but she was too loyal to say so, and Rhoda leant back against the cushions of the sofa, and continued to discourse on games in general, and school games in particular, with an air of such intimacy and knowledge that no one would have suspected that the object of her visit had been to listen, rather than to teach.

Ella listened meekly to a recital of what her friend intended to do, and be; of the examinations she would pass, the honours she would gain; the influence she would exercise over her fellows; and sighed to think of her own limitations, and the impossibility of such a career ever falling to her lot. And then Rhoda rose, and put on her gloves preparatory to saying good-bye.

"I shall come down to see you again, of course, but I shall be very busy. I am going to have a complete new outfit, and everything as nice as possible."

"Ye-es," said the Vicar's daughter.

"I shall have all my best skirts lined with silk."

"Ah!" sighed Ella, and felt a pang of keenest envy. She had never possessed a silk lining in her life. It seemed to her at times that if she could only hear herself rustle as she walked, there would be nothing left to wish for in life!

"They will think you are a Princess!" she said, and Rhoda smiled, and did not attempt to deny the impeachment.

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## Chapter Four.

### Departure.

Mr and Mrs Chester returned from their visit to Hurst Manor with somewhat different accounts of the establishment. The father was delighted with all he had seen, thought the arrangements excellent, and Miss Bruce a charming and lovable woman. The mother did not see how draughts were to be avoided in those long, bare passages, considered the hours of work cruelly long, and was convinced that Miss Bruce could be very stern if she chose. Her husband laughed, and declared that a school of two hundred girls would fare badly indeed if she could not, and the maternal fears were silenced at once by his banter, and by Rhoda's fearless confidence.

It was finally decided that the girl should join at the beginning of the term, and preparations were set on foot without delay. It was almost like buying a trousseau, Rhoda declared; and certainly no bride-elect could have taken a keener interest in her purchases. The big, new box with her initials on the side; the dressing-bag with its dainty fittings; the writing-case and workbox; the miniature medicine chest stocked with domestic remedies, in case she should feel feverish or chilled, have earache, toothache, or headache; be threatened with sore throat or swollen glands—they were all new possessions, and as such afforded acute satisfaction, for though the wardrobe list was disappointingly short, there were at least no restrictions as to quality.

When the key was turned in her box Rhoda heaved a sigh of satisfaction in the confidence that not one of the two hundred girls could possess a better equipment than her own. Then she looked round her dismantled room, and felt a pang of depression. It looked so *dead*—as if its owner had already departed, and left it to its fate. The wardrobe door swung apart and revealed the empty pegs; the drawers were pulled open and showed piles of torn-up letters; the carpet was strewn with pins. All the treasured ornaments had been stored away, and the ugly ones looked uglier than ever, as if infected by the general dejection. In story-books girls were wont to bid a sentimental adieu to their maiden bowers before leaving for a new sphere, but Rhoda did not feel in the least inclined to be sentimental; she took to her heels instead and ran downstairs, only too glad to escape from her dreary surroundings, and presently she and her mother *were* driving towards the station on the first stage of the eventful journey.

The village women stood at the doors of their cottages to put their aprons to their eyes, and murmur, "Ay, poor dear!" as she drove past; little Tommy Banks threw a nosegay of marigolds through the carriage window, and waddled away, scarlet with confusion; and there was quite a gathering of friends on the platform.

Ella had brought a box of home-made Fuller's sweets from herself and a dainty copy of *The Christian Year* as the Vicar's farewell offering; Mrs Ross had a stack of magazines for reading on the journey, and little Miss Jones, who owed all the comforts of life to Mrs Chester's friendship, presented the most elaborate "housewife," stocked with every necessary which it seemed probable that a girl at school would *not* require. It was all most touching and gratifying. Even the station-master came up to express his good wishes, and the one-eyed porter blurted out, "Glad to see you back, Miss!" as if it were impossible to suppress his feelings a moment longer.

Rhoda felt an insight into the feelings of Royalty as she stood at the window of the carriage, graciously smiling and bowing so long as she remained in sight, and when this excitement was over, another appeared to take its place. Mrs Chester was discovered to be crying in quite uncontrolled fashion, and at the sight of her tears Rhoda put on her severest air.

"Mother! What are you doing? You must *not* cry! Please remember that in half an hour we shall be at Euston, and meet the school. I should never get over it if the girls saw my mother with a red face!"

Mrs Chester mopped her eyes obediently, and made a valiant effort to regain her composure. For herself, poor dear, she cared little about appearances, but Rhoda had already exhibited an intense anxiety that she should make a good impression on the minds of her future school-fellows. Each separate article of clothing had been passed in review, while the bonnet had been changed three times over before the critic was satisfied. It would never do to spoil an effect which had been achieved with so much trouble; so the unselfish creature gulped down her tears, and tried to talk cheerfully on impersonal topics, keeping her eyes fixed on the landscape the while, lest the sight of her child might prove too much for her resolution.

Rhoda was immaculate in blue serge coat and skirt, and sailor hat with a band of school colours. Nothing could have been simpler; but there are ranks in even the simplest garments, and she was agreeably conscious that her coat was not as other coats, neither was her skirt as other skirts. The hand of the Regent Street tailor was seen in both, and there was a new arrangement of pleats at the back which ought in itself to secure the admiration of the school! She was all complacency until Euston was reached, when the first glimpse at a group of "Hurst" girls smote her to earth. She had sewn the band on her hat upside down, putting the wide stripe next the brim, which should by rights have been the place of the narrow! To the cold, adult mind such a discovery might seem of trifling importance, but to the embryo school-girl it was fraught with agonising humiliation. It looked so ignorant, so stupid; it marked one so hopelessly as a recruit; Rhoda's cheeks burned crimson; she looked searchingly round to see if by chance any other strangeling had fallen into the same error, but, so far as bands were concerned, she was solitary among the throng.

A governess, seeing the two figures standing apart from the rest, came forward and welcomed Rhoda with a few kindly words, but she was too busy to spare time for more than a greeting. Fresh girls kept arriving with every moment—a crowd of brisk, alert, bustling young creatures, skurrying along bags in hand, and bright eyes glancing to



right and left. At every step forward there would come a fresh recognition, a nod of the head, a wave of the hand, a quick "Halloa!" more eloquent than elegant. Rhoda felt a spasm of loneliness at the realisation that no greeting waited for herself, and at the strangeness of the many faces. She looked critically around and came to the most unfavourable conclusions.

"I don't like that one—she's a fright! I hate that one—she's so affected. Those two look common; I won't have anything to do with *them*. The big one with spectacles looks horribly learned. The one with the violin has a most unmusical face. *She* looks fit for stratagems if you like! The little one in brown is a cunning fox, I can see it in her eyes. Of all the plain, uninteresting, stodgy set of girls—"

There was a movement inside the saloon carriage opposite, and a large mamma clad in black, with a profusion of bugles, stepped on to the platform and marched stolidly away. She steered a course clear of the crowd of girls, the ends of her mantle floating behind her, like a brig in full sail before the breeze, while her poor little daughter hung out of the doorway gazing after her, sobbing bitterly, and mouthing in pathetic, helpless misery.

Mrs Chester began to cry at once in sympathy, and even Rhoda felt a smarting of the eyes. It was coming! The crucial moment was at hand; the bell was ringing, the girls were crowding into the carriages, the governess stepped forward and spoke a warning word.

"You had better come now, dear! Please take your seat."

Rhoda turned and bent her tall young head to her little mother, but neither spoke—the tension was too great. Mrs Chester's face was tremulous with agitation, the girl's white and defiant. Then she stepped into the carriage and seated herself among the crowd of strangers. The girls were all silent now, pale of face and red of eye, a few crying openly, the majority fighting against emotion. The mothers came to the edge of the platform, and stared in through the windows.

"It is like looking at animals in a cage," said Rhoda to herself, and then the wheels began to move, she saw her mother's quivering face—saw it from a distance—saw it no more—and realised for the first time, with a great, bitter pang of anguish, the meaning of farewell!

She had not intended to cry, she had never believed it possible that she *would* cry, but it was hard work to resist it during the next half-hour, when every second bore her further from home, and the strangeness of her surroundings pressed more heavily upon her. Other girls were beginning to cheer up and exchange confidences with their companions, but she had no one with whom to talk. Two girls opposite—the foxey one and the affected one—were chatting quite merrily together. The affected one, whose name appeared to be Hilda, had spent part of her holiday at Boulogne, and was discoursing on the delights of Continental bathing, while Foxey, not to be outdone, would have her know that Scarborough kept pace with all the Continental methods.

Another girl made the harrowing discovery that she had left her spectacles at home, and announced the same to a chum, who remarked that it was "a ripping joke!" The violin girl had had a bicycling accident, and exhibited her scars with pride. The shock of parting over, they all seemed very happy together, very friendly, very absorbed; far too much absorbed to notice a new-comer, or trouble themselves on her behalf. The governess stood by Rhoda's side for a few minutes and made remarks in an aggressively cheerful manner, but her reception was not encouraging, and presently she went away, and did not return.

Rhoda looked at the pictures in her magazines, or pretended to look, for her brain was so much occupied with other matters that she could not grasp their meaning, and after five minutes' inspection would hardly have been able to say whether she had been studying the features of a country landscape or those of a society beauty. Then she turned and cautiously examined her neighbours. The girl to the right was a square, stolid-looking creature, square-faced, square-shouldered, with square toes to her boots, and elbows thrust out on each side in square, aggressive fashion. Her eyes were small and light, and her nose a defiance of classic traditions; the corners of her mouth turned down, and she had at once the solemnest and the most mischievous expression it is possible to imagine. After a critical survey of her charms, Rhoda felt that she was not the person with whom to force a conversation, and turned her attention to the neighbour on her left.

A recruit, surely; for, though her hat-band was in order, there was in her mien an absence of that brisk, independent air which seemed to characterise the old Hurst girl. A pretty damsel, too, with curling hair and soft dark eyes, which at the present moment were bent in elaborate scrutiny on the paper before her. Rhoda noticed that it was the advertisement page at which she was looking, and suspected a pre-occupation kindred to her own. She coughed slightly and ventured a gentle question—

"Is this your first term at school?"

The dark-eyed girl turned a fleeting glance upon her, so fleeting that it seemed as if she had never altered her position, and replied monosyllabically:

"Yes."

"You are going up, like me, for the first time?"

"Yes."

"And you have never been to school before?"

"Yes."

"I mean a boarding school. A big school like this, on all the new lines?"

"Yes."

This was disconcerting! What *did* she mean? It was her first term, she was a new girl, and yet she had been up before! What was the girl thinking about! She might really trouble herself to say more than one single word.

"But you said—I understood you to say—"

Brown Eyes turned fiercely upon her, and fairly snapped in indignation.

"I don't care what I said, or what you understood. Can't you *see* I want to be quiet? Can't you leave me alone? If I am a new girl, I don't want to howl before all the others, do I! Very well, then! don't make me talk! Read your book, and let me read mine."

"I *beg* your pardon!" said Rhoda, in her most stately manner. She took up her magazine obediently, but now it was more impossible than ever to read it, for she was tingling with mortification. Such a snub from a stranger, and when she was trying to be friendly too! It would be a long time before she troubled Brown Eyes again. Her thoughts went back regretfully to Ella, the loyal, the sympathetic, the faithfully admiring. If Ella were only here now, how different it would be! Why had she not thought of it before, and asked her parents to pay Ella's fees, so that she might have the solace of her presence? They would have done it gladly, but, alas! Ella could not have been spared from home. She had to help her mother; to be governess as well as pupil, teaching the younger children for part of every day. No! Ella was impossible; but the craving for companionship grew so intense that it even conquered the dread inspired by her other companion, and strengthened her to make yet another effort.

The train had just left a station whose name was familiar in her ears, and she realised that they had crossed the boundary between two counties, and were now in Blankshire, in which Hurst Manor itself was situated. To remark on this fact seemed an innocent and natural manner of opening a conversation, so she turned towards Square Face, and said brightly, "Now we are in Blankshire, I see! I have never been here before. The country looks very pretty and undulating."

The girl turned and stared at her with a wooden stolidity of feature. Seen at close quarters she appeared to Rhoda as at once the most extraordinarily ugly and comical-looking creature she had ever beheld. Her little eyes blinked, and the thin lips flapped up and down in an uncanny fashion that refused to be likened to any ordinary thing. There was a moment's silence, then she repeated in a tone of the utmost solemnity—

"The country is very pretty and undulating—you are quite right. Your remark is most apt! May I ask if you would object to my repeating it to my friend over here? She would be so very much interested."

She was so preternaturally grave, that for a moment Rhoda was taken in by the pretence, the next she flushed angrily, and tilted her head in the air, but it was of no avail, for already the next girl was tittering over the quotation, and turning to repeat it in her turn. The simple words must surely contain some hidden joke, for on hearing it each listener was seized with a paroxysm of laughter, and face after face peered forward to stare at the originator, and chuckle with renewed mirth. It was a good ten minutes before it had travelled round the carriage and been digested by each separate traveller, and then, so far from dying out, it acquired fresh life from being adapted to passing circumstances, as when the train having stopped at a junction and moved on again with a jerk, Square Face fell prone into her companion's arms, and excused herself with a bland—

"Excuse me, dear. It's my little way. I *am* so pretty and undulating," and instantly the titters burst out afresh.

Rhoda's face was a study, but even as she sat fuming with passion, a voice spoke in her ear from the side where Brown Eyes still studied her advertisements.

"Laugh, can't you?" said the voice. "Laugh, too, as if you enjoyed the joke. It's the only way. They will go on all the more if they see you are angry."

"I hate them all!" hissed Rhoda savagely, and the other heaved a sigh.

"Ah, so do I, but they shan't hate me if I know it! I'm sorry I snapped, but I'll talk now, and for pity's sake don't look so dismal. Let us look over this paper together, and make remarks, and smile as if we were enjoying ourselves too."

"I don't feel as if I should ever enjoy myself again. It's hateful going to school. If I had known it was as bad as this I would never have come."

"There's a lake in the grounds. We will drown ourselves together after tea, but in the meantime do please keep up appearances. Don't give yourself away before all these girls!"

Rhoda looked at her curiously, and felt a thrill of comfort at finding a friend in the midst of her desolation. "What is your name?" she queried eagerly, and the dark eyes met hers in a solemn stare.

"Marah, for bitterness. That's how I feel to-day, anyhow. My godmothers and godfather christened me Dorothy, and in festive moments I have even answered to 'Doll,' but I'd murder any one who called me that to-day. Now, I'll show you something interesting... I've travelled on this line before, and if you look out of the window you can catch a glimpse of Hurst Manor as we pass the next station. It stands in its own grounds with nothing between it and the line. Over there to the right—you can't miss it if you keep your eyes open. Now! There! That gaunt, grey building."

Rhoda looked, and there it lay—a gaunt building, indeed, with row upon row of tall, bare windows staring like so many eyes, and out-standing wings flanked like sentinels on either side. The poor recruit's face lengthened with

horror.

"It looks," she said dismally, "like a prison! It looks as if when you once got in, you would never never get out any more!"

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## Chapter Five.

### First Impressions.

Ten minutes later the journey came to an end, and the girls surged out on to the platform of the country station. A line of waggonettes, cheerfully denominated "Black Marias" by the pupils, was in waiting, and with less confusion than might have been expected the girls divided into different parties, and seated themselves in the carriages marked with their own house colours. Rhoda and her travelling companions, being all "blue," were among the first to drive off, each girl clutching the handbag which contained the immediate necessities of her toilet, and chattering away at the pitch of her voice. "Square Face" was evidently the wag of the party, and was treated with an admiring deference which seemed to bespeak a position of importance. She was professionally addressed as "Tom," and Rhoda from her seat opposite, read the words, "Thomasina Bolderston," upon the label of the bag, and reflected that she had never heard a name more entirely appropriate to its owner. It was at once so ugly, so uncommon, and so arresting to the memory, while Tom herself, once seen, could never be forgotten, nor confounded with another girl. There she sat, the keen autumn air blanching her cheeks and reddening her eyes, her arms crossed squarely over her bag, her lips twitching with mischievous enjoyment. She had but to roll her eyes, and the girls went into fresh convulsions of laughter; and when, at the entrance to "Hurst" grounds, she took out her handkerchief and affected to sob, the merriment reached an almost hysterical pitch. Rhoda, however, failed to appreciate the humour of the joke, being inclined to cry in good truth as the grim doorway yawned before her, and she caught a glimpse of the chill, grey hall, so different from the glowing warmth of her own dear home.

Dorothy gripped her arm in sympathetic fashion as they alighted and fell into position in the long line of girls, who had suddenly thrown off their hoyden airs, and assumed a demeanour of severe propriety. The queue wended its serpentine course down the hall itself, and across a smaller corridor to the head of the great staircase, where stood a lady in a black silk dress, and a cap with lavender ribbons, crowning bands of iron-grey hair. She was in reality small of stature, but she held herself with an air which gave her the appearance of being six feet high at least, and as she shook hands with each girl she addressed to her a word of greeting.

"How do you do, Mary? Glad to see you, Kathleen. Hope you are better, Ella. Welcome back, Carrie!" and so on, and so on. Occasionally there came a hesitation, and the greeting terminated without a name being added, but whenever this was the case there was a knitting of the brows which showed distinct annoyance. Miss Bruce evidently took a pride in remembering her pupils, and was hard on herself for any forgetfulness. When it came to the turn of the new girls, she detained them a moment to hope they would be happy, before waving them forward with an encouraging smile.

"That's what we call being 'presented.' She is the Queen, and on the next landing are 'the Lords,' and on the second 'the Commons,'" whispered a girl, who being herself only in her second term was not averse from posing as preceptor. Rhoda lifted her eyes and beheld an array of governesses standing before her, shaking hands and welcoming the pupils in their turn. Some looked formidable and learned, some did not. Some had the orthodox braided locks and spectacles, some even condescended to the frivolity of a 'fringe,' but one and all bore themselves with a dignity worthy of a foremost position in the newest of all new schools.

Rhoda passed by as in a dream, and felt far more interest in "the Commons," who were for the most part young women removed from girlhood by so slight a barrier that there was a tone of comradeship in their voices, a sympathetic understanding in their glance. The sweetest looking of all was evidently in special charge of the Blues, and, walked by the side of the two new girls as the detachment filed along the endless corridor towards its own apartments.

"You two are sisters? No! Ah, well, you must pretend you are, for a day or two at least, until you get over the first loneliness. Every one feels lonely at first among such a crowd of strangers, but it soon passes, and we are very happy together. You must come and sit with me in my little den sometimes. I'll ask you to tea on Sunday, and you must always come to me if you are in any difficulty. In the meantime do as the other girls do, and you will get along quite easily. You are in the same room. Wash and get ready for tea at once. The gong will ring in half an hour, and after that your boxes will have arrived and you will be able to unpack."

They reached the door of the dormitory as she finished speaking, and the girls entered, trying not to feel as if they were being introduced to a prison cell, or to be unduly cast down because they were separated by half the length of the room.

"If we could have been next each other and just wobbled the curtain occasionally it would have been friendly!" sighed Rhoda, sinking down on the solitary chair and gazing forlornly round her new abode. A bed, a wash-stand, a chest of drawers with a glass on top, a small fixture wardrobe, and about three yards of space on which to disport her own fair self—different quarters, indeed, from her room at home, with its spacious floor, its deep bay windows, its adjoining dressing-room and bathroom! When the curtains were drawn there was a feeling of cramped confinement which was most depressing to the spirits; yet, as her eye took in one detail after the other, Rhoda realised that there were redeeming points in the situation. Small as it was, the cubicle was decidedly pretty, and blue enough to satisfy the blondest of mistresses. Blue was the paint on the walls, blue the mat on the floor, blue and white the coverlet on the bed, blue the quaintly shaped china on the wash-stand. She remembered with a thrill of satisfaction that her own bags and cases were of the same hue, and took off her hat feeling that she had found an oasis in the desert of life.

Half-an-hour seemed a long time to prepare for tea, when no change of garment was possible, but it passed so quickly that the sound of the gong came as a surprise, and she emerged from her retreat to find her room-mates already filing towards the door. Thomasina led the way, staring at Rhoda's locks with an amusement which the girl found it hard to fathom. She had brushed out the curling mane with even greater care than usual, and was conscious that it was as tidy as nature had intended it should be. Then why stare and smile? She could not understand, but Thomasina only said enigmatically—

"Gather ye rosebuds while ye may! Come on, Fuzzy!" and led the way out into the corridor.

Lines of girls were appearing on every side—along this corridor, along that, down narrow flights of stairs, around unexpected corners, all converging steadily on the central staircase. It was like a game of "Follow my leader," and Rhoda could not but admire the ease and skill with which "Tom" avoided collision, and marshalled her party to its own table in the great dining-hall. When every one was seated, and grace said, the clatter of cups and saucers began, and Rhoda had her first experience of a school meal.

Well! the tea was very welcome, and it certainly was hot, but somehow or other it did not taste like the tea at home. There was so much "cup" about it—perhaps that was the explanation. It was quite an effort to get one's lips over the rim. Thickness seemed to be the order of the day when one looked from the china to the slices of bread and butter piled in the many plates. One such chunk would make a meal in itself, thought Rhoda, nibbling fastidiously at the first slice, but whether from the fatigue of the long journey or the stimulating effect of companionship, her appetite seemed to be unusually keen, and when it was finished she put out her hand to take a second slice.

Instantly Thomasina's voice rang out in warning. "Stop that, Fuzzy! That's forbidden!" Rhoda stared at her in dignified displeasure. "My name happens to be Rhoda Chester!"

"Congratulate you, I'm sure. Couldn't be sweeter; but you mustn't break rules, Rhoda Chester, all the same. The rule in this school is that no girl helps herself at meals, or asks for more, or pays any attention to her own plate."

"But if I am hungry? If I *want* more? How am I to get it?"

"You must rely on the thoughtfulness and attention of your neighbours. Each girl is supposed to look after those beside her, but if she forgets you must starve in silence, knowing that you suffer in a good cause. I find myself that a slight nudge applied to the elbow just as the cup is being carried to the mouth is a useful and judicious reminder... Let me press a piece of plum-cake upon you, Miss Chester!"

She held out the plate of bread with her squarest smile, and Rhoda smiled back with a curious sense of elation. She questioned herself curiously as to its cause, and made the surprising discovery that it was because Thomasina had spoken to her, and showed some faint signs of friendliness!

Tea over, there was another game of "Follow my leader," to the top story of the building this time, where all the length of a corridor was lined by baggage, with the mysterious addition of a flat wicker clothes-basket beside each trunk. The house-mistress, Miss Everett, was flitting to and fro, and explained to the bewildered new girls that as the cubicles afforded no room for the accommodation boxes they must unpack upstairs, and carry down their possessions to store in drawers and wardrobes.

For the next hour and a half, therefore, the curious scene was witnessed of sixty pupils staggering downstairs in turns under the weight of heavy baskets of clothes, and meeting with sundry adventures by the way. Lazy girls gave themselves the usual additional share of trouble by overweighting their load and toppling it over on the floor; hasty girls tripped on the stairs and collapsed in a heap, with a rain of boots falling on their head and pins showering broadcast through the banisters; careless girls took a rest to ease aching backs, then nipped up the wrong basket and bore it away, to reappear ten minutes later, puffing and injured, and receive indignant reproaches from the rightful owners.

Rhoda worked with a will, undisturbed by any such interruptions. It was with the unconsciousness of habit that she shook out her silk-lined skirts, on lifting them from the box, but the rustling sound could not be mistaken, and instantly she was aware that the girls on either side were mincing round in affected fashion, shaking out their own skirts, and simpering meaningly in her direction.

At the first glance from her eyes they became statues of propriety, but she felt their ridicule, and catching the giggles of laughter which followed her retreat blushed over cheek and neck in an agony of mortification.

After all, was it appropriate to bring fine clothes to school? Where the rules of the house were plain living and high thinking, was it not better to dress accordingly? Might not display savour of ignorance, of lack of perception, of—oh, horrors!—of snobbishness itself?

The new dresses hung neglected on their pegs, and Rhoda put on a silk blouse with her serge skirt, and walked down to supper in mental sackcloth and ashes.

But here was a pleasant surprise! The room was not grey any longer, but flooded with rosy light from the pink-hued shades which covered the electric burners. The girls, too, were no longer clad in dark blue as in a uniform, but shone forth in blouses of brilliant hues, pink, blue, red, and white alternating gaily, with an occasional green or yellow to add to the variety. There was in the atmosphere an indefinable air of relaxation, of rest after labour, which added tenfold to the brightness of the scene. What if on each plate there was only a morsel of fish, not half enough to satisfy clamorous appetites, there was unlimited bread and jam to follow, and if cocoa was not the drink of all others which one would have chosen, it was at least wholesome and satisfying. Rhoda ate and was thankful, and felt ready for bed even before the summons came. Several times during the day, when her feelings had threatened to become too keen for endurance, but pride had forbidden outward demonstration, she had cherished a determination to cry

comfortably in bed; but when the time came she was so sleepy, so exhausted with excitement, the bed was so unexpectedly sympathetic, that she forgot her resolution, and, snoodling down on the pillow, fell swiftly and happily asleep.

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## Chapter Six.

### Tom's Rule.

The next moment, as it seemed, there came the roll of a distant gong, and instantly there burst into life a score of jangling bells, clanging and tinkling over one's very head in a manner calculated to destroy the strongest nerves. Rhoda felt an agonised certainty that the Chase was on fire, and springing up was confronted by the blue walls of her little cubicle. Memory came back then, and with a pang of regret she lay back in bed, listening to the succession of groans, yawns, and sighs which arose from every corner of the room.

They were so eloquent that one could almost *see* the sleepers stretching themselves in turn, blinking heavy lids, and rubbing dishevelled locks like so many sleek, lazy kittens. For a moment no one spoke, then began a chorus of lamentations.

"Seven o'clock! It can't be true. I haven't slept a wink all night!"

"I've been getting up at half-past eight all the holidays, and having a cup of tea in bed before that. It's killing going back to this!"

"Wait till the mornings are dark, and the water is frozen in the jugs; that's the time it is really fun. This is a mere trifle."

"It's not a trifle at all. I'm a growing girl, and need sleep. If Miss Bruce had any heart she would see it, and give me an excuse."

"She'll give you a mark instead, if you are not quick. Hurry up now! No laggards!" cried Thomasina's voice, in answer to which there came still louder groans, and the creaking of bedsteads as one girl after another rose to her feet.

Rhoda rose with the rest, and for ten minutes there was silence, broken only by the splashing of water. Then suddenly the air was filled with a deep, melodious roll, at which, as at a signal, Thomasina appeared from her lair—beautiful in a magenta dressing-jacket, and hair coiled in a tight little knot at the top of her head—and opened wide the door of the dormitory. Rhoda, peering from between her curtains could see other doors opening all the way down the corridor, and bare arms hastily withdrawn from view, while all the time the music swelled into fuller force, and pealed over the great, silent house like some majestic wakening voice.

"What is it?" she queried breathlessly, and Thomasina answered from behind her curtain:

"The organ, of course. The organ in the hall. One of the music mistresses plays a voluntary every morning ten minutes after we get up, and the choir sings a hymn. You will hear them presently. Each house takes it in turn to do choir duty. It's the Greens this week."

As she spoke the first note of the hymn sounded, and the words rose clearly on the air:—

"Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty,  
Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee.  
Holy, holy, holy, Merciful and Mighty,  
God in Three Persons, Blessed Trinity!"

The clear voices were softened by distance into almost angelic sweetness, the treble rang true and sweet against the harmonious background of alto; the organ sank to a flute-like softness. It was an unexpected and beautiful beginning to the day's work, and the tears started to Rhoda's eyes as she listened, for she was of an emotional nature, quick to respond to any outside influence. She followed each line of the hymn with devout attention, and when it was finished knelt down beside her bed to offer a prayer, which was much longer and more fervent than it would have been ten minutes before. She prayed for strength, for guidance, and—with a remembrance of yesterday's trials—for patience too, that she might be able to take a joke in good part, and not value too highly her own dignity, and finally rose from her knees in a glow of virtuous resolution.

No sooner was she out of her cubicle than the blow descended. With the glow of good resolution still upon her, she was tried—and fell!



“That coiffure is very becoming, Fuzzy, but it won't do here.” (p. 59).

Thomasina regarded her critically, and said, with a cool assurance more maddening than downright rudeness:

“That coiffure is very becoming, Fuzzy, but it won't do here. Go back to your den, and plait it in a pigtail like mine!”

The glare of indignation, of scorn, of outraged dignity in Rhoda's eyes was beyond description. She straightened her back into a poker of obstinacy, and replied—

“I shall do no such thing! I shall wear my hair as I choose, and as I have always worn it.”

“No you won't, my dear. Pigtails are the rule in this establishment, and pigtails you must wear so long as you are within its walls.”

“If a teacher tells me to wear one, I shall obey. If it is a rule, some one in authority will tell me. I won't be ordered by you.”

There was a gasp of astonishment throughout the room, and one head after another peered out to stare at the rebellious spirit who dared to defy that important personage, the Head Girl.

Thomasina closed her eyes and smiled in maddening fashion.

“That's where you make your mistake, sweet love, for it's just exactly what you've got to do! I'm Head Girl, and don't you forget it. The Queen on her throne is not more absolute than I am in this room. If you don't do what I tell you, it will be my painful duty to report you for insubordination, and it is a sad thing for a girl to get a mark on her first day. I must trouble you for that pigtail, if you please.”

She was speaking the truth, that was evident! Confirmation was written on every watching face, in every warning frown. Rhoda's pride battled with a sense of helplessness so acute that she had much ado not to burst into tears on the spot. The two girls stood confronting each other, the new-comer flushed and quivering, like a beautiful young fury, with her flaxen hair streaming over her shoulders, and her blue eyes sending out sparks of fire; Thomasina composed and square, with her lips pursed up in a good-humoured, tolerant smile.

“Hurry up!” she said, and Rhoda whisked round and dashed behind her curtain, which flew out behind in an aggrieved fashion, as if unused to be treated with such scant courtesy. The next few moments seemed to have concentrated in them a lifetime of bitterness. The comb tugged remorselessly through the curling locks, but the physical pain passed unnoticed; it was the blow to pride which hurt—the sharp, sharp stab of finding herself worsted, and obliged to give in to the will of another. It was nothing at that moment that the pigtail was ugly and unbecoming; Rhoda would have shaved her head and gone bald for ever if by this means she could have escaped that verdict; but to appear again before all the girls with that hateful, hateful wisp hanging down her back—she felt as if she would die rather than do it; yet would it not be even more degrading to wait for a summons? She stalked forth, straight and defiant, and was received with a bland smile.

“Pretty fair for a first attempt. Plait it down further next time. I must have my girls neat and tidy. Now then, forward please—Right, left! right, left!”

The order was accompanied by a tap on the shoulder, which put the finishing touch to Rhoda's exasperation. She stepped into her place in the queue, trembling from head to foot, and with a painful throbbing in her head which was something new in her healthy experience. Immediately in front marched a tall, straight form, whom at first she failed to recognise, but at the head of the staircase there came a temporary wait, and then the head was turned towards her, and, behold, it was Dorothy herself, pigtailed like the rest, and looking curiously reduced without the background of hair.

"Morning!" she cried cheerily, and Rhoda gasped a breathless question.

"You too! Did she tell you? I never heard—"

"Didn't give her a chance! Heard her ordering you, and nipped mine up in a trice. Treat it as a matter of course, and don't seem to mind—that's the tip! Only get yourself disliked by making a fuss."

"I know, but I *can't* help it," sighed Rhoda dismally.

"I'm not used to bullying, and it makes me wild. My head's splitting. I feel all churned up."

"Worse troubles at sea!" said Dorothy shortly, and after that there was no more chance of conversation, for the queue moved on again, and they were separated at breakfast as at dinner the night before. Thomasina sat opposite to Rhoda, and pressed the various dishes upon her good-temperedly, ignoring all causes of discord, an attitude which, if she had only known it, but added to the score against her, for pride forced a haughty "No, thanks," whilst appetite prompted "Yes, please." To sit with empty plate, and see others feast on bread and marmalade is no slight trial when one is fifteen and a-hungred, but no one urged Rhoda to change her mind, or thought it possible to succeed where the Head Girl failed.

There were no regular lessons during the morning, but a great deal of confusing moving to and fro from one classroom to another, to go over preliminary arrangements, and receive instructions from the mistresses. Sometimes the new girls were ignored altogether, and then they felt worms, and ready to sink through the earth; sometimes they were questioned as to their attainments, and then the very walls seemed to have ears, and their replies echoed through a deadly silence. Dorothy attained a fair level throughout, and reaped neither praise nor blame, but Rhoda knew alternate rapture and despair, as Mademoiselle and Fraulein beamed approval, and the "class-mistress" put up her eye-glasses and regarded her as one might regard a wild animal at the Zoo, upon hearing that she had "done" no Latin or mathematics.

"You will not do much good at this school without them," she said, severely. "They are the most important subjects. I advise you to give all the time you can spare to working them up, and to get, if possible, some coaching during the holidays. That is, of course, if you wish to excel."

If she wished to excel! *If*, indeed! Did any one suppose for a moment that Rhoda Chester would be content to remain among the rank and file? Did they think that she could continue to be ignored, and live! Ten thousand times no! "A day would come!" as Disraeli had said. They thought just now that she was nobody, but in time to come the school would know her name, would be proud of it, would boast of it to other schools. Rhoda reared her head and smiled complacently, and the class-mistress noted the action, and made a mental note that the new pupil must be "kept down."

The morning seemed very long, but it came to an end at last with a blessed ten minutes "off" before preparing for dinner. The other girls hurried to their cubicles, but Rhoda waylaid Miss Everett in the corridor, and appealed to her in breathless eagerness.

