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# PEGGY STEWART AT SCHOOL

BY  
GABRIELLE E. JACKSON

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HEELS," "THREE GRACES SERIES," "CAPT.  
POLLY" SERIES, ETC.



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## Contents

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	THE BAROMETER FALLING	1
II	RECONSTRUCTION	16
III	HOSTILITIES SUSPENDED	32
IV	HOSTILITIES RESUMED	48
V	RUCTIONS!	64
VI	A NEW ORDER OF THINGS	81

VII	COLUMBIA HEIGHTS SCHOOL	97
VIII	A RIDING LESSON	114
IX	COMMON SENSE AND HORSE SENSE	131
X	TZARITZA AS DISCIPLINARIAN	149
XI	BEHIND SCENES	167
XII	CHRISTMAS AT SEVERNDALE	184
XIII	YULETIDE	202
XIV	AT SEVERNDALE	221
XV	IN SPRING TERM	239
XVI	A MIDNIGHT SENSATION	256
XVII	A SEND-OFF WITH FIREWORKS	274

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1

## CHAPTER I

### THE BAROMETER FALLING

The September morning was warmer and more enervating than September mornings in Maryland usually are, though the month is generally conceded to be a trying one. Even at beautiful Severndale where, if at any point along the river, a refreshing breeze could almost always be counted upon, the air seemed heavy and lifeless, as though the intense heat of the summer had taken from it every particle of its revivifying qualities.

In the pretty breakfast room the long French windows, giving upon the broad piazza, stood wide open; the leaves upon the great beeches and maples which graced the extensive lawn beyond, hung limp and motionless; the sunlight even at that early hour beat scorchingly upon the dry grass, for there had been little rain during August and the vegetation had suffered severely; every growing thing was coated like a dusty miller. But within doors all looked most inviting. The room was scrupulous; its appointments indicated refined taste and constant care; the breakfast table, laid for two, was dainty and faultless in its appointments; our old friend, Jerome, moved about noiselessly, giving last lingering touches, lest any trifle be omitted which might add to the comfort and sense of harmony which seemed so much a part of his young mistress's life. As he straightened a fruit knife here, or set right a fold of the snowy breakfast cloth, he kept up a low-murmured monologue after the manner of his race. Very little escaped old Jerome's sharp eyes and keen ears, and within the past forty-eight hours they had found plenty to see or hear, for a guest had come to Severndale. Yes, a most unusual type of guest, too. As a rule Severndale's guests brought unalloyed pleasure to its young hostess and her servants, or to her sailor father if he happened to be enjoying one of his rare leaves, for Captain Stewart had been on sea-duty for many successive years, preferring it to land duty since his wife's death when Peggy, his only child, was but six years of age. Severndale had held only sad memories for him since that day, nearly ten years ago, in spite of the little girl growing up there, cared for by the old housekeeper and the servants, some of whom had been on the estate as long as Neil Stewart could remember.

2

But nine years had slipped away since Peggy's mother's death, and the little child had changed into a very lovely young girl, with whom the father was in reality just becoming acquainted. He had spent more time with her during the year just passed than he had ever spent in any one of the preceding nine years, and those weeks had held many startling revelations for him. When he left her to resume command of his ship, his mind was in a more or less chaotic state trying to grasp an entirely new order of things, for this time he was leaving behind him a young lady of fifteen who, so it seemed to the perplexed man, had jumped over at least five years as easily as an athlete springs across a hurdle, leaving the little girl upon the other side forever. When Neil Stewart awakened to this fact he was first dazed, and then overwhelmed by the sense of his obligations overlooked for so long, and, being possessed of a lively sense of duty, he strove to correct the oversight.

3

Had he not been in such deadly earnest his efforts to make reparation for what he considered his inexcusable short-sightedness and neglect, would have been funny, for, like most men when confronted by some problem involving femininity, he was utterly at a loss how to set about "his job" as he termed it.

As a matter of fact, a kind fate had taken "his job" in hand for him some time before, and was in a fair way to turn out a pretty good one too. But Neil Stewart made up his mind to boost Old Lady Fate along a little, and his attempts at so doing came pretty near upsetting her equilibrium; she was not inclined to be hustled, and Neil Stewart was nothing if not a hustler, once he got under way.

4

And so, alack! by one little move he completely changed Peggy's future and for a time rendered the present a veritable storm center, as will be seen.

But we will let events tell their own story.

Old Jerome moved about the sunny breakfast-room; at least it would have been sunny had not soft-tinted awnings and East-Indian screens, shut out the sun's glare and suffused the room in a restful coolness and calm, in marked contrast to the vivid light beyond the windows.

Jerome himself was refreshing to look upon. The old colored man was quite seventy years of age, but still an erect and dignified major-domo. From his white, wool-fringed old head, to the toes of his white canvas shoes, he was immaculate. No linen could have been more faultlessly laundered than Jerome's; no serviette more neatly folded. All was in harmony excepting the old man's face; that was troubled. A perplexed pucker contracted his forehead as he spoke softly to himself.

"'Taint going to do *no* how! It sure ain't. She ain't got de right bran', no she ain't, and yo' cyant mate up no common stock wid a tho'oughbred and git any sort of a span. No siree, yo' cyant. My Lawd, what done possess Massa Neil fer ter 'vite her down hyer? *She* cyant 'struct an' guide *our* yo'ng mist'ess. Sho! She ain' know de very fust *rudimints* ob de qualities' ways an' doin's. Miss Peggy could show her mo' in five minutes dan she ever is know in five years. She ain't,—she ain't,—well I ain't jist 'zackly know how I'se gwine speechify it, but she ain't like *we* all," and Jerome wagged his head in deprecation and forced his tongue against his teeth in a sound indicating annoyance and distaste, as he moved his mistress' chair a trifle.

Just then Mammy Lucy stuck her white-turbaned head in at the door to ask:

"Whar dat chile at? Ain't she done come in fer her breckfus yit? It's nine o'clock and Sis Cynthia's a-stewin' an' a steamin' like her own taters."

"She say she wait fer her aunt, an' her aunt say she cyant breckfus befo' half-pas' nine, no how," answered Jerome.

"Huh, huh! An' ma chile gotter wait a hull hour pas' her breckfus time jist kase Madam Fussama-fiddle ain't choose fer ter git up? I bait yo' she git up when she ter home, and I bait yo' she ain't gitting somebody ter dress her, an' wait on her han' an' foot like Mandy done been a-doin' sense yistiddy; ner she ain' been keepin' better folks a-waiting fer dey meals. I'se pintedly put out wid de way things is been gwine in dis hyer 'stablishmint fer de past two days, an' 's fur 's *I* kin see dey ain' gwine mend none neider. No, not fer a considerbul spell lessen we has one grand, hifalutin' tornader. Yo' hyar me!"

"I sho' does hyar yo' Mis' Lucy, an' I sho' 'grees wid yo' ter de very top notch. Dere's gwine ter be de very dibble—'scuse me please, ma'am, 'scuse me, but ma feelin's done got de better of ma breedin'—ter pay ef things go on as dey've begun since de Madam—*an' dat dawg*—invest deyselves 'pon Severndale. But yonder comin' our yo'ng mistiss," he concluded as a clear, sweet voice was heard singing just beyond the windows, and quick decisive footsteps came across the broad piazza, and Peggy Stewart, only daughter and heiress of beautiful "Severndale," entered the room. By her side Tzaritza, her snowy Russian wolfhound, paced with stately mien; a thoroughbred pair indeed.

"Oh, Jerome, I am just starved. That breakfast table is irresistible. Mammy, is Aunt Katherine ready?"

"I make haste fer ter inquire, baby," answered the old nurse, hurrying from the room.

"I trus' she is," was Jerome's comment, adding: "Sis Cynthia done make de sallylun jist ter de perfection pint, an' she know dat pint too."

Peggy made no comment upon the implied reproach of her guest's tardiness, but crossing the room to a big chair, whither Tzaritza had already preceded her to rub noses with a magnificent white Persian cat, she stooped to stroke Sultana, who graciously condescended to purr and nestle her beautiful head against Peggy's hand. Sultana had only been a member of the Severndale household since July, Mr. Harold having sent her to Peggy as "a semi-annual birthday gift," he said. She had adapted herself to her new surroundings with unusual promptitude and been adopted by the other four-footed members of the estate as "a friend and equal." The trio formed a picturesque group as they stood there.

The dark-haired, dark-eyed young girl of fifteen, with her rich, clear coloring, her cheeks softly tinted from her brisk walk in the morning sunshine was very lovely. She wore a white duck skirt, a soft nainsook blouse open at the throat, the sailor collar knotted with a red silk scarf. Her heavy braids were coiled about her shapely head and held in place with large shell pins, soft little locks curling about her forehead.

The past year had wrought wonderful changes in Peggy Stewart. The little girl had vanished forever, giving place to the charming young girl nearing her sixteenth milestone. The contact with the outer world which the past three months had given, when she had made so many new friends and seen so much of the service and social world, had done a great deal towards developing her. Always exceptionally well poised and sure of herself, the summer at Navy Bungalow in New London, at Newport, Boston, and at other points at which the summer practice Squadron had touched, had broadened her outlook, and helped her gauge things from a different and wider viewpoint than Severndale or Annapolis afforded. Though entirely unaware of the fact, Peggy had few rivals in the world of young girls.

Presently a step sounded upon the polished floor of the broad hall and Mrs. Peyton Stewart,

Peggy's aunt by marriage, stood in the doorway. Under one arm she carried her French poodle. Stooping she placed it upon the floor with the care which suggested a degree of fragility entirely belied by the bad-tempered little beast's first move, for as Peggy advanced with extended hand to greet her aunt, Toinette made a wild dash for the Persian cat, which onset was met by one dignified slap of the Sultana's paw, which left its red imprint upon the poodle's nose and promptly toppled the pampered thing heels-over-head. Tzaritza stood watching the entire procedure with dignified surprise, and when the yelping little beast rolled to her feet, she calmly gathered her into her huge jaws and stalking across the room held her up to Peggy, as though asking:

9

"What shall I do with this bad-mannered bit of dogdom? Turn her over to your discipline, or crush her with one snap of my jaws?"

"Oh you horrible, savage beast! You great brute! Drop her! Drop her! Drop her instantly! My precious Toinette. My darling!" shrieked Toinette's doting mistress. "Peggy, how *can* you have such a savage creature near you? She has crushed every bone in my pet's body. Go away! Go away!"

The scorn in Tzaritza's eyes was almost human. With a low growl, she dropped the thoroughly cowed poodle at Peggy's feet and then turned and stalked from the room, the very picture of scornful dignity. Mrs. Stewart snatched the poodle to her breast. There was not a scratch upon it save the one inflicted by Sultana, and richly deserved, as the tuft of the handsome cat's fur lying upon the floor testified.

10

"I hardly think you will find her injured, Aunt Katherine. Tzaritza never harms any creature smaller than herself unless bidden to. She brought Toinette here as much for the little dog's protection as for Sultana's."

"Sultana's! As though she needed protection from *this* fairy creature. Horrible, vicious cat! Look at poor Toinette's nose."

"And at poor Sultana's fur," added Peggy, pointing to the tuft upon the floor and slightly shrugging her shoulders.

"She deserved it for scratching Toinette's nose."

"I'm afraid the scratch was the second move in the onslaught."

"We will not argue the point, but in future keep that great hound outside of the house, and the cat elsewhere than in the dining-room, I beg of you—I can't have Toinette's life endangered, or my nerves shocked in this manner again."

For a moment Peggy looked at her aunt in amazement. Keep Tzaritza out of the house and relegate the Sultana to the servant's quarters? What had become of the lady of smiles and compliments whom she had known at New London, and who had been at such infinite pains to ingratiate herself with Neil Stewart that she had been invited to spend September at Severndale? And, little as Peggy suspected it, with the full determination of spending the remainder of her days there could she contrive to do so. Madam Stewart had blocked out her campaign most completely, only "the best laid plans," etc., and Madam had quite forgotten to take Mrs. Glenn Harold, Peggy's staunchest champion and ally, into consideration. Mrs. Harold had been Peggy's "guide, philosopher and friend" for one round year, and Mrs. Harold's niece, Polly Howland, was Peggy's chum and crony.

11

Mrs. Stewart felt a peculiar sensation pass over her as she met the girl's clear, steady gaze. Very much the sensation that one experiences upon looking into a clear pool whose depth it is impossible to guess from merely looking, though one feels instinctively that it is much deeper, and may prove more dangerous than a casual glance would lead one to believe. Peggy's reply was:

"Of course if you wish it, Aunt Katherine, Tzaritza shall not come into the house during your visit here. I do not wish you to be annoyed, but on the contrary, quite happy, and, Jerome, please see that Sultana is taken to Mammy, and ask her to keep her in her quarters while Mrs. Stewart remains at Severndale. Are you ready for your breakfast, Aunt Katherine?"