"You said I was to come to you in any difficulty... I want to know if it is necessary for me to wear my hair like this? I never do it at home, and I'm sure my mother wouldn't like it. Is it really the rule?"

"I'm afraid it is," said Miss Everett kindly. "You don't like it, eh? Well, I don't wonder! I shouldn't myself, in your place; but you see, dear, bending over desks, and running about at games, loose hair gets in the way, and cannot possibly be kept tidy. It seems an arbitrary rule, but there's reason in it, as there is in all the rules if you think them out, and it doesn't apply to every day. On Thursday evening we have 'Frolics,' and then you can wear it loose, and put on your prettiest things. There is always something going on—concerts, dances, or theatricals—and Miss Bruce likes the girls to look bonnie and festive. On Sundays, too, you can go back to your mop if you choose. I hope you will, for I like to see it. I have a little sister with hair just like yours."

She laid her hand affectionately on the curly head, and the touch of kindness acted as balm to Rhoda's sore heart. Her eyes glistened with unshed tears, and she said huskily:

"I'll do anything *you* tell me. I won't mind; but that Thomasina—she's hateful! I can't stand being ordered about by a girl of my own age."

"Ah-h!" cried Miss Everett, and sighed as at the recurrence of a well-known trouble. "Well, you know, Rhoda, you must get over that feeling, and conform to the rules of the school. Thomasina is a great help to me, and makes a capital 'head girl.' You see, dear, I have no time to look after these details. The girls think that they are busy, but long after they are asleep at night I am slaving away correcting exercises. Oh such piles of books! It makes me tired even to see them. I'll do what I can for you, but you mustn't expect too much; and after all, in a week or ten days you will have mastered the rules, and the difficulty will be over. You wouldn't make a fuss for one week, would you? Stay! There is one thing I *can* tell you now, and that is that you won't be allowed to wear those slippers any longer. I'll give you an order, and you can go downstairs to the bureau and get a pair of school shoes like the other girls wear."

Rhoda gasped with dismay.

“What! Those frightful things with square toes and no heels! Those awful tubs that Thomasina waddles about in!”

Miss Everett laughed gaily. She was only a girl herself, and she cast a quick glance up and down the corridor to see if any one were coming before she drew aside her skirt to exhibit her own flat feet.

“They *are* awful! I love pretty shoes, too; and the first time I wore these I—I *cried*! I was very home-sick, you see, and nervous and anxious about my work, and it seemed the last straw. Never mind! it’s only a little thing, and on Thursday you shall wear your very best pair and I’ll wear mine, and we’ll compare notes and see which is the prettier.”

To say that Rhoda adored her is to state the matter feebly. She could have knelt down in the passage and kissed the ugly little feet; she could have done homage before this young mistress as before a saint; when the light streamed out of a window and rested on her head, it seemed to take the form of a halo!

She went meekly downstairs, procured the shoes, and carried them into Dorothy’s cubicle, to display before the eyes of that horrified young woman.

“There! We’ve got to wear those, too! It’s the rule. Miss Everett told me, and gave me an order to get them. You had better ask her for one before Thomasina gets a chance.”

Dorothy looked at her solemnly, and measured the slipper against her own neat shoe; then she took off the latter and held the two side by side. One was arched and slim, the other flat and square; one had French heels and little sparkling buckles, the other was of dull leather, unrelieved by any trace of ornament.

“Here’s deggeradation!” she sighed hopelessly. “Here’s deggeradation!”

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## Chapter Seven.

### The Record Wall.

There was no end to the surprises of that wonderful school! When Rhoda returned to her cubicle to get “tidy” for dinner, she washed, brushed her hair, put an extra pin in her tie to make sure that it was straight, wriggled round before the glass to see that belt and bodice were immaculately connected, put a clean handkerchief in her pocket, nicked the clothes-brush over her skirt, and, what could one do more? It seemed on the face of it that one could do nothing, but the other girls had accomplished a great deal more than this. Rhoda never forgot the shock of dismay which she experienced on first stepping forth, and beholding them. It was surely a room full of boys, not girls, for skirts had disappeared, and knickerbockers reigned in their stead. The girls wore gym. costumes, composed of the aforesaid knickers, and a short tunic, girt round the waist with a blue sash, to represent the inevitable house colour. Thomasina’s aspect was astounding, as she strode to and fro awaiting the gathering of her forces, and the new girls stared at her with distended eyeballs. Rhoda had registered a vow never to volunteer a remark to the hateful creature; but Dorothy stammered out a breathless—

“You never said—We never knew—Is it a *rule*?”

“Not compulsory, or I would have told you; you may do as you please. They wear gyms, at Wycombe in the afternoon, and we have adopted the idea to a certain extent. Most of the girls prefer it for the sake of the games, for it is so much easier to run about like this. For myself, I affect it for the sake of appearances. It is so becoming to my youthful charms.”

She simpered as she spoke, with an affectation of coyness that was irresistibly amusing. Dorothy laughed merrily, and Rhoda resisted doing the same only by an enormous effort of self-will. She succeeded, however, in looking sulky and bad-tempered, and went downstairs feeling quite pleased with herself for resisting an unworthy impulse.

All the old girls were in gym. costume, and a quaint sight it was to watch them descending the great central staircase. Lanky girls, looking lankier than ever; fat girls, looking fatter than ever; tall girls magnified into giantesses; poor little stumpies looking as if viewed through a bad piece of window glass. Plump legs, scraggy legs, and legs of one width all the way down, and at the end of each the sad, inevitable shoe, and down each back the sad, inevitable pigtail! Now and again would come a figure, light and graceful as a fawn, the embodiment of charming youth; but as a rule the effect was far from becoming.

Rhoda’s criticisms, however, were less scathing than usual, for she herself was suffering from an unusual attack of humility! If any reader of this veracious history has to do with the management of a self-confident, high-spirited girl, who needs humbling and bringing to her senses, let the author confidently recommend the pigtail and flat-heeled system! To fasten back a mane of hair is at once to deprive the culprit of one of her most formidable means of defence.

She has no shelter behind which to retire, as an ambush from the enemy; she has nothing to toss and whisk from side to side, expressing defiance without a word being uttered. The very weight of the pigtail is a sobering influence; its solemn, pendulum movement is incompatible with revolt. As for the slippers—well, try heel-less shoes yourself, and test their effect! They bring one to earth, indeed, in the deepest sense of the word. All very well to mince about in French shoes, and think “What a fine girl am I,” but once try mincing in flat, square soles, and you will realise that the days are over for that kind of thing, and that nothing remains but humility and assent!

Dinner over, the girls adjourned into the grounds; but as games, like lessons, could not be begun without some preliminary arrangement, most of the pupils contented themselves with strolling about, in twos and threes,



exchanging confidences about the holidays and hatching plans for the weeks to come. Rhoda and Dorothy were standing disconsolately together, when Miss Everett flitted past, and stopped for a moment to take pity on their loneliness.

"What are you two going to do? You mustn't stand here looking like pelicans in the wilderness. You must walk about and get some exercise. I'm too busy to go with you myself, but—er—Kathleen!" She held up her hand in summons to the second-term girl who had volunteered information about the Lords and Commons—"Here, Kathleen, you remember what it is to be a new girl; take Rhoda and Dorothy round the grounds, and show them everything that is interesting. Have a brisk walk, all of you, and come back with some colour in your cheeks!"

She was off again, smiling and waving her hand, and the three girls stood gazing at each other in shy, uncertain fashion.

"Well," said Kathleen, "where shall we go first? The Beech Walk, I suppose; it's half-a-mile long, so if we go to the end and back we shall have a constitutional before looking at the sights. The grounds are very fine here, and there is lots of room for all we want to do. You can find a sunny bit, or a shady bit, according to the weather, but it's only on really scorching days that we are allowed to lounge. Then there's a scramble for hammocks, and the lucky girls tie them on to the branches of trees, and swing about, while the others sit on the grass. Once or twice we had tea under the trees, and that was fine, but as a rule they keep you moving. Games are nearly as hard work as lessons!"

"But you needn't play unless you like?"

"Oh, yes, you must; unless you are ill or tired. You can get off any day if you don't feel well, but not altogether. And you would not wish to either. It would be so horribly flat! Once you are into a team, you are all anxiety to get into another, and I can tell you when you see your remove posted up on the board, it is bliss!—perfect bliss!"

The recruits laughed, and looked at their new friend with approving glances. She was, so far, the only one of the girls who had treated them on an equality, and gave herself no air of patronage, and they were correspondingly appreciative. They asked eagerly in which games she had won her remove, and Rhoda, at least, was disappointed at the answer.

"Cricket! That's the great summer game. I've three brothers at home, and used to practise with them sometimes to make an extra one. They snubbed me, of course: but I'm not a bad bat, though I say it myself."

"And what about tennis?"

"Um-m!" Kathleen pursed up her lips. "We have courts, of course, but it's rather—*Missy*, don't you think? The sports captains look down on it, and so, of course, it's unpopular. The little girls play occasionally. It keeps them happy."

This was a nice way to speak of a game which had been for years the popular amusement of young England! Rhoda was so shocked and disappointed that she hardly dared mention croquet, and it seemed, indeed, as if it would have been better if she had refrained, for Kathleen fairly shouted at the name.

"My dear, how can you! *Nobody* plays croquet except old tab— I mean ladies who are too old to do anything else. Miss Bruce plays sometimes when she has the vicar's wife to tea. We hide behind the bushes and watch them and shake with laughter. *Croquet*, indeed! I should like to see Tom's face if you mentioned croquet to her!"

"It's a matter of perfect indifference to me what Miss Bolderston thinks," said Rhoda, loftily; but she veered away from the subject of games all the same and tackled lessons instead.

"Are you working for any special examination, or just taking it easily?"

"I'm going in for the Oxford Senior in summer. My birthday is so horribly arranged that it comes just one week before the limit. A few days later would give me a year to the good, but as it is it's my last chance. If I can only scrape through in preliminaries I am not afraid of the rest, but I am hopelessly bad in arithmetic. I add up with all my fingers, and even then the result comes wrong; and when so much depends upon it I know I shall get flurried and be worse than ever."

"The great thing is to keep cool. If you don't lose your head, I shouldn't wonder if the excitement helped you. Say to yourself, '*Don't be a fool!*' and *make* yourself keep quiet," quoth Miss Rhoda, with an air of wisdom which evidently impressed her hearers. They glanced first at her and then at each other, and the glance said plainly as words could speak that here was a girl who had strength of mind—a girl who would make her mark in the school!

"I'll try!" said Kathleen, meekly. "I am terribly anxious about this exam., for if I do well and pass better than any one else in the school I shall get a scholarship of £40 towards next year's fees. That would be a great help to my parents, for they are poor, and have only sent me here that I may have a chance of getting on and being able to teach some day. I should be so thankful if I could help, for it's horrid to know the people at home are stinting themselves for your sake. I lie awake at nights imagining that the report is in, and I am first, and then I write a long letter home and tell them about it. Each time I invent a fresh letter, and they are so touching, you can't think! I cried over one, one night, and Tom came round to see what was the matter. At other times I imagine I'm plucked, and I go cold all over; I think I should *die*! Never mind, nine months yet! I'll work like a slave, and if I *do* fail no one can say it's my own fault."

"You won't fail. Don't imagine anything so horrible! You will get over your nervousness and do splendidly, and write your letter in real earnest," cried Dorothy cheerily. "I am going in for the Oxford too, but you need fear no rival in me. I am one of those deadly, uninteresting creatures, who never reach anything but a fair medium. There isn't a 'distinction' in me, and one could never be first at that rate. A scrape-through pass is all *I'm* good for!"

"I could get two distinctions at once! I know more German and French than ninety girls out of a hundred. Two distinctions! It's a big start. I wonder—I wonder if I could possibly be first!" said Rhoda to herself, and her breath came fast, and her cheeks grew suddenly hot. "Nine months! Nine months!" If she studied hard, and worked up the subjects on which she was behind, might she not have a chance with the rest? The first girl! Oh, if only it could be possible, what joy, what rapture! What a demonstration of power before the school. She went off into a blissful dream in which she stood apart, receiving the congratulations of Miss Bruce and her staff, and saw Thomasina's face regarding her with a new expression of awe. Then she came back to real life, to look remorsefully at her new friend, and notice for the first time her pinched and anxious air.

"But I would give Kathleen the money. I want nothing but the honour," she assured herself, shutting her mind obstinately against the conviction that such a division might not be altogether easy to arrange. "And Dorothy is going in, too; lots of girls are going in, so why should not I? And if I enter I must do my best; nobody could object to that!"

Nevertheless there was an unaccountable weight on her heart, which made it a relief when the subject dropped, and Kathleen began to point out the various out-buildings scattered over the grounds.

"That's the pavilion. We keep all the games there, and it's so nicely furnished. There is quite a pretty sitting-room, and a stove, and all the materials for making tea. On Saturday afternoons the winning teams may stay behind and have tea there by themselves, and buy cakes from the housekeeper. It's ripping! We look forward to it as the Saturday treat, and aren't you just mad if your side loses! That's the joiner's shop. You can have lessons if you like, and learn to make all sorts of things; but I've no ambition to be a carpenter, so I don't go... That's a summer-house, but it's so earwiggy that we leave it alone... That was meant to be a swimming-bath, but the water comes straight from a well, and it is so deadly cold that the girls got cramp, and Miss Bruce forbade them to use it any more. It looks wretchedly deserted now. If you want to be miserable all by yourself you couldn't have a better place. It's so still and dark, and the birds have built their nests in the corners, and come suddenly flying past, and frighten you out of your wits... Those little patches are the girls' own gardens. You can have lessons in gardening, and get a prize if you are clever. I don't go in for that either, for it's an extra expense."

"Oh, I must have a garden!" cried Rhoda quickly. "I adore flowers, and they could send me cuttings from home. I always had my own garden, but I didn't do the work, of course. I just said how it was to be arranged, and what plants I wanted, and every one admired it, and said how successful it was. I had big clumps of things, you know; not one straggling plant here and another there, but all banked up together. You should have seen my lily bed! I made the men collect all the odd bulbs and plant them together, and they were a perfect show. The scent met you half-way down the path; it was almost overpowering. And then I had a lot of the new cactus dahlias, and left only about two branches on each, so that they came up like one huge bush with all the lovely contrasting colours. Many people say they don't like dahlias, but that is only because they haven't seen them properly grown."

"Oh well, I loathe them myself, and I always shall do. You never get any satisfaction out of them, however pretty they may be, for as soon as people see them, they begin groaning and saying, 'Oh, dear, dear, autumn flowers already! How sad it is. Winter will soon be upon us.'" Dorothy sniffed derisively. It was evident that no support was to be expected from her on the dahlia question, and Rhoda felt that only time and experience could prove to her the folly of her position.

When all the out-buildings had been explained, Kathleen led the way down a winding path which seemed to lead to nowhere in particular, but rather to come to an abrupt *cul-de-sac* in the shape of a high grey wall. Her companions wondered at her choice, but she went forward with an air of determination, so that there was nothing left but to follow, and hope soon to return to more interesting scenes. When she came to the end of the path, however, she stood still and began to smile with a most baffling air of mystery. What did it mean? What were they expected to see? The girls wheeled to and fro, looked at the paths, the beds, the flowers, frowned in bewilderment, and then suddenly lifted their eyes to the wall, and uttered simultaneous exclamations of surprise.

The wall was dotted over with little tablets of stone, on each of which was a neatly engraved inscription, and each inscription bore the name of a girl at its head. Rhoda craned forward and read first one and then another:

"...Winifred Barton, joined Hurst Manor, September, 189—, left Christmas, 189—. The youngest pupil who ever obtained honours in Mathematics in the Oxford Local Examinations."

"Elizabeth Charrington, an old pupil of the school, obtained First Class in the Honours School of Modern History at Oxford."

"Eleanor Newman, joined Hurst Manor, September, 189—, left Mid., 189—. Beloved by her fellow-students as the kindest and most loyal of friends, the most unselfish of competitors. Held in grateful remembrance for the power of her influence and example."

"Fanny Elder. For two years Games President of the school. Winner of the Wimbledon Lawn Tennis Tournament, 189—. Holder of Edinburgh Golf Cup, 189—. A just and fearless sportswoman..."

The list of names went on indefinitely, but Rhoda had read enough to inflame curiosity, and wheeled eagerly round to confront Kathleen.

"What is it? What does it mean? Who puts them up? Is it just the cleverest girls?—"

"It's the Record Wall!" said Kathleen. "We are very proud of our Record Wall at Hurst. The cost of these tablets is paid by the pupils themselves, and they are put up entirely at their discretion. The teachers have nothing to do with it. If a girl has distinguished herself at work, but is conceited and overbearing, and makes herself disliked, no one wants to put up a tablet to *her*; so it is really a testimony to character, as well as to cleverness. Eleanor Newman was quite stupid, they say. I never knew her. She never passed a single examination, nor took a prize nor anything, yet

every one loved her. She was a little, fair thing, with curly hair too short to tie back, and soft, grey eyes. She wasn't a bit goody, but she always seemed waiting to do kind things, and make peace, and cheer the girls when they were home-sick. And no one ever heard her say a cross word, or make an uncharitable remark."

"And did she die?" croaked Rhoda solemnly. A long experience of girls' stories had taught her that when girls were sweet and fair, and never said an unkind word, they invariably caught a chill, and died of rapid consumption. She expected to hear the same report of Eleanor Newman, but Kathleen replied briskly:

"Die! Not a bit of it. She married, at nineteen, a doctor down in Hampshire, and brought him to see the school on their honeymoon. The Greens escorted her in a body to the Record Wall, and when she saw her own name she covered her face with her hands, and flew for her life. And her husband looked quite weepy. The girls said he could hardly speak!"

"Ah-h!" sighed Rhoda, and was silent. She felt "weepy" too, filled with a sudden yearning, a sudden realisation of want. Eleanor Newman had risen to heights to which she could never attain. "A little, fair thing, and almost stupid," yet her school-fellows loved her, and immortalised her name in words of grateful loyalty. She sighed again, and yet again, and heard Kathleen's voice cry sharply—

"Oh, I look at that empty space, and wonder if this time next year I shall read there that I have passed first, and won the Scholarship. I wonder if ever, ever there will be a tablet with my name upon it!"

"I expect there will be," said Dorothy. "It's a lovely idea, and I can imagine every girl longing to see her name on the scroll of honour; but for my own part I never shall. Not for this child! There is no hope for me, unless they put me up as 'a good little tortoise who never fell asleep.' The worst of it is that in real life the hare keeps awake too, and spoils one's chance. I must be content to bloom, in obscurity—'A violet by a mossy dell, half hidden from the eye'—"

But Rhoda already saw a new tablet twinkling on the empty space, a tablet recording phenomenal success and distinction, and the name at the head of the inscription was not "Kathleen Murray," but one much more familiar in her ears!

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## Chapter Eight.

### An Encounter.

Sunday afternoon was hopelessly wet; but the fact was less regretted than usual, as from three to four was the time put aside for writing home. So far a postcard to announce safe arrival had been the only word written, and each girl was eager to pour forth her feelings at length, to tell the latest news, and report changes of class. The two new-comers had a score of complaints and lamentations to record, and Rhoda, at least, entered unhesitatingly into the recital.

She had never been so miserable in her life. The girls were hateful, domineering, and unfriendly—Miss Bruce had spoken to her three times only—the food was good enough in its way, but so plain that she simply longed for something *nice*; the lessons were difficult, the hours unbearably long.—It took three whole sheets to complete the list of grievances, by which time her hand was so tired that she read it over by way of a rest, with the result that she was quite astonished to discover how miserable she had been! Everything she had said was true, and yet somehow the impression given was of a depth of woe which she could not honestly say she had experienced. Perhaps it was that she had omitted to mention the alleviating circumstances—Miss Everett's sweetness, Fraulein's praise, hours of relaxation in the grounds, signs of softening on the part of the girls, early hours and regular exercises, which sent her to the simple meals with an appetite she had never known at home. Five days at school, and on the whole there had been as much pleasure as suffering. Then, was it quite fair to send home such a misleading account?

Rhoda drew from her pocket the latest of the five loving letters penned by the maternal hand, and read it through for the dozenth time. Sunday was a lonely day for new-comers, and the period occupied by the sermon in church had been principally occupied by Rhoda in pressing back the tears which showed a presumptuous desire to roll down her cheeks and splash upon her gloves. It had been a sweet consolation to read over and over again the words which showed that though she might be one of a crowd at "Hurst," she was still the treasured darling of her home. There was nothing original in the letter; it simply repeated in different words the contents of its four predecessors—sorrow for her absence, prayers for her welfare, anxiety for the first long letter.

"I can hardly wait until Monday morning. I am so longing to know how you are faring!" Rhoda read these words, and looked slowly down upon her own letter. Well! it would arrive, and the butler would place it on the breakfast-table, and her mother would come hurrying into the room, and seize it with a little cry of joy. She would read it over, and then—then she would hand it to her husband, and take out her handkerchief and begin to cry. Mr Chester would pooh-pooh her distress, but she would cry quietly behind the urn, and despite his affectation of indifference he, also, would look worried and troubled; while Harold would declare that every one must go through the same stage before settling down, and that Rhoda might be expected to "make a fuss." She had been so spoiled at home!

Rhoda dug her pen into the blotting-paper, and frowned uneasily. Five days' experience at school had impressed her with the febleness of "making a fuss."

"If you are hurt—bear it! If you are teased—look pleasant! If you are blamed—do better next time! If you feel blue—perk up, and don't be a baby!" Such were the Spartan rules of the new life, and an unaccustomed shame rose up in her mind at the realisation of the selfishness and weak betrayal of that first home letter. Was it not possible to represent the truth from the bright side as well as the dark, to dwell on the kindnesses she had received, and leave disagreeables untold? Yes, it *was* possible; she would do so, and save her dear ones the pain of grieving for her

unhappiness. So the thick sheets were torn across with a wrench, which made Thomasina look up from her desk.

As a head girl, "Tom" possessed a study of her own, to which she had prepared to depart earlier in the afternoon, but had been persuaded to stay by the entreaties of her companions.

"Tom, don't go! Don't leave us! It's a wet day, and so dull—do stay with us till tea-time. You might! You might!" urged the suppliant voices, and so Tom sat down to her desk in the house-parlour which was the property of the elder Blues, and indited letters on blue-lined, manly paper, with a manly quill pen.

As her eyes rested on the torn letter and on the clean sheet of paper drawn up for a fresh start, she smiled, a quiet understand-all-about-it smile, which Rhoda chose to consider an impertinent liberty. Then down went her head again, and the scrape, scrape of pens continued until four o'clock, by which time the girls were thankful to fold the sheets in their envelopes and make them ready for post. Rhoda read over her second effort in a glow of virtue, and found it a model of excellence. No complaints this time, no weak self-pity; but a plain statement of facts without any personal bias. Her father and mother would believe that she was entirely contented; but Harold, having been through the same experiences, would read between the lines and understand the reserve. He would say to himself that he had not expected it of Rhoda, and that she had behaved "like a brick," and Harold's praise was worth receiving.

Altogether it was in a happier frame of mind that Rhoda left her desk and took her place in one of the easy chairs with which the room was supplied. From four to five was a free hour on Sundays, and the girls were allowed to spend it as they liked, without the presence of a teacher.

This afternoon talk was the order of the day, each girl in turn relating the doings of the holidays, and having her adventures capped by the next speaker. Thomasina, however, showed a sleepy tendency, and kept dozing off for a short nap, and then nodding her head so violently that she awoke with a gasp of surprise. In one of these intervals she met Dorothy's eyes fixed upon her with a wondering scrutiny, which seemed to afford her acute satisfaction.

"Ah!" she cried, sitting up and looking in a trice quite spry and wide-awake. "I know what you are doing! You are admiring me, and wondering what work of nature I most resemble. I can see it in your face. And you came to the conclusion that it was a codfish! No quibbles, please! Tell me the truth. That was just exactly it, wasn't it?"

"No!" cried Dorothy emphatically, but the emphasis expressed rather contrition for a lost opportunity than for a wrongful suspicion. "No, I did not!" it seemed to say, "How stupid not to have thought of it. You—really—are—extraordinarily like!"

"Humph!" said Thomasina. "Then you are the exception, that's all. All the new-comers say so, and therein they err. It's not a cod at all, it's a pike. I am the staring image of a pike!"

She screwed up her little eyes as she spoke, and pulled back her chin in a wonderful, fish-like grin which awoke a shriek of merriment from the beholders. Even Rhoda laughed with the rest, and reflected that if one were born ugly it was a capital plan to accept the fact, and make it a joke rather than a reproach. Thomasina was the plainest girl she had ever seen, yet she exercised a wonderful attraction, and was infinitely more popular among her companions than Irene Grey, with her big eyes and well-cut features.

"Next time you catch a pike just look at it and see if I'm not right," continued Tom easily. "But perhaps you don't fish. I'm a great angler myself. That's the way I spend most of my time during the holidays."

"I don't like fishing, it's so wormy," said Irene, with a shudder. "I like lolling about and feeling that there's nothing to do, and no wretched bells jangling every half-hour to send you off to a fresh class. 'Nerve rest,' that's what I need in my holidays, and I take good care that I get it."

"I don't want rest. I want to fly round the whole day and do nice things," said a bright-eyed girl in a wonderful plaid dress ornamented with countless buttons—"lunches, and teas, and dinners, and picnics, and dances, and plays. I like to live in a whirl, and stay in bed to breakfast, and be waited on hand and foot. I don't say I *get* it, but it's what I would have if I could."

"Well, I'm a nice, good little maid who likes to help her mother and be useful. When I go back I say to her, 'Now don't worry any more, dear; leave all to me,' and I run the house and make them all c-ring before me. Even the cook is afraid of me. She says I have such 'masterful ways.'"

The speaker was a tall, fair girl, with a very large pair of spectacles perched on the bridge of an aquiline nose. She looked "masterful" enough to frighten a dozen cooks, and made a striking contrast to the next speaker, a mouse-like, pinched little creature, with an air of conscious, though unwilling, virtue.

"I spent the last half of these holidays with a clergyman uncle, and helped in the parish. I played the harmonium for the choir practice, and kept the books for the Guilds and Societies. His daughter was ill, and there was no one else to take her place, so, of course, I went at once. It is quite a tiny little country place—Condleton, in Loamshire."

"What!" cried Rhoda, and sat erect in her seat sparkling with animation. "Condleton! I know it quite well. I often drive over there with my ponies. It is only six miles from our place, and such a pretty drive. I know the Vicarage quite well, and the Church, and the funny little cross in the High Street!"

She spoke perfectly simply, and without thought of ostentation, for her parents' riches had come when she herself was so young that she had no remembrance of the little house in the manufacturing town, but looked as a matter of course upon the luxuries with which she was surrounded. It never occurred to her mind that any of her remarks could be looked upon as boasting, but there was a universal glancing and smiling round the room, and Thomasina enquired gravely:

"Do you drive the same pair every day?"

"Of ponies? Oh, yes, generally," replied Rhoda innocently. "They are frisky little things, and need exercise. Of course if we go a very long way, I give them a rest next day and drive the cobs, but as a rule they go out regularly."

Thomasina shook her head in solemnest disapproval. "That's a mistake! You should change *every* day. The merciful man is merciful to his beast. I can't endure to see people thoughtless in these matters. My stud groom has special orders *never* to send out the postilions on the same mounts oftener than twice a week!"

There was a moment's pause, and then a shriek of laughter. Girls threw themselves back in their seats, and held their sides with their hands; girls stamped on the floor, and rolled about as though they could not contain their delight; girls mopped their eyes and gasped, "Oh, dear! oh, dear!" and grew red up to the roots of their hair. And Rhoda's face shone out, pale and fixed, in a white fury of anger.

"You are a very rude, ill-bred girl, Thomasina Bolderston! I made an innocent remark, and you twist it about so as to insult me before all the house! You will ask my pardon at once if you have any right feeling."

"I'm the Head Girl, my dear. The Head Girl doesn't ask pardon of a silly new-comer who can't take a joke!"

"I fail to see where the joke comes in. If you are Head Girl a dozen times over, it doesn't alter the fact that you don't know how to behave. You have bullied me and made me miserable ever since I came to this school, and I won't stand it any longer, and so I give you notice!"

"Much obliged, but it's no use. The rules of this school are that the pupils must obey the Head Girl in her own department, and there can be no exception in your favour, unpleasant as you find my yoke."

"When I am a Head Girl I shall try to be worthy of the position. I'll be kind to new girls, and set them a good example. I'll not jeer at them and make them so wretched that they wish they never had been born!"

Thomasina leant her head on her hand, and gazed fixedly into the angry face. She made no reply, but there was no lack of speakers to vindicate her honour. Sneering voices rose on every side in a clamour of indignant protest.

"When *she* is Head Girl indeed! It will be a good time before *that* happens, I should say."

"Not in our day, let us hope. We are not worthy to be under such a mistress."

"Oh my goodness, what a pattern she will be; what a shining example! You can see her wings even now beginning to sprout."

"Nonsense, child! It's not wings, it's only round shoulders. These growing girls *will* stoop. You had better be careful, or you will be set in order next."

Rhoda looked across the room with smarting, tear-filled eyes.

"Don't alarm yourselves; I wouldn't condescend to bandy words. You are like our leader—not worthy of notice!"

"Look here, Rhoda Chester, say what you like about us, but leave Thomasina alone. We will not have our Head Girl insulted, if we know it. If you say another word we will turn you out into the passage."

"Thank you, Beatrice; no need to get excited; I can fight my own battles without your help. This little difference is between Rhoda and me, and we must settle it together. I think we could talk matters over more comfortably in my study, without interrupting your rest hour. May I trouble you, Miss Chester? Three doors along the passage. I won't take you far out of your way!"

Thomasina rose from her seat, and waved her hand towards the door. She was all smiles and blandness, but a gasp of dismay sounded through the room, as if a private interview in the Head Girl's study was no light thing to contemplate.

Rhoda's heart beat fast with apprehension. What was going to happen. What would take place next? It was like the invitation of the spider to the fly—full of subtle terror. Nevertheless, her pride would not allow her to object, and, throwing back her head, she marched promptly, and without hesitation, along the corridor.

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## Chapter Nine.

### Having it out.

Thomasina led the way into her study, and shut the door behind her. It was a bare little room, singularly free from those photographs and nick-nacks with which most girls love to adorn a private sanctum. It looked what it was—a workroom pure and simple, with a pile of writing materials on the table, and the walls ornamented with maps and sheets of paper, containing jottings of the hours of classes and games. On the mantelpiece reposed a ball of string, a dogskin glove, a matchbox, and a photograph of an elderly gentleman, whose pike-like aspect sufficiently proclaimed his relationship. There were three straight-back chairs, supplied by the school, and two easier ones of Thomasina's own providing, both in the last stages of invalidism.

The mistress of this luxurious domain turned towards her visitor with a hospitable smile.

"Sit down," she cried, "make yourself comfortable. Not that chair—the spokes have given way, and it might land you

on the floor. Try the blue, and keep your skirts to the front, so that it won't catch on the nails. I can't think how it is that my chairs go wrong. I'm always tinkering at them. Nice little study, isn't it? So cosy!"

"Ye-es!" assented Rhoda, who privately thought it the most forlorn-looking apartment she had ever seen, but was in no mood to discuss either its merits or demerits. It was in no friendly spirit that she had paid this visit; then why waste time on foolish preliminaries? She looked expectantly at Thomasina, and Thomasina stood in front of the chimney-piece with both hands thrust into the side pockets of her bicycling skirt, jingling their contents in an easy, gentlemanly fashion. From her leathern band depended a steel chain which lost itself in the depths of the right-hand pocket. Rhoda felt an unaccountable curiosity to discover what hung at the end of that chain and rattled in so uncanny a fashion.

"Well!" began Thomasina, tilting herself slowly forward on the points of her flat, wide shoes, "Well, and now about this little matter. I asked you to step in here because I think differences of opinion are more easily settled without an audience, and as it were, man to man." She buried her chin in her necktie, and gazed across the room with a calm, speculative glance. The likeness between her and the pike-like gentleman grew more startling every moment. "Now, we have known each other barely a week, and already I have offended you deeply, and you, without knowing it, have hit me on a tender spot. It is time that we came to an understanding. Before going any further, however, there are one or two questions I should like to ask. You have had time to notice a good many things since you arrived. You have seen me constantly with the girls. Do they dislike me? Do they speak of me hardly behind my back? Do they consider me a bully or a sneak? Should you say on the whole that I was popular or unpopular?"

"Popular!" said Rhoda firmly. Whatever happened she would speak the truth, and not quibble with obvious facts. "They like you very much."

"And you wonder how they can, eh? Nevertheless it's true. I'll tell you something more. I'm the most popular Head Girl at Hurst. You ask the other colours to-morrow, and they'll tell you to a man that you are lucky to have me. Very well then, Rhoda, who's to blame if you think the opposite? Yourself, and nobody but yourself, as I'll proceed to prove. You come to school with a flourish of trumpets, thinking you are doing us a mighty big favour by settling among us, and that you are to be allowed to amble along at your own sweet will, ignoring rules you don't like, graciously agreeing to those you do, and prepared to turn into a wild cat the first moment any one tries to keep you in order. Then, when you are unhappy, as you jolly well deserve to be, you turn and rend me, and say it is my fault. If all the new girls behaved as you have done, I should have been in my little tomb long ago, and you would have some one else to deal with. It seems to me, my dear, that you don't recognise my duties. I am placed in a position of authority, and am bound to enforce the rules. If the girls are obedient, well and good; if they kick, well and good also. *I break 'em in!* I'm going to break *you* in, Rhoda Chester, and the sooner you realise it the happier you'll be."

Rhoda looked at her fully, with a firmness of chin, a straightness of eye, which argued ill for the success of the project.

"You will never break me in, as you call it, by domineering, and treating me like a child."

"I know it, my dear. I haven't been studying girls all these years without learning something of character. Some fillies you can drive with a snaffle, others need the curb. You drive yourself, and understand what I mean. I can see quite well that you are a proud, sensitive girl, with a good heart hidden away behind a lot of nonsense. If it were not for that heart I shouldn't trouble myself about you, but simply give my orders, and see that they were obeyed. But there's nothing mean about me, and I'd scorn to take an unfair advantage. Now, I'll tell you straight that I have come to the conclusion that I judged you wrongly about that pony business, and that you didn't mean to brag. I saw by the way you flared out that you were really hurt, and I was sorry. I've no pity on brag, but when I judge a girl wrongly I feel sick. If it's any relief to your mind to know it, I believe that little episode upset me more than it did you. When you said I was not worthy of my position, and made new-comers wretched, you hit me very hard, Rhoda, very hard indeed!"

She stopped short and jingled furiously at her chains, then suddenly looked up, gave a roguish smile, and cried, insinuatingly—

"There, I've done my part. I've acknowledged I was wrong. You are no coward, so you will do as much! You will admit that you have been a difficult subject, won't you now?"

Rhoda looked at her and hesitated. She cleared her throat and determined to speak openly, and then suddenly, suddenly, something swelled at her throat, and she heard her own voice say chokingly:

"I suppose I've been stupid... I've never been accustomed to be—ordered about! I'm sorry if I was disagreeable, but I never, never meant to—give myself airs!"

"But you did though, all the same," cried Thomasina briskly. "Bless me, yes! The way you came into a room, the way you walked out, the way you looked at your food, and turned it over on your plate, the way you eyed the other girls up and down, down and up—it all said as plainly as print 'I'm Her Royal Highness of Chester, and I won't have any dealings with the likes of *You!*' If you had been a Princess of the blood you couldn't have put on more side, and so, of course, we judged your words by your actions, and thought you were bragging when you meant nothing of the sort. Now, just make up your mind, like a sensible girl, to forget your own importance, and don't always be on the lookout for insults to your dignity. Your dignity will look after itself if it's any good, and you'll be a heap happier if you give up coddling and fussing over it all day long. There was that little matter of the pigtail the other morning! It wasn't my wish that you should tie back your hair. I don't mind telling you that it's much less becoming than it was, but I was simply acting as the mouthpiece of Miss Bruce, as you might have known if you had taken one minute to consider. Your friend, Dorothy What-ever-she-calls-herself, behaved like a sensible girl, and did as she was told without making a fuss, but you must needs work yourself into a fury. You'll have a fit one of these days if you are not careful. You are

just one of those fair, reddy people who are subject to apoplexy, so don't say I didn't warn you. When we went down to breakfast I tried to be friendly, just to show there was no ill-feeling, and you went and starved yourself rather than accept a crumb from my hands. It reminded me awfully of my little cousin of three. When he is made to do what he doesn't like, he refuses to eat his bread and milk. He seems to think he is punishing us somehow; but, bless your heart, *we* don't mind! We know he is strong and hearty, and that it will do him no harm to starve once in a way. I wasn't in the least anxious about you, but I don't want you to go on feeling wretched in my house, so I'll do my best to consider your feelings. I warn you, however, I can't stop chaffing. If I think of a funny thing to say, I *must* say it or burst, and if you don't like it you can comfort yourself by thinking that it's for your good, and will teach you to control your temper. If you get offended after this, the more fool you, for I tell you straight there will be no ill-feeling in my mind, nothing but simple, pure buffoonery."

Rhoda smiled feebly. The cool, unemotional tones of the other had effectually dried her tears, but the softened expression remained, and her voice had almost an humble intonation.

"I'll try. I know I am touchy, but I shan't mind so much now that you—that you have explained! I think you have been very generous."

"All right," interrupted Thomasina briskly. "Don't gush. I loathe gush. That's all right, then, and I'll tell the girls I was wrong just now. They will all treat you decently if I tell them to; so behave sensibly, and don't be a young jackass, and all will be well."

"I—er, I *beg* your pardon!"

"Don't mention it!" Thomasina beamed amiably over her shoulder. "Jackass, I said—don't be a jackass! The gong will ring in ten minutes, so you'd better be off to your room. Pleased to have seen you! Good afternoon. Come again another day!"

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## Chapter Ten.

### Hard Work.

From that day forward matters moved more smoothly for Rhoda. Dorothy reported that Tom had returned to the house-parlour to explain her regret at having misjudged a new-comer, and her desire that her colleagues would second her effort to make Rhoda happy, and, as usual, Tom's word was law. That very evening several of the girls took an opportunity of exchanging friendly remarks with Rhoda, while at supper an amount of attention was bestowed upon her plate which was positively embarrassing. It was a delightful change, but through all the relief rang the sting of remembering that it had been accomplished by Thomasina, not herself; that the new friendliness was the result of Thomasina's orders rather than her own deserts. To her fellow-students she was still an insignificant new-comer, with no claim to distinction. If she excelled in one subject, she was behind in the next, while at games she was hopelessly ignorant. It was wormwood and gail to be obliged to join the "Bantlings" at hockey, and be coached by a girl of twelve; but Rhoda set her teeth and determined that if pluck and energy could help, it would be a short time indeed before she got her reward. Oh, those first few games, what unmitigated misery they were! The ankle pads got in her way, and made her waddle like a duck, and when at last she began to congratulate herself on overcoming the first difficulty, they tripped her up, and landed her unexpectedly on the ground. Although she was repeatedly warned to keep her stick down, it seemed to fly up of itself, and bring disgrace upon her; and then, alas! the ball followed its example, bounded up from the ground, and landed neatly on her cheek immediately beneath her left eye. A hideous swelling and discolouration was the result, but after the first rush to see that the damage was not serious, no one seemed in the least agitated about the mishap. Erley Chase would have been convulsed with panic from attic to cellar, but Thomasina only struck an attitude, and exclaimed, "Oh! my eye!" and even Miss Everett smiled, more in amusement than horror, as she cried, "In the wars already, Rhoda? You *have* begun early." Mrs Chester would hardly have recognised her darling in the knickerbockered girl, with her curly mane screwed into a pigtail, her dainty feet scuffling the ground, and her face disfigured by a lump, which changed to a different colour with each new dawn. If she could have had a glimpse of her during that tragic period it is certain that Rhoda's term at "Hurst" would have been short indeed: but she was not informed of the accident, while each letter showed an increasing interest in work and play. Rhoda had put her back into her studies, and worked with an almost feverish earnestness. The hours of preparation were all too short, but she found a dozen ways of adding to their length, so that from morning to night her brain was never allowed to rest. She grew white and tired, and so perceptibly thin that Miss Bruce questioned her class-mistress as to the change in her appearance.

"She is an ambitious girl," was the reply, "and does not like to feel behind. She is working hard, and making progress; but she never complains, or appears to feel ill."

"Oh, well, everything in moderation. See that she is not overworked. There will be no time gained in that way," said the principal, and forthwith banished the subject from her busy brain. There came a day, however, half way through the term, when Rhoda collapsed, and found it impossible to rise from her bed. Three times over she made the effort, and three times sank back upon her pillow faint and trembling, and then in despair she raised her voice, and wailed a feeble "Tom!"

Tom came promptly, buttoning her magenta jacket, and went through a most professional examination.

"To the best of my judgment," she announced finally, "you are sickening for scarlatina, tonsillitis, and housemaid's knee, but if you stay in bed and have an invalid's breakfast I should say you would be fairly convalescent by twelve o'clock. Snoddele down, and I'll see Nurse as soon as I'm dressed, and put her on the track."

"I want Miss Everett!" sighed Rhoda plaintively, and Tom gave a grunt of assent.

"I expect you do. All the girls want her when they are ill. She's no time to spare, but I'll tell her, and probably she'll squeeze in five minutes for you after breakfast. You are not going to die this time, my dear, so don't lose heart. We shall see your fairy form among us before many hours are past!"

Perhaps so. Nevertheless it *was* good to be coddled once more, to lie snugly in bed and have a tray brought up with a teapot for one's very own self, and egg, and fish, and toast—actually toast! instead of thick slices of bread-and-scrape. The luxury of it took away one's breath. It was pleasant, also, to have Nurse fussing around in motherly fashion, and hear her reminiscences of other young ladies whom she had nursed, in days gone by, and brought back from the jaws of death. From her manner, it is true, she did not appear to suffer any keen anxiety about her present patient: but, as Rhoda looked at the empty dishes before her, she blushingly acknowledged that, after all, she could not have been so ill as she had imagined.

After breakfast came Miss Everett, sweet as ever, and looking refreshingly pretty in her pale blue blouse and natty collar and cuffs. If one did not know to the contrary, she would certainly have been mistaken for one of the elder girls, and her manner was delightfully unprofessional.

"Well, my poor dear, this is bad news! I *was* sorry when Tom told me. What is it?—headache—back-ache—pain in your throat?"

Rhoda stretched herself lazily and considered the question.

"A kind of general all-overishness, if you know what that means. I feel played out. I tried to get up, but it was no use, I simply couldn't stand. I feel as if I had no back left—as weak as a kitten."

Miss Everett looked at her quietly, then her eye roved round the room and rested meaningly on half-a-dozen pieces of paper fastened up in conspicuous positions. One sheet was tacked into the frame of the looking-glass, another into a picture, a third pinned against the curtain, and each was covered with Rhoda's large writing, easily legible across the few yards of space: Rules of Latin Grammar, List of Substantives, Tenses of Verbs—they stared one in the face at every turn, and refused to be avoided. Miss Everett laid her hand upon the bed, and something rustled beneath her touch. Yet another sheet had been concealed beneath her pillow.

"Oh, Rhoda!" she cried, reproachfully; "oh, Rhoda!"

The girl put on an air of protest.

"What? There's no harm in it, is there? I can't catch the others up unless I work hard. I have not enough time in preparation, so I put these up and learn them while I dress and undress, and every time I come in to prepare for a meal. You have no idea what a lot I get through. And I keep a list in my pocket too, and take it out at odd moments. Miss Murray is surprised at the way I am getting on."

"I have been surprised too, to see you look so ill, with such white cheeks and heavy eyes. I understand it now."

"But, Miss Everett, I *must* work. I *must* get on! If I am behind I *must* catch up. Even if I am tired I must get on in my class."

"Why?"

Why? Why must she get on? It was such an extraordinary question to come from a teacher, that Rhoda could only gasp in bewilderment—"Why? You ask *why*?"

"Yes, I do. One has always some object in work. I wondered what yours might be. Why are you so terribly anxious to come to the front?"

A dozen answers rose to Rhoda's lips. To impress Thomasina; to show her that if I do think a good deal of myself, it's not without a cause... To take the conceit out of the girls who patronise me. To be able to patronise in my turn, and not remain always insignificant and powerless... To show Harold how clever I am, and to have my name put on the Record Wall when I leave! ... They were one and all excellent reasons, yet somehow she did not care to confide them to Miss Everett. Instead, she hesitated, and answered by another question.

"I suppose you think there is a wrong and a right motive? I suppose you think mine is the wrong one. What is the right, then? I'm ill, and reduced in my mind, so it's a good time to preach; I'll listen meekly!"

"And disagree with every word I say," cried Miss Everett laughing. "No, no, Rhoda, I never preach. I know girls well enough to understand that that doesn't pay. There are some secrets that we have to find out for ourselves, and it is waste of time telling the answers before the hearer is ready to receive them; only, when one has oneself suffered from ignorance, and sees another poor dear running her head against the wall, one is sorry, that's all, and one longs to point out the danger signals. Find out, dear, what your motive is, and be satisfied that it's a good one. Meantime, I'm going to take away these papers. Do you see? Every—single—one!" She walked round the room, confiscating the lists, and putting them in her pocket with an air of good-natured determination. "Let that tired head rest, and believe me, my dear, that your elders understand almost as much about girls as you do yourself. We are never blamed for under-working at Hurst, and you may take for granted that the hours for work are as long as you can stand. The short time spent in your cubicle is not intended for work, but for rest—of all kinds!"

Rhoda blushed guiltily. During the first days at school the morning hymn had been both a delight and stimulus. She had listened to the words with a beating heart, and whispered them to herself in devout echo; they had seemed to strike a keynote for the day, and send her to work full of courage; but, alas! for weeks past the strains had fallen on deaf ears, and the lips had been too busy conning Latin substantives to have leisure for other repetition. Her sense of



guilt made her meek under the confiscation of her lists, and pathetically grateful for the kiss of farewell.

"Thank you for coming. I know you are busy, but I wanted you so! It's nice to see you; you look so sweet and pretty!"

"Oh, you flatterer! I'm surprised at you. As if it matters what a staid old teacher looked like; I'm above such silly vanities, my dear."

She looked, however, extremely pleased, quite brisked up in fact, and so delightfully like a girl that Rhoda took heart of grace, and enquired:—

"I wish you would tell me *your* object! That wouldn't be preaching, and you are so young to be working so hard! I have often wondered—"

"Ah!" cried Miss Everett, and a curious look passed over her face—half glad, half sad, wholly proud. "I'll tell you my object, Rhoda—it's my brother, Lionel! I have an only brother, and he is a genius. You remember his name, and when you are an old lady in a cap and mittens you can amuse other old ladies by telling how you once knew his sister, and she prophesied his greatness. At school he carried all before him, and he is as good as he is clever, and as merry as he is good. He won a scholarship at Oxford, but that was not enough. My father is the vicar of Stourley, in D—shire, and has such a small stipend that he could not afford to help him as much as was needed. Then I wrote to Miss Bruce, and asked her if she could give me an opening. She is an old family friend, and knew that I had done well in examinations and was good at games (the younger teachers here must be able to play with the girls—it's one of the rules), so she gave me my present position, and I am able to help the boy. He went up last year and did famously, but I have had sad news this week. He had been obliged to go home and convalesce after an attack of influenza, and is so weak still that the doctor says he will want any amount of rest and feeding up before he can go back. So you see I am more thankful than ever to be able to help!"

"I don't see it at all," said Rhoda bluntly. "I should be mad. What's the good of your slaving here if, after all, he can't get on with his work? You might as well be comfortably at home."

"Rhoda! Rhoda! be quiet this moment. It's bad enough to fight against my own rebellious feelings without hearing them put into words. I won't stay another moment to listen to you!"

She gave a playful shake to the girl's shoulder, and ran out of the room, while Rhoda "snoddled" down to think over the conversation.

"Well, then, I suppose her motive is love—love for her brother, and—er—thinking of him before herself. She comes here and slaves so that he may have his chance. She is an angel, of course, an unselfish angel, and I'm a wretch." She lay still for a few moments, frowning fiercely, then suddenly the bedclothes went up with a wrench—"I don't care—she's ambitious too! She thinks he is clever, and wants him to be great! Well, so do I want to be great! If it isn't wrong for one person, it can't be for another. My motive is *success*, and I'll work for it till I drop!"

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## Chapter Eleven.

### Tom's Examination.

A day in bed renewed Rhoda's energy, and she took up her work with unabated fervour. The "lists" were, perhaps, less conspicuously displayed than before, but were none the less in readiness when needed, and if Miss Everett disapproved, the Latin mistress was all praise and congratulation.

"I certainly have a gift for languages, and with lessons during the holidays I shall soon be steaming ahead," Rhoda told herself proudly. "I'll ask mother to let Mr Mason coach me. He is a splendid teacher, and if I have an hour a day I shall learn a lot. Won't the girls stare when I come back, and go soaring up the class! I shouldn't wonder if I got a remove. It will be impossible to work up to Thomasina and her set, but at any rate I'll be past the baby stages, and not disgrace myself in the examinations."

All the world seemed bounded by examinations at present. Thomasina and the elder girls working steadily towards the goal of the "Matric"; Kathleen and her friends dreaming night and day of the "Oxford"; while nearer at hand loomed the school examinations, which ended the term. Rhoda was in a fever of anxiety to acquit herself well in the eyes of her companions on this occasion, and could think, speak, and dream of nothing else. Even her joy of getting her remove from the "Bantlings" into a higher team was swallowed up in the overwhelming interest, while Dorothy was filled at once with admiration and disgust at the monotony of her conversation.

"I don't know, and I don't care!" she replied callously, when anxiously consulted about a point in mathematics. "I've come out to play, and I'm not going to rack my brains for you or anyone else. You are getting a regular bore, Rhoda! It's like walking about with 'Magnall's Questions.' Let's talk about frolics, or holidays, or something nice, and not worry about stupid old lessons."

Well! Rhoda told herself, it was no wonder if Dorothy *were* medium, if this was the way she regarded her studies. If she took no more interest than this in the coming contest, what could she expect from the result? She would be sorry, poor dear, when she saw her name at the bottom of the list! There was no help to be expected from Dorothy; but Rhoda stored up a few knotty questions, and took the first opportunity of asking Tom for a solution. She had discovered that Tom liked nothing better than to be consulted by the younger girls, and had a tactful way of asking help in return, which took away the sense of obligation.

"Oh, by-the-by," she would call to Rhoda, in her elegant fashion, "you are a bit of a German sausage, aren't you? Just

read over that passage for me. I've been puzzling over it for the whole of the evening," and then would follow some blissful moments, when Rhoda would skim lightly over the difficulty, and feel the eyes of the girls fixed admiringly upon her.

In the present instance a wet Saturday afternoon afforded a good opportunity for the desired questioning. The Hurst girls did not stay indoors for an ordinary drizzle, but this was a downpour of so hopeless a character that even the most enthusiastic athletes felt that the house-parlour was preferable to the soaking, wind-swept grounds. They gathered together, stoked up the fire, and prepared to spend the two hours' leisure as fancy should dictate, some girls reading, some sewing, and some making themselves as comfortable as circumstances would permit, and doing nothing at all with every appearance of enjoyment.

"If we had only some chestnuts," said one of the lazy ones, "how happy we might be! I have a wild craving for chestnuts. It came over me suddenly just now, sitting looking at that fire."

"I think," said Irene Grey solemnly, "it's very sad, but I do think a school like this makes one horribly greedy. You get so tired of the food, and have such a longing for something that *isn't* wholesome. I assure you, my dears, there have been occasions when the centre table has had beef, while we have had mutton, when I could have wept—simply wept! I should like to order a meal regardless of everything but what I like—lobster mayonnaise, and salmon, and veal cutlets, and ice pudding, and strawberries and cream, and fizzy lemonade. That would be something like a dinner—better than old joints and milk puddings!"

The girls groaned in sympathy, and Rhoda took advantage of their absorption to cross to Tom's desk and consult her quietly on the knotty points. The solutions were remarkably simple—when you knew them!—and Tom delivered herself solemnly on the subject.

"You don't think, my dear; you don't reflect. Your brain would help you out, but you don't give it a chance. It's what I am always saying to this room—it's not cram you need, it's intelligence! Use your reason! Cultivate your faculties! Now, then, I'll tell you what I'll do!"—she raised her voice suddenly, and swung round in her seat. "I'll give you girls an examination myself. You need some practice before the real business begins, and it will be just the thing for this wet afternoon. Get out your books and pencils and I'll dictate the questions. It's to be a 'General Intelligence' paper, and the examiner's instructions are—use your wits! They will not be the ordinary blunt, straightforward questions manufactured by the masculine mind, and intended mainly for the coarse, masculine ability, but full of depth and subtlety, so that they will require careful consideration. If you go scribbling down your answers before you have read the questions, you'll be sorry, that's all; but don't say you were not warned. Now, then, are you ready? ... We will begin our studies to-day, young ladies, with a problem in calculation!" She deepened her voice into such an accurate imitation of the Arithmetical Mistress as filled her listeners with delight. "Attention to the board!—If a room were 20 feet long, 13 feet broad, 11 feet high, and 17 feet square, how much Liberty wall-paper 27 inches wide would be required to paper it, allowing 5 feet square for the fireplace and seven by three for the door?"

The girls wrote down the question, not, however, without some murmurs of protest.

"If there is one kind of sum I hate more than another, it's these horrid old wall-papers!" declared Bertha Stacey. "I shall never be a paper-hanger, so I don't see why I should worry my head. I don't call *this* General Intelligence."

"I expect we shall have a taste of most subjects; but really, Tom, really now—the room could not be 17 feet square if your other measurements were right!" argued Irene, who knew arithmetic to be her strong point, and was not sorry to impress the fact on her companions. "You have made a mistake."

She expected the examiner to be discomfited, but Tom fixed her with a glittering eye, and demanded if perchance she had *seen* the room in question, since she was so positive.

"No, of course not, but then— You know quite well—"

"Well, I *have*, so perhaps you will allow me to know better. Go on, young ladies, and the next one who dares to raise any objections gets ten bad marks to begin her list. I must have perfect submission. Five minutes allowed for working!"

The time proved all too short for some of the workers, for the less expert they were the more elaborate became their calculations, until page after page was filled with straggling figures. Thomasina made a round of inspection, frowning over each book in turn, protesting, scolding, marking the result with a big black cross. According to her verdict everyone was wrong, although five girls had arrived at the same result; and Irene obstinately disputed the decision.

"I *know* it is right! Work it for yourself, and see. It's a simple enough sum, and any one could tell—"

"That's apparently just what they can't do! I don't deny that you may be correct in the broad, vulgar sense, but that is not enough for me. I expect you to grasp the inner meaning. Now the *real* answer to this question is that there can be no answer! To a perceptive mind it would be impossible to reply without further information. It entirely depends on how the paper is cut out, and the amount of waste incurred in matching the pattern!"

The girls shrieked aloud in mingled protest and delight. It was too bad; it was ripping, it was mean; it was killing; they all spoke together and at the pitch of their voices, and alternately abused and applauded until they were tired. The *dénouement* had taken them by surprise, though in truth they knew their Head too well to have taken the examination seriously. When Tom played schoolmistress there was bound to be a joke in ambush, and they settled down to question number two with minds alert for a trap.

"We will now, young ladies, take an excursion into the realms of Literature, and test your insight into human nature. I will ask you, if you please, to compare the respective characters of Alfred the Great and Miss Charlotte Yonge—Jo

March' and Joseph Chamberlain—four great, and, it will be obvious to all, strongly-defined personalities. I shall be interested to hear your distinctions!"

It appeared, however, as if there would be little to interest, for most of the girls stared blankly into space, as if powerless to tackle such a subject. Rhoda was one of the few exceptions, and scribbled unceasingly with a complacent sense of being on her own ground until the limit of time was reached. Tom had evidently noticed her diligence, for she called out a peremptory, "Rhoda, read aloud your answer!" which was flattering, if at the same time slightly alarming.

"Ahem—er—er—in the historical character of Alfred the Great we find combined the characteristics of courage and simplicity. He waged a long and unequal fight, and was equally inspired by failures or success.

"In the person of Miss Charlotte Yonge we discover the same virtues, but in a softer and more feminine mould. Her heroes are for the most part refined and cultivated young men, actuated by the highest motives—"

"Stop! Stop!" screamed Thomasina desperately. "For pity sake spare us the rest. Such deadly propriety I never encountered! It reminds me of the Fairchild family at their very worst. If *that's* the sort of thing you are going to write, Rhoda, I pity the poor examiners. And what do you mean by Alfred fighting? He was a most peaceful creature, so far as I have heard!"

"Thomasina! the war with the Danes—all those years! You must remember!"

"I don't remember a thing about it. How could a man fight the Danes living in a peaceful retreat in the Isle of Wight, as Tennyson did for—?"

Tennyson! Tennyson! Who spoke of Tennyson? Oh! it was too bad; too mean! How on earth could anyone be expected to guess that Tom had meant Tennyson, when she had expressly said Alfred the Great? Rhoda protested loudly, and the other girls backed her up; but Tom was obdurate.

"And isn't Tennyson known as 'Alfred the Great' as well as the other crittur? It is just another example of want of intelligence! You read the words, and never trouble about the connection. Who in their sane senses would ask you to compare a warrior king with old Miss Yonge? A little reflection would have saved you from the pitfall into which you have all fallen headlong. Five bad marks each! Now, then, for the next two. What have you got to say about the two Joes?"

Very little apparently. No one had tackled the comparison in Rhoda's grandiose fashion, but a few pithy sentences were to be found scribbled on the sides of exercise books. "Jo March was very clever, and my father says Mr Chamberlain is, too!" from one dutiful pupil. "Jo March was a darling, and Chamberlain is not," from another of Radical principles. "Both wore eye-glasses, and wrote things for magazines," and other such exhaustive criticisms.

"You are *all* plucked in Literature," announced Thomasina, solemnly, "and I am deeply pained by the exhibition! I will give you one more chance in Arithmetic before going on to the higher branches, because, as you are aware, this is a most vital and important subject. Write down, please: A and B each inherited thirty thousand pounds. A invested his capital in gold-mine shares to bring in eighteen per cent, interest. B put his money into the Post Office Savings Bank, and received two and a half per cent. State to three places in decimals the respective wealth of each at the expiration of twenty-seven years!"

"Er—with what deduction for current expenses?" queried Irene, with an air. She had been snubbed once, but was not in the least subdued. "What were their current expenses?"

"There were none!"

"Thomasina, what bosh! There *must* have been. They couldn't live on nothing."

"Well, they did, then. Since you are so particular, I may tell you that they were in prison! They had their wants supplied by their native land."

"I'm not going to do sums about convicts! My mother wouldn't like it," said Dorothy, shutting up her book with a bang. She leaned forward, and whispered in Rhoda's ear, "Don't bother; it's only another joke. What's the use of worrying for nothing?"

"It's practice," said Rhoda, and away went her pencil, scribbling, calculating, piling up row upon row of figures. To her joy the answer came out the same as Irene's, which surely must prove it right; yet, as Dorothy had prophesied, Tom was once more sweeping in denunciation, "Wrong! Wrong! All wrong! The gold-mine failed, and left A a pauper, while B lived happily ever after. You are old enough to know that gold-mines that pay eighteen per cent, invariably *do* fail and ruin their shareholders; or if you don't, you may be thankful to me for telling you. I must say, young ladies, you are coming exceedingly poorly through my test. I cannot congratulate you on your insight. I doubt whether it is any use examining you any further."

"Oh, yes, let us have the higher branches, Tom! Do let us have the higher branches! Who knows? Perhaps we may distinguish ourselves at last. Give us another chance!" pleaded the girls, mockingly; and, thus challenged, Tom could not but consent. She tackled Zoology, and giving the three divisions of Plantigrada, Pinnigrada, and Digitigrada, added a list of animals to be classified accordingly. When it is said that the list included such widely diverging creatures as "A camel-leopard, a duck-billed platypus, Thomasina Bolderston, and Spring-heeled Jack," it can be imagined with what zest the pupils began their replies.

Tom professed to be mortified beyond endurance to find her fairy tread unanimously classed under the first heading,

and begged the Blues to take notice that if any girl pined to call her “splay-footed” to her face she might do so, and take the consequences! No one accepted the challenge, however; so she proceeded to Latin, and, with much jingling of keys, gave out a sentence for translation:—

“Aequam memento rebus in arduis servare mentem.” The girls smiled at this, confident of their powers. The students at Hurst prided themselves on their Latin, and could have stood a much severer test without wavering. The seniors did not trouble to write their answers, but waited complacently until the time came when they should have an opportunity of airing their proficiency. It never came, however, for Tom chose to disappoint expectations by reading aloud her own translation from her position in front of the fire.

“Memento—remember; mentem—and mind; servare—to hold up; aequam—your mare; in rebus arduis—going up hill. That translation, young ladies, was given by an undergraduate in the University of Oxford. He afterwards rowed stroke in the ‘Varsity boat, and was the best billiard player of his year, so it would ill become us to dispute his conclusions. You will observe the valuable moral lessons inculcated in the words, and, I trust, take them to heart—‘Remember and mind—’”

A laugh sounded from the direction of the door, and there stood Miss Everett, looking round with mischievous eyes. Rhoda noted with relief that she looked brighter than for days past, as if some good news had arrived from the home about which she was so anxious.

“This sounds improving,” she cried, merrily. “Thomasina holding a Latin class! I am glad you have found such an exemplary way of passing the afternoon. I am afraid you must stop, however, as the gong will ring in five minutes, and meantime I must break up the class. I want,”—her eye roved enquiringly round the room—“I want Rhoda!”

“Certainly, Miss Everett. Anything to oblige you. Rhoda, my love, you have my permission to retire,” drawled Thomasina, wagging her head in languid assent, and Rhoda left the room in no little wonder as to the reason of the summons.

Arrived in the corridor, Miss Everett laid both hands on the girl’s shoulders, and asked a quick, laughing question:—

“What about that hamper?”

“Hamper?” echoed Rhoda. “Hamper?” Her air of bewilderment was so unaffectedly genuine that the other’s expression became in turn doubtful and uncertain.

“Yes, yes, the hamper! The hamper of good things that has just arrived for my brother. I thought you—”

“I know nothing about it; truly I don’t! I wish I did, but—”

“But, my dear girl, it came from your home. There was a game label upon it, with your father’s name in print—‘From Henry Chester, Erley Chase.’ There cannot be two Henry Chesters living at houses of the same name.”

“Ah!” exclaimed Rhoda, and her face lit up with pleasure. “It’s mother! Of course it’s mother! It’s just the sort of thing mother would do. I told her that your brother had been ill, and that you were anxious about him, and so she set to work to see how she could help. That’s just like mother, she’s the kindest dear! I believe she sits down in her armchair after breakfast every single morning, and plans out how many kind things she can do during the day.”

“Bless her heart!” cried Miss Everett devoutly. “Well, Rhoda, she succeeded this time. My mother has written me all about it. It was a dull, wet day, and Lionel seemed depressed, and there was nothing nice in the house, and nothing nice to be bought in the little village shops, and she was just wondering, wondering how in the world she could cheer him, and manufacture a tempting lunch out of hopeless materials, when tap-tap-tap came the carrier’s man at the door. Then in came the hamper, and Lionel insisted upon opening it himself, and was so interested and excited! There were all sorts of good things in it—game, and grapes, and lovely, lovely hot-house flowers filling up the chinks. They were all so happy! It was such a piece of cheer arriving in that unexpected fashion, and mother says the house is fragrant with the scent of the flowers. Lionel arranged them himself. It kept him quite happy and occupied. How can I thank you, dear?”

“Don’t thank me. It was not my doing. It’s mother.”

“But how did your mother know where we lived? How did she know who we were?”

“Well!” Rhoda smiled and flushed. “Naturally I tell her the news. I suppose I must have mentioned that your father was Vicar of Stourley. I don’t remember; but then I’ve so often written about you, and she would naturally be glad to do anything she could, for she knows you have been kind to me, and that I’m very—fond of you!”

Miss Everett bent down quickly, and kissed her on the cheek.

“And my people knew who Mr Chester was because I’ve written of you, and they know that you have been kind to *me*, and that I’m fond of you, too. Oh Rhoda, you don’t know how lonely it feels to be a teacher sometimes, or how grateful we are to anyone who treats us as human beings, and not as machines. You don’t know how you have cheered me many a time.”

“But—but—I’ve been tiresome, and stupid, and rebellious. I’ve given you lots of trouble—”

“Perhaps, but you have been affectionate too, and seemed to like me a little bit, in spite of my lectures; and if it had not been for your kind words the hamper would never have come, so I insist upon thanking you as well as your mother. Many, many thanks, dear! I shall always re—” She stopped short suddenly, her attention arrested by the scraping of chairs within the parlour, and concluded in a very different tone, “The girls are coming! For pity’s sake

don't let Tom find us sentimentalising here! Fly, Rhoda, fly!" and off she ran along the corridor, flop, flop, flop, on her flat-soled shoes, as much in fear of the scrutiny of the head girl as the youngest Blue in the house!

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## Chapter Twelve.

### Home Again.

The week of examination passed slowly by, and the morning dawned when the all-important lists were to be read aloud. The girls were tired after the strain, the teachers exhausted by the work of reading over hundreds of papers, and it was consequently a somewhat pale and dejected-looking audience which assembled in the Hall to hear the report.

Rhoda sat tense on her seat, and puzzled for some moments over the meaning of a certain dull, throbbing noise, before discovering that it was the beating of her own heart. It seemed to her morbid sensitiveness that every eye was upon her, that everyone was waiting to hear what place the new girl had taken. When Miss Bruce began to read she could hardly command herself sufficiently to listen, but the first mention of her own name brought her to her bearings with a shock of dismay. After all her work, her care, her preparation, to be so low as this, to take so poor a place! The mortification was so bitter that she would fain have hidden herself out of reach of consolation, but to her surprise, so far from condoling, teachers and pupils alike seemed surprised that she had done so well.

"You have worked admirably, Rhoda. I am pleased with you," said Miss Murray.

"Well done, Fuzzy!" cried Tom, and even Miss Bruce said graciously:

"Very good progress for a first term, Rhoda!"

It was evident from their manner that they meant what they said, and another girl might have gleaned comfort from the realisation that she had expected too much of her own abilities. Not so Rhoda! It was but an added sting to discover that she had been ranked so low, that an even poorer result would have created no astonishment. She was congratulated, forsooth, on what seemed to her the bitterest humiliation! If anything was needed to strengthen the determination to excel at any and every cost, this attitude of the school was sufficient. In the solitude of the cubicle she vowed to herself that the day should come, and that speedily, when she would be estimated at her right value. She stood in the damp and cold gazing up at the Record Wall, and renewed the vow with fast-beating heart. The sun struggled from behind the clouds and lit up the surface of the tablets, and the Honours girl, and the B.A. girl, and the girls who had won the scholarships, seemed to smile upon her and wish her success, but Eleanor Newman's name was in the shade. The sun had not troubled to light it up. She was "stupid," and had never won a prize.