12

"Quite ready," answered Mrs. Stewart, taking her seat at the table. Peggy waited until she had settled herself with the injured poodle in her lap, then took her own seat. Jerome had summoned one of the maids and given Sultana into her charge, while Tzaritza was bidden "Guard" upon the piazza. Never in all her royal life had Tzaritza been elsewhere than upon the rug before the fireplace while her mistress' breakfast was being served, and it seemed as though the splendid wolfhound, with a pedigree unrivalled in the world, stood as the very incarnation of outraged dignity, and a protest against insult. Perhaps some vague sense of having overstepped the bounds of good judgment, if not good breeding, was beginning to impress itself upon Mrs. Peyton Stewart. Certainly she had not so thoroughly ingratiated herself in the favor of her niece, or her niece's friends during that visit in New London the previous summer, as to feel entirely sure of a cordial welcome at Severndale, and to make a false start at the very outset of her carefully formed plans was a far cry from diplomatic, to say the least. During those weeks at New London, when a kind fate had brought her again in touch with her brother-in-law after so many years, Mrs. Stewart had done a vast deal of thinking and planning. There was beautiful Severndale without a mistress excepting Peggy, a mere child, who, in Madam's estimation, did not count. Neil Stewart was a widower in the very prime of life and, from all Madam had observed, sorely in need of someone to look after him and keep him from making some foolish marriage which might end in—well, in *not* keeping Severndale in the family; "the family" being

13

strongly in evidence in Mrs. Peyton. Her first step had been to secure an invitation to visit there. That done, the next was to remain there indefinitely once she arrived upon the scene. To do this she must make herself not only desirable but indispensable.

Certainly, the preceding two days had not promised much for the fulfillment of her plan. So being by no means a fool, but on the contrary, a very clever woman in her own peculiar line of cleverness, she at once set about dispelling the cloud which hung over the horizon, congratulating herself that she had had sufficient experience to know how to deal with a girl of Peggy's age. So to that end she now smiled sweetly upon her niece and remarked:

"I am afraid, dear, I almost lost control of myself. I am so attached to Toinette that I am quite overcome if any harm threatens her. You know she has been my inseparable companion in my loneliness, and when one is so utterly desolate as I have been for so many years even the devotion of a dumb animal is valued. I have been very, very lonely since your uncle's death, Peggy, dear, and you can hardly understand what a paradise seems opening to me in this month to be spent with you. I know we are going to be everything to each other, and I am sure I can relieve you of a thousand burdens which must be a great tax upon a girl of your years. I do not see *how* you have carried them so wonderfully, or why you are not old before your time. It has been most unnatural. But now we must change all that. Young people were not born to assume heavy responsibilities, whereas older ones accept them as a matter of course. And that's just what *I* have come way down here to try to do for my sweet niece," ended Mrs. Stewart smiling with would-be fascinating coyness. The smile would have been somewhat less complacent could she have heard old Jerome's comment as he placed upon the pantry shelf the fingerbowls which he had just removed from the table.

"Yas, yas, dat's it. Yo' needn't 'nounce it. We knows pintedly what yo's aimin' ter do, an' may de Lawd have mussy 'pon us if yo' *succeeds*. But dere's shorely gwine be ructions 'fore yo' does, er my name ain't Jerome Randolph Lee Stewart."

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## CHAPTER II

### RECONSTRUCTION

"I have to ride into Annapolis, this morning, Aunt Katherine. Would you like to drive in?" asked Peggy, when the unpleasant breakfast was ended.

"I should be delighted to, dear," answered Mrs. Stewart sweetly, striving to recover lost ground, for she felt that a good bit had been lost. "At what time do you start?"

"Immediately. I will order the surrey."

She left the room, her aunt's eyes following her with a half-mystified, half-baffled expression: Was the girl deeper than she had given her credit for being? Had she miscalculated the depth of the pool after all?

All through the breakfast hour Peggy had been a sweet and gracious young hostess, anticipating every want, looking to every detail of the service, ordering with a degree of self-possession which secretly astonished Mrs. Stewart, who felt that it would have been difficult for her, even with her advantage of years, to have equaled the girl's unassuming self-assurance and dignity, or have rivaled her perfect ability to sit at the head of her father's table. A moment later Mrs. Stewart went to her room to dress for the drive into town, her breakfast toilet having been a most elaborate silk negligee. Twenty minutes later the surrey stood at the door, but, contrary to Mrs. Stewart's expectations, her niece was not in it: she was mounted upon her beautiful black horse Shashai, at whose feet Tzaritza lay, her nose between her paws, but her ears a-quiver for the very first note of the low whistle which meant, "full speed ahead." On either side of Shashai, a superb bodyguard, stood Silver Star, Polly Howland's saddle horse, though he was still quartered at Severndale, and Roy, the colt that Peggy had raised from tiny babyhood, and which had followed her as he would have followed his dam, ever since the accident that had made him an orphan.

Perhaps the reader of "Peggy Stewart" will recall Mrs. Stewart's horror upon being met at the railway station by "the wild West show," as she stigmatized her niece's riding and her horses, for rarely did Peggy Stewart ride unless accompanied by her two beautiful horses and the wolfhound, and her riding was a source of marvel to more than one, her instructor having been Shelby, the veteran horse-trainer, who had been employed at Severndale ever since Peggy could remember, and whose early days had been spent upon a ranch in the far West where a man had to ride anything which possessed locomotive powers. At the present moment a more appreciative observer would have thrilled at the sight, for rarely is it given to mortal eyes to look upon a prettier picture than Peggy Stewart and her escort presented at that moment.

Given as a background a beautiful, carefully preserved estate, which for generations has been the pride of its owners, a superb old mansion of the most perfect colonial type, a sunny September morning, and as the figures upon that background a charming young girl in a white linen riding-skirt, her rich coloring at its best, her eyes shining, her seat in her saddle so perfect that she seemed a part of her mount, and you have something to look upon. To this add three thoroughbred horses and a snowy dog, an old colored servitor, for Jerome had come out with a message from Harrison, and it is a picture to be appreciated. Had the tall woman standing upon the broad piazza been able to do so, many things which happened later might never have happened at all.

Mrs. Stewart was elaborately gowned in a costume better suited for a drive in Newport than Annapolis, especially Annapolis in September. It was a striking creation of pale blue linen and Irish point lace, with a large lace hat, heavy with nodding plumes and a voluminous white lace veil floating out about it. She was a handsome woman in a certain conspicuous way, and certainly knew how to purchase her apparel, though, not above criticism in her selection of the toilet for the occasion, as the present instance evinced. She now walked to the piazza steps, and had anyone possessing a sense of humor been a witness of it, the transformation which passed over the lady's face en transit would have well nigh convulsed him, for the smile which had illumined her countenance at the door had gradually faded as she advanced until, when the steps were reached, it had been transformed into a most disapproving frown.

To Peggy the reason was a mystery, for she had not overheard her aunt's comments upon the occasion of the drive from the railway station three days before. Of course Jess had, and they had been freely circulated and keenly resented in the servants' quarters, but no whisper of them had been carried to the young mistress. Nevertheless, Peggy was beginning to discover that a good many of her actions, and also the order of things at Severndale, had brought a cloud to her Aunt's brow, and a little sigh escaped her lips as she wondered what the latest development would prove. It seemed so easy for things to go amiss nowadays, when heretofore nearly everything had seemed, as a matter of course, to go right. Then the self-elected dictator spoke:

"Peggy, dear, are you not to drive with me?"

"Thank you, Aunt Katherine, but I always ride, and I have several errands to do which I can better attend to if I am mounted."

"Well, it can hardly be necessary for you to have *three* saddle horses at once. It seems to me unnecessarily conspicuous, and in very bad taste for a young girl to go tearing about the country, and especially into Annapolis—the capital City of the State—in the guise of a traveling circus."

A slight smile curved Peggy's lips as she answered:

"Annapolis is *not* New York, Aunt Katherine. What might be out of place in such a city would be regarded as a matter of course in a little town where everybody knows everybody else, and they all know me, and the Severndale horses. Nobody ever gives us a thought. Why should they? I'm nothing but a girl riding into town on an errand."

"You are extremely modest, I must say. Is it quite native or well—we'll dismiss the question, but I must ask you to do me the favor of leaving your bodyguard behind today; it may not seem conspicuous for you to play in a Wild West Show, but I must decline to be an actor. You are growing too old for such mad pranks, and are far too handsome a girl to invite observation."

Peggy turned crimson.

"Why, Aunt Katherine, I never regarded it as a prank in the least. I have ridden this way all my life and no one has ever commented upon it. Daddy Neil knows of it—he has ridden with me hundreds of times himself—and never said one word against it. And you surely do not think I do it to invite observation? Why, there isn't anything to *observe*. I am certainly no better looking than hundreds of other girls; at least, you are the only one who has ever commented upon my personal appearance. But I beg your pardon; you are my guest. I am sorry. Bud, please call Shelby to take Star and Roy back; I don't dare trust them to you."

The little negro boy who had brought Shashai to the doorstep, and who had been staring popeyed during the conversation, dashed away toward the paddock, to rush upon Shelby with a wild tale of "dat lady f'om de norf was a-sassin' Missie Peggy jist scan'lous and orderin' Shelby fer to come quick ter help her."

"What you a-talking about, you little fool nigger?" demanded Shelby. Then gathering that something was amiss with the little mistress whom all upon the estate adored, he hastened to the house, his face somewhat troubled, for hints of the doings up there had penetrated even to his quarters.

"Shelby, please take Star and Roy back to the paddock and be sure to fasten them in."

"Ain't they a-goin' with you, Miss Peggy?"

"Not this morning, Shelby."

The man looked from the girl to the lady now settling herself in the carriage. Toinette still stood upon the piazza waiting to be lifted up to her mistress, too fat and too foolish to even go down the steps alone. As Shelby stepped toward the horses Mrs. Stewart waved her hand toward the dog and said to him:

"Lift Toinette into the surrey."

Shelby paid no more attention to her than he paid to the quarreling jays in the holly trees, and the order was sharply repeated.

"Oh, are you a-speakin' to me, ma'am?" he then said.

"Certainly. I wish my dog handed to me."

Shelby looked at the pampered poodle and then at its mistress. Then with a guileless smile remarked:

"Now you don't sesso? Well, when I git back to the paddock with these here horses what can't go 'long with Miss Peggy, I'll send a little nigger boy up here for ter boost your dog up to you, but *I* tend *horses* on this here place." 23

The man's dark skin grew several shades darker owing to the blood which flooded his cheeks, and his eyes narrowed as he looked for one second straight into Mrs. Stewart's. What possessed the woman to antagonize everyone with whom she came in touch? Shelby had never laid eyes upon her until that moment, but that moment had confirmed his dislike conceived from the reports which had come to him. He now went up to the horses. Knowing that neither of them had halters on, he had brought two with him and now slipped them over his charges' heads, saying as he did so:

"You've got to come 'long back with me and keep company manners, do you know that, you disrepu'ble gad-about? You ain't never had no proper eddicatin' an' now it's a-goin' to begin for fa'r. You-all are goin' ter be larnt citified manners hot off the bat. So come 'long back to the paddock an' git your fust lesson." 24

The horses toyed and played with him like a couple of children, but went pacing away beside him, now and again pulling at his sleeve, poking at him with their soft muzzles or mumbling at his cheeks with their velvety lips, a pair of petted, peerless creatures and as beautiful as any God had ever created. Now and again they stopped short to neigh a peremptory call, as though asking the reason of this surprising conduct.

"Are you ready, Aunt Katherine?" asked Peggy.