The last two days were broken and unsatisfactory, and Rhoda longed for the time of departure to arrive; yet it was not without a pang of regret that she opened her eyes on the last morning, and gazed round the little blue cubicle. It was delightful to be going home, yet school had its strong points, and there were one or two partings ahead which could not be faced without depression. How nice it would be if she could take all her special friends home—Dorothy and Kathleen, and Miss Everett, and—yes! Tom herself; for, wonderful to state, she was unaffectedly sorry to part from Tom. What fun they would have had running riot in Erley Chase, and summoning the whole household to wait on their caprices!

The gong rang, and all the little bells followed suit in their usual objectionable fashion, but the girls yawned and lay still for another five minutes, aware that leniency was the order of the day. The roll of the organ and the first two lines of the hymn found them still in bed, and the words were clearly distinguishable:—

Awake my soul, and with the sun, Thy daily course of duty run—

"How stupid!" commented Rhoda to herself. "'Course of duty' on the very day we are leaving school. What a ridiculous choice!" and then she tumbled out of bed and listened no more.

The rest of the morning seemed a comical Alice-in-Wonderland repetition of the day of arrival. The same long queues were formed to march down, instead of upstairs; the teachers stood on the landings to say good-bye, instead of welcome; the "Black Marias" bore the pupils to, instead of from, the station, where the saloon carriages stood waiting as before. The Blues crowded into one carriage, and Tom seated herself by Rhoda, and with twinkling eyes called attention to the undulating beauty of the landscape. It was all exactly the same, yet delightfully different, for now there was no shyness nor restraint, but the agreeable consciousness of liberty to chaff in return, and be as cheeky as one chose.

There was unceasing talk on the journey, yet each girl realised as the train steamed into Euston that she had forgotten to say the most important things, and was divided between regret and anxiety to look out for friends waiting on the platform. Rhoda had heard that Harold was to meet her, and presently there he was—handsomer than ever, or looking so after the three months' separation, and as immaculate as if he had stepped out of the traditional bandbox.

"There he is! That's Harold! That's my brother!" she cried, with a thrill of pride in the tall, frock-coated figure; and Thomasina looked, and rolled her little eyes to the ceiling.

"What a bee-ootiful young man! A perfect picter! Give him my fond love, Fuzzy, and say that I am desolated not to be able to stay to make his acquaintance, but I must make a bolt for my train."



“Here I am! I have come back at last!” (p. 128).

She seized her bag as she spoke and hurried to the door, prepared to jump on to the platform at the first possible moment, while her companions impatiently followed in her wake. Rhoda had a vague recollection of promising to write regularly to half a dozen girls, and then she was shaking hands with Harold, and laughing in pure joy at seeing the familiar face.

“Here I am! Here I am! I have come back at last!”

“So I see!” He swept a glance over her, half smiling, half startled. “Awfully glad to see you. Got your luggage in the van, eh? Don’t know how on earth we shall get hold of it in this crowd. What an—excuse me!—an appalling set of girls!”

“I thought so too, at first, but they look different when you know them. Some of them are sweet, and awfully pretty.”

“Humph!” said Harold, sceptically. “They are not conspicuous. I don’t see a decent-looking girl anywhere, except—who’s the girl in the grey hat?”

“That’s Miss Everett, our house-mistress, the one I’m so fond of—the one who has the invalid brother, you know, to whom mother sent the game!”

“Teacher, is she? I thought she was a pupil. Sorry for her, poor little thing, if she has to manage a lot of girls like you. Ha! ‘R.C.’ That’s your box at last. I’ll get a porter to put it on a four-wheeler. Watch where I go, and keep close behind.”

He strolled forward, and such was the effect of his imposing appearance and lordly ways, that the porters flew to do his bidding, and piled the luggage on the cab, while others who had been first on the scene were still clamouring for attention. Rhoda glanced proudly at him as they drove away together, but the admiration evidently was on one side, for he frowned, and said critically—

“You—er—look pale! You have lost your colour!”

“I’ve been working hard.”

“You have grown thinner!”

“Games, I suppose. We are always running about.”

“Er—what has become of your hair?”

Rhoda first stared, and then laughed.

“Oh, my pigtail! I forgot that you hadn’t seen it. I hated it too, at first, but I’ve grown accustomed to it, and find it very comfortable. It worries me now to have my hair blowing about and tickling my face.”

“All the same, my dear, you had better untie it before we get home. We will lunch at the Station Hotel, and you can comb it out there. It will give the mater a shock if she sees you looking so changed. She would hardly know you, I think.”

The tone of disapproval hit hard, and to hide her chagrin Rhoda adopted an air of indifference.

“Oh, we don’t trouble ourselves about appearances at Hurst. So long as we are comfortable we are satisfied. If a girl worries to dress up, we chaff her unmercifully.”

“The more foolish you! I hope and pray, Rhoda, that you are not going to develop into one of the strong-minded young women one meets nowadays, who seem to spend their lives in trying to be as much like men as possible. It will be a mistake if you do. Be as learned as you like, and as sensible as you like, and as hardy as you like—that is all to the good—but, for pity’s sake, be pretty too, and dainty, and feminine! We don’t want to have all our womenkind swallowed up in athletes, warranted to be ‘hard kicks,’ or ‘useful forwards!’ We want them to play the ornamental part in life, and be pretty, and sweet, and attractive.”

“Ha, ha, yes! That’s the man’s point of view!” quoth Rhoda loftily, and her brother smiled good-naturedly as the cab stopped before the hotel.

“It is, my dear, that’s very certain; and as you will probably meet a good many men as you go through life, you might as well study their opinion. It may be regrettable, but it is certainly true, that you will have more influence if you are agreeable to look at. You would have more influence over *me* at this moment if you would kindly walk upstairs and make yourself look—er—a little more like your old self!”

“Oh, I don’t mind. Anything to please you!” said Rhoda carelessly, and strode upstairs after the chambermaid, smiling to herself in lofty superiority at Harold’s “dandy ways.” She did not smile, however, when, on coming suddenly in front of the mirror, she caught a full-length reflection of herself, for her brother’s presence had unconsciously altered her point of view, so that she saw herself no longer from the standpoint of Hurst Manor, but that of Erley Chase. Yes, Harold was right! It was not only the pigtail; there was an indefinable difference in her whole appearance. The clothes were the same, the girl was the same, but there was no longer the immaculate neatness, the dainty care, the well-groomed look which had once characterised her. In her usual impetuous fashion, she had rushed from one extreme to the other; in discarding vanity, had run perilously near neglect.

“I look a nasty, horrid, hidjus fright!” she cried aloud, staring in disgust at the unwelcome vision. “I couldn’t have believed it—really I couldn’t! It’s the fault of those horrid little cubicles with the glass stuck in the darkest corner. Harold was right. Mother would have been shocked.”

She slipped off coat and hat, and with the aid of the well-stocked dressing-bag went through such a process of dusting, brushing, and combing-out as she had not known for weeks past. Finally the old Rhoda seemed to smile upon her in response, in her own eyes at least, but when Erley Chase was reached some hours later Mrs Chester was far from satisfied with her darling’s appearance. Her anxious eyes took in at a glance every change in the beloved features, and nothing could shake her conviction that the child had been starved and overworked. An elaborate system of coddling was inaugurated, to which Rhoda submitted with wonderful meekness.

Oh, the delight at being home again, of being loved and fussed over, and indulged in one’s pet little weaknesses! How beautiful everything looked; the richly-furnished rooms, the hall with its Turkey carpet and pictured walls; the dinner table with its glittering glass and silver! How luxurious to awake in her own pretty room, to hear the fire crackling in the grate, and to sit up in bed to drink the early cup of tea!

“I never realised before how nice home was!” sighed Rhoda to herself, and for four whole days she succeeded in forgetting all about school, and in abandoning herself to the enjoyment of the festivities of the season.

Christmas Day once over, however, recollections came back with a pang, and she was all eagerness to begin the proposed lessons with the Vicar. To her surprise, father and mother looked coldly upon the project, and so far from admiring her industry thought it a pity to introduce work into the holidays. It needed a hard struggle to induce them to consent to three lessons a week instead of six, and she had to face the certainty that private study would be made as difficult as possible. Even Harold elevated his eyebrows and enquired, “Why this tremendous hurry?” as if he had never been to a public school himself and known the necessity for advance.

Rhoda betook herself to the faithful Ella in no very gentle mood, and stormed about the small Vicarage garden like a young whirlwind.

“Well, I must say grown-ups are the most tiresome, aggravating, unreasonable creatures that were ever invented! First they want you to work, and urge you to work, and goad you to work, and ‘Oh, my dear, it would do you all the good in the world to compete with other girls,’ and then, the moment you take them at their word and get interested and eager, round they turn, and it’s, ‘Oh the folly of cram! Oh the importance of health!’ ‘Oh what does it matter, my dear good child, if you *are* a dunce, so long as you keep your complexion!’ No, I’m not angry, I’m perfectly calm, but it makes me *!!!* I can’t stand being thwarted in my best and noblest ambitions. If I had a daughter, and she wanted to cram in her holidays, I’d be proud of her, and try to help, instead of throwing hindrances in the way. It’s very hard, I must say, to get no sympathy from one’s nearest and dearest. Even your father looked at me over his spectacles as if I were a wild animal. I thought he would have been pleased with my industry.”

“He is; I know he is; but he thinks you may overdo it. You know, Rhoda, you *are* impetuous! When you take up an idea you ride it to death, and in lessons that doesn’t pay. Slow and sure wins the—”

“Rubbish! Humbug! It will never win my race, for I have a definite time to run it in, and not a day more. It has to be a gallop, and a pretty stiff one at that. For goodness’ sake, Ella, don’t *you* begin to preach. You might be grown-up yourself, sitting there prosing in that horribly well-regulated fashion.”

“I’m not well-regulated!” cried Ella, incensed by the insinuation. “I was only trying to calm you down because you were in such a temper. What is the use of worrying? You have got your own way; why can’t you be happy? Leave the

wretched old Latin alone, and tell me about school. There are a hundred things I am longing to hear, and we have not had a proper talk yet. Tell me about the girls, and the teachers, and the rules, and the amusements, and what you like best, and what you hate worst.”

It was a “large order,” as Harold would have said, but Rhoda responded with enjoyment, for what can be pleasanter than to expatiate on one’s own doings to a hearer with sufficient knowledge to appreciate the points, and sufficient ignorance to prevent criticism or undue sensitiveness as to consistency of detail!

Rhoda told of the chill, early breakfasts, of the seven o’clock supper when everything looked so different in the rosy light, especially on Thursdays, when frolics and best clothes were the order of the day; of Miss Mott, with her everlasting “Attention to the board”; the Latin mistress, with her eye-glasses; Fraulein, with a voice described by Tom as sounding “like a gutter on a rainy day”; and of Miss Everett, sweetest and best-loved of all. Lastly she told of the Record Wall, and Ella was fired, as every girl hearer invariably was fired, with interest and emulation.

When Rhoda went off to her lesson in the study the poor little stay-at-home recalled the words of Eleanor Newman’s inscription, and capped them by one even more touching:

“Ella Mason, a student of exceptional promise, voluntarily relinquished a career of fame and glory to be a cheerful and uncomplaining helper at home.” Alas, poor Ella! at the word “cheerful” her lips twitched, and at “uncomplaining” the big tears arose and trickled down her cheeks!

For the rest of the holidays Rhoda worked more persistently than anyone suspected, with the exception of her tutor, who invariably found the allotted task not only perfectly accomplished, but exceeded in length. Even making allowances for the girl’s undoubted gift for languages, he was amazed at her progress, and complimented her warmly at the close of the lessons, watching with half-amused, half-pitying eyes the flush of pleasure on the girl’s cheeks.

“You are very ambitious, Rhoda. Very anxious to distinguish yourself?”

“Yes.”

“Well, well! you are young. It is natural. Remember only that there are different kinds of success, and aim for the best. When I was your age I had dreams of a deanery or a bishopric, but I have remained all my life in this sleepy village. My college companions have soared over my head, yet I can never feel myself an unsuccessful man. I have had great compensations, and have discovered that obscurity has many lessons which I needed badly to learn. Don’t be too anxious for honour and glory; there are other things better worth having!”

“The worst of old people is—they *will* preach!” said Rhoda to herself as she walked home across the Park. “He is a good old thing, the Vicar, but a terrible bore. Unsuccessful! I should think he *is* unsuccessful, with half-a-dozen children, and that wretched little bit of a house, and a poor stipend. No wonder he gets prosy. Young people understand young people best, and Miss Everett was quite right when she said it was no use trying to stuff lessons down your throat until you were ready to swallow them. If all the fathers, and mothers, and brothers, and vicars in the world were to lecture me now, and tell me to take it easy, and not to worry about the examination, it would have no effect. In another two days I go back to school, and then—then—” She stood still in the midst of the bare, wintry scene, and clasped her hands together passionately.

“Rhoda Chester, you must work, you must win! If you don’t do well in that examination, it will break your heart!”

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## Chapter Thirteen.

### “If I Pass—”

The Christmas holidays were over, the Easter holidays were over, and spring was back once more. On the slope over which the new students had gaily tobogganed two months before the primroses were showing their dainty, yellow faces, and the girl gardeners were eagerly watching the progress of their bulbs. Hearing that other plots boasted nothing rarer than pheasant eye and Lent lilies, Rhoda had promptly written home for a supply of Horsfieldi and Emperor, which were expected to put everything else in the shade, but, alas! they were coming up in feeble fashion, and showed little sign of flowering. “Another year,” the gardener said, “they would do better another year! Bulbs were never so strong the first season.” Whereat Rhoda chafed with impatience. Always another time, and not *now*!

Always postponement, delay, uncertainty! Try as she might, checks seemed to be waiting on every side, and she could never succeed in distinguishing herself above her fellows. In moments of depression it seemed that she was as insignificant now as on the day when she first joined the school; but at other times she was happily conscious of a change in the mental attitude towards herself. Though still far from the front, she was recognised as a girl of power and determination; an ambitious girl, who would spare no work to attain her end, and who might, in the future, become a dangerous rival. Dorothy had long ago thrown up the unequal fight, and even Kathleen had moments of doubt, when she said fearfully to herself, “She is cleverer than I am. She gets on so well. Suppose—just suppose...”

With milder weather, cricket had come into fashion, and on the occasion of the first pavilion tea the Blues turned up in force. Thomasina sat perched in manly attitude on the corner of the table, where, as it seemed to the onlooker, every possible hindrance was put in the way of her enjoyment of the meal. Irene Grey presided at the urn, Bertha handed round the cups, and a bevy of girls hung over the cake basket, making critical and appreciative remarks.

“Bags me that brown one, with the cream in the middle! I’ve tried those macaroons before—they are as hard as bricks!”



"I wish they would get cocoa-nut cakes for a change; I adore cocoa-nuts, when they are soft and mushy. We make them at home, and they are ever so much nicer than the ones you buy!"

"That's what they call plum-cake, my love! Case of 'Brother, where art thou?' like the Friday pudding. Those little white fellows look frightfully insipid. What Rhoda would call a 'kid-glove flavour,' I should say."

Every one laughed at this, for it was still a matter of recent congratulation in the house that Rhoda Chester had invented an appropriate title for a certain mould or blancmange, which appeared at regular intervals, and possessed a peculiar flavour which hitherto had refused to be classified.

In a moment of inspiration, Rhoda had christened it "Kid-Glove Jelly," and the invention had been received with acclamation. Did she say she had never distinguished herself, had never attracted attention? No, surely this was wrong; for in that moment she had soared to the very pinnacle of fame. So long as the school endured, the name which she had created would be handed down from generation to generation. Alas, alas! our ambitions are not always realised in the way we would choose! When one has pined to be in a first team, or to come out head in an examination, it is a trifle saddening to be obliged to base our reputation on—the nickname of a pudding!

Rhoda smiled brightly enough, however, at the present tribute to her powers, and passed her cup for a third supply with undiminished appetite. She had been playing with her usual frantic energy, and was tired and aching. Her shoulders bent forward as she sat on her chair; she shut her eyes with a little contraction of the brows; the dimple no longer showed in her cheek; and when Bertha upset the tray upon the floor, she started with painful violence. Her nerves were beginning to give way beneath the strain put upon them; but, instead of being warned, and easing off in time, she repeated obstinately to herself:—"Three months more—two and a half—only two!—I can surely keep up for eight weeks, and then there will be all the holidays for rest!"

It seemed, indeed, looking forward, as if the world were bounded by the coming examination, and that nothing existed beyond. If she succeeded—very well, it was finished! Her mind could take in no further thought. If she failed—clouds and darkness! chaos and destruction! The world would have come to an end so far as she was concerned.

It filled her with surprise to hear the girls discuss future doings in their calm, unemotional fashion; but though she could not participate, the subject never failed to interest. The discussion began again now, for it was impossible to keep away from the all-engrossing subject, and the supposition, "If I pass," led naturally to what would come afterwards.

"If I do well I shall go up to Newnham, and try for the Gilchrist Scholarship—fifty pounds a year for three years. It's vacant next year, and I don't see why I shouldn't have it as well as anyone else," said Bertha, modestly, and Tom pounded the table with her heels.

"Go in, my beauty, go in and win! I only wish you could wait a few years until I am there to look after you. I am going to be Principal of Newnham one of these fine days, and run it on my own lines. No work, and every comfort—breakfast in bed, and tea in the grounds—nothing to do but wait upon me and pander to my wishes!"

"I daresay! So like you, Tom! You would be a terror, and work the girls to death. You are never tired yourself, so you would keep them going till they dropped. I pity the poor creatures who came under your rule, but most likely you will never be tried. You may be first mistress, or second, or third, but it's not likely you'll ever be a Principal!"

"It's not likely at all, it's positive sure," retorted Tom calmly. "Principals, like poets, are born not made, and the cause can't afford to lose me. I don't say for a certainty it will be Newnham; it may possibly be Girton, or Somerville, or Lady Margaret Hall, but one of the two or three big places it's bound to be. No one shall call me conceited, but I know my own powers, and I intend that other people shall know them too. Education is my sphere, and I intend to devote my life to the advancement of my sex. Pass the cake, someone! I haven't had half enough. Yes, my vocation is among women. You will hardly believe me, my dears, but men don't seem to appreciate me, somehow! There is a 'Je-ne-sais-quoi' in my beauty which doesn't appeal to them a mite. But girls adore me. I've a fatal fascination for them which they can't withstand. There's Rhoda there—she intended to hate me when she first came, and now she adores the ground I tread on. Don't you, Fuzzy? You watch her smile, and see if it's not true! Very well, then; I see plainly what Providence intends, and I'm going straight towards that goal."

"And it is what you would like? You would choose it if you had the choice?"

"Rather, just! It's the dream of my life. There is nothing in all the world that I should like so much."

Pretty Dorothy sighed, and elevated her eyebrows.

"Well—I wouldn't. I enjoy school very much, and want to do well while I am here, but when I leave, I never want to do another hour's study. If I thought I had to teach, I should go crazy. I should like to have a good time at home for a few years, and then—yes, I should!—I should like to marry a nice man who loved me, and live in the country—and have a dear little home of my own. Now, I suppose you despise me for a poor-spirited wretch; but it's true, and I can't help it."

But Tom did not look at all scornful. She beamed at the speaker over her slice of plum-cake, and cried blandly—

"Bless you, no! It's quite natural. You are that sort, my dear, and I should not have believed you if you had said anything else. You'll marry, of course, and I'll come and visit you in the holidays, and you'll say to 'Him,' 'What a terrible old maid Thomasina has grown!' and I'll say to myself, 'Poor, dear old Dorothy, she is painfully domestic!' and we will both pity each other, and congratulate ourselves on our own escape. We have different vocations, you and I, and it would be folly to try to go the same way."

"You are happy creatures if you are *allowed* to go your own way," said Bertha sadly. "I'm not, and that's just the trouble. I'm not a star, like Tom, but I love work, and want to do some good with my education. I should be simply miserable settling down at home with no occupation but to pay calls, or do poker work and sewing; yet that's what my parents expect me to do. They are rich, and can't understand why I should want to work when there is no necessity. I may persuade them to send me abroad for a year or so for languages and music, but even then I should be only twenty, and I can't settle down to vegetate at twenty. It's unreasonable to send a girl to a school where she is kept on the alert, body and mind, every hour of the day, and then expect her to be content to browse for the rest of her life! Now, what ought one to do in my position? *I* want one thing; *they* want another. Whose duty is it to give way?"

She looked at Tom as she spoke, but Tom swung her feet to and fro, and went on munching plum-cake and staring into space with imperturbable unconsciousness. Bertha called her sharply to attention.

"Tom! answer, can't you? I was speaking to you."

"Rather not, my dear. Ask someone else; some wise old Solomon who has had experience."

"No, thank you. I know beforehand what he would say. 'Submission, my child, submission! Parents always know best. Young people are always obstinate and hot-headed. Be ruled! Be guided! In time to come you will see'—Yah!" cried Bertha, with a sudden outburst of irritation. "I'm sick of it! I've had it dinned into my ears all my life, and I want to hear someone appreciate the other side for a change. I'm young; I've got all my life to live. If I were a boy I should be allowed to choose. Surely! surely, I ought to have *some* say in my own affairs! Don't shirk now, Tom, but speak out and say what you think. If you are going to be a Principal you ought to be able to give advice, and I really do need it!"

"Ye-es!" said Tom slowly. "But you needn't have given me such a poser to start with. It's a problem my dear, that has puzzled many a girl before you, and many a parent, too. The worst of it is that there is so much to be said on both sides. I could make out an excellent brief for each; and, while I think of it, it wouldn't be half a bad subject to discuss some day at our Debating Society: 'To what extent is a girl justified in deciding on her own career, in opposition to the wishes of her parents?' Make a note of that someone, will you? It will come in usefully. I'm thankful to say my old dad and I see eye to eye about my future, but if he didn't—it would be trying! I hate to see girls disloyal to their parents, and if the 'revolt of the daughters' were the only outcome of higher education I should say the sooner we got back to deportment and the use of the globes the better for all concerned. But it wasn't all peace and concord even in the old days. Don't tell me that half a dozen daughters sat at home making bead mats in the front parlour, and never had ructions with their parents or themselves! They quarrelled like cats, my dears, take my word for it, and were ever so much less happy and devoted than girls are now, going away to do their work, and coming home with all sorts of interesting little bits of news to add to the general store. It's impossible to lay down the law on such a question, for every case is different from another, but I think a great deal depends on the work waiting at home. If a girl is an only daughter, or the only strong or unmarried one, there is no getting away from it that her place is with her parents. We don't want to be like the girl in *Punch*, who said, 'My father has gout, and my mother is crippled, and it is so dull at home that I am going to be a nurse in a hospital!' *That* won't do! If you have a duty staring you in the face you are a coward if you run away from it. An only daughter ought to stay at home; but when there are two or three, it's different. It doesn't take three girls to arrange flowers, and write notes, and pay calls, and sew for bazaars; and where there is a restless one among them, who longs to do something serious with her time, I—I think the parents should give way! As you say, we have to live our own lives, and, as boys are allowed to choose, I think we should have the same liberty. I don't know how large your family is, Bertha, or—"

"Three sisters at home. One engaged, but the other two not likely to be, so far as I can see, and Mother quite well, and brisk, and active!"

"Well, don't worry! Don't force things, or get cross, and they'll give in yet, you'll see. Put your view of the case before them, and see if you cannot meet each other somehow. If they find that you are quiet and reasonable they will be far more inclined to take you seriously, and believe that you know your own mind. That's all the advice I can give you, my dear, and I'm afraid it's not what you wanted. Perhaps someone else can speak a word in season!"

"Well, I side with the parents, for if the rich are going to work, what is to become of the poor ones like me, who are obliged to earn their living?" cried Kathleen, eagerly. "Now, if Bertha and I competed for an appointment, she could afford to take less salary, and so, of course—"

"No, no! That's mean! I do beg and pray all you Blues that, whatever you do, you never move a finger to reduce the salaries of other women!" cried Tom fervently. "If you don't need the money, give it away to Governesses' Institutions—Convalescent Homes—whatever you like; but, for pity's sake, don't take less than your due. For my own part, I must candidly say that when I am Principal I shall select my staff from those who are like Kathleen, and find work a necessity rather than a distraction. It seems to me, if I were rich and idle, I could find lots of ways of making myself of use in the world without jostling the poor Marthas. I could coach poor governesses who were behind the times, but couldn't afford to take lessons; I'd translate books into Braille for the blind; I'd teach working boys at their clubs, and half a dozen other interesting, useful things. There's no need to be idle, even if one *does* live at home with a couple of dear old conservative parents. Where there's a will there's a way!"

"But I want it to be my way!" sighed Bertha, dolefully. Like the majority of people who ask for advice, she was far from satisfied now that she had got it.

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## Chapter Fourteen.

### The "Revels."

One of the Hurst Manor institutions was a whole holiday on the first Saturday in June, which was technically known as "Revels." The holiday had been inaugurated partly to celebrate the coming of summer, and partly as a kindly distraction for the students, who at this season of the year were apt to be too absorbingly engrossed in the coming examinations. Old pupils declared that at no other time was the Principal so indulgent and anxious to second the girls' fancies, while the particular form of entertainment was left entirely to their discretion. When the programme was drawn up it was submitted to Miss Bruce for approval, but, as she had never been known to object, the consultation was more a matter of form than necessity.

To Rhoda's surprise, she found her name among those of the General Committee posted on the notice board, and the delight and pride consequent thereon diverted her thoughts into a new channel, and were as good as a tonic to her nervous system. It was a compliment to have been chosen, for the dozen girls had been drawn from all five houses, and Irene Grey and herself were the only representatives of the Blues.

"It's a beauty competition, evidently. Can't think why they haven't asked me!" was Tom's comment; but Rhoda felt convinced that she had been selected because of the dramatic abilities which she had exhibited on more than one of the Thursday "Frolics," and was not far wrong in her surmise. She had, in truth, a keen eye for effect, a power of manufacturing properties, and of learning and even inventing suitable rhymes, which were invaluable in organising an entertainment.

"And besides," said the Games Captain to her Secretary, "there's her back hair! She has really admirable back hair!"

The Committee held their meetings in the study of the Head Green, and anxiously discussed their programme. On previous years they had held Gymkhanas and various kinds of picnics, but the ambition was ever to hit on something so original and startling as to eclipse all that had previously been attempted. They racked their brains and gazed helplessly at the ceiling, while the Chairwoman begged for remarks, after the manner of all Committees since the world began. Then, at last, someone hazarded a suggestion, someone else took it up and added a fresh idea; and the ball, once set rolling, grew bigger and bigger, until, at last, there it was, complete and formed before them! It was a charming programme—quite charming! They were full of admiration for their own cleverness in inventing it, and away they flew, smiling and confident, to consult Miss Bruce in her sanctum.

The Principal read the sheet handed to her, and the corners of her lips twitched in humorous fashion. She looked across at the twelve eager young faces, and smiled a slow, kindly smile.

"It sounds *very* charming!" she said; "I am sure it would be most entertaining, but—would it not involve a great deal of preparation? Do you think you have realised how much work you will have?"

"Oh yes, Miss Bruce, but we can manage it easily!" cried the Chairwoman. "We can get as many helpers as we like in game hours, and you always allow us an afternoon off to make preparations."

"Certainly, certainly! You can do nothing without time. Very well, then, if you think you can manage, I have no objection. You have my permission to ask the carpenter and gardeners to help you, and if anything is needed, one of the governesses shall go into town to make your purchases."

Nothing could have been more gracious. The Committee gave a unanimous murmur of acknowledgment, and were immediately smitten with embarrassment. So long as one has something to say it is easy to retain self-confidence, but, when the business is finished, the necessity of saying good-bye and beating a retreat becomes fraught with terror to the timid guest. The girls felt that it would be discourteous to retire without speaking another word, but what to say they could not think, so they huddled together beside the door, and waited to be dismissed, which they presently were in the kindest of manners.

"I shall look forward with great pleasure to the performance. Success to your efforts! You will have plenty to do, so I won't detain you any longer. Good afternoon!"

The Committee retired in haste, gasped relief in the corridor, and promptly set about collecting forces for the furtherance of its aim. They enlisted the sympathies of the workmen engaged in the grounds, selected parties of amateur gardeners to supplement their efforts, and chose the forty prettiest girls in the school to be on the "acting staff." Each new worker was pledged to secrecy, as surprise was to be the order of the day, and a certain portion of the grounds was marked off by placards bearing the announcement that "Trespassers would be persecuted!" A casual observer might have imagined a slip of the pen in this last word, but the girls knew better. It would be persecution, indeed, and of no light nature, which would be visited upon a willing violator of that order.

For the next ten days preparations went on busily, both outdoors and in the various studies. Lessons, of course, could not be interrupted, but the hours usually devoted to games, added to odd five minutes of leisure, made up a not inconsiderable total. The onlookers reported eagerly among themselves that the dancing mistress had been pressed into the service, and that sundry mysterious boxes had been sent to the leading members of the Committee from their various homes. Everyone was agreed that "It" was to be very grand, and they prepared to enjoy the entertainment in a hearty, but duly critical fashion; for when we ourselves have not been asked to take part in an enterprise, pride has no better consolation than to think how much more successful it would have been in happier circumstances!

The Committee announced that, should the weather prove unpropitious, a modified form of the proposed entertainment would be given in Great Hall, but no one seriously contemplated such a catastrophe. Providence was so invariably kind to "Revels" that the oldest student could not recall a day that had been less than perfect, and this year was no exception to the rule. The air was soft, the sky was blue, the grass, unscorched as yet by the heat of summer, of a rich emerald green, the sunshine sent flickering shadows over the paths; it was one of those perfect days when our native land is seen at its best; and when England is at her best, go east or west, or where you will, you can find no place to equal it! Every single inmate of school came down to breakfast with a smile on her face, for this

was a day of all play and no work, and as the formal entertainment did not take place until three o'clock, the whole morning remained in which to laze after one's heart's desire. Even the Committee were so well on with their preparations that by eleven o'clock they were free to join their friends, and Rhoda looked eagerly round for Miss Everett. No one had seen her, however, and a vague report that she was "headachy" sent the searcher indoors to further her inquiries. She found the study door closed, but a faint voice bade her enter, and there on the sofa lay Miss Everett with a handkerchief bound round her head. She looked up and smiled at Rhoda's entrance, and said immediately:

"Do you want me, dear? Can I do anything to help you?"

"So likely that I would let you, isn't it?" returned Rhoda scornfully. "What is the matter? Is your head bad?"

"Yes! No! It isn't really so very bad, but one seems to give way when there is nothing to do. If it had been an ordinary day I should have gone on with my work, and even played games. I have managed to get through many a time when I've been worse than this; but it's a luxury to lie still and rest. I—I'm enjoying it very much!"

"You look like it!" said Rhoda shortly, noting with sharp eyes the flushed cheeks, the drops of tell-tale moisture on the eyelashes. "This room is like an oven, and it will get worse and worse as the day goes on. Now, it's my turn to order you about, and you've got to obey. Get up and put on your hat, and come out with me!"

"Rhoda, I can't! It's cruel! I can't walk about. Do—do let me rest when I get a chance. I'm *so* tired!"

"You are not going to walk about; you are going to rest better than you could ever do here, so don't worry and make objections. Here's your hat, and here's my arm, and please come along without any more arguing. You'll be thankful to me when I get you nicely settled!"

"*When!*" echoed Miss Everett ungratefully; but she was too languid to oppose the girl's strong will, so she sat up, put on her hat, and allowed herself to be led downstairs and into the grounds. The girls were scattered about under the trees, but Rhoda skirted round the paths so as to avoid them as much as possible, and presently came to a sheltered spot, where Dorothy lay swinging to and fro in a most superior Canadian hammock which had been sent from Erley Chase at the beginning of the summer weather. She peered over the edge as footsteps approached and Rhoda cried briskly:

"Tumble out, Dorothy! I said you could have it until I needed it myself, and I want it now for Miss Everett. She has a headache, and is going to rest here until lunch. Now then, I'll shake up the pillows, and if you don't say it is the most delicious hammock you ever lay in, I shan't think much of your taste. I'll put up the parasol and tuck it into the ropes—so!—that you may feel nice and private if anyone passes. Now then, how's that? Isn't that comfy? Isn't that an improvement on the stuffy little study?"

Miss Everett rested her head on the cushion, and drew a long breath of enjoyment.

"It's—beautiful! It's perfect. I'm so happy! I never want to move again."

"You are not to move until I tell you. Go fast asleep, and I'll promise faithfully to wake you in time for lunch. We must have you well for the afternoon, you know. I'd be heart-broken if you didn't see me in my grand—. Never mind, that's a secret, but you *will* rest, won't you? You will be good, and do as you are told?"

"Kiss me!" replied Miss Everett simply, lifting her dark eyes to the girl's face with an appeal so sweet that it would have touched a heart of stone. No sooner was the kiss given, than down fell the eyelids, and Rhoda crept away realising that sleep, the best of medicines, was indeed near at hand. She herself spent a happy morning lying flat on her back on the grass in company with half a dozen other girls, discussing the affairs of the world in general, the blatant follies of grown-ups, and the wonderful improvements which would take place when they in their turn came into power. Rhoda was specially fervid in denunciation, and her remarks were received with such approval that it was in high good temper that she went to awaken the sleeper from her two hours' nap. Miss Everett declared that she felt like a "giant refreshed," had not a scrap of pain left, and had enjoyed herself so much that if "Revels" ended there and then, she would still consider it an historic occasion, which was satisfactory indeed.