"As soon as Jerome takes your hound in charge. I don't care to have Toinette driven frantic with fear by the sight of her. She will grow so excited that I shall be unable to hold her." 25

Now the past two hours had held a good many annoyances for Peggy Stewart to whom annoyances had been almost unknown. Perhaps they constitute the discipline of life, but thus far Peggy Stewart had apparently gotten on pretty well without any radical chastening processes. Her life had been simply, but well, ordered, and her naturally sunny soul had grown sweet and wholesome in her little world. If correction had been necessary Mammy's loving old heart had known how to order it during Peggy's babyhood; Harrison had carefully watched her childhood, and her young girlhood had been most beautifully developed by her guardian, good Dr. Llewellyn, who loved her as a grand-daughter. Then had come Mrs. Harold, who had done so much for the young girl. Why could it not have gone on? 25

Perhaps the ordering of Peggy's life had been too smooth to develop the best in her character, so Kismet, or whatever it is which shapes the odd happenings of our lives, had stepped in to lay a hurdle or two to test her ability to meet obstacles. Since seven-thirty that morning she had met little else in one form or another, and had taken them rather gracefully, all things considered. Her breakfast had been delayed an hour; the breakfast itself had been far from the pleasant meal it usually proved; she had been needlessly criticised for her habit of riding with her beloved horses; and now poor Tzaritza, after being banished the house, was to be debarred from following her young mistress; something unheard of, since the hound had acted as Peggy's protectress ever since she could follow her. The blood flooded into the girl's face, as turning to her Aunt she said very quietly, but with a dignity which Mrs. Stewart dared not encroach upon:

"I am very sorry to seem in any way discourteous or disobliging, Aunt Katherine, but Daddy Neil and Compadre, have always wished Tzaritza to accompany me when I ride. I have never felt any fear but they feel differently, as there are, of course, some undesirable characters between Severndale and Annapolis, and they consider Tzaritza a great protection against any possible annoyance. We will ride on ahead, since it is likely to annoy you, but I must go into Annapolis this morning. Another time I shall drive with you, but I can't ask you to drive where I must ride today. When you see some of the Annapolitan streets you will understand why. They have not been re paved since the first pavements were laid generations ago, and you would be most uncomfortable. Be careful where you drive, Jess. I will meet you at the Bank." 26

There was a graceful bow to Mrs. Stewart, a slight pressure of the knee against Shashai, a low whistle to Tzaritza and she had whirled and was away like the wind.

Madam Stewart drew a quick breath and compressed her thin lips until they formed barely a line, and during that drive into Annapolis did some rapid thinking. Evidently she had made another mistake.

As Peggy rode along the highway which led to Annapolis, the usual merry, lilting songs, to which Shashai's hoofbeats kept time, were silenced, and the girl rode in deep thought. Shashai tossed his head impatiently as though trying to attract her attention, and now and again Tzaritza bounded up to her with a deep, questioning bark. Peggy smiled a little abstractedly and said: 27

"Your Missie is doing some hard thinking, my beauties and doesn't feel songful this morning." Then after a moment she resumed:

"O Shashai, what *is* the matter with everything? Am *I* all wrong, or is Aunt Katherine different from everybody else? I have never met anyone just like her before, and I feel just exactly as though someone had drawn a file across my teeth, and I dare say that's all wrong too. If the Little Mother and Polly were only here they'd know how to make me see things differently, but I seem to get in wrong at every turn. Aunt Katherine has been here only two days, but what days they have been! And ten times more to follow before the month ends!"

Shashai had gradually slowed down until he was walking with his own inimitably dainty step, his hoofs falling upon the leaf-strewn road with the lightness of a deer's. Presently they came to a pretty wood-road leading almost at angles to the highway, but Peggy was again too occupied to notice that Tzaritza had turned into it and that Shashai, as a matter of course, had followed her. Annapolis could be reached by this less frequented way but it made a wide detour, leading past Nelly Bolivar's home. As they struck the refreshing coolness of the byway Shashai broke into what Peggy called his "rocking-chair gait," though she was so much a part of him that she was hardly aware of the more rapid motion. Her first clear intimation that her route had changed occurred when a cheerful voice called out:

28

"And she wandered away and away into the land o' dreams, my princess."

Peggy raised her head quickly and the old light flashed back into her eyes, the old smile curved her lips as she cried:

"Why, Nelly Bolivar! How under the sun came I here?"

"In the usual way, I reckon, Miss Peggy. I don't often see you come in any other. But this time you sure enough look as though you had been dreaming," laughed Nelly, coming close to Shashai, who instantly remembered his manners and neighed his greeting, while Tzaritza thrust her head into the girl's arms with the gentlest insinuation. Nelly held the big head close, rested her face against it a second, then took Shashai's soft muzzle in both hands and planted a kiss just where it was most velvety, saying softly:

"I can't imagine you three separated. The picture would not be complete. But what is wrong, Miss Peggy? You look so sober you make me feel queer," for the smile had gone from the girl's face and Nelly was quick to feel the seriousness of her expression.

29

"Perhaps I'm cross and cranky, Nelly. At any rate I've no business to be here this minute. I started for Annapolis, but my wits got wool-gathering, I reckon, and I let Shashai turn in here without noticing where he was going. Aunt Katherine will reach Annapolis before I do and—then —" and Peggy stopped and wagged her head as though pursuit of the subject would better be dropped. Nelly's face clouded. It had not required the two days of Mrs. Stewart's visit to circulate a good many reports concerning her. Indeed both Jerome and old Mammy had described her at length, and the description had lost nothing upon their African tongues, nor had the experiences of the three months spent up north: Madam Stewart had figured rather conspicuously in their pictures of the "doin's up yander." Had she suspected how accurately the old colored people had gauged her, or how great an influence their gauging was likely to have upon the plans she had so carefully laid, she might have been a little more circumspect in her conduct toward them. But to her they were "just black servants" and she was entirely incapable of weighing their influence in the domestic economy, or of understanding their shrewd judgment as to the best interests of the young girl whom each, in common with all the other old servants upon the estate, loved with a devotion absolutely incomprehensible to most northern-born people. And another potent fact, entirely absent from the characteristics of the northern negro, is the fact that the southern negro servants' "kinnery" instantly adopts and maintains the viewpoint of those "nearest the throne." It is a survival of the old feudal system, unknown in the cosmopolitan North, but which even in this day, so remote from the days of slavery, makes itself very distinctly felt in many parts of the South.

30

And many of the servants upon the Severndale estate had been there for three generations. Hence Peggy was their "chile," and her joys or sorrows, happiness or unhappiness, were theirs, and all their kin's, to be talked over, remedied if possible, but shared if not, or made a part of their own delight in living, as the case might demand. And the ramifications of their kinship were amazing. No wonder the report that "an aunt-in-law ob de yo'ng mistress yonder at Severndale, had done come down an' ondertuck fer ter run de hull shebang *an'* Miss Peggy inter de bargain, what is never been run by nobody," had circulated throughout the whole community, and met with a resolute, though carefully concealed opposition—subtle, intangible, but sure to prove overwhelming in the end—the undertow, so hidden but so irresistible. All this had stolen from one pair of lips to another and, of course, been related with indignant emphasis to Jim Bolivar, Nelly's father, one of the tenants of Severndale's large estate. And he, in turn, had discussed it with Nelly, who worshipped the very ground Peggy chose to stand upon, for to Peggy Stewart Nelly owed restored health, her home rescued when ruin seemed about to claim everything her father owned, and all the happiness which had come into her lonely life.

31

No wonder she now looked up to the deep brown eyes with her own blue ones troubled and distressed.

32



# CHAPTER III

## HOSTILITIES SUSPENDED

During her drive into Annapolis Madam Stewart did more deep thinking than it was generally given to her shallow brain to compass. Like most of her type, she possessed a certain shrewdness, which closely touched upon cunning when she wished to gain her ends, but she had very little real cleverness, and practically no power of logical deduction.

Today, however, she had felt antagonism enveloping her as a fog, and would have been not a little surprised to realize that its most potent force lay in Peggy's humble servitors rather than in Peggy herself. From the old darkey driving her, so deferentially replying to her questions, and at such pains to point out everything of interest along the way, she felt it radiate with almost tangible scorn and hostility, and yet to have saved her life she could not have said: "He is remiss in this or that."

They drove into Annapolis by the bridge which crosses the Severn just above the Naval Hospital, and from which the whole Academy is seen at its best, with the wide sweep of the beautiful Chesapeake beyond. Jess pointed out everything most carefully. Then on they went across College Creek bridge, up College Avenue, by historic old St. Ann's and drew up at the Bank to meet Peggy. Mrs. Stewart looked about her in undisguised disappointment and asked:

"Is *this* the capital city of the State of Maryland? *This* little town?"

Jess' mouth hardened. He loved the quaint old town and all its traditions. So did his young mistress. It had always meant home to her, and to many, many generations of her family before her. The old "Peggy Stewart" house famous in history, though no longer occupied by her own family, still stood, a landmark, in the heart of the town and was pointed to with pride by all.

"Dis sho' is de capital city ob de State, Ma'am. Yonder de guv'nor's mansion, jist over dar stan' de co't house, an' yonder de Cap'tal an' all de yether 'ministrashum buildin's, an' we'all's powerful proud ob 'em."

Mrs. Stewart smiled a superior smile as she replied:

"I have heard that the South is not progressive and is perfectly apathetic to conditions. It *must* be. Heavens! Look at these streets! They are perfectly disgusting, and the odor is horrible. I shall be glad to drive home."

"De town done been pave all mos' all new," bridled Jess. "Dis hyar pavement de bes' ob brick. Miss Peggy done tole me ter be keerful whar I drive yo' at, an' I tecken yo' on de very be's."

"And what, may I inquire, is your very worst then? Have you no street cleaning department in your illustrious city?"

"We suttently *has!* Dey got six men a-sweeping de hull endurin' time."

"What an overwhelming force!" and Mrs. Stewart gave way to mirth.

It was fortunate that Peggy should have arrived at that opportune moment, for there is no telling what might have occurred: Jess's patience was at the snapping-point. But Peggy's talk with Nelly Bolivar had served to restore her mental equilibrium to a certain degree—and her swift ride into Annapolis had completed the process. It was a sunny, smiling face which drew up to the surrey and greeted Mrs. Stewart. Peggy had made up her mind that she would not let little things annoy her, and was already reproaching herself for having done so. She had resolved to keep her temper during her aunt's visit if a whole legion of tormenting imps were let loose upon her.

Three weeks of Mrs. Stewart's visit passed. Upon her part, three weeks of striving to establish a firmer foothold in the home of her brother-in-law; to obtain the place in it she so ardently coveted—that of mistress and absolute dictator. But each day proved to her that she was striving against some vaguely comprehended opposition. It did not lie in Peggy, that she had the grace to concede, for Peggy had complied with every wish, which she had graciously or otherwise, expressed, except the one debarring Tzaritza from following Shashai when she rode abroad, and be it said to Peggy's credit that she had held to her resolution in spite of endless aggravations, for Madam was a past mistress of criticism either spoken or implied. Never before in all her sunny young life had Peggy been forced to live in such an atmosphere.

Little by little during those weeks Mrs. Stewart had pre-empted Peggy's position as mistress of the household; a position held by every claim of right, justice and natural development, for Peggy had grown into it, and its honors and privileges rested upon her young shoulders by right of inheritance. She had not rushed there, or forced her claim to it, hence had it been gradually given into her hands by old Mammy, her nurse, Harrison, the trusty housekeeper, and at length, as she had more and more clearly demonstrated her ability to hold it, by Dr. Llewellyn, her guardian, who regarded it as an essential part of a Southern gentlewoman's education.

Then had come Mrs. Harold, whose tact and affection seemed to supply just the little touch which the young girl required to round out her life, and fit her to ultimately assume the entire control of her father's home.

But all this was entirely beyond Mrs. Stewart's comprehension. Her own early life had been passed in a small New Jersey village in very humble surroundings. She had been educated in the little grammar school, going later to an adjoining town for a year at high-school. In her home, domestic help of any sort had been unknown, she and her mother, an earnest, hard-working woman, having performed all the household work. There were no traditions connected with that simple home; it was just an everyday round of commonplace duties, accepted as a matter of course. Then Mrs. Stewart, at that time "pretty Kitty Snyder," went as a sort of "mother's helper" to a lady residing in Elizabeth, whose brother was in a New Jersey College. Upon one of his visits to his sister he had brought Peyton Stewart home for a visit: Peyton, the happy-go-lucky, irresponsible madcap. Kitty Snyder's buxom beauty had turned all that was left to be turned of his shallow head and she had become Mrs. Peyton Stewart within a month. 37

The rest has been told elsewhere. For a good many years she had "just lived around" as she expressed it, her income from her husband's share of the very comfortable little fortune left him by his father, being a vast deal more than she had ever dreamed of in her youthful days. She felt very affluent. All things considered, it was quite as well that Peyton had quit this earthly scene after two years of married life for "Kitty" had rapidly developed extravagant tastes and there were many "scenes." Her old associates saw her no more, and later the new ones often wondered why the dashing young widow did not marry again.

They did not suspect how often her plans laid to that end had miscarried, for her ambitions were entirely out of proportion to her qualifications.

Now, however, chance had brought her once more in touch with her husband's family, and she was resolved to make hay while the sun shone. If Neil Stewart had not been an odd mixture of manly strength and child-like simplicity, exceptional executive ability and credulity, kindness and quick temper, he would never in the wide world have become responsible for the state of affairs at present turning his old home topsy-turvy, and in a fair way to undo all the good works of others, and certainly make Peggy extremely unhappy. 38

But he had "made a confounded mess of the whole job," he decided upon receiving a letter from Peggy. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say upon reading between the lines, because it was not so much what Peggy had *said* as that which she left unsaid, which puzzled him, and to which puzzle Harrison supplied the key in her funny monthly report. Never in all the ten years of her stewardship had she failed to send her monthly letter.

Harrison was a most conscientious old body if somewhat below par in educational advantages. Nevertheless, she had filled her position as nurse, maid and housekeeper to Peggy's mother for over thirty years, and to Peggy for ten more and her idea of duty was "Peggy first, Martha Harrison second." Her letter to Neil Stewart, which he read while his ship was being overhauled in the Boston Navy Yard, set him thinking. It ran:

Severndale, Maryland.  
September 21, 19—

Captain Neil Stewart,  
U. S. N.

Respected Sir:—

As has been my habit these many years, I take my pen in hand to make my monthly report concerning the happenings and the events of the past month. Most times there isn't many of either outside the regular accounts which, praises be, ain't never got snarled up none since I've had the handling of them. 39

As to the past three weeks considerable has took place in this quiet, peaceful (most times, at least) home, and I ain't quite sure where I stand at, or am likely to. Things seem sort of stirred round. Like enough we-all are old-fashioned and considerable sot in our ways and can't rightly get used to new-fangled ones. Then, too, we—I speak for everybody—find it kinder hard to take our orders from anybody but Miss Peggy, who has got the right to give them, which we can't just see that anybody else *has got*. Howsoever, some folks seem to think they have, and what I am trying to get at is, *have they?* If I have got to take them from other folks, why, of course I have got to, but it has got to be *you* that tells me I must.

Up to the present time I seem to have been pretty capable of running things down here, though I am free to confess I was right glad when Mrs. Harold come along as she done, to give me a hint or two where Miss Peggy was concerned, for that child had taken to growing up in a way that was fair taking the breath out of my body, and was a-getting clear beyond *me* though, praises be, she didn't suspicion the fact. If she had a-done it *my* time would a-come for sure. But the good Lord sent Mrs. Harold to us long about that time and she was a powerful help and comfort to us all. *He* don't make no mistakes as a rule and I reckon we would a done well to let well enough alone and not go trying to improve on his plans for us. When we do that the *other one* is just as likely as not for to take a hand in the job and if he ain't a-kinder stirring round on these premises right this very minute I'm missing my guess and sooner or later there is going to be ructions.

Cording to the way *we*-all think down here Miss Peggy's mighty close to the angels, but maybe we are blinded by the light o'love, so to speak. Howsoever and nevertheless, we have got along pretty comfortable till *lately* when we have begun to

discover that our educasyons has been terribl neglected and we have all got to be took in hand. *And we are being took powerful strong, let me tell you!* It is some like a Spanish fly blister: It may do good in the end but the means thereto is some harrowing to the flesh and the spirit.

I don't suppose there is no hope of your a-visiting your home before the ship is ordered South for the fall target practice, more is the pity. Tain't for me to name nothing but I wish to the Lord Mrs. Harold was here. SHE is a lady—Amen.

Your most humble and obedient housekeeper,  
Martha Harrison.

The day after this letter was written Dr. Llewellyn 'phoned to Peggy that he would return at the end of the week and if quite agreeable would like to pass a few days at Severndale with her, as his own housekeeper had not yet returned from her holiday. 40

Peggy was in an ecstasy of joy. To have Compadre under her own roof from Saturday to Monday would be too delightful. Brimful of her pleasurable anticipations, and more like the natural, joyous girl of former days than she had been since leaving Mrs. Harold and Polly, she flew to the piazza where her aunt, arrayed in a filmy lingerie gown, reclined in one of the big East India chairs. For a moment she forgot that she did not hold her aunt's sympathies as she held Mrs. Harold's, and cried:

"Oh, Aunt Katherine, Compadre will be here on Friday evening and will remain until Monday! Isn't that too good to believe?"

"Do you mean Dr. Llewellyn?" asked Mrs. Stewart, coldly.

"Yes, Aunt Katherine, you had no chance to know him before he went away, but you will just love him."

"Shall I?" asked Mrs. Stewart with a smile which acted like a wet blanket upon poor Peggy.

"But why do you call him by that absurd name? Why not call him Dr. Llewellyn?" 41

"Call him Dr. Llewellyn?" echoed Peggy. "Why, I have never called him anything else since he taught me to call him by that dear name when I was a wee little thing."

"And do you expect to cling to childish habits all your days, Peggy dear? Isn't it about time you began to think about growing up? Sit here upon this cushion beside me. I wish to have a serious talk with you and this seems a most opportune moment. I have felt the necessity of it ever since my arrival, but have refrained from speaking because I feared I might be misjudged and do harm rather than good. Sit down, dear."

Mrs. Stewart strove to bring into her voice an element of deep interest, affection was beyond her,—and Peggy was sufficiently intuitive to feel it. Nevertheless, if anything could have appealed to this self-centered woman's affection it ought surely to have been the young girl who obediently dropped upon the big Turkish cushion, and clasping her hands upon the broad arm of the chair, looked up into the steely, calculating eyes with a pair so soft, so brown, so trustful yet so perplexed, that an ordinary woman would have gathered her right into her arms and claimed all the richness and loyalty of affection so eager to find an outlet. If it could only have been Mrs. Harold, or Polly's mother, how quick either would have been to comprehend the loving nature of the girl and reap the reward of it. 42

Mrs. Stewart merely smiled into the wild-rose face in a way which she fondly believed to accentuate her own charms, and tapping the pretty brown hands with her fan, said:

"I am growing extremely proud of my lovely niece. She is going to be a great credit to me, and, also, I foresee, a great responsibility."

"A responsibility, Aunt Katherine?" asked Peggy, a perplexed pucker upon her forehead. "Have I been a responsibility to you since you came here? I am sorry if I have. Of course I know my life down here in the old home is quite different from most girls' lives. I didn't realize that until I met Mrs. Harold and Polly and then, later, went up to New London and saw more of other girls and the way they live. But I have been very happy here, Aunt Katherine, and since I have known Mrs. Harold and Polly a good many things have been made pleasanter for me. I can never repay them for their kindness to me."

Peggy paused and a wonderfully sweet light filled her eyes, for her love for her absent friends was very true and deep, and speaking of them seemed to bring them back to the familiar surroundings which she knew they had grown to love so well, and where she and Polly had passed so many happy hours. 43

Mrs. Stewart was not noted for her capacity for deep feeling and was more amused than otherwise affected by Peggy's earnest speech, classifying it as "a girl's sentimentality." Finer qualities were wasted upon that lady. So she now smiled indulgently and said:

"Of course I can understand your appreciation of what you consider Mrs. Harold's and her niece's kindness to you, but, have you ever looked upon the other side of the question? Have you not done a great deal for them? It seems to me you have quite cancelled any obligation to them. It must have been some advantage to them to have such a lovely place as this to visit at will, and, if I can draw deductions correctly, to practically have the run of. It seems to me there was considerable advantage upon *their* side of the arrangement. You, naturally, can not see this, but I'll venture to say Mrs. Harold was not so unsophisticated," and a pat upon Peggy's hand playfully emphasized the lady's charitable view.

Peggy felt bewildered and her hands fell from the arm of the chair to her lap, though her big soft eyes never changed their gaze, which proved somewhat disconcerting to the older woman who had the grace to color slightly. Peggy then rallied her forces and answered:

44

"Aunt Katherine, I am sure neither Mrs. Harold nor Polly ever had the faintest idea of any advantage to themselves in being nice to me. Why in this world should they? They have ten times more than *I* could ever give to them. Why think of how extensively Mrs. Harold has traveled and what hosts of friends she has! And Polly too. Goodness, they let me see and enjoy a hundred things I never could have seen or enjoyed otherwise."

Mrs. Stewart laughed a low, incredulous laugh, then queried:

"And you the daughter of Neil Stewart and a little Navy girl? Really, Peggy, you are deliciously *ingenue*. Well, never mind. It is of more intimate matters I wish to speak, for with each passing day I recognize the importance of a radical reconstruction in your mode of living. That is what I meant when I said I foresaw greater responsibilities ahead. You are no longer a child, Peggy, to run wild over the estate, but—well, I must not make you vain. In a year or two at most, you will make your *début* and someone must provide against that day and be prepared to fill properly the position of chaperone to you. Meantime, you must have proper training and as near as I can ascertain you have never had the slightest. But it can not be deferred a moment longer. It is absolutely providential that I, the only relative you have in this world, should have met you as I did, though I can hardly understand how your father overlooked the need so long. Perhaps it was from motives of unselfishness, though he must have known that I stood ready to make any sacrifice for my dear dead Peyton's brother." Just here Mrs. Peyton's feelings almost overcame her and a delicate handkerchief was pressed to her eyes for a moment.

45

Ordinarily tender and sympathetic to the last degree, Peggy could not account for her strange indifference to her aunt's distress. She simply sat with hands clasped about her knees and waited for her to resume the conversation. Presently Madam emerged from her temporary eclipse and said:

"Forgive me, dear, my feelings quite overcame me for a moment. To resume: I know dear Neil would never ask it of me, but I have been thinking very seriously upon the subject and have decided to forget self, and my many interests in New York, and devote my time to you. I shall remain with you and relieve you of all responsibility in this great household, a responsibility out of all proportion to your years. Indeed, I can not understand how you have retained one spark of girlish spontaneity under such unnatural conditions. Such cares were meant for older, more experienced heads than your pretty one, dear. It will be a joy to me to relieve you of them and I can not begin too soon. We will start at once. I shall write to your father to count upon me for everything and, if he feels so disposed, to place everything in my hands. Furthermore, I shall suggest that he send you to a fine school where you will have the finishing your birth and fortune entitle you to. You know absolutely nothing of association, with other girls,—no, please let me finish," as Peggy rose to her feet and stood regarding her aunt with undisguised consternation, "I know of a most excellent school in New York, indeed, it is conducted by a very dear friend of mine, where you would meet only girls of the wealthiest families" (Mrs. Stewart did not add that the majority had little beside their wealth to stand as a bulwark for them; they were the daughters of New York City's newly rich whose ancestry would hardly court inspection) "and even during your school days you would get a taste of New York's social advantages; a thing utterly impossible in this dull—ahem!—this remote place. I shall strongly advise dear Neal to consider this. You simply cannot remain buried here. *I shall*, of course, since I feel it my duty to do so, but I can have someone pass the winter with me, and can make frequent trips to Washington."

46

47

Mrs. Stewart paused for breath. Peggy did not speak one word, but with a final dazed look at her aunt, turned and entered the house.

48

## CHAPTER IV

### HOSTILITIES RESUMED

As Peggy left the piazza her aunt's eyes followed her with an expression which held little promise for the girl's future happiness should it be given into Mrs. Stewart's keeping. A more calculating, triumphant one, or one more devoid of any vestige of affection for Peggy it would have been hard to picture. As her niece disappeared Mrs. Stewart's lips formed just two words, "little fool," but never had she so utterly miscalculated. She was sadly lacking in a discrimination of values. Peggy had chosen one of two evils; that of losing her temper and saying something which would have outraged her conception of the obligations of a hostess, or

of getting away by herself without a moment's delay. She felt as though she were strangling, or that some horrible calamity threatened her. Hurrying to her own room she flung herself upon her couch and did that which Peggy Stewart was rarely known to do: buried her head in the cushions and sobbed. Not the sobs of a thwarted, peevish girl, but the deeper grief of one who feels hopeless, lonely and wretched. Never in her life had she felt like this. What was the meaning of it?

49

Those who were older and more experienced, would have answered at once: Here is a girl, not yet sixteen years of age, who has led a lonely life upon a great estate, remote from companions of her own age, though adored by the servants who have been upon it as long as she can remember. She has been regarded as their mistress whose word must be law because her mother's was. Her education has been conducted along those lines by an old gentleman who believes that the southern gentlewoman must be the absolute head of her home.

About this time there enters her little world a woman whose every impulse stands for motherhood at its sweetest and best, and who has helped all that is best and truest in the young girl to develop, guiding her by the beautiful power of affection. All has been peace and harmony, and Peggy is rapidly qualifying in ability to assume absolute control in her father's home.

Then, with scarcely a moment's warning, there is dropped into her home and daily life a person with whom she cannot have anything in common, from whom she intuitively shrinks and cannot trust.

50

Under such circumstances the present climax is not surprising.

Peggy's whole life had in some respects been a contradiction and a cry for a girl's natural heritage—a mother's all-comprehending love. The love that does not wait to be told of the loved one's needs and happiness, but which lives only to foresee what is best for her and to bring it to pass, never mind at what sacrifice to self. Peggy had missed *that* love in her life and not all the other forms combined had compensated.