But there was more to follow! There was a great dressing up in the cubicles after lunch, the girls making their appearance in pique skirts and crisp new blouses, and rustling into the grounds, all starch and importance. The "persecuting placards" had been withdrawn, and replaced by others directing the visitors' steps in the right direction. They followed meekly, "This way to the Opening Ceremony!" and found themselves on the south side of the lake, where a semicircle of chairs had been set for the teachers, and gaily-hued rugs spread on the grass to protect the freshness of the pique skirts. Here, no doubt, was the place appointed, but where was the Ceremony? The girls took their places, and began to clap in impatient fashion, speculating vaguely among themselves.

"What's going to happen now? Why do we face this way where we can't see anything except the lake? There's the landing place opposite—perhaps they are going to play water-polo? It wouldn't be bad fun in this weather."

"I think some one should have been here to receive us. It's rude to let your guests arrive without a welcome. If I had been on the Committee— What's that—?"

"What? Oh, music! But where—where? It is growing nearer. It's a violin, and a 'cello—and someone singing. This grows mysterious! Oh, I say—Look! look to the right! To the right! Oh, isn't it romantic and lovely?"



“ ‘ It’s Rhoda Chester ! ’ ” (see page 157).

The girls craned forward, and cried aloud in delight, for round the corner of the lake was slowly coming into view a wonderful, rose-wreathed barque, with Youth at the prow and Pleasure at the helm, clad in the most fanciful and quaint of garments. It would have been idle to assert that this wonderful craft was the old school tub, guaranteed to be as safe as a house, and as clumsy as hands would make it; for no one could have been found to listen to such a statement. Garlands of roses fluttered overhead; roses wreathed the sides, pink linings concealed the dark boards, and, as for the occupants, they looked more like denizens of another world than practical, modern-day schoolgirls. The oarswomen stood at their post, wearing pale green caps over their flowing locks, and loose robes of the same colour. The musicians were robed in pink, with fillets of gauze tied round their heads, and underneath the central awning sat a gorgeous figure who was plainly the Queen of the Ceremony.

Amidst deafening applause the boat drew up before the landing-stage, and, while the oarswomen stood to attention, the central figure alighted, and moved slowly forward until she stood in front of the semicircle of watchers.

“It’s Rhoda Chester!” gasped the girls incredulously, pinching their neighbours’ arms in mingled excitement and admiration; and Rhoda Chester in truth it was, transformed into a glorified vision, far removed from the ordinary knickerbockered, pigtailed figure associated with the name. A white robe swept to the ground, the upper skirts necked over with rose-leaves of palest pink; in the right hand she bore a sceptre of roses, and a wreath of the same flowers crowned her head. Her cheeks were flushed with excitement, and she bore herself with an erect, fearless mien which justified her companions’ choice.

When it had become necessary to apportion the *rôle* of “Mistress June” the Committee had unanimously agreed that it would be safest in Rhoda’s hands. She would not quail at the critical moment, mumble her words, nor forget her duties; but, on the contrary, would rise to the occasion, and find the audience a stimulus to her powers.

It was her genius also which had invented the verses for recitation, so that there seemed a double reason for giving her the place of honour. So Rhoda had sent home an imperious dressmaking order, and here she was, dainty as loving care could make her, her flaxen mane streaming over her shoulders, the sceptre extended in welcome—as fair a personation of “Mistress June” as one need wish to see—

“Friends and companions, and our teachers dear  
We give you welcome to our kingdom here.  
Once more has kindly summer come to stay,  
And Mistress June resumes her wonted sway.  
We are your hosts, and to our leafy bowers  
We welcome you to spend the sunny hours;  
In happy revels we will all unite,  
In song, and dance, and ancient pastimes bright;  
All cares forgotten, labours laid aside,  
Hearts turned to joy, and glad eyes open wide  
To watch, as when bright fay and sportive faun  
Wove their gay dances on the woodland lawn.  
Alas! the stress of higher education

Has vanished these, the poet's fond creation.  
But nature—not to be denied—has sent  
Yet fairer forms for gladsome merriment,  
Who wait my nod. The beauty of the nation  
Are gathered here to win your approbation.  
But you grow weary—Hither, maidens all,  
Forth from your bowers, responsive to my call,  
With roses crowned, let each and all advance,  
And let the Revels start with song and dance!"

It was astonishing how well it sounded, recited with an air, and to an accompaniment of smiles and waving hands. Little Hilary Jervis, the youngest girl in the school, remarked rhapsodically that it was "Just like a pantomime!" and the finale to the address was so essentially dramatic that her elders were ready to agree with her decision.

Rhoda backed gracefully to the spot where her flower-decked chair had been placed by her attendants, and having taken her seat, clapped her hands as a signal to her handmaidens. Instantly from behind the shelter of the trees there tripped forward a band of pink and green-robed figures, bearing in their hands garlands of many-coloured roses. The roses were but paper, it is true, and of the flimsiest manufacture, but at a little distance the effect could not have been improved, and when the dance began to the accompaniment of music "on the waters" the effect was charming enough to disarm the most exacting of critics. It was an adaptation of the "scarf dance" practised by the pupils, but the dresses, the circumstances, the surroundings added charm to the accustomed movements, and there were, of course, deviations from the original figures, noticeably at the end, when, with a simultaneous whirling movement, the dancers grouped themselves round their Queen, holding up their skirts so as to entirely conceal their figures. The greens were on the outside, the pinks arranged in gradually deepening lines, and Rhoda's smiling face came peeping out on top; it was evident to the meanest intellect that the final tableau was intended to represent a rose, and—granted a little stretch of imagination—it was really as much like it as anything else!

This first item of the programme over, the dancers grouped themselves in attitudes of studied grace, while little green-robed heralds led the way to what, for want of a more high-flown name, was termed "The Rose Bower," where various sports and competitions had been organised. Roses were, indeed, conspicuous by their absence; but there was an archery ground, an amateur Aunt Sally (clad, one regrets to state, in the garb of a University Examiner!) and many original and amusing "trials of skill." Tom came off victorious in an obstacle race, in the course of which the competitors had to pick up and set in order a prostrate deck chair, correctly add up a column of figures, unravel a knotted rope, and skip with it for fifteen or twenty yards, thread a needle, and hop over the remaining portion of the course; while Dorothy, who held a stick poised in her hand, called out in threatening tones, "You *would* pluck me in arithmetic, would you? Take *that!*" and let fly with such energy that the "Examiner" fell in fragments to the ground.

It was a scene of wild hilarity, for even the teachers threw off their wonted airs of decorum, and entered into the spirit of the occasion, and to see severe Miss Mott throwing for cocoa-nuts, and fat little Fraulein hopping across the lawn, were by no means the least entertaining items in the programme.

Rhoda sat enthroned on her rose-wreathed chair, looking on at the revels, well content with idleness since it was the badge of superiority. The pleasantest part of her duties was still to come, and the girls realised for what purpose the sixpence-a-head contribution had been levied by the Games Captains, as they saw the prizes which were awarded the successful competitors. No one-and-eleven-penny frames this time; no trashy little sixpence-three-farthing ornaments; nor shilling boxes supplied with splinty pencils and spluttering pens; but handsome, valuable prizes, which any girl might be proud to possess. Dorothy was presented with an umbrella with a silver handle; another lucky winner received the most elegant of green leather purses, with what she rapturously described as "scriggles of gold" in the corners; Tom won a handsome writing-case, and a successful "Red" the daintiest little gold bangle, with six seed pearls encircling a green stone, concerning the proper name of which it was possible to indulge in endless disputations.

Rhoda was in her element distributing these gifts, and afterwards in leading the way towards the pavilion, which had been transformed into a veritable bower by the hands of willing workers, and in which were displayed a supply of the most luxurious refreshments. Miss Bruce had contributed generously towards the afternoon's entertainment, and as the girls sat about upon the grass, and were waited upon by the "Rose Maidens," no one had need to sigh in vain for "something nice." The choice of good things was quite bewildering, and little Hilary Jervis was reported to have reverted twice over from coffee to lemonade, and to have eaten an ice-cream and a ham sandwich in alternate bites. She was blissfully happy, however, and so was everyone else, and when at last Mistress June returned to her Barque, and the singers started the first notes of "Good Night," two hundred voices took up the strain with a strength and precision which made the unrehearsed effect one of the most striking in the programme.

And so ended "Revels"—the happiest day which many of the students were to know for long weeks to come.

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## Chapter Fifteen.

### Drawing Near.

A week after "Revels" had taken place the very remembrance seemed to have floated away to an immeasurable distance, and only wonder remained that any interest could have been felt on so trivial a subject. From morning to night, and from night till morning, the same incessant grind went on, for of what rest was sleep when it opened the door for fresh torture, as, for instance, when a Cambridge Examiner condescended to the unfair expedient of kidnapping a candidate's wardrobe, leaving her to decide between the alternative of staying at home or attending the examination room attired in a *robe de nuit*? On other occasions it appeared that by some unaccountable freak of

memory one had forgotten about the examinations until the very hour had arrived, and was running, running—trying to overtake a train that would *not* stop, not though one leapt rivers and scaled mountain heights in the vain attempt to attract attention! It was really more restful to lie awake and study textbooks by the morning light, which came so early in these summer days; or so thought Rhoda, as she sat up in bed and bent her aching head over her task. Her head was always aching nowadays, while occasionally there came a sharp, stabbing pain in the eyes, which seemed to say that they, too, were inclined to rebel. It was tiresome, but she had no time to attend to them now. It was not likely that she was going to draw back because of a little pain and physical weakness.

She never complained, but amidst all the bustle of preparation the teachers kept a keen eye on their pupils, and Rhoda found more than one task mysteriously lightened. No remark was made, but Miss Mott reduced the amount of preparation; Miss Bruce sent an invitation to tea, which involved an idle hour, and shortcomings were passed over with wonderful forbearance. Only Miss Everett “croaked,” and, dearly as she loved her, Rhoda was glad to keep out of Miss Everett’s way just now. It was unpleasant to be stared at by “eyes like gimlets,” to be asked if one’s head ached, and warned gravely of the dangers of overwork.

“When I went up for the Cambridge Senior,” began Miss Everett, and the girl straightened herself defiantly, on the outlook for “sermons.”

“When I went up for the Cambridge Senior I was not at school like you, but studying at home with a tutor. My sister was delicate, so an old college friend of my father’s came to us for three hours a day. He was delightful—a very prince of teachers—and we had such happy times, for he entered into all our interests, and treated our opinions with as much respect as if we had been men like himself. I remember disputing the axioms of political economy, and arguing that a demand for commodities *must* be a demand for labour, and the delight with which he threw back his head and laughed whenever I seemed to score a point. Instead of snubbing me, and thinking it ridiculous that I should presume to dispute accepted truths, he welcomed every sign of independent thought; and there we would sit, arguing away, two girls of fifteen and sixteen and the grey-headed man, as seriously as if history depended on our decision. Later on, when I was going in for the examination, I joined some of his afternoon classes at a school near by, so that I could work up the subjects with other candidates. There was one girl in the class called Mary Macgregor, a plain, unassuming little creature, who seemed most ordinary in every way. When I first saw her I remember pitying her because she looked so dull and commonplace. My dear, she had a brain like an encyclopaedia!—simply crammed with knowledge, and what went in at one ear stayed there for good, and never by any chance got mislaid. You may think how clever she was when I tell you that she passed first in all England, with distinction in every single subject that she took. She won scholarships and honours and went up to Girton, and had posts offered to her right and left, and practically established herself for life. Well, to go back a long way, to the week before the Cambridge. We had preliminary examinations at school, and had worked so hard that we were perfectly dazed and muddled. Then one day ‘Magister,’ as we called him, marched into the room to read the result of the arithmetic paper. I can see him now, standing up with the list in his hands, and all the girls’ faces turned towards him. Then he began to read: ‘Total number of marks, one hundred. Kate Evans, eighty-nine; Sybil Bruce, eighty-two; Hilda Green, seventy-one;’ so on and so on—down, and down and down until it came to thirties and twenties, and still no mention of Mary or of me! The girls’ faces were a study to behold. As for the ‘Magister’ he put on the most exaggerated expression of horror, and just hissed out the last few words—‘Laura Everett, *twelve!* Ma-ry Mac-gre-gor, *ten!*’ We sat dumb, petrified, frozen with dismay, and then suddenly he banged his book on the table and called out, ‘No more lessons! No more work! I forbid any girl to open a book again before Monday morning. Off you go, and give your brains a rest, if you don’t wish to disgrace yourselves and me. Give my compliments to your mothers, and say I wish you *all* to be taken to the Circus this evening.’ He nodded at us quite cheerfully, and marched out of the room there and then, leaving us to pack up our books and go home, Mary and I cried a little, I remember, in a feeble, helpless sort of way; but we were too tired to care very much. I slept like a log all the afternoon, and went to the Circus at night, and the next day I skated, and on Saturday spent the day in town, buying Christmas presents, and by Monday I was quite brisk again, and my mind as clear as ever. I have often thought how differently that examination might have turned out for Mary and for me if we had had a less wise teacher, who had worked himself into a panic of alarm, and made us work harder than ever, instead of stopping altogether! I am convinced that it was only those few days of rest which saved me.”

“There!” cried Rhoda, irritably; “I knew it! I *knew* there was a moral. I knew perfectly well the moment you began, that it was a roundabout way of preaching to me. If I am to have a sermon, I would rather have it straight out, not wrapped up in jam like a powder. I suppose you think my brain is getting muddled, but it would go altogether if I tried to do nothing but laze about. I should go stark, staring mad. I must say, Evie, you talk in a very strange way for a teacher, and are not at all encouraging. I don’t think you care a bit whether I get the scholarship or not.”

“Yes, I do! I hope very much that you will *not!* Wait a moment now; I am very fond of you, Rhoda; and I hope with all my heart that you will pass, and pass well—I shall be bitterly disappointed if you don’t; but I want Kathleen to get the scholarship. She *needs* it, and you don’t; it means far, far more to her than you can even understand.”

“In one way, perhaps—not another! She wants the money, which she could have in any case; but she is not half so keen as I am for the honour itself—and, after all, that’s the first thing. I can’t do anything in a half-and-half way, and now that I have taken up examinations I am just burning to distinguish myself. It would be a perfect bliss, the height of my ambition, to come out first here, and go up to Oxford, and take honours, and have letters after one’s name, and be a distinguished scholar, written about in the papers and magazines like—like—”

“Yes! Like Miss Mott, for instance. What then?” Rhoda stood still in the middle of her tirade, and stared at the speaker with startled eyes. *Miss Mott!* No, indeed, she had meant nobody in the least like Miss Mott. The very mention of the name was like a cold douche on her enthusiasm. The creature of her dream was gowned and capped, and moved radiant through an atmosphere of applause. Miss Mott was a commonplace, hard-working teacher, with an air of chronic exhaustion. When one looked across the dining-room, and saw her face among those of the girls, it looked bleached and grey, the face of a tired, worn woman. “The idea of working and slaving all one’s youth to be like—Miss Mott!” Rhoda exclaimed contemptuously, but Miss Everett insisted on her position.

"Miss Mott is a capital example. You could not have a better. She was the first student of her year, and carried everything before her. Her position here is one of the best of its kind, for she is practically headmistress. She would tell you herself that she never expected to do so well."

"I think it's very mean of you, Evie, to squash me so! It's most discouraging. I don't want to be the *least* like Miss Mott, and you know it perfectly well. It's no use talking, for we can't agree; and really and truly you are the most unsympathetic to me just now."

Miss Everett looked at her steadily, with a long, tender gaze.

"I *seem* so, Rhoda, I know I do, but it is only seeming. In reality I'm just longing to help you, but, as you say, you think one thing and I think another, so we are at cross purposes. Come and spend Sunday afternoon with me in my den, dear, and I'll promise not to preach. I'll make you so comfy, and show you all my photographs and pretty things, and lay in a stock of fruit and cakes. Do; it will do you good!"

But Rhoda hesitated, longing, yet fearing.

"I'd love it; it would be splendid, but—there's my Scripture! I want to cram it up a little more, and Sunday afternoon is the only chance. I'm afraid I can't until after the exam., Evie, dear. I need the time."

"A wilful lass must have her way!" quoted Miss Everett with a sigh, and that was the last attempt which she made to rescue Rhoda from the result of her own rash folly. Henceforth to the end the girl worked unmolested, drawing the invariable "list" from her pocket at every odd moment, and gabbling in ceaseless repetition, nerved to more feverish energy by the discovery that her brain moved so slowly that it took twice as long as of yore to master the simplest details. She felt irritable and peevish, disposed to tears on the slightest provocation, and tired all over, back and limbs, aching head, smarting eyes, weary, dissatisfied heart. Did every ambition of life end like this? Did it always happen that when the loins were girded to run a race, depression fell like a fetter, and the question tortured: "Is it worth while? Is it worth while?" What was the "right motive" of which Evie had spoken? What was the Vicar's meaning of "success"? They, at least, seemed to have found contentment as a result of their struggles. Rhoda groped in the dark, but found no light, for the door was barred by the giant of Self-Will.

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## Chapter Sixteen.

### The Examination.

Four o'clock on the morning of Examination Monday. The clock on the wall chimed the hour, and Rhoda awoke with a start, and sat up wearily in bed. The pale, grey light already filled the room, and the birds clamoured tumultuously in the trees outside. Three hours before the gong rang—the last, the very last chance of preparing for the fray!

She slipped noiselessly out of bed, sponged her face with cold water, seized the eau-de-Cologne in one hand and a pile of books in the other, and settled herself against a background of cushions. There was silence in the room, broken only by fitful cries from Dorothy, who was given to discoursing in her sleep, and more than once in the course of the first half-hour Rhoda's own eyes glazed over, and the lids fell. Nature was pleading for her rights, but each lapse was sternly overcome, and presently nerves and brain were fully awake, and battling with their task. She learned by heart passages marked as likely to be useful, searched to and fro for answers still unknown, and worked out imaginary calculations. One thing was no sooner begun than she recalled another which needed attention, and so on it went from arithmetic to Shakespeare, from Shakespeare to history, from history to Latin, back and forward, back and forward, until her head was in a whirl.

The clock struck six, the girl in the next cubicle murmured sleepily, "Such a noise! Something rustling!" and Rhoda held her breath in dismay. Her haste in turning over the leaves had nearly brought about discovery, but henceforth she moved with caution, turning from place to place with wary fingers. Her back ached despite the supporting cushions, and her head swam, but she struggled on until at last the roll of the gong sounded through the house, and the girls awoke with yawns and groans of remembrance.

"Black Monday! Oh! Oh! I wish I'd never been born!"

"Misery me, and I was having such a lovely dream, all about holidays and picnics, and walks on the sands—"

"I've had the most awful night, doing sums all the time, with the Examiner looking over my shoulder. My head is like a jelly!"

Then Tom's voice arose in derisive accents. Happy Tom! who was well through her June Matric, and could afford to chaff the poor victims.

"Would any young lady like to explain to me how to find the resultant of a system of parallel forces?"

"Tom, you are brutal! Be quiet this moment, or we'll come and make you—"

"Ha! Ha! Ha! Rhoda, love, just give me the Substance of King Richard's speech to Northumberland, when the latter announced that he was to be removed to Pomfret!"

Rhoda began to reply, but stopped abruptly, for on rising from bed she was attacked by a strange giddiness, and lay back against the pillows trembling with cold and nausea. Her hands shook as she uncorked the eau-de-Cologne, and the scent, so far from being reviving, made her shudder afresh. She dressed with difficulty, sitting down at frequent intervals, and growing colder and colder with each exertion, so that when she emerged from her cubicle her pallid



face roused Tom's instant attention.

"Rhoda, you are ill!" she cried, her chaffing manner changing at once, as she realised the seriousness of the occasion. "What's the matter? Didn't you sleep? Let me feel your hand—. Goodness, what a frog! You had better lie down, and let me send for nurse."

"No, thank you, Tom, *please!* It's only excitement. I shall be better after breakfast. Please, please, don't make a fuss!"

"Humph!" said Tom shortly, "just as you like. If you feel yourself going, stoop down and pretend to fasten your shoe, and give a scrub to your cheeks before passing Miss Bruce. She'll spot you in a moment if you go in with a face like that."

Thus adjured, Rhoda "scrubbed her cheeks" all the way downstairs, and looked so rosy as she passed the Principal that the good lady felt much relieved. She had had some anxious thoughts about Rhoda Chester of late, and was only too glad to feel that her anxiety had been needless; but, alas! three times over during breakfast did Rhoda stoop down to button her shoe, and in vain did her companions press food upon her. A sumptuous breakfast had been served in honour of the occasion, but ham and eggs seemed just the last things in the world that she wanted to eat, while the sight of fried fish took away the last remnant of appetite. She drank her tea, trying to laugh with the rest, and to take no notice of the swaying movement with which the walls whirled round from time to time, or of the extraordinary distance from which the girls' voices sounded in her ears.

"She's game! She's real game!" said Tom to herself, watching the set face with her sharp little eyes, "but she's uncommon bad all the same. I'll put Evie on her track!" So Miss Everett's attention was duly called to the condition of her pupil, and Rhoda was dosed with sal-volatile, and provided with smelling salts to keep in her pocket. Not a word of reproach was spoken, and Evie indeed appeared to treat the indisposition as quite an orthodox thing under the circumstances. So affectionate was she, so kind and cheery, and so thoughtful were the girls in giving up the best seats in omnibus and train, and in offering supporting arms along platforms, that Rhoda felt inclined to cry with mingled gratitude and remorse.

When the hall was reached in which the examination was to be held, she had yet another dose of sal-volatile as a preparation for the ordeal of the arithmetical paper, and then, gathering up pens and pencils, marched slowly into the dreaded room. It was shaped like an amphitheatre, with a railed-in platform at one side, and sloping seats descending all round.

"It's like the operating theatre at a hospital! Oh my! and don't I feel as if I were going to be cut up too!" groaned Dorothy, as she filed along in front of a seat, looking for her place. At a distance of every two or three yards the desks were marked with a number, in front of which was a supply of blotting and writing paper. Some of the candidates made out their own number at once, others went roaming helplessly about, and Rhoda found herself perched in the furthest corner, far from her companions. She looked across and received Dorothy's smiling nod, but Kathleen's face was set in stern anxiety, and the others were too busy arranging papers to remember her existence. The Examiner, in cap and gown, stood on the platform, talking to the lady secretary of the Centre. She made a remark, and he smiled, and said something in reply at which they both laughed audibly. It shocked Rhoda in much the same way as it would have done to hear a chief mourner laugh at a funeral. Such levity was most unseemly, yet on the other hand the pictures on the walls were surely unnecessarily depressing! They were oil-coloured portraits of departed worthies, at that gloomy stage of decay when frame, figure, and background have acquired the same dirty hue, and the paint has cracked in a hundred broken lines. One old gentleman—the ugliest of all—faced Rhoda as she sat, and stared at her with a mocking gaze, which seemed to say:

"You think you are going to pass in arithmetic, do you? Wait until you see the paper! *You'll* be surprised—!"

It was a relief to turn to the paper itself and know the worst, which seemed very bad indeed. She glanced from question to question, feeling despair deepen at the sight of such phrases as—"Simplify the expression"; "debenture stock at 140  $\frac{1}{8}$ "; "at what rate per cent.?" etcetera, etcetera. In the present condition of mind and body it was an effort to recall the multiplication table, not to speak of difficult and elaborate calculations. Poor Rhoda! She dipped her pen into the ink, and wrote the headline to her paper, hesitated for a moment, added "Question A," and then it seemed as if she could do no more. The figures danced before her eyes, her knees shook, her hands were so petrified with cold that she clasped them together to restore some feeling of warmth, and the faintness of an hour ago seemed creeping on once more. She leant her elbows on the desk, bowed her hands in her head, and remained motionless for ten minutes on end. The other girls would think that she was studying the paper, and deciding what question she could best answer; but in reality she was fighting the hardest battle of her life, a battle between the Flesh, which said, "Give in; say you are too ill! Think what bliss it would be to lie down and have nothing to do!" and the Will, which declared, "No, never! I must and shall go on. Brain! Hands! Eyes! you are my servants. I will not *let* you fail!" In the end Will conquered, and Rhoda raised her face, pale to the lips, but with determination written on every feature.

The girl next to herself had covered half the sheet with figures, and was ruling two neat little lines, which showed that Question A was satisfactorily settled. All over the room the girls were scribbling away, alert and busy; there was plainly no time to be wasted, and Rhoda began slowly to puzzle out the easiest problem. The answer seemed inappropriate; she tried again, with a different result; a third time, with a third result; then the firm lips set, and she began doggedly the fourth time over. To her relief this answer was the same as number two, so it was copied out without delay, and the next puzzle begun, and the next, and the next.

Oh, the weariness of those two hours, the struggle against weakness, the moments of despair when memory refused to work, and simplest facts evaded her grasp! Nobody ever knew all that it meant, and as she had the presence of mind to tear up her blotting-paper, no examining eyes were shocked by the sight of the expedients to which a senior

candidate had been reduced in order to discover the total of six multiplied by six, or eight plus eleven. There were other moments, however, when the brain cleared and allowed a space for intelligent work. More faintness came on again, and at the end she could announce to her companions that she had answered nine out of the twelve questions.

"What did you get for the square root?" enquired Kathleen anxiously. "Irene's answer was different from mine; but I *did* think I was right. I went over it twice!"

The girls were all surging together in the ante-room, comparing answers, and referring eagerly to Irene, who read aloud her own list with a self-satisfied air. Those whose numbers agreed with hers announced the fact with whoops of joy, those who had differed knitted their brows and were silent. Kathleen looked worried and anxious, and could not think what she had been about to get "that decimal wrong."

"But it was horrible, wasn't it? The worst we have had."

"The wall-paper was vile," cried another voice indignantly. "*Toujours* wall-paper! They might have a little originality, and think of something else. I longed to give Tom's answer!"

"It wasn't really difficult, but tricky! Decidedly tricky!" said Irene, with an air. She could afford to be superior, for there was no doubt that she had passed! and passed well. "The square root was absurdly easy." Then her eye fell on Rhoda, and she asked, kindly enough, "What did you make it, Rhoda? I hope you got on all right, and feel better."

"Thanks, yes; but I didn't put down my answers. I really can't remember what they were."

"And a good thing too! You have done your best, so don't worry over it any more, but come along to lunch!" cried Miss Everett, cheerily; and the girls obeyed with willing haste, for it was one of the "treats" of examination time to lunch in a restaurant, and be allowed to order what one chose.

Rhoda was so much revived by the walk and the joy of knowing the ordeal over that she was able to eat a morsel of chicken, but the fascinations of jam puffs had departed for the time being, and she could even look unmoved at the spectacle of a dozen strawberry ices in a row.

"If every candidate indulges in an ice a day, state accurately the number of bushels of fruit—" began Dorothy, with her mouth full of Vanilla biscuit, but she was promptly elbowed into silence; no one being in the mood for further calculations just then.

For the next four days the examination dragged its weary course, and Rhoda was carefully nursed and coddled so as to be able to stand the strain. She was sent to bed immediately on her return from the train; was not allowed to rise until eight o'clock; was dosed with nurse's pet tonic, and with Bovril and sandwiches between the papers, and for once she was sufficiently conscious of past errors to acknowledge that Nature could not be defied, and to attempt no more four o'clock preparation classes. On the whole she got through fairly well, growing stronger each day, and even feeling occasional bursts of exultation at the conclusion of a paper which might have been written especially for her benefit. What rapture to be questioned about those very rules in French grammar which one had rubbed up the week before; to have pet passages selected from Shakespeare, and find the Latin prose for translation become gradually intelligible, as one telling substantive gave the clue to the whole! Once assured of the meaning, it was easy to pick out the words, skimming lightly over difficult phrases, but making a great show of accuracy when opportunity arose. As to the elegance of the translation from English into Latin the less said the better, but even with a realisation of its shortcomings, Rhoda was hopeful of the result.

"They will say, 'She doesn't know much, poor thing, but she has worked hard, and deserves to pass. Her grammar is good, and she has mastered the books. Oh, yes; certainly she has enough marks to pass.'"

"I think I have done fairly well in Latin," she told Miss Mott on her return, and that severe lady actually smiled, and said graciously:

"I hope you have. You have certainly worked with a will."

Miss Bruce, however, was not nearly so encouraging, and her last interview with her pupil was somewhat in the nature of a cold douche.

"Now that the week is over, Rhoda," she said, "I must tell you that I have felt a good deal of anxiety on your account, which I would not willingly have repeated. There is a strain about examinations which some girls feel more than others. The head of your house, for instance, Thomasina Bolderston, is a capital subject, and seems able to hit the happy medium between working hard and over-working; but you appear to suffer physically from the strain. I thought you seemed ill even before the breakdown on Monday, and I fear your parents will be far from satisfied with your looks. In the case of a girl who is preparing to earn her livelihood, and to whom certificates are all-important, one must take all reasonable precautions and then face the risk; but with you it is different. You are the only daughter of wealthy parents, and as, in all probability, you will never need to work for yourself, it would be wiser to content yourself with taking the ordinary school course and leaving examinations alone. I shall feel it my duty to acquaint your mother with my opinions, and to advise—"

Rhoda gave a gasp of dismay, and stared at her with horrified eyes.

"You will forbid me to go in for any more exams.! You won't allow me to try again?"

The Principal smiled slightly.

"That is, perhaps, over-stating the case. The final decision must, of course, rest with your parents. If, in opposition to

my advice, they should still desire—”

But Rhoda heard no more. The idea that her father and mother should wish her to go in for any work which interfered with health was so impossible to conceive that it might as well be dismissed at once. With one fell crash her castle in the air had fallen to the ground and lay in ruins at her feet. If she had not done well this time, farewell for ever to her dreams of distinction, for no other opportunity would be granted!

For the first half of the holidays the thought weighed upon her with depressing force, but gradually, as health improved, the outlook lightened also, and she began to pose to herself in a new light. If she passed well—and, despite her illness, she looked back on most of the papers with a feeling of complacency—if she won the scholarship, or even gained distinction, her reputation among her class-mates would be to a certain extent established, and the fact that the delicate nature of her nervous system debarred her from further efforts would entitle her to a tribute of peculiar sympathy. When other girls succeeded, their companions would shake their heads, and whisper among themselves, “If Rhoda could only—”

“A good thing for her that Rhoda,” etcetera, etcetera. In imagination she could hear the remarks, and her face unconsciously assumed the expression of meek endurance with which she would listen. And so more and more did the result of that week’s work fill the horizon of her life; she thought of it day by day, and dreamt of it by night; she talked of it to Ella, until even that patient listener wearied of the theme; she counted the weeks, the days, the hours, until the report should arrive. And then one morning, half-way through breakfast, Mr Chester looked up from his eggs and bacon and remarked casually—as if it were an ordinary, commonplace subject, and not an affair of life and death:

“By the way, Rhoda, there is something about your examination in the paper to-day. I noticed the heading. You may like to see it!”

Rhoda leant back in her chair, and held out her hand in dumb entreaty. The newspaper was open at the right page, and her eye fell at once on the familiar heading, and, underneath, a long list of numbers.

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## Chapter Seventeen.

### Failed!

First Class, Second Class, and still no sign of the familiar number. Third Class—it was not there! Rhoda gave a little gulp, and began again from the very beginning. She had been too quick, too eager. It was so easy to miss a number. One by one she conned them over, but it was not there. The long Pass List lay below, and she looked at it with dreary indifference. To scramble through with the rabble was a sorry attainment, or it seemed so for one moment, but at the next it became, suddenly, a wild, impossible dream, for—the number was not there! No fear of overlooking this time, for the figures stood out as if printed in fire, and burned themselves into her brain. The number was not in the First Class, nor the Second, nor the Third; it was not in the Pass List, it was not mentioned at all.

If she had ever permitted herself to anticipate such a situation, which she had not, Rhoda would have pictured herself flying into a paroxysm of despair; but in reality she felt icy cold, and it was in a tone almost of indifference that she announced:

“I am plucked! I have not passed at all.”

“Never mind, dear; you did your best, and the work matters more than the result. Very uncertain tests, these examinations—I never cared about them,” said her father kindly, and Mrs Chester smiled in her usual placid fashion, and murmured, “Oh, I expect it’s a mistake. It’s so easy to make a mistake in printing figures. You will find it is all right, darling, later on. Have some jam!”

They were absolutely placid; absolutely calm; absolutely unconscious of the storm of emotion raging beneath that quiet exterior; but Harold glanced at his sister with the handsome eyes which looked so sleepy, but which were in reality so remarkably wide-awake, and said slowly:

“I think Rhoda has finished, mother. You don’t want any jam, do you, Ro? Come into the garden with me instead. I want a stroll.”

He walked out through the French window, and Rhoda followed with much the same feeling of relief as that with which a captive escapes from the prison which seems to be on the point of suffocating him, mentally and physically. Brother and sister paced in silence down the path leading to the rose garden. Harold was full of sympathy, but, man-like, found it difficult to put his thoughts into words, and Rhoda, after all, was the first to speak. She stopped suddenly in the middle of the path, and confronted him with shining eyes. Her voice sounded strange in her own ears.

“Harold, I—have—failed! I am plucked. I have not passed at all—not even a common pass.”

“No? I’m uncommonly sorry, but—”

“But do you realise it; do you understand what it means? I *think* I do, but I don’t. If I did, I should not be here talking quietly to you. I should go mad! I should want to kill myself. I should be desperate!”

“Don’t be silly now, Ro. It’s a big disappointment, and I’m sorry for you, but it’s not a bit of use working yourself into hysterics. Face the thing quietly, and see—”

“All that it means—. It means a good deal, Harold; more than you can understand. I think I’d rather be alone, please.

You are very kind, but I can't stand consolation just yet. I'll sit in the arbour."