Until the previous year she had never felt this; nor could she have put it into words even at the present moment. She only knew that in Polly's companionship she had been very, very happy and that she was terribly lonely without her. That in Mrs. Harold she had found a friend whom she had learned to love devotedly and trust implicitly, and that in the brief time Mrs. Howland, Polly's mother, had been in Annapolis and at New London, she had caught a glimpse of a little world before undreamed of; a world peculiarly Polly's and her mother's and which no other human being invaded. Mrs. Howland had just such a little world for each of her daughters and for the son-in-law whom she loved so tenderly. It was a world sacred to the individual who dwelt therein with her. There was a common world in which all met in mutual interests, but she possessed the peculiar power of holding for each of her children their own "inner shrine" which was truly "The Holy of Holies."

51

Although Peggy had known and loved Mrs. Harold longest, there was something in Mrs. Howland's gentle unobtrusive sweetness, in her hidden strength, which drew Peggy as a magnet and for the first time in her life she longed for the one thing denied her: such a love as Polly claimed.

But it seemed an impossibility, and her nearest approach to it lay in Mrs. Harold's affection for her.

Peggy was not ungrateful, but what had befallen the usual order of things? Was this aunt, with whom, try as she would, she could not feel anything in common, about to establish herself in the home, every turn and corner of which was so dear to her, and utterly disrupt it? For this Peggy felt pretty sure she would do if left a free hand. Already she had most of the old servants in a state of ferment, if not open hostility. They plainly regarded her as an interloper, resented her assumption of rule and her interference in the innumerable little details of the household economy. Her very evident lack of the qualities which, according to their standards, stood for "de true an' endurin' quality raisin'," made them distrust her.

52

Now the "time was certainly out of joint" and poor little Peggy began to wonder if she had to complete the quotation.

All that has been written had passed like a whirlwind through Peggy's harassed brain in much less time than it has taken to put it on paper. It was all a jumble to poor Peggy; vague, yet very real; understood yet baffling. The only real evidences of her unhappiness and doubt were the tears and sobs, and these soon called, by some telepathic message of love and a life's devotion, the faithful old nurse who had been the comforter of her childish woes. For days Mammy had been "as res'less an' onsettled as a yo'ng tuckey long 'bout Thanksgivin' time," as she expressed it, and had found it difficult to settle down to her ordinary routine of work during the preceding two weeks. She prowled about the house and the premises "fer all de 'roun worl' like yo' huntin' speerits," declared Aunt Cynthia, the cook.

"Huh!" retorted Mammy, "I on'y wisht I could feel dat dey was frien'ly ones, but I has a percolation dat dey's comin' from *below* stidder *above*."

So perhaps this explains why she went up to Peggy's room at an hour which she usually spent in her own quarters mending. Long before she reached the room she became aware of sounds which acted upon her as a spark to a powder magazine, for Mammy's loving old ears lay very close to her heart.

53

With a pious "Ma Lawd-God-Amighty, what done happen?" she flew down the broad hall and, being a privileged character, entered the room without knocking. The next second she was

holding Peggy in her arms and almost sobbing herself as she besought her to tell "who done hurt ma baby? Tell Mammy what brecken' yo' heart, honey-chile."

For a few moments Peggy could not reply, and Mammy was upon the point of rushing off for Harrison when Peggy laid a detaining hand upon her and commanded:

"Stop, Mammy! You must not call Harrison or anyone else. There is really nothing the matter. I'm just a silly girl to act like this and I'm thoroughly ashamed of myself." Then she wiped her eyes and strove to check a rebellious sob.

"Quit triflin'! Kingdom-come, is yo' think I'se come ter ma dotage? When is I see you a cryin' like dis befo'? Not sense yo' was kitin' roun' de lot an' fall down an' crack yo' haid. Yo' ain' been de yellin', squallin' kind, an' when yo' begins at dis hyar day an' age fer ter shed tears dar's somethin' pintedly wrong, an' yo' needn' tell me dar ain't. Now out wid it." 54

Mammy was usually fiercest when she felt most deeply and now she was stirred to the very depth of her soul.

"Why, Mammy, I don't believe I could tell you what I'm crying for if I tried," and Peggy smiled as she rested her head upon the shoulder which had never failed her.

"Well, den, tell me what yo' *ain't* cryin' fo', kase ef yo' ain't cryin' fer somethin' yo' *want* yo' shore mus' be a-crying fo' somethin' yo' *don't* want," was Mammy's bewildering argument. "An' I bait yo' I ain't gotter go far fer ter ketch de thing yo' *don't* want neither," and the old woman looked ready to deal with that same cause once it came within her grasp.

Peggy straightened up. This order of things would never do. If she acted like a spoiled child simply because someone to whom she had taken an instinctive dislike had come into her home, she would presently have the whole household demoralized.

"Mammy, listen to me."

Instinctively the blood of generations of servitude responded to Peggy's tone.

"I have been terribly rude to a guest. I lost my temper and I'm ashamed of myself."

"What did you say to her, baby?" 55

"I didn't say anything, I just acted outrageously."

"An' what *she* been a-sayin' ter yo'?"

Peggy only colored.

Mammy nodded her head significantly. "Ain't I *know* dat! Yo' cyant tell *me* nothin' 'bout de Stewart blood. No-siree! I know it from Alphy to Omegy; backards an' forrards. Now we-all kin look out fer trouble ahead. But I'se got dis fer ter say: Some fools jist nachelly go a-prancin' an' a-cavortin' inter places whar de angils outen heaven dassent no mo'n peek. If yo' tells me I must keep ma mouf shet, I'se gotter keep it shet, but Massa Neil is allers a projectin' 'bout ma safety-valve, an' don' yo' tie it down too tight, honey, er somethin' gwine bus' wide open 'fore long. Now come 'long an' wash yo' purty face. I ain' like fer ter see no tears-stains on *yo'* baby. No, I don'. Den yo' go git on Shashai an' call yo' body-gyard and 'Z'ritza an' yo' ride ten good miles fo' yo' come back hyer. By *dat* time yo' git yo' min' settle down an' yo' stummic ready fo' de lunch wha' Sis' Cynthia gwine fix fo' yo'. I seen de perjections ob it an' it fair mak' ma mouf run water lak' a dawg's. Run 'long, honey," and Mammy led the way down the side stairs, and watched Peggy as she took a side path to the paddock. 56

As she was in and out of her saddle a dozen times a day she wore a divided skirt more than half the time—another of Mrs. Stewart's grievances—and upon reaching the paddock her whistle soon brought her pets tearing across it to her. Their greeting was warm enough to banish a legion of blue imps, and a joyous little laugh bubbled to her lips as she opened the paddock gate and let the trio file through. Then in the old way she sprang upon Shashai's back and with a gay laugh cried:

"Four bells for the harness house."

Away they swept, as Peggy's voice and knees directed Shashai, Tzaritza, who had joined Peggy as she stepped from the side porch, bounding on ahead with joyous barks.

Peggy called for a bridle, which Shelby himself brought, saying as he slipped the light snaffle into Shashai's sensitive mouth and the headstall over his ears:

"So you've bruck trainin', Miss Peggy, an' are a-going for a real old-time warm-up? Well, I reckon it's about time, an' the best thing you can do, for you look sort o' pinin' an' down-in-the-mouth. Light out, little girl, an' come back lookin' like you uster; the purtiest sight God ever created for a man, woman or child ter clap eyes on. Take good care of her, Shashai, and you too, Tzaritza, cause you won't get another like her very soon." 57

Shelby's eyes were quick to discern the traces of Peggy's little storm, and he was by no means slow in drawing deductions. Peggy blushed, but said:

"I guess Daddy was right when he said I'd better go to school this year. You-all will spoil me if I stay here. Good-by, dear old Shelby, I love everyone on the place even if they do spoil me," and away she swept, as bonny a little bareback rider as ever sat a horse.

Meanwhile, up at the house events were shaping with the rapidity of a moving picture show.

When Peggy left her so abruptly Madam Stewart sat still for a few moments, pondering her next

step. She had arrived at some very definite conclusions and intended carrying them out without loss of time. Her first move in that direction led her into the library where she wrote a letter to her brother-in-law. It was while she was thus occupied that Mammy had found Peggy and sent her for her ride. Then Mammy sought Harrison. Ordinarily, Mammy would have died before consulting Harrison about anything concerning Peggy, but here was a common issue, and if Mammy did not know that a house divided against itself must fall, she certainly felt the force of that argument. In Harrison she found a sympathetic listener, for the old housekeeper had been made to feel Mrs. Stewart's presence in the house in hundreds of irritating little ways. Mammy told of finding Peggy in tears, though she could not, of course, tell their cause. But Harrison needed no cause: the tears in themselves were all the cause she required to know.

58

Their conversation took place in the pantry and at the height of Harrison's protest against the new order of things a footfall was heard in the dining-room beyond. Thinking it Jerome's and quite ready to add one more to their league of defenders of Peggy's cause, Harrison pushed open the swinging door and stepped into the dining-room with all of her New England-woman's nervous activity. Mrs. Stewart stood in the room surveying with a critical, calculating eye, every detail of its stately, chaste appointments, for nothing had ever been changed.

Mrs. Stewart looked up as Harrison bounced in.

"O Harrison, you are exactly the person I wished to speak with," she said. "There are to be a few changes made in Mr. Stewart's domestic arrangements. In future I shall assume control of his home and relieve Miss Peggy of all responsibility. You may come to me for all orders."

She paused, and for the moment Harrison was too dumbfounded to reply, while Mammy in the pantry, having overheard every word, was noiselessly clapping her old hands together and murmuring: "Ma Lawd! Ma Lawd! *Now* I knows de sou'ce ob dat chile's tears." Before Harrison could recover herself Mrs. Stewart continued:

59

"Dr. Llewellyn will be here tomorrow for the weekend, and as I am to be mistress of the household it is more seemly that I preside at the head of the table. Tell Jerome that I shall sit there in future. And now I wish you to take me through the house that I may know more of its appointments than I have thus far been able to learn."

Without a word Harrison led the way into the hall, and up the beautiful old colonial stairway.

Peggy's sitting-room and bed-room were situated at the south-east corner of the house overlooking the bay. Back of her bath and dressing-rooms were two guest rooms. A broad hall ran the length of the second story and upon the opposite side of it had been Mrs. Neil Stewart's pretty sitting-room, which corresponded with Peggy's and her bed-room separated from her husband's by the daintiest of dressing and bath-rooms. Neil Stewart's "den" was at the rear. Beyond were lavatories, linen-room, house-maid's room and every requirement of a well-ordered home.

60

Mrs. Peyton began by entering Peggy's sitting-room, a liberty she had not hitherto taken, but she felt pretty sure Peggy was not in the house. At any rate she had made her plunge and did not mean to be diverted from her object now. Martha Harrison was simply boiling with wrath at the intrusion.

"You are a wonderfully capable woman, Martha. I see I shall have very light duties," was Mrs. Peyton's patronizing comment.

"*Harrison*, if you please, ma'am," emphasized that person.

"Oh, indeed? As you prefer. Now let me see the rooms on the opposite side of the hall."

Perhaps had Mrs. Peyton asked Harrison to lead her into the little mausoleum, built generations ago in the whispering white pine grove upon the hill back of the house, it could not have been a greater liberty or sacrilege. Not so great, possibly. In all the nine years nothing had been changed. They were sacred to the entire household and especially sacred to Harrison who had held it her especial privilege to keep them immaculate. In the bed-room the toilet and dressing tables held the same articles Mrs. Neil had used; her work-table stood in the same sunny window. In the sitting-room the books she loved and had read again and again were in the case, or lying upon the tables where she had left them. It seemed as though she might have stepped from the room barely ten minutes before. There was nothing depressing about it. On the contrary, it impressed upon the observer the near presence of a sweet, cultivated personality. The sitting-room was a shrine for both Peggy and her father, and it was his wish that it be kept exactly as he had known and loved it during the ideal hours he had spent in it with wife and child. He and Peggy had spent many a precious one there since its radiant, gracious mistress had slept in the pine grove. Harrison crossed the hall and opened the door, still mute as an oyster. Mrs. Stewart swept in, Toinette, who had followed her, tearing across the room ahead of her and darting into every nook and corner. At that moment the obnoxious poodle came nearer her doom than she had ever come in all her useless life, for Harrison was a-quiver to hurl her through the open window.

61

"What charming rooms," exclaimed Madam, trailing languidly from one to the other, touching a book here, some exquisite curio there, the carved ivory toilet articles on the dresser. The morning sunlight, tempered by the green and white awnings at the great bowed-windows filled the tastefully decorated rooms with a restful glow. They were beautiful rooms in every sense of the word.

62

"Very charming indeed and very useless apparently. They seem not to have been occupied in months. They are far more desirable than those assigned to me at the North side of the house.

The view of the bay is perfect. As I am to be here indefinitely, instead of one month only, you may have my things moved over to this suite, Harrison. I shall occupy it in future."

"Occupy *this* suite?" Harrison almost gasped the words.

"Certainly. Why not? You need not look as though I had ordered you to build a fire in the middle of the floor," and Mrs. Peyton laughed half scornfully.

"Excuse me, ma'am, but when *Mr. Neil* gives the order to move your things into this suite, I'll move them here. These was his wife's rooms and his orders to me was never to change 'em and I never shall 'till *he* tells me to. There's some things in this world that can't be tampered with. Please call your dog, ma'am; she's scratchin' that couch cover to ribbons."

The enemy's guns were silenced for the time being. She picked up her poodle and swept from the room. Harrison paused only long enough to close all the doors, lock them and place the keys in her little hand bag. Then she departed to her own quarters to give vent to her pent-up wrath.

Mrs. Stewart retired to her own room.

The next evening Dr. Llewellyn arrived and when he took his seat at the table his gentle face was troubled: Mrs. Peyton had usurped Peggy's place at the head. Peggy sat opposite to him. She had accepted the situation gracefully, not one word of protest passing her lips and she did her best to entertain her guests. But poor old Jerome's soul was so outraged that for the first time in his life he was completely demoralized. Only one person in the entire household seemed absolutely and entirely satisfied and that was Harrison, and her self-satisfaction so irritated Mammy that the good old creature sputtered out:

"Kingdom come, is yo' gittin' ter de pint when yo' kin see sich gwines-on an' not r'ar right spang up an' *sass* dat 'oman?"

"Just wait!" was Harrison's cryptic reply.

63

64

## CHAPTER V

### RUCTIONS!

Jerome had just passed a silver platter to Madam Stewart, his hands trembling so perceptibly as to provoke from her the words: "Have you a chill, Jerome?" as she conveyed to her plate some of Cynthia's delicately fried chicken.

Jerome made no answer, but started toward Peggy's chair. He never reached it, for at that moment a deep voice boomed in from the hall:

"Peggy Stewart, ahoy!"

With the joyous, ringing cry of:

"Daddy Neil! Oh, Daddy Neil!" Peggy sprang from the table to fling herself into her father's arms, and to startle him beyond words by bursting into tears. Never in all of his going to and fro, however long his absences from his home, had he met with such a reception as this. Invariably a smiling Peggy had greeted him and the present outbreak struck to the very depth of his soul, and did more in one minute to reveal to him the force of Harrison's letter than a dozen complaints. The tears betrayed a nervous tension of which even Peggy herself had been entirely unaware, and for Peggy to have reached a mental condition where nerves could assert themselves was an indication that chaos was imminent. For a moment she could only sob hysterically, while her father held her close in his arms and said in a tone which she had never yet heard:

"Why, Peggy! My little girl, my little girl, have you needed Daddy Neil as much as this?"

Peggy made a gallant rally of her self-control and cried:

"Oh, Daddy, and everybody, please forgive me, but I am so surprised and startled and delighted that I don't know what I'm doing, and I'm so ashamed of myself," and smiling through her tears she strove to draw away from her father that he might greet the others, but he kept her close within his circling left arm, as he extended his hand in response to the effusive greeting of his sister-in-law.

With what she hoped would be an apologetic smile for Peggy's untoward demonstration, Mrs. Stewart had risen to welcome him.

"We must make allowances for Peggy, dear Neil. You came so very unexpectedly, you know. I hardly thought my letter would be productive of anything so delightful for us all."

65



"I fear it was not wholly, Katherine. I had several others also. How are you, Doctor? I see you haven't quite abandoned the ship. Well, I'm glad of that; I need my executive officer and my navigator also."

66

At the concluding words Mrs. Peyton smiled complacently. Who but she could fill that office? But Captain Stewart's next words dissipated that smile as the removal of a lantern slide causes the scene thrown upon the screen to vanish.

"Yes, indeed, my navigator must get busy. She's had a long leave, but I need her now and she's never failed me in heavy weather. She'll report for duty on the thirtieth, thank the powers which be. Hello, Jerome! What's rattled you like this? Next time I set my course for home I'd better send a wireless, or I'll demoralize the whole personnel," and Neil Stewart's hearty laugh brought a sympathetic smile to Dr. Llewellyn's and Peggy's lips.

And well it might, for in the background the minor characters in the little drama had filled a rôle all their own. In the doorway stood Harrison, bound to witness the outcome of her master-stroke and experiencing no small triumph in it. Behind her Mammy, with characteristic African emotion, was doing a veritable camp-meeting song of praise, though it was a *voiceless* song, only her motions indicating that her lips were forming the words, "Praise de Lawd! Praise Him!" as she swayed and clasped her hands.

67

But Jerome outdid them all: At his first glimpse of the master he was so flustered that he nearly collapsed where he stood, and his platter had a perilous moment. Then, crying, "Glory be!" he beat a hasty retreat intending to place it upon his serving table, but growing bewildered in his joy, inadvertently set it upon a large claw-foot sofa which stood at the end of the dining-room, where Toinette, ever upon the alert, and *not* banished from the dining-room as poor Tzaritza had been, promptly pounced upon the contents, and in the confusion of the ensuing ten minutes laid the foundation for her early demise from apoplexy.

"Brace up, Jerome, I'm too substantial to be a ghost, and nothing short of one should bowl you over like this," were Captain Stewart's hearty words to the old man as he shook his hand.

"Asks yo' pardon, Massa Neil! I sho' does ask yo' pardon fer lettin' myself git so frustrated, but we-all's so powerful pleased fer ter see yo', an' has been a-wanting yo' so pintedly, that—that—but, ma Lawd, I—I—I'se cla'r los' ma senses an', an—Hi! look yonder at dat cusséd dawg an' ma fried chicken!"

68

For once in her useless life Toinette had created a pleasing diversion. With a justifiable cry of wrath Jerome pounced upon her and plucked her from the platter, in which for vantage she had placed her fore feet. Flinging her upon the floor, he snatched up his dish and fled to the pantry, Neil Stewart's roars of laughter following him. Toinette rolled over and over and then fled yelping into her mistress' lap to spread further havoc by ruining a delicate silk gown with her gravy-smearred feet. Tzaritza, who had followed her master into the room, looked upon the performance with a superior surprise. Neil Stewart laid a caressing hand upon the beautiful head and said laughingly:

"You'd blush for that little snippin-frizzle if you could, wouldn't you, old girl? Well, it's up to you to teach her better manners. She's young and flighty. The next time she starts in on any such rampage, just pick her up and carry her out, as any naughty child should be carried. Understand?"

"Woof-woof," answered Tzaritza, deep down in her throat.

"She's wise all right. After this you can leave that midget of yours in her care, Katherine. But now let's get busy. I'm upon the point of famishing. Come, Peggy, honey; rally your forces and serve your old Daddy."

69

Peggy turned toward her aunt. Not until that moment had her father been aware of the change made at his table. Then it came to him in a flash, and Mrs. Peyton was hardly prepared for the change which overspread his countenance as he asked:

"Peggy, why have you allowed your aunt to assume the obligations of hostess? Have you lost your ability to sit at the head of my table, daughter?"

Poor Peggy! It was well she understood or she would have been nearly heartbroken at the rebuke. Mrs. Peyton answered for her:

"Little Peggy had far too much upon her young shoulders, dear Neil. So I have volunteered to relieve her of some of her duties. I am happy to be able to do so."

"Indeed, Katherine, we are all under deep obligation to you, I am sure, but Peggy hardly seems overborne by her burdens, and it is my wish that my daughter shall preside in her mother's place at my table. Jerome, Mrs. Stewart is to be relieved of this obligation after this meal. You are to be quite free of all responsibility during your visit with us, Katherine. And now, little girl, let me look at you. July, August, and, let me see, twenty-five days of September since I left you? Nearly three months. You manage to do remarkable things in a brief time, little daughter. But I fancy by the time I get back here again they will be more remarkable. Great plans are simmering for you; great plans," and her father nodded significantly across at her.

70

Peggy was too happy to even ask what they were. She could only smile and nod back again.

Meanwhile Mrs. Stewart had used her napkin to scrub off her besmirched poodle's feet and had then surreptitiously thumped her down upon her lap where the table-cloth would conceal her. At Captain Stewart's concluding words she felt her hopes revive a trifle. She was a fair actress

when it served her turn. So now smiling across the table she said:

"So you have decided to consider my suggestion, Neil?"

"In one respect, yes, Katherine. I see plainly that things can no longer go on as they have been going. Llewellyn concurs in that." He glanced toward the Doctor, who nodded gravely.

"I do most fully. Our halcyon days must end, I fear, as all such days do eventually, and we must meet the more prosaic side of life. Let us hope it will assume a pleasing form. I am loth to hand in my resignation as Dominie Exactus, however," he ended with a smile for Peggy.

71

Peggy looked puzzled, and glanced inquiringly from one to the other. Her father stretched forth a hand and laid it over hers which rested upon the edge of the table:

"Smooth out the kinks in your forehead, honey. Nothing distressing is to happen."

"Hardly," agreed Mrs. Stewart. "On the contrary, if your father acts upon my suggestion something very delightful will be the outcome, I am sure. I feel intuitively that you approve of my plan regarding the school, Neil."

Peggy started slightly, and looked at her father. He nodded and smiled reassuringly, then turning toward his sister-in-law, replied:

"Your letter, Katherine, only served to convince me that Peggy must now have a broader horizon than Severndale, or even Annapolis affords. Dr. Llewellyn and I talked it over when I was home over a year ago, and again last June. When we first discussed it we were about as much at sea as the 'three wise men of Gotham' who launched forth in a tub. We needed a better craft and a pilot, and we needed them badly, I tell you, and at that time we hadn't sighted either. Then the 'Sky Pilot' took the job out of our hands and He's got it yet, I reckon. At any rate, indications seem to point that way, for on my way down here He ran me alongside my navigator and it didn't take her long to give me my bearings. She got on board the limited at Newark, N. J., and we rode as far as Philly together. She had three of her convoys along and they're all to the good, let me tell you."

72

"Oh, Daddy, did you really meet Mrs. Harold and Polly, and who was with them?" broke in Peggy eagerly.

"I surely did, little girl; Mrs. Harold, Polly, Ralph and Durand. She was on her way for a week's visit with some relatives just out of Philly—in Devon, I believe, a sort of house-party, she's chaperoning—and a whole bunch of the old friends are to be there. Well, I got the 'Little Mother' all to myself from Newark to Philly and we went a twenty-knot clip, I tell you, for big as I am, I was just bursting to unload my worries upon someone, and that little woman seems born to carry the major portion of all creation's. She gets them, any way, and they don't seem to feaze her a particle. She bobs up serene and smiling after ever comber. But I've yet to see the proposition she wouldn't try to tackle. Oh, we talked for fair, let me tell you, and in those two hours she put more ideas into this wooden old block of mine than it's held in as many months. Did your ears burn this afternoon, Peggy? You are pretty solid in *that* direction, little girl, and you'll never have a better friend in all your born days, and don't you ever forget *that* fact. Well, the upshot is, that next Friday, one week from today, Middie's Haven will have its tenant back and, meantime, she is to write some letters and lay a train for *your* welfare, honey. That school plan is an excellent plan, Katherine, but not a New York school: New York is too far away from home *and* Mrs. Harold. Peggy will go to Washington this winter. Hampton Roads is not far from Washington and the — will put in there a number of times this winter. That gives *me* a chance to visit my girl oftener and also gives Peggy a chance to visit Mrs. Harold, and run out here now and again if she wishes, though the place will be practically closed up for the winter. It was very good of you to offer to remain here but I couldn't possibly accept that sacrifice; for all your interests lie in New York, as you stated in your letter to me. You still have your apartments there, you tell me, and to let you bury yourself down here in this lonely place would be simply outrageous. Even Peggy has been here too long, without companions."

73

Neil Stewart paused to take some nuts from the dish which Jerome, now recovered and beaming, held for him. Mrs. Stewart could have screamed with baffled rage, for, now that it was too late, she saw that she had quite overshot the mark, and given her brother-in-law a complete advantage over her designs. "And that hateful, designing cat!" as she stigmatized Mrs. Harold "had completed her defeat." She had gauged her brother-in-law as "a perfect simpleton where a woman was concerned," and never had she so miscalculated. He *was* easygoing when at home on leave, or off on one of his outings, as he had been when she met him in New London. Why not? When he worked he worked with every particle of energy he possessed, but when he "loafed," as he expressed it, he cast all care to the winds and was like an emancipated school-boy. It was the school-boy side of his nature she had gauged. She knew nothing of Neil Stewart the Naval Officer and man; hadn't the very faintest conception of his latent force once it was stirred. And she little guessed how she *had* stirred it by her letter written the morning she had made Peggy so unhappy. It was the one touch needed to bring the climax and it had brought it with a rush which Mrs. Peyton had little anticipated. What the outcome might have been had Neil Stewart not met Mrs. Harold on that train is impossible to surmise further than that he had fully decided to free himself of all connection with Peyton's widow. He had always disliked and distrusted her, but now he detested her. Peggy's letters had revealed far more than she guessed, though they had not held one intended criticism. She had written just as she had written ever since she promised him when he visited her the previous year, to send "a report of each day, accurate as a ship's log." But she could not write of the daily happenings without giving him a pretty graphic picture of Mrs. Stewart's gradual usurpation, and Harrison had felt

74

75

no compunction in expressing *her* views.