"Just as you please. I don't want to force myself, but I'd like to help you, old girl. Is there nothing else I can do?"

"Yes; keep mother away! Don't let her come near me until lunch. I am best left alone, and she doesn't understand—no one understands except those who have been at school, and know how—how hard—"

The girl's voice trembled, and broke off suddenly, and she walked away in the direction of the summer-house, while Harold thrust his hands into his pockets and kicked the pebbles on the gravel path. He was very fond of his impetuous young sister, and the quivering sob which had strangled her last word echoed painfully in his ears. He realised as neither father nor mother could do what such a failure meant to a proud, ambitious girl, and how far-reaching would be its consequences. It was not to-day nor to-morrow that would exhaust this trouble; the bitterest part was yet to come when she returned to school, and received the condolences of her more successful companions; when she sat apart and saw them receive their reward. Harold longed to be able to help, but there was nothing to do but persuade his parents to leave the girl alone, and to return at intervals to satisfy himself that she was still in her retreat, and not attempting to drown her sorrows in the lake. Three times over he paced the path, and saw the white-robed figure sitting immovable, with elbows planted on the table, and falling locks hiding the face from view. So still she sat that he retired silently, hoping that she had fallen asleep, but on the fourth visit he was no longer alone, but accompanied by a graceful, girlish figure, and they did not halt until they stood on the very threshold of the arbour itself.

"Rhoda!" he cried, then, "look up! I have brought someone to you. Someone you will be glad to see."

The flaxen mane was tossed back, and a flushed face raised in protest. "I don't—" began Rhoda, and then suddenly sprang to her feet and stretched out her arms. "Oh, Evie—Evie! You have come. Oh, I wanted you—I wanted you so badly!"

Miss Everett stepped forward and drew the girl to her side, and Harold waited just long enough to see the fair head and the dark nestle together, and then took himself off to the house, satisfied that comfort had come at last.

"I have *failed*, Evie!" cried Rhoda, clasping her friend's hands, and staring at her with the same expression of incredulous horror with which she had confronted her brother a couple of hours earlier. "Yes, darling. I know."

"And what are you going to say to me, then?"

"Nothing, I think, for the moment, but that I love you dearly, and felt that I must come to be with you. Aren't you surprised to see me, Rhoda?"

"No, I don't think so. I don't feel anything. I wanted you, and then—there you were! It seemed quite natural."

"But it was rather peculiar all the same. I have been staying with Tom, and we were both asked down to D— for a four days' visit. That is only half an hour's rail from here, as you know; so this morning when I saw the list in the paper I thought at once—'I must see Rhoda! I will go down and chance finding her at home!'"

"Yes!"

"So I came, and am so glad to be with you, dear. I have seen your mother, and have promised to stay to lunch. I need not go back until four o'clock."

"Oh, that's nice. I like to have you. Evie, I believe it was the arithmetic. I was so ill, I could hardly think. You might as well know all now. It was my own doing. I had been working every morning before getting up, and that day I began at four. I tired myself out before the gong rang."

"I guessed as much. Dorothy told me that she heard someone turning over leaves!"

"Why don't you say, 'I told you so!' then, and tell me that it's my own fault?"

"I—don't—know! Perhaps because I do so many foolish things myself; perhaps because I haven't the heart to scold you just now, you poor dear."

Rhoda's face quivered, but she pressed her lips together, and said with a gulp:

"I suppose—it's a childish trouble! I suppose—when I am old—and sensible—I shall look back on to-day, and laugh to think how I worried myself over such an unimportant trial."

"I am sure you will do nothing of the kind. You will be very, very sorry for yourself, and very pitiful, and very proud, too, if you can remember that you bore it bravely and uncomplainingly."

"But I can't! I can't bear it at all. It gets worse every moment. I keep remembering things that I had forgotten. Miss Bruce preaching, and Miss Mott staring through her spectacles—the girls all saying they are sorry, and the—the Record Wall, where I wanted to see my name! I *can't* bear it, it's no use."

"But you will *have* to bear it, Rhoda. It is a fact, and nothing that you can do will alter it now. You will have to bear it; but you can bear it in two ways, as you make up your mind to-day. You can cry and fret, and make yourself ill, and everyone else miserable, or you can brace yourself up to bear it bravely, and make everyone love and admire you more than they have ever done before. Which are you going to do?"

"I am going to be cross and horrid. I couldn't be good if I tried. I'm soured for life!" said Rhoda stoutly, but even as

she spoke a smile struggled with her tears, and Evie laughed aloud—her sweet, ringing laugh.

“Poor, dear old thing! She looks so like it! I know better, and am not a bit afraid of you. You will be good and plucky, and rejoice unaffectedly in Kathleen’s success.”

“Has Kathleen—Oh! Is Kathleen first?”

“She has won the Scholarship. Yes, it will be such a joy. She needed it so badly, and has worked so hard.”

“I hate her!”

“She was always kind to you. I remember the very first day she took you round the grounds. You were very good friends.”

“I hate her, I tell you! I detest her name.”

“I am sure you will write and congratulate her. Imagine if *your* parents were poor, and you saw them harassed and anxious, how thankful you would feel to be able to help! Kathleen had a harder time than any of you, for she could take none of the nice, interesting ‘Extras.’ I think all her friends will be glad that she has won.”

“I shall be glad, too, in about ten years. If I said I was glad now I should be a hypocrite, for I wanted it myself. I suppose Irene is all right, and Bertha, and all the Head girls? Has—has Dorothy—”

“Yes, Dorothy has passed too.”

Rhoda cried aloud in bitter distress.

“Oh, Evie—oh! Dorothy passed, and I have failed! Oh it is cruel—unjust. I am cleverer than she! You can’t deny it. I worked harder. I was before her always, in every class, in every exam. Oh, it’s mean, it’s mean that they should have put her before me!”

The tears streamed down her face, for this was perhaps the bitterest moment she had known. To be beaten by Kathleen, and Irene, was bearable, but—Dorothy! Easy-going, mediocre Dorothy, who had so little ambition that she could laugh at her own shortcomings, and contentedly call herself a “tortoise.” Well, the tortoise had come off victor once more, and the poor, beaten hare sat quivering with mortified grief. Miss Everett looked at her with perplexed, anxious eyes.

“You will probably find when the full report comes out that you have done better in most respects, but that it is the preliminaries which have caused your failure. But Rhoda, Rhoda, how would it help you to know that another poor girl had failed, and was as miserable as yourself? Would you be *glad* to hear that Dorothy was sitting crying at home, and Kathleen bearing her parents’ grief as well as her own? You could not possibly be so selfish. I know you too well. You are far too kind and generous.”

“I’m a pig!” said Rhoda contritely, and the tears trickled dimly off the end of her nose, and splashed on to the wooden table. “I should like to be a saint, and resigned, and rejoice in the good fortunes of my companions like the girls in books, but I can’t. I just feel sore, and mad, and aching, and as if they were all in conspiracy against me to make my failure more bitter. You had better give it up, Evie, and leave me to fight it out alone. I’ll come to my senses in time, and write pretty, gushing letters to say how charmed I am—and make funny little jokes at the end about my own collapse. This is Monday—perhaps by Wednesday or Thursday—”

“I expect it will be Tuesday, and not an hour later. You are letting off such an amount of steam that you will calm down more quickly than you think. And now, hadn’t we better go indoors, and bathe those poor red eyes before lunch? Your mother will think I have been scolding you, and I don’t want to be looked upon as a dragon when I’m out of harness, and posing as an innocent, unprofessional visitor. Come, dear, and we’ll talk no more of the horrid old exam., but try to forget it and enjoy ourselves!”

Rhoda’s sigh was sepulchral in its intensity, for, of course, happiness must henceforth be a thing of the past, so far as she was concerned; but as she did not appreciate the idea of appearing at lunch with a tear-stained face, she followed meekly to the house, and entering by a side door, led the way upstairs to her own luxurious bedroom.

Half an hour of chastened enjoyment followed as she sat sponging her eyes, while Evie strolled round the room, exclaiming with admiration at the sight of each fresh treasure, and showing the keenest interest in the jugs and their histories. She admired Rhoda’s possessions, and Rhoda admired her, watching the graceful figure reflected in the mirrors; the pretty dress, so simple, yet so becoming; the dark hair waving so softly round the winsome face. Evie was certainly one of the prettiest of creatures, and Rhoda felt a sort of reflected glory in taking her downstairs and exhibiting her to her family.

If the tear marks had not altogether disappeared, no one appeared to notice them, and despite her own silence, lunch was a cheery meal. Evie chattered away in her gayest manner; Mrs Chester agreed with every word she said, and called her “dear” as if she were a friend of years’ standing. Mr Chester beamed upon her with undisguised, fatherly admiration, and Harold looked more animated than Rhoda had seen him for many a long day. The brisk, bright way in which Evie took up his drawling sentences, and put him right when he was mistaken in a statement, would have made him withdraw into his shell if attempted by a member of the household, but he did not seem in the least annoyed with Evie. He only smiled to himself in amused fashion, and watched her narrowly out of the corners of his eyes.

When dessert was put upon the table, Mrs Chester looked wistfully at Rhoda’s white face, lighted into a feeble smile by one of her friend’s sallies, and was seized with a longing to keep this comforter at hand.

"I suppose you must go back to D— this afternoon, dear," she said, "but couldn't we persuade you to come back and pay us a visit before you leave this part of the world? It would be a great pleasure to Rhoda, and to us all, and any time would suit us. Just fix your own day, and—"

"Oh, Evie, do!" cried Rhoda eagerly, and both the men joined in with murmurs of entreaty; but Miss Everett shook her head, and said regretfully:

"I'm so sorry, but it's impossible. I have already been away longer than I intended, and cannot spend another day away from home. My mother is busier than usual, for a sister who used to teach has had a bad illness and is staying with us for six months, to rest and be nursed up. It would not be fair to stay away any longer."

"I should think you might be allowed to rest in your holidays. You work hard enough for the rest of the year, and I need you more than the old aunt, I'm sure I do. You must come, if only for a week!"

"I wish I could, Rhoda, but it is not possible. I'll tell you, however, who I believe *could* come, and who would do you more good than I, and that is Tom Bolderston! She is in no hurry to return home, and as it is decided that she is not to come back to Hurst Manor, but go on straight to Newnham, it will be your last opportunity of seeing her for some time. You would enjoy having Tom, wouldn't you, Rhoda?"

Rhoda lifted her eyebrows with a comical expression. Tom here; Tom in Erley Chase! Tom sitting opposite to Harold and blinking at him with her little fish eyes—the thought was so comical that she laughed in spite of herself.

"I think I should. It would be very funny. If I may ask her, mother—"

"Of course, of course, darling! Ask whom you will, for as long as you like," cried the fond mother instantly. From what she had heard of Tom she had come to the conclusion that she was a very strange, and not entirely sane, young woman; but Rhoda wished it, Rhoda had laughed at the suggestion, and said it would be "funny," and that settled the question.

A letter of invitation was duly written and given into Miss Everett's hand when the time came for departure, and brother and sister escorted her to the station. Rhoda was insistent in her regrets at parting, and, wonderful to relate, Harold condescended to make still another plea. If it were impossible to arrange a visit, could not Miss Everett spare a few hours at least, come down by an early train, and spend a day on the river with himself and his sister? He urged the project so warmly that Evie flushed with mingled pleasure and embarrassment.

"Don't tempt me! I should love it, but we are here only for four days, and I have been away for one already. It would not be courteous."

"She is so horribly conscientious, that's the worst of her!" said Rhoda, as she and Harold retraced their steps across the Park. "She is always thinking about other people. A day on the river would have been lovely."

"Yes, it's a pity. I thought we would ask Ella, and take up lunch and tea."

"Yes, of course, a very good idea. Then we should have been four, and I could have had Evie to myself—"

"Y-es!" drawled Harold slowly. Two minutes later Rhoda happened to look at his face, and wondered why in the world he was smiling to himself in that funny, amused fashion!

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## Chapter Eighteen.

### Tom Arrives.

Tom wrote by return to state that she considered Rhoda "a brick" for sending her such a "ripping" invitation; that it would be "great sport" to see her at home, and that she would arrive by the twelve o'clock train on the next Monday.

"She isn't pretty," Rhoda explained anxiously to Harold, the fastidious; "in fact, she's plain, very plain indeed. I'm afraid you won't like her, but she likes *you*. She saw you on the platform at Euston, and said you were a 'bee-ootiful young man,' and that she was broken-hearted that she couldn't stay to make your acquaintance."

"Good taste, evidently, though unattractive!" said Harold, smiling. "I'm sorry she's not good-looking, but it can't be helped. No doubt she makes up for it in moral worth."

"Well, she does, that's perfectly true. I loathed and detested her at first, but I'm devoted to her now. She's just, and kind, and awfully clever, and so funny that you simply can't be in low spirits when she's about. All the girls adore her, but you won't. She says herself that men can't appreciate her, so she's going to devote her life to women, out of revenge. Men never care for women unless they are pretty and taking," cried Rhoda, with an air, and Harold protested sententiously.

"I'm the exception to the rule! I look beyond the mere exterior, to the nobility of character which lies behind. Dear Tom's lack of beauty is nothing to me. I am prepared for it, and shall suffer no disillusion."

He changed his mind, however, when at the appointed time "dear Tom" arrived, and stepped from the carriage on to the platform of the little station. When his eye first fell upon her, in response to Rhoda's excited, "There she is!" he felt a momentary dizzy conviction that there must be a mistake. This extraordinary apparition could never be his sister's friend, but yes! it was even so, for already the girls were greeting each other, and glancing expectantly in his direction. He went through the introduction with immovable countenance, saw the two friends comfortably seated in

the pony carriage, and called to mind a message in the village which would prevent him from joining them as he had intended. He required a few minutes' breathing time to recover his self-possession, and the girls drove off alone, not at all sorry, if the truth were told, to be deprived of his company.

"Well, Fuzzy!" cried Tom.

"Well, Tom!" cried Rhoda, and stared with wondering eyes at the unaccustomed grandeur of her friend's attire. Thomasina had done honour to the occasion by putting on her very best coat and skirt, of a shade of fawn accurately matching her complexion, while on her head was perched that garment unknown at Hurst, "a trimmed hat." Fawn straw, fawn wings sticking out at right angles, bows of fawn-coloured ribbon wired into ferocious stiffness—such was the work of art; and complacent, indeed, was the smile of its owner as she met her companion's scrutiny.

"Got 'em *all* on, haven't I?" she enquired genially. "Must do honour to the occasion, you know, and here's yourself all a-blowing, all a-growing, looking as fresh as a daisy, in your grand white clothes!"

"Indeed, then, I feel nothing of the kind, or it must be a very dejected daisy. You have heard the news, of course, and know that I am—"

"Plucked!" concluded Tom, pronouncing the awful word without a quiver. "Yes. Thought you would be; you were so cheap that arithmetic morning. You can't do sums when you are on the point of fainting every second minute... Very good results on the whole."

"Yes, but—isn't it awful for me? Don't you pity me? I never in my life had such a blow."

"Bit of a jar, certainly, but it's over now, and can't be helped. No use whining!" said Tom calmly, and Rhoda gave a little jump in her seat. After all, can anyone minister to a youthful sufferer like a friend of her own age? Tom's remarks would hardly have been considered comforting by an outsider, yet by one short word she had helped Rhoda more than any elderly comforter had been able to do. It was interesting and praiseworthy to grieve over such a disappointment as she had experienced, to be sorrowful, even heart-broken, but *to whine!* That put an entirely different aspect on her grief! To whine was feeble, childish, and undignified, a thing to which no self-respecting girl could stoop. As Rhoda recalled her tears and repinings, a flush of shame came to her cheeks, and she resolved that, whatever she might have to suffer in the future, she would, at least, keep it to herself, and not proclaim her trouble on the house-tops.

When the Chase was reached, Tom was taken into the drawing-room and introduced to Mrs Chester, who poured out tea in unusual silence, glancing askance at the fawn-coloured visitor who sat bolt upright on her chair, nibbling at her cake with a propriety which was as disconcerting to the kindly hostess as it was apparently diverting to her daughter. Rhoda had been accustomed to see Tom play a hundred sly tricks over this sociable meal, a favourite one being to balance a large morsel on the back of her right hand, and with an adroit little tap from the left send it flying into the mouth stretched wide to receive it, and it tickled her immensely to witness this sudden fit of decorum. She sat and chuckled, and Mrs Chester sat and wondered, until Tom politely declined a third cup of tea, and was dragged into the garden, with entreaties to behave properly, and be a little like herself, "I thought I was charming," she declared. "I tried to copy Evie, and look exactly as she does when she is doing the agreeable. Didn't you notice the smile? And I didn't stare a bit, though I was longing to all the time. You *do* live in marble halls, Fuzzy, and no mistake! We could get the whole of our little crib into that one room, and we don't go in for any ornaments or fal-lals. A comfortable bed to sleep in, and lots of books—that's all my old dad and I trouble about."

Rhoda thought of the dismal little study at Hurst Manor, with the broken chairs, and the gloves on the chimney-piece, and could quite imagine the kind of home from which the owner came; but she murmured little incredulities, as in politeness bound, as she led the way in the direction best calculated to impress a stranger. Tom did not pay much attention to the grounds themselves, but she raved over the horses, and made friends with all the dogs, even old Lion, the calf-like mastiff, who was kept chained up in the stable-yard because of his violent antipathy to strangers. When he beheld this daring young woman walking up to his very side, and making affectionate overtures for his favour, he showed his teeth in an alarming scowl, but next moment he changed his mind, and presently Tom was pinching and punching, and stroking his ears, with the ease of an old acquaintance.

"I've never met the dog yet that I couldn't master!" she announced proudly. "That old fellow would follow me all round the grounds as meekly as a lamb, if he had the chance!"

"We won't try him, thank you; he might meet a messenger-boy *en route*, and we should have to pay the damages. Come along now, and I will show you—" but at this opportune moment Harold came in view, sauntering round the corner of the stable, and Rhoda called to him eagerly, glad to be able to impress him with a sense of Tom's powers.

"Harold, look here! See what friends Tom has made with Lion already. He lets her do anything that she likes. Isn't it wonderful?"

"By Jove!" exclaimed Harold, and looked unaffectedly surprised to see his gruff old friend submitting meekly to the stranger's advances. "Tastes differ!" was the mental comment, but aloud he said suavely, "Lion is a good judge of character. He knows when he has found a friend."

"Yes, they all recognise me. I was a bulldog in my last incarnation," said Tom calmly, and by some extraordinary power which she possessed of drawing her mobile features into any shape which she chose, certain it is that she looked marvellously like a bulldog at that moment: twinkling eyes set far apart, heavy mouth, small, impertinent nose, all complete! Harold was so taken aback that he did not know what to say, but Rhoda dragged laughingly at her friend's arm and cried,—

"Come along! Come along! It will soon be time to go indoors and dress for dinner, and we haven't done half our

round. I was going to take Tom to the links, Harold. She is a great golfer, and will be interested in seeing them. You'll come too, won't you?"

"With pleasure. They are just our own tame little links, Miss Bolderston, which we have faked up in the park. You won't think much of them if you are a player, but they give an opportunity for private practice, and we have some good sport there occasionally."

"Ah, yes! How many holes?" enquired Tom, sticking one thumb between the buttonholes of her coat, and tilting her head at him with such a businesslike air that he felt embarrassed to be obliged to reply.

"Nine, with a little crossing about; some of the distances are very short, I'm afraid. Still, it has its points, and I've played on larger links with less enjoyment. We will take a short cut across here to the first hole. We start here, as you see, and a good full cleek shot should land you on the green. There are only two holes which really give a chance for a driver. Now you can see the second green, but it's not so easy a hole as it looks from here, for the grass is tussocky, and one almost always gets a bad lie for the approach."

"Yes, but why not drive for the green?"

"Well, you see, it's rather too far for a cleek, and too short for a driver. Sometimes I try it with a brasse, but on the whole I think the cleek is best. If you over-drive you get into awful trouble, as you will see." So the course was gone over and explained, and Tom's eye was quick to see the possibilities, and note the dangers, nor did she hesitate sometimes to differ from Harold's tactics.

"Well," said he, in conclusion, "what do you think of 'em? Rather sporting, aren't they?"

"Humph—yes!" said Tom. "That fifth hole is a little tricky, but I think they ought to be done in—er—What's your record?"

"M—well, it varies—of course. I'm no pro., but I can get round in forty, with luck."

"Forty! Humph!" Tom wheeled round on her heel, and gazed from right to left with calculating eyes. Her lips moved noiselessly, then she nodded her head, and cried confidently:

"I'll take you! I'll play you to-morrow for the better man!"

"Done!" agreed Harold at once, but he straightened his shoulders as he spoke with a gesture which meant that he had no intention, if he knew it, of being beaten by a school-girl, and his sister looked forward to the contest with very mingled feelings. If Tom lost, it would be a distinct blow; yet if Tom won, how Harold would dislike her! How hopeless it would be to look for any friendship between them after that! She was glad that the game would have to be deferred for a day at least, for an evening spent in Tom's company must surely instal her in public favour. When, however, she went to her friend's room to convey her downstairs to dinner, Rhoda's confidence was shaken, and she nearly exclaimed aloud in dismay at the apparition which she beheld.

Tom in full evening dress was a vision which had been denied to Hurst Manor, but on the present occasion she had evidently determined to pay every honour to her hosts, and bony arms and neck emerged festively from a shot-silk gown, which Rhoda felt convinced must have been a possession of the long-deceased mother.

"What do you think of *that*?" Tom cried proudly, rustling round to confront the new-comer, arms akimbo, and eyes twinkling with complacency. "There's a natty get-up! Quite a fashion plate, ain't I? The very latest from Par-ee. You didn't expect to see anything like that, did you?"

"I didn't!" cried Rhoda, truthfully enough; but Tom suspected no satire in her words, and taking up the hand-glass, began twisting and turning before the mirror so as to get a view of her hair, which was no longer plaited into a pigtail, but screwed into a knot the size of a walnut, planted accurately in the middle of her head.

"I say, what do you think of my coiffure?"

Rhoda looked, and burst into a shriek of laughter. "Oh, Tom! that's it! I noticed there was something different, but couldn't think what it was. Oh, no, no, Tom, you can't leave it like that! You must make it bigger, and wear it either high or low. It's too ridiculous—that little button just in the very wrong place. Sit down for one moment, and I'll arrange it for you!"

But Tom beat her off resolutely with the hair-brush.

"I won't! It's my own hair, and I like it this way. It's *distingué*—not like every other woman you meet. Now that I've left school and am grown-up, I must study *les convenances*, and it's fatal to be commonplace. I may be prejudiced, but it seems to me that in this get-up I'm a striking figure!"

The beaming good-humour of her smile, the utter absence of anything approaching envy or discontent, struck home to Rhoda's heart, and silenced further protestations. She put her arm round Tom's waist, gave her an affectionate grip, wishing, for perhaps the first time in her life, that she herself had put on an older frock, so that the contrast between herself and her guest should be less marked in the eyes of the household.

Alas! socially speaking, Tom was not a success. Mrs Chester was plainly alarmed by her eccentricities; Mr Chester did not know whether to take her in fun or in earnest; and Harold's languor grew more and more pronounced. The very servants stared with astonishment at the peculiar guest, and when dinner was over Rhoda, in despair, took Tom up to her own den to avoid the ordeal of an evening in the drawing-room.



Once alone, with closed doors and no critical grown-ups to listen to their conversation, the hours sped away with lightning speed, while Tom told of her own plans, sympathised with Rhoda's ambition, and let fall words of wisdom, none the less valuable for being uttered in the most casual fashion. Every now and again the remembrance of her recent disappointment would send a stabbing pain through Rhoda's heart, but, as she had said, it was impossible to remain in low spirits in Tom's company, and if no one else enjoyed that young lady's society it was precious beyond words to her girl companion.

The game of golf was played as arranged, but though Harold came off victor it was too close a contest to be agreeable to his vanity, or to increase his liking for his opponent, while Mr Chester confided to his wife that he could not understand Rhoda's infatuation for such a remarkably unattractive companion.

"If it had been that sweet little Miss Everett, now, she might have stayed for a year, and been welcome, but I confess I shall be glad when this girl takes her departure. She makes me quite nervous, sitting blinking at me with those little eyes. I have a sort of feeling that she is laughing to herself when she seems most serious."

"Oh, she could never laugh at you, dear. She couldn't be so audacious!" declared Mrs Chester fondly; "but I can't bring myself to like her, and where her cleverness lies is a mystery to me. I never met a more ignorant girl. She can neither sew nor knit nor crochet, and the remarks she made in the market yesterday would have disgraced a child of ten. I pity the man who gets *her* for his wife!"

But, as we have seen, Thomasina had other ideas than matrimony for her own future. As she drove to the station by Rhoda's side she fell into an unusual fit of silence, and emerging from it said slowly:

"I'm glad I've seen your home, Fuzzy. It's very beautiful, and very happy. You are all so fond of one another, and so nice and kind, that it's a regular ideal family. I think you are a lucky girl. I like all your people very much, though they don't like me!"

Rhoda exclaimed sharply, but Tom's smile was without a shadow of offence as she insisted—

"My dear, I know it! Don't perjure yourself for the sake of politeness. I'm sorry, but—I'm accustomed to it. Strangers *don't* like me, and it's not a mite of use trying to ingratiate myself. I did all I knew when I came here. I wore my best clothes, I tried to behave prettily, and you see, dead failure, as usual! You needn't look doleful, for no doubt it's all for the best. If I were beautiful and fascinating I might be distracted from my work, whereas now I shall devote myself to it with every scrap of my strength. Girls love me, and I love them, so I'll give up my life for their service. We have all our vocation, and it would be a happier world if everyone were as well satisfied as I am. 'In work, in work, in work always, let my young days be spent.' Bother it! Here's the station already, and I haven't said half I wanted to!"

"Nor I to you. It's horrid to say good-bye, and think of school without you, but you'll write to me, won't you, Tom? You will promise to write regularly?"

"Indeed, I won't! Fifty odd girls implored me to write to them, and it's too big an order. No, my dear Fuzz, I shall have no time to tell you how busy I am. Here we part, and we must leave it to fate or good fortune when we meet again. Bless you, my infant! Perk up, and be a credit to me."

"But—but—how am I to know, how am I to hear what happens to you? I *can't* say good-bye and let you fade away completely, as if we had never met. It's horrible. You *must* let me know!"

"Look in the newspapers. You will see my doings recorded in the Public Press," replied Tom, as she skipped into the carriage. Rhoda looked on blankly, her heart sinking with a conviction that Tom did not care; that it was nothing for her to say good-bye and part without a prospect of reunion. She was too proud to protest, but, waving her hand, turned abruptly away and walked out of the station. The train lingered, however, and the temptation to take one more peep became too strong to be resisted, so she ran along the path for twenty or thirty yards, and peered cautiously through a gate from which a sight of the carriage in which her friend sat could be commanded. Tom had leant back in her seat, and flung her hat on one side; her little eyes were red with tears, and she was mopping them assiduously with a ball-like pocket handkerchief!

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## Chapter Nineteen.

### School Again.

School again, and no Tom! The house-parlour with no manly figure to lean with its back against the mantelpiece, and jingle chains in its pocket; the dining-hall with no one to make faces at the critical moment when a girl was swallowing her soup, or to nudge her elbow as she lifted a cup to her lips; the cubicle with no magenta dressing-jacket whisking to and fro—it was ghastly! The girls could not reconcile themselves to their loss, and the first fortnight of the term was one of unalloyed depression. No one dared to joke, for if she did her companions instantly accused her of "apeing Tom" and snubbed her for the feebleness of the attempt; no one dared to be cheerful, lest she should be charged with fickleness, and want of heart. And Irene, the beautiful, reigned in Tom's stead! It would have been a difficult post for any girl to have succeeded Thomasina Bolderston, but, curious though it may appear, Irene's flaxen locks and regular features were for the time being so many offences in the eyes of her companions. They were accustomed to Tom; Tom had been the Head Girl of their heart, and they resented the "finicking" ways of her successor as an insult to the dear departed.

Irene strove by a gentle mildness of demeanour to soften the prejudice against her, and the girls but abused her the more.

"Catch Tom saying '*It didn't matter!*'! Imagine Tom pretending she didn't hear! A nice Head Girl *she* is! We might as well have Hilary Jervis!" Irene assumed a pretence of firmness; the girls rolled their eyes at each other and tittered audibly. The idea of Irene Grey ordering others about! Plainly, it was time, and time only, which could give any authority to Tom Bolderston's supplanter!

How keenly Rhoda felt her friend's absence no one guessed but herself. Tom's attitude towards the result of the late examinations would have given the keynote to that of her companions, and have shielded the poor, smarting victim from much which she now had to endure. The girls were unaffectedly sorry for her, but pity is an offering which a proud spirit finds it hard to accept. It seemed strange to realise that girls cast in such graceful moulds as Dorothy and Irene should be so deficient in tact as to gush over the humiliation of another, and check the rhapsodies of successful candidates by such significant coughings and frownings as must have been obvious to the dullest faculties. Oh, for Tom's downright acceptance of a situation—her calm taking-for-granted that the sufferer was neither selfish nor cowardly enough to grudge success to others! Rhoda felt, as we have all felt in our time, that she had never thoroughly appreciated her friend until she had departed, and she was one of the most enthusiastic members of the committee organised to arrange about the tablet to be composed in Tom's honour.

Of course, Tom must have a place on the Record Wall! Blues, Reds, Greens, and Yellows were unanimously decided on the point; contributions poured in, and on Sunday afternoon the Blues sat in consultation over the wording of the inscription.

"The simpler the better. Tom hated gush!" was the general opinion; but it was astonishing how difficult it was to hit on something simple yet telling. A high-flown rhapsody seemed far easier to accomplish, and at last, in despair, each girl was directed to compose an inscription and to read it aloud for general approval. None were universally approved, but Rhoda's received the largest number of votes, as being simple yet comprehensive:—

"This tablet is erected to the memory of Thomasina Bolderston, the most popular 'Head Girl' whom Hurst Manor has ever known. Her companions affectionately record the kindly justice of her rule, and the unfailing cheerfulness which was a stimulus to them in work and play."

"Yes—it's the best, decidedly the best, but I should like it to have been better still!" said Kathleen thoughtfully. "It is so difficult to describe Tom in three or four lines."

"And it leaves so much unsaid! I should like to describe her a little bit so that future pupils might know what she was like. If they read that, they would imagine her just like anyone else," objected Bertha, frowning. "I suppose it wouldn't do to say something about her—er—'*engaging ugliness!*' or some expression like that?"

Howls of indignation greeted this audacious proposition, and Bertha was alternately snubbed, reproached, and abused, until she grew sulky and retired from the discussion. Rhoda herself came to the rescue, and with the critical spirit of the true artist acknowledged the defect in her own work.

"Bertha is right! What I have written gives no idea of Tom herself. It's a pity, but I don't see how it can be helped. What words could describe Tom to anyone who had not seen her? Now, here's another idea! Why not make a rule that every girl who has had her name inscribed on the Record Wall must present a framed portrait to the school? All the frames would be alike, and they would be hung in rows in the Great Hall, so that future generations of pupils might be able to see what the girls were like, and feel more friendly towards them!"

"Rhoda! What a h-eavenly idea!" cried Irene rapturously. "How s-implify lovely! Why in the world have we never thought of that before?"

"I never heard of anything so splendid!" cried the girls in chorus, while Rhoda sat beaming with gratified smiles. Well, if her own name would never be printed in that roll of honour, at least she had composed the inscription of one of the most important tablets, and had suggested a new idea which bade fair to be as much appreciated as the Wall itself! Already the girls were debating eagerly together as to its inauguration, and deciding that the different "Heads" should be deputed to write to those old members of each house who had been honoured with tablets, to ask for portraits taken as nearly as possible about the date of leaving school. Irene, of course, would communicate with Tom to inform her of the step about to be taken by her companions, and to direct her to be photographed at the first possible moment.

"And—er—you might just drop a hint about her attire!" said Rhoda, anxiously, as a remembrance of the dress and coiffure of Erley Chase rose before her. Nothing more likely than that Tom would elect to do honour to her companions by putting on her very best clothes for their benefit, and imagine the horror of the Blues at seeing their old Head decked out in such fashion! "We should like best to see her as she used to look here."

"She must wear the old blue dress, and stand with her back to the fireplace, with her hands in her pockets," cried Kathleen firmly. "We don't want to see Tom lying in a hammock against a background of palms, or smirking over a fan—not much! It's the genuine article we want, and no make-up. What will she say, I wonder, when she hears she is going to have a tablet? Will she be pleased or vexed?"

"She must be pleased—who could help it?—but she will pretend she is not. Mark my words, she'll write back and say it's a piece of ridiculous nonsense."

So prophesied Irene; but the result proved that she was wrong, for Tom, as usual, refused to be anticipated. Instead of protesting that she had done nothing worthy of such an honour, and beseeching her companions not to make themselves ridiculous, she dismissed the subject in a couple of lines, in which she declared the proposed scheme to be "most laudable," and calmly volunteered to contribute half-a-crown!

The Blues agreed among themselves that such behaviour came perilously near "callousness," but Rhoda recalled

that last peep through the bars of the station gate, and could not join in the decision. She believed that Tom would be profoundly touched by the honour, so touched and so proud that she dared not trust herself to approach the subject from a serious view. And she was right, for if imagination could have carried her old companions to the study where Tom was then domiciled, they would have seen her chalking an immense red cross on her calendar against the date when Irene's letter had arrived, and mentally recording it as the proudest day of her life.