And so the "best laid plans o' mice and (wo)men" had "gone a-gley" in a demoralizing manner, and Neil Stewart had come down to Severndale "under full headway," and wasted no time in "laying hold of the helm." That talk upon the train had been what he termed "one real old heart-to-hearty," for Mrs. Harold had foreseen just such a crisis and felt under no obligation to refrain from speaking her mind where Mrs. Stewart was concerned. She had seen just such women before. Captain Stewart had asked her to read the letters sent to him. She nearly had hysterics over Harrison's, but Peggy's brought tears to her eyes, for she loved the girl very dearly and understood her well. Mrs. Stewart's letter made her eyes snap and her mouth set firmly, as she said:

76

"Captain Stewart, you have asked my advice and I shall give it exactly as though Peggy were my daughter, for I could hardly love her and Polly more dearly if they were my own children. I am under every obligation of affection to Peggy but not the slightest to Mrs. Stewart, and from all I observed in New London she is by no means the woman to have control over a girl like Peggy. She is one of the most lovable girls I have ever known, but at the same time has one of the most distinct personalities and the strongest wills. She can be easily guided by combined wisdom and affection, but she would be ruined by association with a calculating, unrefined, or capricious nature, and, pardon my frankness, I consider Mrs. Peyton Stewart all of these. Peggy needs association with other girls—that is only natural—and we must secure it at once for her."

Neil Stewart laid her words to heart, and the ensuing week brought to pass some radical changes.

On the thirtieth of September the whole brigade of midshipmen came pouring back to Annapolis, the academic year beginning on October first.

On the thirtieth also came Mrs. Glenn Harold and her niece Polly Howland, brown, happy and refreshed by their summer's outing, and Polly eager to meet her old friends at the Academy and her chum Peggy.

77

October first falling upon Sunday that year the work at the Academy would not begin until Monday, and, although the midshipmen had to report on September thirtieth, Sunday was to a certain extent a holiday for them and on that afternoon a rare treat was planned for some of them by Captain Stewart.

On Sunday morning Neil Stewart, with Mrs. Stewart and Peggy drove into Annapolis to attend service at the Naval Academy Chapel where their entrance very nearly demoralized Polly Howland, no hint of their intention having been given her. They were a little late in arriving and the service had already begun. As Polly was rising from her knees after the first prayer Peggy was ushered into the pew, and Polly, *Polly* under all circumstances, cried impulsively:

"Oh, lovely!" her voice distinctly audible in the chancel. Whether the Chaplain felt himself lauded for the manner in which he had read the prayer, or was quick to guess the cause of that unusual response, it is not necessary to decide. Certain, however, were two or three distinct snickers from some pews under the gallery, and Polly nearly dove under the pew in front of her.

78

There was no chance for the thousand and one topics of vital importance to be even touched upon while the service was in progress, but once the recessional rolled forth Peggy's and Polly's tongues were loosened and went a-galloping.

"Oh, Daddy has a plan for the afternoon which is the dearest ever," announced Peggy, the old light back in her eyes, and the old enthusiasm in her voice.

"Tell it right off then. Captain Stewart's plans are the most wonderful ever. I'll never forget New London," cried Polly.

"Why, he wants you and the Little Mother and Durand and Ralph and Jean and Gordon—"

"Gordon?" echoed Polly, a question in her eyes.

Peggy nodded an emphatic little nod, her lips closing in a half-defiant, half who-dares-dispute-his-judgment little way, then the smile returned to the pretty mouth and she continued, "Yes, Gordon Powers and his room-mate, great, big Douglas Porter, and Durand's new room-mate, Bert Taylor, he comes from Snap's old home, so Daddy learned, to come out to Severndale this afternoon for a real frolic."

She got no further for they had reached the terrace in front of the Chapel by that time where greetings were being exchanged between many mutual friends and the two girls, so widely known to all connected with the Academy were eagerly welcomed back.

79

Meanwhile, out on the main walk the Brigade had broken ranks and the midshipmen were hurrying up to greet their friends. Captain Stewart was a favorite with all, and one of the very few officers who could recall how the world looked to him when *he* was a midshipman. Consequently, he was able to enter into the spirit and viewpoint of the lads and was always greeted with an enthusiasm rare in the intercourse between the midshipmen and the officers. Mrs. Harold was their "Little Mother," as she had been for the past five years, and Peggy and Polly the best and jolliest of companions and chums, their "co-ed cronies," as they called them.

Mrs. Stewart they had met in New London, but there was a very perceptible difference in their greeting to that lady: It was the formal, perfunctory bow and handclasp of the superficially known midshipman; not the hearty, spontaneous one of the boy who has learned to trust and love someone as Mrs. Harold's boys loved and trusted her.

The crowd which had poured out of the Chapel was soon dispersed, as everybody had something to call him elsewhere. Our group sauntered slowly toward the Superintendent's home where Captain Stewart left them and went in to make his request for the afternoon's frolic. It was promptly granted and orders were given to have a launch placed at his disposal at two-thirty P.M.

80

Such a treat, when least expected, sent the boys into an ecstatic frame of mind, and when the bugle sounded for dinner formation they rushed away to their places upon old Bancroft's Terrace as full of enthusiasm as though averaging eight and ten instead of eighteen and twenty years of age.

81

## CHAPTER VI

### A NEW ORDER OF THINGS

That Sunday afternoon of October first, 19— was vital with portent for the future of most of the people in this little story.

It took but a short time to run out to Severndale, and once there Neil Stewart made sure of a free hour or two by ordering up the horses and sending the young people off for a gallop "over the hills and far away." Shashai, Silver Star, Pepper and Salt for Peggy, Polly, Durand and Ralph, who were all experienced riders, and four other horses for Douglas, Gordon, Jean and Bert, of whose prowess he knew little. He need not have worried, however, for Bert Taylor came straight from a South Dakota ranch, Gordon Powers had ridden since early childhood and Douglas Porter had left behind him in his Southern home two hunters which had been the joy of his life. But Jean Paul Nicholas, Ralph's little pepper-pot of a room-mate, had never ridden a horse in his life, and the running he would come in for at the hands of his fellow midshipmen if they suspected that fact might have made almost any other lad hesitate before taking his initial spin in the company of experts. Not so little Jean Paul with his broad shoulders, the brace of an Admiral and his five-feet-six-inches; a veritable little bantam-cock, and game to the finish.

82

As the happy cavalcade set off, waving merry farewells to the older people gathered upon the piazza, Tzaritza bounding on ahead, their route led them past the paddock where Shelby and old Jess, with several others connected with the estate, stood watching them. Shelby as an old hand and privileged character, took off his hat and waved it hilariously, as he called out:

"Well *that* is one sight worth while, Miss Peggy. We've got our *own* girl back again, praises be!" while old Jess echoed his enthusiasm by shouting:

"Praise de Lawd we *has*, an' we got de boss yander, too!"

"Sure thing, Shelby!" answered Durand.

"He's all right, Shelby!" cried Ralph.

"Nicest Daddy-Neil in the world," was Polly's merry reply, then added, "Oh, Peggy, look at Roy! He's crazy to come with us," for Roy, the little colt Peggy had raised, was now a splendid young creature though still too young to put under the saddle.

Peggy looked toward the paddock where Roy was running to and fro in the most excited manner and neighing loudly to his friends.

83

"Let him come, Shelby, please," she called, and the foreman opened the gate. Roy darted through like a flash, giving way to all manner of mad antics, rushing from one four-footed companion to another, with a playful nip at one, a wild Highland-fling-of-a-kick at another, a regular rowdy whinny at another, until he had the whole group infected, but funniest of all, Jean Paul's mount, the staid, well-conducted old Robin Adair, whose whole fifteen years upon the estate had been one long testimony to exemplary behavior, promptly set about demonstrating that when the usually well-ordered being does "cut loose" he "cuts loose for fair."

Jean Paul was essentially a sailor-laddie, the direct descendant of many sailor-laddies, and he was "built upon nautical lines," so said Ralph. On the summer cruise just ended he had demonstrated his claim to be classed among his sire's confrères, for let the ship pitch and toss as it would, his legs never failed him, his stomach never rebelled and his head remained as steady and clear as the ship's guiding planet.

But he found navigating upon land about as difficult as a duck usually finds it, and was about as well qualified to bestride and ride a horse as that waddling bird is. Consequently, he had "heaved aboard" his mount with many well concealed misgivings, but up to the present moment none of his friends had even suspected his very limited experience as a horseman, but truth to tell, never before in his life had Jean Paul's legs crossed anything livelier than one of the

84

gymnasium "side horses." Now, however, the cat was about to escape from the bag, for Robin Adair, flinging decorum and heels behind him, set forth on a mad gallop to overhaul Roy, who had elected to set the pace for the others. Whinnying, prancing, cavorting, away Roy tore in the lead, Robin Adair hot-foot upon him, Jean Paul striving manfully to keep his pitching seat, which he felt to out-pitch any deck ever designed by man. In about two minutes the pair were a hundred yards in the lead, Jean's cap had sailed airily from his head, and after flaunting into Silver Star's face, had roosted upon a near-by shrub. Jean himself promptly decided that reins were a delusion and a snare (Robin's mouth *was* hard) and let them go to grasp the pommel of his Mexican saddle. But even that failed to steady him in that outrageous saddle, nor were stirrups the least use in the world; his feet were designed to stick to a pitching deck, not those senseless things. In a trice both were "sailing free" and—so was Jean. As Robin's hind legs flew up Jean pitched forward to bestride the horse's neck; as he bounded forward Jean rose in the air to resume his seat where a horse's crupper usually rests.

85

Oh it was one electrifying performance and not a single move of it was lost upon his audience which promptly gave way to hoots and yells of diabolical glee, at least the masculine portion of it did, while Polly and Peggy, though almost reduced to hysterics at the absurd spectacle, implored them to "stop yelling like Comanches and *do* something."

"*Aren't* we doing something? Aren't we encouraging him and helping on a good show?" "Oh, get onto that hike!" "Gee whiz, Commodore, if you jibe over like that you'll go by the board." "Put your tiller hard a-port." "Haul in on your jib-sheet," "Lash yourself to the main-mast or you'll drop off astern," were some of the encouraging words of advice which rattled about Jean's assailed ears, as the space grew momentarily wider between him and his friends, those same friends wilfully holding in their mounts to revel in "the show."

But Jean's patience and endurance were both failing. He could have slain Robin Adair, and he was confident that his spine would presently shoot through the crown of his head. So flinging pride to the four winds, he shouted:

86

"Hi, come on here one of you yelling chumps, this craft's steering-gear's out of commission! Overhaul her and take her in tow. I'd rather pay a million salvage than navigate her another cable's length."

"Don't give up the ship!" "Never say die!" "Belay, man, belay!" were the words hurled back until Peggy crying:

"You boys are the very limit!" pressed one knee against Shashai's side and said softly: "Four Bells, Shashai."

Robin Adair was no match for Shashai. Robin was as good a hackney as rider ever bestrode, but Shashai was a thoroughbred hunter with an Arab strain. Ten mighty bounds took him to Robin's head and for Peggy to swing far out of her saddle, grasp the dangling reins, speak the word of command which all her horses knew, loved and obeyed, took less time than it has taken to write of it.

"One Bell, Shashai. Robin, halt! Steady!" and Jean Paul's mount came to a standstill with Jean Paul sitting upon its haunches, and Jean Paul's eyes snapping, and Jean Paul's teeth biting his tongue to keep from uttering words "unbecoming an officer and a gentleman;" for "being overhauled by a girl" after he had "made a confounded fool of himself trying a land-lubber's stunt" was not a rôle which seemed in any degree an edifying one to him.

87

To her credit be it said, Peggy managed to keep a straight face as she turned to look at her disgruntled guest, which was more than could be said of his companions who came crowding upon him, even Polly's self-control being taxed beyond the limit.

"Why didn't you tell me you'd never ridden?" asked Peggy, her lips sober but her eyes dancing.

"Because it would have knocked the whole show on the head," answered Jean, yanking himself forward into the saddle which only a moment before had seemed to be in forty places at once.

"So you decided to be the whole show yourself instead! You're a dead game sport, Commodore. Bully for you!" cried Durand, slipping from his mount to examine the "rigging of the Commodore's craft."