No mention was made of the photograph, but in due time it arrived, so life-like and speaking in its well-known attitude, that the more sentimental of the girls shed tears of joy at beholding it. Closely following it came other contributions to the gallery, which the new-comers examined with keenest interest, feeling more able to understand the enthusiasm of their seniors, now that the well-known names were attached to definite personalities.

About this time, too, arrived a full report of the examination, and, as had been expected, Rhoda was found to have failed in arithmetic. In other subjects she had done well, gaining the longed-for distinction in German and French, so that if only— Oh! that little "If!" How much it meant! That terrible mountainous "If," which made all the difference between failure and success! *If* it had been a dark morning and she had slept on! *If* she had given way to temptation, and dozed off in the middle of her work! *If* she had listened to Evie's words of warning!—If but one of those possible Ifs had been accomplished, she would have been among the happy crowd to-day, and not standing miserably apart, the only girl in the house who had failed to pass. The wild grief of the first few days swept back like a wave and threatened to overwhelm her, but she clung to the remembrance of Tom's words, and told herself passionately that she would *not* "whine"! She would not pose as a martyr! Even on that great occasion when the certificates were presented in Great Hall, and the school burst into ecstatic repetitions of "See the Conquering Hero Comes!" as each fresh girl walked up to the platform, even through that dread ordeal did Rhoda retain her self-possession, attempting—poor child—to add a trembling note to the chorus.

She never knew, nor guessed, that the girls honoured her more in that moment than if she had won a dozen distinctions. She did not see the kindly glances bent upon her by the teachers, for they were careful to turn aside when she looked in their direction; and if she had seen, she would never have believed it was admiration, and not pity, which those looks expressed. In her estimation the occasion was one of pure, unalloyed humiliation, and when she reached the shelter of her cubicle she seized the hand-glass and examined her ruddy head anxiously beneath the electric globe.

"It isn't true!" she exclaimed. "The ghost stories tell lies. I don't believe now that anyone's head ever turned white in a night. I can't see a single grey hair."

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## Chapter Twenty.

### An Accident.

After a storm comes a calm. Compared with the struggle and anxiety of the summer term, the one which followed seemed stagnation itself. The arrival of the report had been an excitement, it is true; but when that was over the days passed by in uneventful fashion, until autumn waned and winter came back, with the attendant discomforts of dark mornings, draughty corridors, and coatings of ice on the water in the ewers; for this was a good, old-fashioned winter, when Jack Frost made his appearance in the beginning of December, and settled down with a solidity which meant that he had come to stay. The hardy girls declared that it was "ripping," and laughed at the shivery subjects who hobbled about on chilblained feet, and showed faces mottled blue and red, like the imitation marble in lodging-house-parlours; the shivery girls huddled in corners, and wished they could go to bed and hug hot bottles until May came back and it was fit for human creatures to go about again! People who possess brisk circulations can never understand the sufferings of those whom no amount of clothing will keep warm, and who perform their duties for four months in the year feeling as though icy water were streaming down their backs. Human sympathy is an elastic virtue, but it seems powerless to reach so far as that!

Poor Miss Everett belonged to this latter unhappy class, and perhaps the hardest duty which she had to perform at Hurst Manor was the spending of two hours daily in the grounds with her pupils, be the weather warm or cold. To be sure, they always moved about briskly, playing hockey and lacrosse so long as the weather allowed, and then turning to skating and tobogganing, but there were moments of waiting and hanging about, when the wind cut through her like a knife, and made her pretty face look pinched to half its size. Rhoda, brisk and glowing, would look at her with affectionate superiority, call her a "poor, dear, little frog," and insist upon running races to restore circulation. Evie would declare that she felt warmer after these exertions, but when at the expiration of ten minutes she was found to be shivering and chattering as much as ever, Rhoda would grow anxious, and consequently more flattering in her smiles.

"You are a hot-house flower, and not fit to rough it like this! It makes me cold to look at you. I have a great mind to tell Miss Bruce how you suffer, and ask her to forbid you to come out to games in this weather!"

But at this Miss Everett protested in genuine alarm.

"Rhoda, you must do nothing of the kind! Don't you see that it would be as much as saying that I am unfit for my work? Miss Bruce thinks it quite as important that I should be with you for games as for work; perhaps more so, for there is more likelihood of your getting into mischief. I don't like feeling cold, but after all it is only for a few weeks in the year, and as I thoroughly enjoy being out of doors for the rest of the time there is not much to grumble about. It won't kill me to shiver a little bit."

"Cold, cough, consumption, coffin!" quoted Rhoda cheerfully. "I hate to see you with a blue nose, when I am tingling all over with heat, and feeling so fit and jolly. It's unsociable—and unbecoming! Now just skate once more round the field with me, and I won't worry you any more!"

Miss Everett sighed, and consented. Her feet were so numbed that she had believed them incapable of any feeling, but now the straps of her skates were beginning to cut into her like so many sharp-edged knives. She longed to take them off, but did not like to refuse the girl's kindly invitation, while, unselfishly speaking, it was a pleasure to see the graceful figure skimming along by her side, with such healthful enjoyment in the exercise.

The pupils at Hurst Manor were seldom, if ever, allowed to skate on the lake, for it was deep, and the Principal preferred to have one of the fields flooded in its stead, where the girls could disport themselves with that sense of security which comes from seeing little tufts of grass showing beneath the surface of the ice. Even nervous subjects grew bold under such conditions, and while the more advanced skaters cut figures, or even essayed a game of hockey, the spectators circled round and round, looking admiringly at their exploits. At one end of the field was a slight ditch, or rather undulation in the ground, which when frozen over afforded a source of unending amusement, being as good as a switchback itself. Daring skaters went at it with a dash which brought them safely up the incline on the further side, but by far the greater number collapsed helplessly at the bottom, or, rising half-way up the ascent, staggered back with waving arms and gasping cries, vastly entertaining to the spectators. Evie would never be induced to make this experiment, having, as she said, "too much respect for her ankles" to subject them to so severe a trial, and having also passed that age when to tumble down in an icy ditch twenty times over in the course of an afternoon seems the height of mortal bliss.

The hardihood of the vast majority of the girls, the imperturbable good nature with which they picked themselves up from their recumbent position and hobbled up the banks on the edge of their skates, spoke volumes for the success of the system on which they were educated. They returned to the house glowing and panting, and surged up the staircase—a stream of buoyant young life which seemed to warm the draughty corridors and bring sunshine into the colourless rooms. The piles of "bread and scrape" which disappeared at tea after such an afternoon as this would have amazed the parents of the daughters whose appetites at home had been so captious as to excite anxiety in the maternal heart!

"Of course," as the croakers had it, as soon as a week's consecutive skating had made everyone proficient enough to enjoy the pastime, the snow descended, and fell in a persistent shower which made the ice impossibly rough. The girls looked out from their windows on a wonderful white world, whose beauty was for the time hidden from them by disappointment, but, in the end, even snow seemed to bring with it its own peculiar excitements. Relief gangs of pupils were organised to sweep the principal paths in the grounds, while those not so employed set to work to manufacture "snow men." Not the ordinary common, or garden snow man, be it understood—that disreputable, shapeless individual with his pipe in his mouth, and his hat perched on the back of his head, with whom we are all familiar—the Hurst Manor girls would have none of him; but, superintended by the "Modelling Mistress," set to work with no smaller ambition than to erect a gallery of classic figures. Some wise virgins chose to manufacture recumbent figures, which, if a somewhat back-breaking process, was at least free from the perils which attended the labours of their companions. What could be more annoying than to have two outstretched arms drop suddenly, at the very moment when the bystanders were exclaiming with admiration, and to be obliged to convert a flying god into a Venus de Milo as the only escape from the difficulty? Or, again, how was it possible to achieve a classic outline when a nose absolutely refused to adhere to a face for more than two minutes together? The recumbent figures lay meekly on their beds and allowed themselves to be rolled, and patted, and pinched into shape, until at a distance, they presented quite a life, or rather deathlike, effect. The girls declared that the sight gave them the "creeps," whatever that mysterious malady might be, and snowballed the effigies vigorously before returning to the house, so that no straggler through the grounds might be scared by their appearance.

All this time an eager outlook was kept on a sloping bank at the end of the cricket ground, where the snow lay first in patches and then by degrees in an unbroken mass. When it grew deep enough tobogganing would begin, and that was a sport held in dearest estimation. The course was dubbed "Klosters," after the famous run at Davos, for the school-girl of to-day is not happy unless she can give a nickname to her haunts, and it was sufficiently steep to be exciting, though not dangerous.

Rhoda had been accustomed from childhood to practise this sport at home, and had brought to school her beautiful American toboggan, with the stars and stripes emblazoned on polished wood, ready for use if opportunity should occur. She knew that her experience would stand her in good stead, and was now, as ever, on the outlook for a chance of distinguishing herself in the eyes of her companions. One may be naturally clever and athletic, but it is astonishing how many others, equal, and even superior to oneself, can be found in an assembly of over two hundred girls. Do what you would, a dozen others appeared to compete with you, and it was ten to one that you came off second best.

"But wait till we can toboggan!" said Rhoda to herself. "They will see *then* who has the most nerve! I'll astonish them before I have done!" And she did.

Following a fall of snow came a frost, which pressed down and hardened the soft surface until it was in perfect condition for the desired sport. The games captains surveyed the course, and pronounced it ready, and directly after lunch a procession of girls might have been seen wending their way from the house, dragging toboggans in their wake, and chattering merrily together. The wind blew sharp and keen, and many of the number looked quite Arctic, waddling along in snow shoes, reefer coats, and furry caps with warm straps tied over the ears. It was *de rigueur* to address such personages as "Nansen"; but Rhoda gained for herself the more picturesque title of "Hail Columbia" as she strode along, straight and alert, her tawny curls peeping from beneath a sealskin cap, her stars and stripes toboggan making a spot of colour in the midst of the universal whiteness. No one thought of addressing her except in a more or less successful imitation of an American twang, or without including the words "I guess" in every sentence, and she smiled in response, well satisfied to represent so honoured a nation.

The progress of dragging toboggans to the top of an incline is always uninteresting, and never takes place without an accompaniment of grumbling, in which, we may be sure, the Hurst Manor girls were in no way behind. They groaned, and sighed, and lamented, as in duty bound, while Dorothy went a step further and improved the occasion by moral

reflections.

"If I were a man I could preach a splendid sermon on tobogganing. All about sliding down hill, you know, and how easy it is, and how quickly done, and how jolly and lively it feels, and then the long, long drag back when you want to get to the top again. It is a splendid illustration; for, of course, sliding down would mean doing wrong things that are nice and easy, and the climb back the bad time you would have pulling yourself together again and starting afresh... It's really a splendid idea. I wonder no—" But at this moment it occurred to Dorothy to wonder at something else, namely, how it was that her toboggan had grown suddenly so light, and turning round to discover the reason, she found it rapidly sliding downhill. The girl immediately behind had nipped out her knife and deftly cut the leading string, as a practical demonstration of the favour in which "sermonising" was held at Hurst, and the whole band stood and screamed with laughter as the would-be preacher retraced her steps to the bottom of the hill, and started afresh on her symbolic climb!

Five minutes later, with a rush and a whoop the first toboggans came flying down the slope. Their course was, perhaps, a trifle erratic, and apt to be followed by a spill at the bottom, but these were unimportant details only to be expected in the first run of the season, and the style improved with every fresh start. One girl after another came flying down, drew her toboggan up a little slope facing the run, and sat down upon it to recover breath and watch the exploits of her companions. Experience had proved that, however rapid the descent, a toboggan invariably stopped short before this edge was reached, so that it was accepted as a retreat of absolute safety, and, as a rule, there were as many girls resting there as starting from the brow of the hill. All went on merrily, then, until in the very height of the fun Dorothy was seized with an attack of her usual sickness. It was not a very deadly complaint—nothing more serious than haemorrhage from the nose, but it was astonishing how much trouble it seemed able to give her! To the gaze of the world that nose was both a pretty and innocent-looking feature, but it must surely have been possessed with an evil spirit, since there was no end to the plights in which it landed the unhappy owner! It disdained to bleed in a cubicle, or any such convenient place, but delighted in taking advantage of the most awkward and humiliating opportunities. It bled regularly at Frolics, when she wore her best clothes, and wished to be merry; it bled in the ante-room of the Examination Hall, so that she went in to tackle the mathematical paper with three pennies and two separate keys poked down her back; it bled at the critical part of a game or when she went out to tea, or forgot to put a handkerchief in her pocket. "It is my cross!" she would sigh sadly, and to-day she was inclined to say so more than ever, since the attack was so severe, that she must needs go indoors, and leave her favourite sport on the very first day when it had been possible to enjoy it.

Miss Everett walked with her across the field, cheering and encouraging, and directing her to go straight to Nurse when she reached the house, then retraced her own steps and hurried back to her charges. She had been away only five minutes, barely five minutes, but in that short time something had happened which was destined to bring about life-long consequences to more than one member of the party, for it chanced that just as she turned away Rhoda Chester reached the top of the run, on the lookout for fresh opportunities. It was absurd to go over the same course, with no change, no excitement—to do what thirty other girls could do as well as herself! She must try to discover some variety this time, and so she gazed about with critical eyes, and suddenly had an inspiration, for why not drag the toboggan a yard or two further up the steep bank beyond the path which made the present start? It was a tree-crowned bank, forming the very crest of the hill, so short that it measured at the most six or seven yards, but of a steepness far eclipsing any other portion of the run. If she could start from this higher point she would accomplish a feat unattempted by any of her companions, and descend at a velocity hitherto unknown!

No sooner thought than done, and she began to climb the bank, dragging the toboggan behind her, while the onlookers stared aghast.

"In the name of everything that is crazy, Rhoda Chester, what are you doing up there?"

"Rhoda, come *down*! Don't be absurd! You can't possibly start from there!"

"Why not, pray? I can, if I choose. I'm tired of ambling down that baby-run. I want a little variety!"

"You will have it with a vengeance, if you start from there. It's far too steep. Don't be obstinate now, and get into trouble. Evie will be furious with you."

"Why should she be? There's no rule against it. I'm not doing anything wrong... Get out of the way, please. I'm coming!"

"No, no; wait, wait! Wait until Evie comes back, and says you may. She will be here in a moment. *Do* wait, Rhoda, just one minute!"

But Rhoda would not wait. Although, as she had argued, there was no rule forbidding what she was about to do, she had an instinctive feeling that Evie was too anxious about the safety of her charges to give consent to anything that involved unnecessary risk. Evie's absence was her opportunity, and she must act now or never; so, seating herself firmly on her toboggan, she called out the last word of warning; "I'm coming, I tell you! Stand back!"

"You will break your neck! You will kill yourself, if you are so mad!"

"Oh, bother my neck! I'll risk it! I'll not blame you if it *is* broken!" cried Rhoda, recklessly; and even as she spoke the last word the toboggan shot forward and bounded over the edge. *Bounded* is the right word to use, for it did not seem to glide, but to leap from top to bottom with a lightning-like speed which took away breath, sight, and hearing. That first moment was a terrible blank and then she shot over the path itself, and was flying down, down the slope, drawing her breath in painful gasps, and staring before her with distended eyes.

The girls on the bank were craning forward to watch her approach. She saw the blur of their whitened faces, and behind them a little figure running wildly forward, waving its arms and crying aloud:

"Girls, girls! Jump! *Run!* Get away, get away!"

The words rang meaningless in her ears, for she was dazed beyond the power of thought. The running figure drew nearer and nearer, still waving its hands, still calling out that agonised cry. The girls disappeared to right and left, but the figure itself was close at hand—closer—closer—at her very side. Then came a shock, a jar. Evie's tottering figure fell forward over her own; Evie's shriek of anguish rang in her ears, and then came blackness—a blackness as of death!

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## Chapter Twenty One.

### The Consequences.

When Rhoda opened her eyes she was lying in a strange bed, and some one was sitting by her side, anxiously watching her face. It was not Nurse *par excellence*, but the matron of another house, whose features seemed unfamiliar, despite their kindly expression.

"You are better? You feel rested now?" she questioned, and Rhoda struggled wearily to form a reply.

"My head aches. I feel—tired!"

"Yes, yes, of course. Don't speak, but lie quite still; I will stay beside you."

A soothing hand was pressed upon her own, and once again her eyes closed, and she floated away into that strange, dream-like world. Sometimes all was blank, at other times she was dimly conscious of what went on around, as when voices murmured together by her side, and Nurse related how she had spoken and answered a question, and the doctor declared in reply that she was better, decidedly better! She was heavy and weary, and had no desire but to be left alone, while time passed by in a curious, dizzy fashion, light and darkness succeeding each other with extraordinary celerity. Then gradually all became clear; she was lying in the sick room where patients suffering from non-infectious complaints were taken. The pressure at her head was giving way, allowing glimmering flashes of memory. What was it?—a terrible, terrible nightmare; a horror as of falling from a great height; a sudden, numbing crash... Where has she been? What had she done? And then with another struggling gleam—the toboggan!

Her cry of distress brought the nurse to her side, while she gasped out a feeble—

"I remember! I was tobogganing.—I was too quick. I suppose I fell?"

"Yes, you fell, but you are better now; you are getting on finely. Just keep quiet, and you will be up again in a few days."

There was a tone of relief in the good woman's voice as though there had been another remembrance which she had feared to hear, but Rhoda did not notice it, for a very few words seemed to tire her in those days, and her brain was unable to grasp more than one idea at a time.

The next time she awoke her mother was sitting by the bed. It appeared that she had been staying in the house for the past four days, peeping in at the invalid while she slept, but waiting the doctor's permission to appear before her waking eyes. Rhoda was languidly pleased to see her, but puzzled to account for the air of depression which lay so constantly on the once cheery face. If she were getting better, why did everyone look so doleful—the doctor, her mother, Miss Bruce—everyone whom she saw? She questioned, but could get no answer, struggled after a haunting memory, which at one moment seemed at the point of shaping itself into words, and at the next retreated to a hopeless distance. And then suddenly, by one of those marvellous actions of the brain which we can never understand, the whole scene flashed upon her as she lay upon her pillow, thinking of something entirely different, and not troubling her head about the mystery.

She saw herself dragging the toboggan up the bank, felt again the horror of that first mad rush, saw the girls flying to right and left before Evie's waving arms, and heard Evie's voice shriek aloud in the pain of the sudden collision. Her own agonised exclamation brought mother and nurse hurrying across the room to lay soothing hands upon her, and hold her down in bed as she cried out wildly—

"Oh, I remember! I remember! Evie! The toboggan dashed up the bank, and she was looking after the girls, and I crashed into her, and she shrieked. Oh, Evie! Evie! She was hurt, terribly hurt... She fell down over me. Where is she now? I must go to her—I must go at once!"

The two watchers exchanged a rapid glance, and even in that moment of agitation Rhoda realised that this was the awakening which they had been dreading, this the explanation of the universal depression. A new note of fear sounded in her voice, as she quavered feebly:

"Is Evie—dead?"

"No, no, nor likely to die! She has been ill, but is getting better now. She is in her own room, with Nurse to look after her. You cannot possibly see her yet, for it would be bad for both."

"But you are sure she is better? You are sure she will get well? You are not deceiving me just to keep me quiet?"

"No, indeed. It is the truth, that she is getting stronger every day. When I say that, you can believe that I am not deceiving you, can't you, dear?"

Yes, of course, she was bound to believe it; but in some patients the faculties seem strangely sharpened in convalescence, and despite her mother's assurance Rhoda felt convinced that something was being kept back—that something had happened to Evie which she was not to be allowed to know. She asked no more questions, but with sharpened eyes watched the faces of the visitors who were now allowed to see her, and found in each the same shade of depression. She was waiting for an opportunity, and it came at last on the first day when she was allowed to sit up, and Miss Bruce came in to pay her usual visit. No one else was in the room, and Rhoda looked up into the strong, grave face, and felt her heart beat rapidly. Now was her opportunity! Miss Bruce could be trusted to answer truthfully, however painful might be the news which she had to unfold; she was neither hard nor unsympathetic, but she had the courage of her convictions, and had faced too many disagreeable duties to understand the meaning of shirking. Rhoda clasped her hands tightly together, swallowed nervously once or twice, and began—

“Miss Bruce please—I want to ask you—Mother won't tell me. Was it my fault that—Evie was hurt?”

The Principal's face hardened involuntarily.

“What do you think yourself, Rhoda? Your companions, as you know, are never ready to speak against a friend, but I have made the strictest enquiries into this sad affair, and I hear that the girls warned you that you were attempting a dangerous feat, and implored you to wait until Miss Everett returned. You chose to disregard them, and to take no thought of the risk to others, and—”

Rhoda turned, if possible, a shade paler than before.

“I see!” she said slowly. “I suppose it's no use saying that I never thought I could hurt anyone but myself. I *should* have thought! Everyone who knows me, knows that I love Evie, and would rather have been smashed to pieces than have harmed her in any way.”

“Yes, Rhoda!” Miss Bruce sighed heavily, “that is quite true, nevertheless it seems to me a little inconsistent that you did not think more of her feelings. She was responsible for your safety, and you can hardly have believed that she would have allowed such a mad trick. However, I don't wish to reproach you, for your punishment has been taken out of my hands. Nothing that I could do or say could affect you half so much as the thought of the trouble which you have brought upon your kind, good friend—”

It was coming now; it was coming at last! Rhoda's heart gave a wild, fluttering leap; she looked up breathlessly into the unbending face.

“What is the trouble? I thought she was like me—stunned and shaken. I never heard—”

“No, it is not at all the same. You had a slight concussion, from which you have now recovered. Her injury is much more lasting. Her right knee-cap was broken, and the doctors fear it will never be quite right again. She will probably be lame for life.”

Rhoda turned her head aside, and said no word, and Miss Bruce stood looking down at her in silence also. The curly hair was fastened back by a ribbon tied in the nape of the neck, and the profile was still visible leaning against the pillows. It was motionless, except for one tell-tale pulse above the ear which beat furiously up and down, up and down, beneath the drawn skin. The Principal looked on that little pulse, and laid her hand pitifully on the girl's head.

“I will leave you now, Rhoda. You would rather be alone. I am truly sorry for you, but I am powerless to help. One can only pray that some good may come out of all this trouble.”

She left the room, and Rhoda was alone at last, to face the nightmare which had come into her life. Evie *lamed*, and by her doing! Evie injured for life by one moment's thoughtlessness—rashness—call it *wickedness* if you will—even then it seemed impossible that it should be *allowed* to have such lasting consequences! One moment's disobedience, and then to suffer for it all her life! to see Evie—dear, sweet, graceful Evie—limping about, crippled and helpless; to keep ever in one's mind the memory of that last wild run—the last time Evie would ever run! Could retribution possibly have taken to itself a more torturing form? She had spoiled Evie's life, and brought misery into a happy home.

“I could have borne it if it had happened to myself,” she gasped. “But no! I must needs get well, and be strong, and rich, and healthy. I suppose I shall laugh again some day, and forget, and be happy, while Evie—. I am a Cain upon earth, not fit to live! I wish I could die this minute, and not have a chance to do any more mischief.”

But we cannot die just because we wish to escape the consequences of our own misdoing; we are obliged to live, and face them day after day. Crises of suffering, moments of humiliation, stabbing returns of pain just when we are congratulating ourselves that the worst is over—they must be lived through, and though we fly to the ends of the world they will still follow in our wake.

One of the consequences which Rhoda dreaded, and yet longed for in curious, contradictory fashion, was her first interview with Evie herself. What would she say? What would she do? Would she be sweet and self-forgetful as of old, or full of bitter reproaches? She could gather no clue from her companions, and her first request to be allowed to visit the invalid in her room was vetoed on the ground that the excitement would be bad for herself, and could do Evie no good. When, however, she was allowed to walk about, and even entertain her companions to tea, the first excuse could no longer be offered, and at last, consent being given, she tapped tremblingly at the well-known door. Nurse's voice bade her enter, and she walked forward with her eyes fixed on the bed on which Evie lay. Her face was thin and drawn, and had lost its colour, yet it was none of these things which struck a chill to Rhoda's heart, but the expression in the eyes themselves—Evie's sweet brown eyes, which of old had been alight with kindly humour. They were blank eyes now, listless eyes, which stared and stared, yet seemed hardly to see that at which they gazed. Rhoda stood before her for a full moment, before the light of recognition showed in their depths, and even then it

was a flicker more than a light, and died out again with startling rapidity.

The girl stood trembling, the carefully rehearsed words fading away from memory, for excuses and protestations seemed alike useless in the presence of that despairing calm. She looked pitifully into the set face, and faltered out:

“Evie, I’ve come... I wanted to see you! I have thought about you every minute of the time... I could not stay away—”

No answer. Evie might not have heard her speak, for all signs of emotion which appeared on her face. Rhoda waited another moment and then with a catch in her voice asked another question:

“Is—is your knee very painful, Evie?”

“No!” Evie winced at that, and turning towards the other side of the bed, held out her hand appealingly towards the Nurse, who took it in her own, and frowned a warning to the visitor.

“You had better go now, Miss. She isn’t equal to much yet. You have got your way and seen her, so just give her a kiss, and go quietly away.”

Tears of disappointment rushed to Rhoda’s eyes, and as she stooped to give that farewell kiss the salt drops fell upon Evie’s cheeks, and roused her momentarily from her lethargy.

“Poor Rhoda!” she sighed softly. “Poor little Rhoda!” then her eyes closed, and Nurse took hold of the girl’s arm and led her resolutely away.

“You look as if you were going to faint yourself, and I can’t have two of you on my hands,” she said as soon as the corridor was reached, and the door closed behind them. “You’ll just come back to your own room, my dear, and lie down on the bed.”

“Nurse—tell me! you have been with her the whole time, and know how she feels. Will she ever forgive me? I never, never thought it would be so bad as this. She would not speak to me, would not look at me even.”

“She wasn’t thinking of you at all, my dear, she was thinking of her knee. That is all she can find time to think of just now. The doctors kept it from her as long as they could, but she questioned them, and would not be put off, so they had to tell her the truth. She knows she will be lame, and it has pretty well broken her heart. It’s the bread out of her mouth, poor lamb, and she knows it. It will be many a long day before she is herself again.”

And this was the end of Rhoda’s first meeting with Laura Everett after her accident!

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## Chapter Twenty Two.

### Mrs Chester’s Plan.

It was many days before Rhoda saw Miss Everett again, but, if she was not admitted to the sick room, her mother was a frequent and welcome visitor, and took entire charge of the invalid while the nurse fulfilled her ordinary duties. There was little actual nursing to be done, but the doctors were anxious to prevent solitary repinings, and to do what was possible to raise the spirits of their patient. Evie’s own mother had come down for a few days to satisfy herself concerning her daughter’s condition, but had been obliged to hurry back to the Vicarage, where the invalid sister was growing worse rather than better, so that her presence could badly be spared. She was a worn, faded edition of Evie, and looked so typical of what the girl herself might now become that Rhoda could not bear to look at her. The two mothers, however, became great friends, for they met with a remembrance of kindness on the one side, and an overwhelming sympathy on the other, and were drawn together by hours of mutual anxiety. In each case the worst dread was unfulfilled, but what remained to be borne required all the fortitude which they could summon. The Vicar’s wife saw one of the props of the home disabled for life, and Mrs Chester’s kind heart was wrung with anguish at the thought that her child had been the cause of so much suffering. It seemed a strange dispensation of Providence that she, the main object of whose life had been to help her fellow-creatures, should have this burden laid upon her; but she bore it uncomplainingly, striving to cheer the poor woman whose lot was so much harder than her own.

Before they parted she broached a scheme which she had been planning in secret, and, having received a willing consent, bided her opportunity to lay it before the invalid herself. It came at last one chilly afternoon, when Evie was laid on a sofa before the fire, as a sign that convalescence had really begun. The knee was still bound up, as it was not proposed that she should attempt to walk until the journey home had been accomplished, and it was on this subject that Evie made her first remark.

“I suppose,” she began, looking at Mrs Chester with the brown eyes which had grown so pathetic in their gaze in the last few weeks, “I suppose I can travel now, as soon as it can be arranged. I shall have to be carried about at each of the changes, and it must be planned ahead in this busy season. I must speak to Miss Bruce, and ask her what I had better do.”

Mrs Chester bent forward and poked the fire in a flurried, embarrassed manner; she knitted her brows, and her rosy face grew a shade deeper in colour.

“Er—yes,” she assented vaguely. “Of course; but Evie, dear, I have been waiting to talk to you about something which has been very much on my mind lately. We are leaving on Thursday, Rhoda and I, and are having a through carriage and every possible appliance to make the journey easy, and I thought that it would be so much simpler for you, dear, to travel with us, and spend a few weeks at the Chase before going home!”



Evie smiled, with the languid courtesy with which an invalid listens to an impossible proposition.

"It is very kind of you," she said. "Some day I shall be glad to come, but not at present, thank you. I am not well enough to pay visits."

"But my child, it would not be like an ordinary visit; you should do exactly as you would in your own home—stay in bed, or get up, as you pleased, and make out your own programme for the day. You know me now, and can surely understand that you need feel no ceremony in coming to my house."

"No, indeed! You have been so kind to me all this time, that I should be ungrateful if I did not realise that. I would rather be with you than anyone else outside my own family, but—but—" the tears gathered and rolled down the pale cheeks—"Oh, surely you understand that just now I want to be at home with my own mother and father!"

"Yes, I do understand, poor dear; it would be unnatural if you felt anything else; but listen, Evie, it is for your parents' sake, as well as for your own, that I urge you to come. You need constant care and nursing, and cheering up, and it would be very difficult for them to manage all this just now. Your mother is overworked as it is, and has already one invalid on her hands; but if you come to us, the whole household will be at your service. My kind old Mary shall be your nurse, and wait upon you hand and foot. I will drive you about so that you can get the air without fatigue, and you shall have your couch carried into the conservatory off the drawing-room, and lie there among the flowers which you love so much. Every comfort that money can buy shall be yours to help to make you strong again. I say it in no spirit of boasting, dear, for we have been poor ourselves, and owe our riches to no merit of our own. We look upon them as a trust from God, to be used for the good of others even more than ourselves, and surely no one had ever a nearer, stronger claim—"

Her voice broke off tremblingly, and Evie looked at her with a troubled glance.

"Dear Mrs Chester, you are so good! It all sounds most attractive and luxurious, and I am sure you would spoil me with kindness, but—would it not be rather selfish? You say mother is overworked, and that is quite true; but, all the same, she might feel hurt if I chose to go somewhere else."

"Now, I'll tell you all about it," cried Mrs Chester briskly, scenting victory in the air, and beginning to smile again in her old cheery fashion. "Your mother and I had a talk about it before she left. She felt grieved not to have you at home for Christmas, but for your own sake was most anxious that you should come to us. She realised that it would be better for you in every way, and the quickest means to the end which we all have in view, to make you well and strong again. She left it to me to make the suggestion, but you will find that she is quite willing, even anxious—"

"Yes," said Evie, and lay silently gazing at the heart of the fire. The downcast face looked very fair and fragile, but for the moment the old sweetness was wanting. The lips were pressed together, the chin was fixed and stubborn, outward signs of the mental fight which was going on between the impulse to give way, and a sore, sore feeling of injury which made it seem impossible to accept a favour from this quarter of all others. The elder woman saw these signs, and read their meaning with painful accuracy, and the exclamation which burst from her lips startled the invalid by its intensity.

"Oh, my lassie!" she cried. "Oh, my lassie, be generous! You have been sorely tried, and our hearts are broken to think of your trouble, but don't you see this is the only way in which it is left to us to help? Sympathy and regret are abstract things, and can do no real good, for, though they ease our minds, they leave you untouched. My dear girl, can you be generous enough to accept help from the hands that have injured you? It's a hard thing to ask—I know it is; but I am an old woman, and I plead with you to give us this opportunity! Let me be a mother to you, dear, and ease your recovery in every way that I can. Money has great power, and one never realises it more than in time of sickness. I can spare you many a pain and discomfort if you will give me the opportunity, and my poor girl is fretting herself thin by brooding over the past—it would be new life to her to be allowed to wait upon you! It's hard for you, dear, I know it's hard! You would rather cut yourself adrift from us, and never see us again; but it is in your power to return good for evil—to lighten our trouble as no one else could do. Will you come, Evie?"

Evie looked into the quivering face, and her eyes shone—then the kind arms opened wide and the brown head nestled down on the broad, motherly shoulder. There was no need for words, for the answer was given far more eloquently in look and gesture.

"God bless you, my lassie!" murmured Mrs Chester fondly, and they sat in silence together, gazing into the fire. A few tears rose in Evie's eyes and ran silently down her cheeks, but they were happy tears, with which were wiped away all remains of bitterness. There is no truer way of forgiving our enemies than by consenting to be helped at their hands, and, if the effort be great, it brings with it an exceeding great reward. At the end of ten minutes Evie raised her head from its resting place and said, in her old, bright voice:

"Shall we ask Rhoda to tea? It is such a lovely fire, and you brought in such a bountiful supply of cakes and good things that it seems greedy to keep them all to myself. Ask Rhoda to come in and help to make a cosy little party."

Then, as Mrs Chester stooped to kiss her cheek, she whispered hastily, "Tell her not to mention the past—never to mention it again! We will turn over a new leaf to-day and think only of the future."

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## Chapter Twenty Three.

### Good-bye to Hurst Manor.

The morning of the day dawned on which the invalids were to travel to Erley Chase, and Rhoda lay awake upon her

bed, listening to the echo of the girls' voices as they sang the morning hymn in the hall below. Her heart was softened with a feeling at once of thankfulness and dread—thankfulness that Evie's life had been spared, and her friendship renewed, and dread because, she dimly realised, this was the last of the dear school days as they had been. Even if she returned after the holidays, which seemed doubtful, it would be a changed house indeed, with the older girls scattered all over the country, and Evie no longer at hand to soothe and lighten every trouble. Her thoughts went back to her first coming to Hurst Manor eighteen months before, and dwelt sadly on her own ambitious hopes. It had all seemed so easy, so certain; she had planned her career with such happy assurance, with never a thought but that success and distinction lay waiting for her grasp; and it had all ended in this—that she was returning home, enfeebled in health, foiled in ambition, with the bitter weight on her conscience that her self-will had inflicted a life-long injury on the kindest of friends.

"I have failed!" sighed Rhoda humbly to herself. "But why? I never meant to do wrong. I intended only to work hard and get on. Surely, surely, there was nothing wicked in that? It can't be possible to be too industrious, and yet Evie evidently thought something was wrong, and the Vicar... What can it have been? I wish, I wish I knew! I'm tired of going my own way, for it leads to nothing but misery and disappointment. I should like to find out the secret of being happy and contented like other people." Her eyes filled with tears, those blue eyes which had been so full of confidence, and she clasped her fingers upon the counterpane. The roll of the organ sounded through the house, and the girls' clear voices singing a familiar tune. She listened unthinkingly, until suddenly one verse struck sharply on her ear, and startled her into vivid attention:—

"The trivial round, the common task, Will furnish all we ought to ask; Room to deny ourselves, a road To bring us daily nearer God."

She had heard those words a hundred times before, had repeated them at her mother's knee, had sung them in church, not once, but many times, yet it seemed that until that moment no conception of their meaning had penetrated to her brain. What was it, which was all we ought to ask? "*Room to deny ourselves!*"—to put ourselves last—to be careless of our own position? And this path of self-denial was the road that led to God Himself? Was this what Evie had meant when she spoke of the secret which each one must find out for herself? Was this the explanation of the contentment which the Vicar had found in his ill-paying parish? "*Room to deny oneself!*" Oh, but this had been far, far from her own ambitions. She had asked for room to distinguish herself, to shine among her fellows, to be first and foremost, praised and applauded. Her own advancement had been the one absorbing aim in life, and to gratify it she had been willing to see others fail, and to congratulate herself in the face of their distress. Never once in all the miseries of disappointment which she had undergone had it occurred to her that the explanation of her difficulties lay in the *motive* underlying her efforts—the point of view from which she had started. Other girls had worked as hard as herself, but with some definite and worthy aim, such as to help their parents, or to fit themselves for work in life. Rhoda was honest, even when honesty was to her own hurt, and she acknowledged it had been far otherwise in her case when she had failed in her examination, it had not been deficiency in knowledge which she had deplored, but the certificate, the star to her name, the outward and visible signs of success. When she realised the hopelessness of seeing her name on the Record Wall, loss of honour and glory had been her regret, not sorrow for the thought that she had passed through school and failed to leave behind a tradition of well-doing whereby future scholars might be strengthened and encouraged!

Rhoda hid her face in the pillow and lay still, communing with her own heart. How bitter they are, these moments of self-revelation! How mysterious is the way in which the veil seems suddenly to lift and show us the true figure, instead of the mythical vision which we have cherished in our thoughts! They come suddenly at the most unexpected moments, roused by apparently the most trivial of causes, so that the friend by our side has no idea of the crisis through which we are passing.

Rhoda Chester never forgot that last morning at school; she could never hear that hymn sung without a thrill of painful remembrance. When the years had passed and she had daughters of her own, the sound of the familiar words would still bring a flush to her cheeks, but no human friend ever knew all that it meant to her. Rhoda learnt her lesson none the less surely for keeping silence concerning it.

A few hours later the travellers were ready to depart, and Evie was carried down the staircase into the hall.

Mrs Chester had promised that everything that wealth could secure should be done for the comfort of her guest, and royally did she keep her promise. If she had been a Princess of the Blood, Evie declared she could not have had a more luxuriously comfortable journey. An ambulance drove up to the door to convey the little party to the station, and inside sat a surgical nurse, ready to give her skilled attention to any need that might arise. The girls flocked in hall and doorway to wave farewells, edging to the front to cry "Come back soon!" in confident treble, and then retiring to the background to gulp back the tears which rose at the sight of the thin little face, which told such a pathetic story of suffering. Not a single tear did Evie see, however, nor any face that was not wreathed in smiles, and when the strains of "For she's a jolly good fellow" followed the ambulance down the drive, she laughed merrily, and waved her handkerchief out of the window, never suspecting with what swelling throats many of the singers joined in the strain.

Rhoda laughed too, but she did not wave her handkerchief. Curiously enough, it never occurred to her to think that she herself was included in that farewell demonstration, or to resent the apparent indifference with which she had been allowed to depart. Her own special friends had embraced her warmly enough, but even they had given the lion's share of attention to Evie, while the majority of the girls had no eyes nor attention for anyone else. The Rhoda of six months or a year ago would have bitterly resented such a slight, but to-day she found no reason to blame others for following her own example.

Evie was the supreme consideration, and the girl was so entirely absorbed in looking after her comfort that she had forgotten all about her own poor little importance. Love is the gentlest as well as the cleverest of schoolmasters, and teaches his lessons so subtly that we are unconscious of our progress, until, lo! the hill difficulty is overcome, and we

find ourselves erect on the wide, breezy plain.

At the station a saloon carriage was waiting labelled "Engaged," inside which were all manner of provisions for the comfort of the journey. Hot-water bottles, cushions, rugs, piles of papers and magazines, and a hamper of dainty eatables from the Chase Evie was wrapped in Mrs Chester's sable cloak and banked up with cushions by the window, so that she might look out and be amused by the sight of the Christmas traffic at the various stations. She stared about her with the enjoyment of a convalescent who has had more than enough of her own society, and the lingerers on the platform stared back at the pretty, fragile-looking invalid who was travelling in such pomp and circumstance.

"They think I am a princess!" cried Evie. "I *hope* they think I am a princess!" and she laid her little head against the cushions, and sniffed at a big silver-mounted bottle of smelling salts with an air of languid complacency which vastly amused her companions. Presently nurse lighted an Etna and warmed some cups of soup, while one good thing after another came out of the hamper to add to the feast; then followed a stoppage, with the arrival of obsequious porters with fresh foot-warmers; then, dusk closing in over the wintry landscape, the lighting of electric lamps, and the refreshing cup of tea. It was Evie's first experience of luxurious travelling, and she told herself with a sigh that it was very, very comfortable. Much more comfortable than shivering in a draughty third class carriage, and changing three times over to wait in still more draughty stations!

With the arrival at Erley Chase came more pleasant surprises, for she was not carried upstairs, but into a room on the ground floor, which was ordinarily used as Mrs Chester's boudoir, and had been transformed into the most cheerful and delightful of bedrooms. There was really little to distinguish it from a sitting-room, except the bed with its silken cover, and even this was hidden behind a screen in the daytime. A couch was drawn up before the fire, and over it lay the daintiest pink silk dressing-gown that was ever seen, with the warmest of linings inside, and trimmed without with a profusion of those airy frills and laces dear to the feminine heart.

"For me?" gasped Evie, staring at its splendour with big, astonished eyes. A glow of colour came into her cheeks as she turned it over and over to inspect its intricacies. "I should think I *would* come in to dinner just, with such a gown to wear!" she cried laughingly. "I am longing to put it on and see what it feels like to be a fashionable lady."

She would not acknowledge that she was tired, but even after an hour's sleep she still looked so fragile that the two members of the household who had not seen her before were deeply impressed with the change which had taken place since their last meeting. Very charming did she look when the sofa was wheeled into the dining-room, and she lay in her pretty pink fineries the centre of attraction and attention; but the flush of excitement soon faded, and the dark eyes looked pathetic in spite of their smiles. Rhoda watched the faces of father and mother, and her heart sank as she saw the elder man knit his brow, and the younger look away quickly and bite his lip under his moustache as if the sight were too painful to be endured. Beyond a few loving words at greeting, neither had manifested any concern about herself, and once again she had not noticed the omission.

"I've had such a happy day. I feel like a princess—such a spoiled princess!" said Evie, when she went to bed that night; but there were sad days in store for the poor little princess from which all the care and love of her friends could not save her.

When the decree went forth that she should make her first attempt to walk, Rhoda clapped her hands with joy, and could not understand the reason of the quick, grave glance which the nurse cast upon her. She and her mother had decided that the attempt must be made in the drawing-room after tea, and nurse made no objection, hoping, perhaps, that the presence of onlookers would give her patient extra strength for the ordeal. She knew what it meant if the others did not; but, alas! they all learned soon enough, as, at the first slight movement, Evie's white face turned grey, and she groaned in mingled anguish and dismay.

"I can't!" she cried; "Oh, I can't! It is like knives going through me! I can't move!"

"Ah, but you must, my dear. It has to be done; and the braver you are, the sooner it will be over. You are bound to suffer the first few times, but it would be ten times worse to allow the joint to stiffen. Now be brave, and try to take just two steps with me! I will support you on one side, and—" Nurse looked round questioningly—"Mr Harold will take the other. You can lean all your weight on us. We won't let you fall."

Harold stepped forward without a word and put his strong arm under hers, and, as he did so, Evie raised her eyes to his with a look which those who saw it never forgot—a look such as might have been given by an animal caught in a snare from which it was powerless to escape. Rhoda told herself savagely that Harold was a brute to persist in the face of that dumb appeal, but he did not quail even when the sob rose to a cry, and a trembling plea for mercy. The two steps were taken, and henceforth, for weeks to come, the nightmare of repeated effort weighed upon the spirits of the household. At eleven o'clock, after tea, after dinner—three times a day—was the inexorable programme repeated, in spite of prayers and protestations. Mrs Chester's theory was that it was brutal to torture the child, and that if she were to be lame, for pity's sake let her be lame in peace. Rhoda suffered agonies of remorse and passionate revolts against the mystery of pain, but the nurse and her assistant never showed a sign of wavering. As a rule, Evie made a gallant attempt to control her sufferings, but there were occasions when even her fortitude gave way, as, on one afternoon, when, after taking a certain number of steps, she was informed that still more must be attempted. She was powerless in the hands that held her, but when she collapsed into helpless sobbings on the sofa, Rhoda turned on her brother with furious indignation:

"You are a *brute*, Harold! You have no heart! How dare you do it—how *dare* you make her suffer so!"

He did not answer, but turned his head aside, and stared steadily out of the window. Rhoda glared at him with smarting eyes, and suddenly saw something which put a check on her excitement. Harold's profile was turned toward her, and the light showed great drops of moisture standing upon the brow, and rolling slowly down the cheek. She realised, with a pang, that once again she had been too quick in her judgment. In spite of his firmness, Harold had

suffered more than she, more than her mother—ay, perhaps, more than Evie herself!

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## Chapter Twenty Four.

### All's well that ends well.

Despite the painful incidents of Evie's convalescence, Christmas was a happy season at Erley Chase, for it had always been a tradition of the household to make much of this festival, and Mrs Chester could not bring herself to change her habits as the years advanced. Every twenty-sixth of December Mr Chester would say solemnly, "This is the last time! I cannot let you wear yourself out like this. When Christmas cards have to be sent off by the hundred, and presents by the score, it is time to call a halt, for what has been a pleasure becomes a burden. Next year you drop these outside people, and think only of our immediate circle," and Mrs Chester would murmur meekly, "Yes, dear; of course. Just as you wish," and begin laying in stores for next Christmas at her first visit to the January sales. There was a cupboard in one of the spare rooms which was dedicated entirely to the keeping of presents, and into it went all manner of nick-nacks which were picked up during the year—bazaar gleanings, in the shape of cushions, cosies, and table-cloths, relics of travel, and a hundred and one articles useful and ornamental, which had been bought because they were so cheap, and it really seemed wicked to leave them lying on the shop counter! When a need arose, as when a birthday was suddenly remembered the day before it fell due, or an anniversary suggested the propriety of a little offering, it was the easiest thing in the world to poke about in the cupboard until a suitable gift was discovered.

Laura Everett was much amused by this novel way of apportioning presents, which was so strangely different from that practised at her own home. When she was wheeled into the morning-room a few days before Christmas, it was to find a small bazaar of fancy articles spread on tables and sofas, while Mrs Chester sat checking off the names written on a long sheet of paper, and Rhoda cried out: "Here's a yellow silk cushion. Whom do we know who has got a complexion that can bear being set off against a background of sulphur yellow?" ... "Here's a gorgeous table centre, quite beautifully worked. Whom do we know who is old-fashioned enough to use table centres still?" ... "Here's a piece of Turkish embroidery, which would be the very thing to cover that shabby old sofa at the Vicarage; it was absolutely in holes the last time I saw it."

"Turkish embroidery—Mrs Mason. Thank goodness, that's one thing settled! Wrap it up at once, Rhoda dear. It will be one thing less to do," cried Mrs Chester in a tone of relief, while Evie held up her hands in astonishment.

"Of all the extraordinary ways of giving presents! To have a room full of things and then to puzzle as to whom you can give them! This is indeed a new experience for me. When we talk over our presents at home it is to wonder how in the world we can contrive to buy twenty things for nineteen shillings. Such a wholesale way of managing things I never imagined in my wildest moments."

She gave a little sigh of envy as she looked at the lavish profusion which lay around; yet, after all, there was a pleasure in contriving those simple gifts—in putting in delicate stitches to add to the value of cheap materials, a triumph in manufacturing something out of nothing, which Rhoda and her mother could never enjoy! She was not at all sure that that old home fashion was not the sweeter after all.

While the apportioning of gifts was going on in the morning-room, the cook and her kitchen maids were busy at work in the great nagged kitchen, manufacturing all sorts of dainties to be packed away in the hampers ranged in readiness along the walls. It was a sight to see the good things laid out on the tables, and Evie was carried down on her chair to admire and praise with the rest, and to watch the interesting process of packing. Far and wide these hampers went, carrying good cheer into many a home where otherwise there would have been scanty provisions for the day of rejoicing, and bringing unexpected gleams of sunshine to many an anxious heart. Needless to say, one of the best was addressed to a country parsonage especially dear to Evie's heart, and was accompanied by a parcel of presents, which had not been lightly bought, but worked by loving fingers during long hours of convalescence.

Christmas Day itself was a busy occasion, when the home party had little leisure to think of themselves, so unending was the stream of pensioners which came up to the Chase to receive their gifts, and to be fed and warmed in the gaily-decorated rooms. Dinner was served early, so that the servants might be free to have their festivities in the evening, and at nine o'clock all the employees on the estate came up, dressed in their best, and danced with the servants in the hall. Mr and Mrs Chester, with Harold and Rhoda, honoured the assembly by joining in the first dance, and Evie sat in her wheeled chair, looking on and trying to keep a smiling face, the while she fought one of the mental battles which seemed to meet her on every step of the road to recovery. She had been so much occupied grieving over the serious financial loss which her inability to work would involve, that she had taken little thought of the pleasures from which she was debarred; but, after all, she was but a girl, and a girl with a keen capacity for enjoyment, and it was a very keen pang which went through her heart as she listened to the seductive strains of the band, and watched the couples glide slowly by. The dark brows twitched as if in pain, and she drew aside the folds of the pink tea-gown to cast a longing glance at the little useless feet stretched before her. A sudden remembrance arose of the day when Rhoda protested in dismay at the thought of wearing the ugly regulation school shoes, and of her own confession of love for pretty slippers, of the satisfaction with which she had donned the same on Thursday evenings, and danced about the hall as blithely as any one of her pupils. Those days were over—for ever over; she would never again know the joy of any rapid, exhilarating motion. She lifted her hand to wipe away a tear, hoping to escape observation the while, but, to her dismay, Harold stood by her side, and his eyes met hers with an expression of pained understanding. Any reference to her infirmity seemed to distress him so acutely that the first instinct was to comfort him instead of herself, and she smiled through her tears, saying in the sweetest tones of her always sweet voice:

"Don't, please! Don't look so sorry! It was babyish of me, but just for one moment—I was so fond of dancing, you

know, and I had never realised before—”

“Just so. You realise fresh losses every day. I know what you must feel. You have not been babyish at all, but most brave and heroic.”

Evie sighed. “It’s nice to be praised, but I feel as if I don’t deserve it. I am not in the least brave at heart... Sometimes I almost dread getting strong, for then I shall have to face so much... I’m conceited, too, for I hate the idea of limping, and being stiff and ungraceful. I thought I did not care for appearance, but I did—oh, a great deal! It is a humiliating discovery, and I am trying hard to cure myself, but pride dies slowly! There was a girl at school who was lame. I used to be so sorry for her, and yet, compared with other misfortunes, it is a very little thing. I can still move about and use my faculties. It is not so bad, after all!”

“Yes,” said Harold, unexpectedly. “It *is* very bad. It is a mistake to pretend to yourself that it is only a small trial, for it’s not true, and the pretence is sure to break down some day, and leave you where you were. It is a great affliction for people to be crippled, even when they are old and have lost their energy; but for a girl like you it is ten times worse. Don’t be too hard on yourself, and expect resignation to come all at once. I believe the best plan is to face it fully, and to say to yourself, ‘It’s a big test—one of the biggest I could have to bear. I shall feel the pinch not to-day only, but to-morrow, and the next year, and as long as I live. It is going to take a big effort to save myself from growing bitter and discouraged, but it’s worth fighting, for my whole life hangs on the result. If I can succeed—if I can rise above infirmity, and keep a bright, uncomplaining spirit’—”

He broke off suddenly, and Evie breathed a quick “Yes, yes, I know! I feel that too. Thank you so much. It is good to talk to someone who understands. It helps me on.”

“Don’t thank me. It is like my presumption to venture to preach to you. But you have helped me so much that when I saw you in trouble I could not be silent. I was obliged to do what I could.”

“I—I have helped you?” repeated Evie, blankly; and a flush of colour rose in her pale cheeks, which made her look for one moment the happy, blooming girl of old. “In what way have I ever helped you, or been anything but an anxiety and care?”

But Harold did not answer, and that was the last chance of a *tête-à-tête* conversation that evening, for presently she was carried off to her own room, and helped into bed, where she lay awake for a long, long time, staring before her in the twilight, and recalling the lessons of consolation to which she had just listened. It must surely have been wonderfully wise, wonderfully true, since it did not so much comfort, as do away with the very necessity for comfort! She could not delude herself that she felt sad or despondent, or anything but mysteriously happy and at rest, as she lay smiling softly to herself in the flickering firelight.

Two days later came a delightful surprise. Evie and her late pupil were sitting in the morning-room writing letters of thanks to the many donors of Christmas presents, when the door opened and shut, and someone walked into the room. It was such an ordinary, matter-of-fact entrance that neither of the writers troubled to look up, taking it for granted that the new-comer was Mrs Chester, who had left the room but a few minutes before. Two minutes later, however, Evie finished her sheet and lifted her eyes to make a casual remark, when she promptly fell back in her chair with a shriek, and a hand pressed over her heart. Rhoda jumped up in alarm, and then—was it a dream, or did a well-known figure really lean up against the mantelpiece, in familiar, gentlemanly attitude, a roguish smile curling the lips, and little eyes alight with mischief?

“Tom, Tom! Oh, Tom, you angel! Where in the world have you come from?” cried Rhoda, rushing forward with outstretched arms, in a very whirlwind of welcome. “How perfectly delicious to see you again, and what a terrific start you gave me!”

“Oh, what a surprise!” chanted Tom easily, rubbing her cheeks as if to wipe away the kisses pressed upon it, and advancing to greet Evie with a nonchalance which for once was a trifle overdone, though neither of her friends was in the least danger of mistaking her real feelings. “The same to you, and many of them,” she continued, sitting down without waiting for an invitation, and smiling round in genial fashion. “It really was as good as a play, standing there, and watching you two scribbling away with faces as solemn as judges—and what a squeal Evie gave! It made me jump in my skin! Yes; I’m visiting my female relative, and determined to pay you a visit even if it were only for an hour. It can’t be much longer, for we have a tea fight on this afternoon, when every spinster in the neighbourhood is coming to stare at me and deliver her views on higher education. Such a lark! Some of them strongly approve, and others object, and I agree with each in turn, until the poor dears are so bamboozled they don’t know what to do. They think I am an amiably-disposed young person, but defective in brains, and poor aunt Jim gets quite low in her mind, for she wants me to impress them, and branch off into Latin and Greek as if they came more naturally to me than English. I wish they did! It takes the conceit out of one to go up to college and compete with women instead of girls.”

“Don’t you like it, Tom? Are you happy? Didn’t you miss the Manor, and feel home-sick for the girls and the old school parlour?” queried Rhoda eagerly, and Tom screwed up her face in meaning fashion.

“Should have done, if I had not kept a tight hand; but you know my principle—never to worry over what can’t be cured! Plenty to bother oneself about, without that. I thought of you all a great deal, and realised that I’d been even happier than I knew, and that I disliked taking a bottom place so abominably that it was plainly the best thing for me to do. I love power!” sighed Tom, wagging her head in sorrowful confession, “and that’s just what I see no chance of getting again for a precious long time to come. I haven’t much time to grieve, however, for my poor little nose is fairly worn away, it’s kept so near to the grindstone.”

“You look thinner,” said Rhoda, truthfully enough. “Poor old Tom, you mustn’t let them wear you out. We will take care of you, at least, so I’ll go and order lunch earlier than usual, if you really must be off so soon. The three o’clock train, I suppose?”

"Yes, please. Don't worry about anything special for me. Half a dozen cutlets or a few pounds of steak is all I could eat, I assure you!" said Tom modestly, and Rhoda went laughing out of the room, leaving her two friends gazing at one another in an embarrassed silence.

No reference had so far been made to the accident which was the cause of Evie's presence at the Chase, but it was impossible that the visit should end in silence, and both instinctively felt that Rhoda's absence gave the best opportunity for what must be said. The colour came into Evie's face as she nerved herself to open the painful subject.

"You know, of course, Tom, that I am not going back to Hurst. Miss Bruce has been most kind, but she must consider the good of the greater number, and this accident has shown more plainly than ever the necessity of having a House-Mistress who can job in the games with the girls. I shall never be any good for a large school again, for, even apart from the games, the long stairs and corridors would be too trying. So you see my career is cut off suddenly."

"Yes, I see; I thought of that. It's very interesting!" said Tom in a dreamy voice, which brought a flush of indignation into Evie's eyes.

"Interesting!" she repeated. "Is *that* what you call it? It's not the word I should have used, or have expected from you, Tom, or from any of my friends."

"No! Perhaps not, but it *is* interesting all the same, for one is so curious to see what will happen next. When you have planned out your life, and fitted in everything towards one end, and then suddenly, by no fault of your own, that end is made impossible—why, if you believe in a purpose in things, what could be more interesting and exciting? What *is* to happen next? What is one to do? It is like reading a story in parts, and breaking off just at the critical crisis. I should like to turn over the pages, Evie, and see what is going to happen to you!"

Evie smiled faintly.

"Would you, Tom? I am afraid I have been hiding my head like an ostrich, and trying not to look forward, but your view is the healthier, and I'll try to adopt it. I don't give up all idea of teaching, though big schools are impossible. Perhaps they would take me at some small, old-fashioned seminary where sports are considered unladylike, and the pupils take their exercise in a crocodile up and down the parade."

"Ugh!" said Tom, with a grimace which twisted every feature out of recognition. "No, surely, Evie, you will never condescend to that! You lie low for a bit and get strong, and keep up your classics, and I'll see if I can't find you some coaching to do among the girls I meet. If you could get along that way for a few years it would be all right, for I shall be settled by that time and able to look after you. You shall be my secretary, dear, and have a jolly little den to yourself, where I can take refuge when the girls get too much for me. We could be very happy together, you and I, couldn't we, and grow into two nice, contented old maids, with too much to do to have time to envy our neighbours?"

She fixed her bright little eyes on Evie's face as she asked the question, and to her horror and dismay Evie felt the colour rush to her cheeks and mount higher and higher in a crimson tide which refused to be restrained by the most desperate mental efforts. How idiotic to blush at nothing—how senseless, how humiliating, and how quite too ridiculous of Tom to turn aside and stare at the opposite side of the room in that ostentatious manner! Evie felt inclined to shake her, but at that opportune moment Rhoda returned, and during the remainder of Tom's visit there was no opportunity for private confidences.

Once more Rhoda accompanied her friend to the station, and waited anxiously for the word which would surely be said concerning the escapade which had cost so dear, but, like Evie, she was obliged to introduce the subject herself.

"Have you nothing to say to me, Tom?" she asked wistfully. "I haven't seen you since—you know when—but, of course, you heard how it happened. It was all my fault. What are you going to say to me about it?"

"Why, nothing, Fuzz!" said Tom, turning her little eyes upon the quivering face with a tenderness of expression which would have been a revelation to casual acquaintances who believed Miss Bolderston incapable of the softer emotions. "Why should I? You have said it all to yourself a hundred times better than I could have done, and who am I that I should make myself a ruler or a judge over you?"

"But she is lame, you know!" said Rhoda, sadly. "Nurse says the knee is stronger than she expected, but even so she will always limp. Imagine Evie limping! She was such a graceful little thing, and tripped about so lightly, and she was so proud of her little feet—I have spoiled her future too, for she can never take such a good post again. I have ruined her whole life."

"We will discuss that point ten years later; it is too early to decide it yet. Many things happen that we do not expect," remarked Tom sagely, whereat Rhoda shook her head in hopeless fashion.

"I cannot imagine anything happening that would make this any better—on the contrary, Tom, it has made me realise how little help one can give, and what a fraud money is when it comes to the test. I used to imagine that I could do pretty nearly everything I wanted because I was rich, but look at Evie! I would give my life to help her, but beyond a few trumpery presents, and a little lightening of pain, what can I do? She would not accept more, and one dare not offer it, though if she would allow it we would be thankful to pension her off for life. Money can't do everything I see!"

"That's a good thing! Let's be thankful for that, at least. It's worth something to have learned that lesson," cried Tom cheerily, and for the rest of the way to the station she talked resolutely on indifferent subjects, refusing to be drawn back to the one sad topic. Only when the last good-bye was said did she soften into tenderness, actually allowing herself to be kissed without protest, and saying hurriedly in a low, half-shamed voice:

“Good-bye, Fuzzy. Bless you! Never say die. Sometimes, you know, it takes a big thing to open one’s eyes. Keep straight ahead from where you are now, and you’ll have no more tumbles.” Then the train moved off and Rhoda lost the last glimpse of her friend in a mist of tears. Dear Tom! Dear, blunt, kindly, honest Tom; what a strength she had been to all who knew her—what a strength she was going to be to generations of girls to come! Rhoda looked forward into the future and prophesied to herself that she would know no prouder boast than that she had been one of Tom Bolderston’s girls, and had been brought up under her rule!



“Rhoda turned to him and swept a stately curtsy” (p. 273).

That evening the occupants of the drawing-room looked up in amaze as a rustle of silken garments struck their ears, and a stately young lady came forward with a fan waving in one hand, and masses of ruddy hair piled high upon her head. Rhoda, of course; and yet, could it be Rhoda? for with the short skirts and flowing mane the last traces of childhood had disappeared, and the woman of the future seemed already to stand before them. Mr Chester gave a quick exclamation, and Rhoda turned to him and swept a stately curtsy.

“At your service, sir. I thought you might like to see your grown-up daughter. My new dress came home to-day, and I looked so fine in it that I was obliged to do up my hair to be in keeping. And I went to mother’s room and stole her pearls and took her very best fan. When girls come out they always help themselves to their parents’ fineries, so I thought I had better begin at once. Do you like me, dear?”

She looked up at him, half shy, half laughing, and there was silence in the room while each of the onlookers felt a thrill of unexpected emotion. It was like looking on at the turning point in a life, and the girl was so beautiful in her fresh young bloom that it was impossible to behold her unmoved. The coiled-up hair showed the graceful poise of her head, the shoulders were smooth and white as satin, the blue eyes had lost their hard self-confidence, and shone sweet and true. Yes! Rhoda was going to be a beautiful woman; she was one already, as her father realised, with a natural pang of regret mingling with his pride. His eye softened as he laid his hand on her shoulder.

“Yes, my daughter, you are grown-up indeed! I never realised it before. You had better prepare for the duties of chaperon, mother, for I foresee that this young lady will keep us busy. We shall have to take her about, and entertain her friends, and yawn in the corners while they dance half through the night. That’s it, isn’t it, Rhoda?”

Rhoda looked at him with a start of surprise. By tacit agreement nothing had yet been said of future arrangements, so that this was the first definite hint which she had received of her parents’ intention. Her voice was half regretful, half relieved, as she said:

“Then I am not to go back to school, father? You have decided that it is better not?”

Mr Chester put his hands on her arms and looked at her fondly, a remembrance rising in his mind as he did so of that other evening eighteen months ago, when the prospect of school had been proposed, and the girl had taken up the question and settled it out of hand, in arrogant, youthful fashion. It was a very different tone in which the present question was asked, and he was quick to note the difference.

“What do you say, mother? She doesn’t look very much like a school-girl to-night, does she? No, Rhoda, I think those days are ended. You have had a year and a half at school, and it has been a valuable experience for you in many ways, but both your nerves and ours have been overstrained lately, and we will not risk any more separations, but try

what travel will do to complete your education. It has always been my dream to go abroad for a year when you were able to come with us, and now that time has arrived. We will plan out a tour that shall be both pleasant and educational, and enlarge our minds by learning something about other countries besides our own."

"Rome for Easter, the Italian lakes and Switzerland in summer, the Riviera and Egypt in winter—Oh, father, how lovely! *How* I shall enjoy it! How happy we shall be travelling about all together! I could not have told you what I wanted, but this is the very thing of all others I should most enjoy. And mother will like it too? It will not tire you, will it, dear, or worry you to be away from home?"

"My home is where you are. I shall be perfectly happy, dear, so long as we are together," said the mother, who had never been known to oppose her own wishes to those of her family; and in this easy fashion the matter was settled. One moment the project was mooted, the next dates and routes were being eagerly discussed, and the question of wardrobe being taken into account. Presently Mr Chester must needs consult the atlas which was in constant reference in every conversation, and away went the three in happy conclave to turn over the leaves on the library table, while Evie was left to look after them with wistful eyes, and Harold to study her face in his turn. She turned to find his eyes fixed upon her, and struggled hard to speak brightly.

"They all seem so happy—it is good to see them; and how pretty Rhoda looks to-night! It is so interesting to see the girls grow up, and come out as full-fledged young ladies. I've seen two transformations to-day—Rhoda and Tom!"

"Miss Bolderston? Really! Would you call her a transformation?" queried Harold, raising his eyebrows with an expression which said all that he dare not put into words. "If that is a transformation, one is tempted to wonder what she was like before—"

"Don't!" Evie looked at him pleadingly. "Don't make fun of her, please, because we love her so dearly. Men don't appreciate Tom, and she doesn't show her best side to them, but she is a splendid girl, and the truest of friends. She was so kind to me to-day."

"You were talking to her about your work, and worrying because you could not go back at once!" said Harold shrewdly, and Evie looked at him under raised, apologetic eyebrows, quite overcome at being read in so easy a fashion.

"Well—just a little! I said that I could not go back to Hurst, as I should not be able to take part in games again—"

"And she sympathised with you, and agreed that it was a desperate lot?"

"No, indeed! You don't know Tom! She is far too much of an optimist to see the black side. She only said she was interested to see what would happen next, and that it was like being stopped suddenly in the middle of a story. I thought it was a very cheerful way of looking at it." She paused, not caring, for some indefinite reason, to say anything of that later proposition, in the carrying out of which she and Tom were to grow old side by side; but the idea lay on her mind, and presently she added dreamily, "But, even if I *am* lame, my mind is not affected. I can teach just as well as ever. There must be an opening for me somewhere. There are plenty of small schools where they don't go in for sports, plenty of girls who have to be educated at home—delicate girls, backward girls, girls who are, perhaps, like myself! I could teach them still if they would let me try—"

It was a very sweet little voice, and the quiver with which it broke off sounded strangely pathetic in the silence. Harold did not speak, and his head was bent forward so that Evie could not see his face. His hands were clasped and pressed so tightly together that the muscles stood out under the skin, but presently one of them was stretched forward and laid pleadingly over her own.

"Dearest and sweetest," said Harold softly; "teach me instead!"

When Rhoda came rushing into the room ten minutes later it was to find her brother seated by Evie on the sofa, and to meet two pairs of eyes which tried vainly to look calm and composed, but which were in reality so brimming over with happiness that the news was told without need of a single word.

"Oh!" she cried, stopping short and staring in astonishment. "*Oh!*" and then Evie struggled to her feet and held out wide, welcoming arms.

"Oh, Rhoda, I am never going to be unhappy any more. Harold won't let me. He is going to help me all my life!"

"She is going to help *me!*" corrected Harold firmly. "I'm the happiest fellow in the world, Rhoda, and you must be happy too. Come and kiss your new sister."

Rhoda gave a little sob of joy, and flew into Evie's arms.

"My own sister! And I can take care of you always. I shall have a right, and you will not have to worry any more, or be anxious, or troubled. Evie, Evie, you can forgive me now, you can feel that I have not spoiled your life! You will be happy even if you are lame!"

"Yes, she will be happy—she has found a good man to take care of her!" said Mrs Chester, coming forward from the background, and taking Evie into a warm embrace. "My dear child, I thought, I hoped, it might come to this! Once upon a time I was afraid I might be jealous of Harold's wife, but not you, dear, not you! That would be impossible. We owe you too much. You are welcome—a thousand times welcome! I am a rich woman indeed, for I have two beautiful daughters instead of one!"

Evie dropped her head on the broad, motherly shoulder and shed a tear of pure happiness and thankfulness.



“Tom was right!” she said to herself softly. “Tom was right—it was too early to judge! Good has come out of evil!”

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