"Do you want to try it again?" asked Polly.

"Will a fish swim?" answered Jean. "Do you think I'm going to let this side-wheeler shipwreck me? Not on your life, Captain. Clear out, the whole bunch of you chumps. If I've got to cross the equator I'll have the escort of ladies, not a bunch of rough-necks. Beat it! You let a *girl* overhaul and slow down this cruiser and now you're all ready to come in for a share of the salvage. Get out! Clear out! Beat it! Take 'em away, Captain, and leave me the Admiral. She can give everyone of you the lead by a mile and then overhaul you on the first tack. Get out, for I'm going to take a riding lesson and I'm going to pay extra and have a private one."

88

"Yes, do go on ahead, and, Polly, call Roy. He is responsible for Robin's capers but he will behave if you take him in charge."

"Come on, Roy—and all other incorrigibles," laughed Polly, unsnapping her second rein and slipping it around Roy's silky neck. Roy loved and obeyed Polly almost as readily as Peggy, and cavorted off beside her as gay as a grig.

"We'll report heavy weather and a disabled ship, messmate," called Ralph.

"Report and hanged. You'll see us enter port all skee and ship-shape, and don't you fool yourself,

my cock sure wife (Bancroft Hall slang for a room-mate), so so-long. Now come on, Peggy, and put me wise to navigating this craft, for it has me beat to a standstill."

"Go on, people; we'll follow presently and when we overhaul you you'll be treated to a demonstration of expert horsemanship," called Peggy after the laughing, joking group, her own and Jean's laughs merriest of all.

89

"Now get busy in earnest," she said to the half-piqued lad, whose face wore an expression of "do or die" as he again mounted his steed.

"You can just bet your last nickel I'm going to! Great Scott, do you think I'm going to let *this* beat me out, or that yelling mob out yonder see me put out of commission? Now fire away. Show me how to keep my legs clamped and to sit in the saddle instead of on this beast's left ear."

As Peggy was a skilled teacher and Jean an apt pupil the combination worked to perfection, and when in a half-hour's time they joined the main body of the cavalcade, Jean had at least learned where a saddle rests and had trained his legs to "clamp" successfully.

Meanwhile, back on Severndale's broad piazza Peggy was the subject of a livelier discussion than she would have believed possible, and the upshot of it was a decision which carried Neil Stewart, Mrs. Harold, herself, and Polly off to Washington early the following morning to visit a school of which Mrs. Harold knew. Mrs. Stewart was very courteously asked to accompany the party of four, which was to spend three or four days in the Capital, but Mrs. Stewart was distinctly chagrined at her failure to carry successfully to a finish the scheme which she felt she had so carefully thought out. Alas, she could not understand that she sorely lacked the most essential qualities for its success—unselfishness, disinterestedness, the finer feeling of the older woman for the younger, and all that goes to make womanhood and maternal instinct what they should be. She felt that her reign at Severndale was ended and nothing remained but to make as graceful a retreat as possible. So she declined the invitation, stating that she was very anxious to visit some friends in Baltimore and would take this opportunity to do so, going by a later train.

90

Neil Stewart did not press his invitation. He wanted Mrs. Harold and the girls to himself for a time and knowing that it would be his last opportunity to see them for many months, resolved to make the most of it. Not by word or act had he expressed disapproval of Mrs. Stewart's rather extraordinary line of conduct since her arrival at Severndale, though evidences of it were to be seen at every turn, and both Harrison's and Mammy's tongues were fairly quivering to describe in detail the experiences of the past month.

Harrison was wise enough not to criticise, but she lost no opportunity for asking if she were to carry out this, that, or some other order of Mrs. Stewart's, until poor Neil lost his temper and finally rumbled out:

91

"Look here, Martha Harrison, how long have you been at Severndale?"

"Nigh on to twenty years, sir, and full fifteen years with that blessed child's mother before she ever heard tell of this place. I took care of her, as right well you know, long before she was as old as Miss Peggy."

"And have I ever ordered any changes made in her rules?"

"None to my knowledge, sir. They was pretty sensible ones and there didn't seem any reason to change them."

"Well, you're pretty long-headed, and until you *do* see reason to change 'em let 'em stand and quit pestering *me*. You're the Exec. on this ship until I see fit to appoint a new one and when I think of doing that I'll give you due notice."

But Mammy would have exploded had she not expressed her views. Harrison had chosen the moment when Captain Stewart had gone to his room just before supper that eventful Sunday evening, but Mammy spoke when she carried up to him the little jug of mulled cider for which Severndale was famous and which, when cider was to be had, she had never failed to carry to "her boy," as Neil Stewart, in spite of his forty-six years, still seemed to old Mammy.

92

Tapping at the door of his sitting-room, she entered at his "Come in." She found him standing before a large silver-framed photograph of Peggy's mother. It had been taken shortly before her death and when such a tragic ending to their ideal life had least been dreamed possible. A fancy-dress ball had been given by the young officers stationed at the Academy and Mrs. Stewart had attended it gowned as "Marie Stuart," wearing a superb black velvet gown and the widely-known "Marie Stuart coif and ruff" of exquisite Point de Venice lace. She had never looked lovelier, or more stately in her life, and that night Neil Stewart was the proudest man on the ballroom floor. Then he had insisted upon a famous Washington photographer taking this beautiful picture and—well, it was the last ever taken of the wife he adored, for within another month she had dropped asleep forever.

Good old Mammy's eyes were very tender as she looked at her boy, and instead of saying what she had come to say: "ter jist nachelly an' pintedly 'spress her min'," she went close to his side and looking at the lovely face smiling at her, said:

"Dar weren't never, an' dar ain' never gwine ter be no sich lady as dat a-one, Massa Neil, lessen it gwine be Miss Peggy. She favor her ma mo' an' mo' every day she livin', an' I wisht ter Gawd her ma was right hyer dis minit fer ter *see* it, dat I do."

93

"Amen! Mammy," was Captain Stewart's reply. "Peggy needs more than we can give her just

now, no matter how hard we try. The trouble is she seems to have grown up all in a minute apparently while we have been thinking she was a child."

Neil Stewart placed the photograph back upon the top of the bookshelf and sighed.

"No, sir, *dat* ain't it. Deed tain't. She been a-growin' up dis long time, but we's been dozin' like, an' ain't had our eyes open wide 'nough. An' now we's all got shook wide awake by *somebody else*."

Mammy paused significantly. Neil Stewart frowned.

"Just as well maybe. But don't light into me. I'm all frazzled out now. Harrison's hints are like eight inch shells; Dr. Llewellyn's like a highly charged electric battery; Jerome fires a blunderbuss every ten minutes and even Shelby and Jess use pop-guns. Good Lord, are you going to let drive with a gatling? Clear out and let me drink my cider in peace, and quit stewing, for I tell you right now the fire-brand which has kept the kettles boiling is going to be removed."

"Praise de Lawd fo' *dat* blessin' den. It was jist gwine ter make some of dem pots bile over if it had a-kep' on, yo' hyer me? Good-night, Massa Neil, drink yo' cider an' thank de Lawd fo' yo' mercies." 94

"Good-night, Mammy. You're all right even if I do feel like smacking your head off once in a while. Used to do it when I was a kid, you know, and can't drop the habit."

The following morning the party of four set off for Washington, Polly sorely divided in her mind regarding her own wishes. To have Peggy elsewhere than at Severndale was a possibility which had never entered into her calculations. How would it seem to have no Severndale to run out to? No Peggy to pop into Middie's Haven? No boon companion to ride, walk, drive, skate with, or lead the old life which they had both so loved? Polly did some serious thinking on the way to the big city, and wore such a sober face as they drew near the end of their journey that Captain Stewart asked, as he tweaked a stray lock which had escaped bonds:

"What's going on inside this red pate? You look as solemn as an ostracized owl."

"I'm trying to think how it is going to seem without Peggy this winter and I don't like the picture even a little bit," and Polly wagged the "red pate" dubiously. 95

"Better make up your mind to come along with your running-mate. By Jove, that's a brain throb, Peggy! How about it? Can't you persuade this girl of ours to give up the co-ed plan back yonder in Annapolis,—she knows all the seamanship and nav. that's good for her already,—and you'll need a room-mate up here at Columbia Heights School if we settle upon it," and Captain Stewart looked at Polly half longingly, half teasingly. Polly had grown very dear to the bluff, sincere man during her companionship with Peggy, and had crept into a corner of his heart he had never felt it possible for anyone but Peggy herself to fill. Somehow, latterly when thinking and planning for Peggy's well-being or pleasure, visions of Polly's tawny head invariably rose before him, and Polly's happy, sunny face was always beside the one he loved best of all. The two young girls had become inseparable in his thoughts as well as in reality.

"Oh, Polly, will you? Will you?" begged Peggy, instantly fired with the wildest desire to have Polly enter the school which it had been decided she should enter if at closer inspection it proved to be all the catalogues, letters and dozens of pamphlets sent to Mrs. Harold represented it to be.

"If I go to the Columbia Heights School what will Ralph say? And all the others, too? They'll say I've backed down on my co-ed plan and will run me half to death. Besides, Ralph needs me right there to let him know I'm keeping a lookout." 96

"He doesn't need you half as much as this girl of mine needs you. You just let Ralph do a little navigating for himself and learn that it's up to him to make good on his own account. He's man enough to; all he needs now is to find it out. Will you let him do so by coming down here with Peggy?"

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## CHAPTER VII

### COLUMBIA HEIGHTS SCHOOL

As Captain Stewart asked the question which ended the last chapter the W. B. & A. electric car came to a standstill in the heart of Washington and as he assisted his charges to descend the steps, Polly was the last. As she placed her hand in his she looked straight into his kind eyes and said:

"I'm just ready to fly all to bits. I love Peggy and want to be with her; I love Aunt Janet and old 97

Crabtown and everything connected with it; I've always kept neck-and-neck with Ralph in his work and I hate the thought of dropping out of it, but, oh, I do want to be with Peggy."

"Come along out to the school and see what you think of it before you decide one way or the other; then talk it all over with your aunt and you won't go far amiss if you follow *her* advice, little girl."

"I'll do it," answered Polly, with an emphatic wag of her head, and Peggy who overheard her words nearly pranced with joy.

98

Hailing a taxicab Captain Stewart directed the chauffeur to drive them to an address in the outskirts of the city and away they sped. It was only a short run in that whirring machine over Washington's beautiful streets and when the school was reached both Peggy and Polly exclaimed over the beauty of its situation, for Columbia Heights School was in the midst of spacious grounds, the buildings were substantial and attractive, giving the impression of ample space, all the fresh air needed by vigorous, rapidly developing bodies, and the sunshine upon which they thrive. Beautiful walks and drives led in every direction and not far off lovely Stony Brook Park lay in all the beauty of its golden October glow.

Mrs. Harold and Captain Stewart were graciously welcomed by its charming principal who promptly led the way to her study, a great room giving upon a broad piazza, where green wicker furniture, potted plants and palms suggesting a tropical garden. When Polly's eyes fell upon it she forgot all else, and cried impulsively:

"Oh, how lovely! Can't we go right out there?" And then colored crimson.

Mrs. Vincent smiled as she slipped an arm across Polly's shoulder and asked:

"Are you to be my newest girl? If so, I think we would find something in common."

99

Polly raised her big eyes to the sweet, strong face smiling upon her and answered:

"I hadn't even thought of coming until an hour ago. It was all planned for Peggy, but, oh, dear, if I *only* could be twins! How am I ever to be a co-ed in Annapolis and a pupil here at the same time? Yet I want dreadfully to be both, I'm so fond of Peggy."

"I fear we cannot solve that problem even in Columbia Heights School, though we try pretty hard to solve a good many knotty ones. Suppose I talk it over with the grown-ups and meantime arrange for your entertainment by two or three of the girls. We think they are rather nice girls too," and Mrs. Vincent pressed an electric button which promptly brought a neat maid to the door.

"Hilda, ask Miss Natalie and Miss Marjorie to step to my study."

Within a few moments two girls appeared in the doorway, the taller one asking:

"Did you wish to see us, Mother?"

Introductions followed, whereupon the Principal said:

"Natalie, please take Miss Stewart and Miss Howland for a walk through the grounds. It is recreation period and they will like to meet the other girls and see the buildings also, I think. And remember, you are to picture everything in such glowing colors, and be so entertaining that they will think there is no other place in all the land half so lovely, for I have fully decided that we must have sweet P's in our posy bed. We have a Rose, a Violet, a Lily, Myrtle, Hazel, Marguerites,—oh, a whole flower garden already—but thus far no sweet-peas."

100

"We will, Mrs. Vincent. Please come with us," said Marjorie cheerily, no trace of self-consciousness or the indefinable restraint so much oftener the rule than the exception between teacher and pupil. Mrs. Harold had been observing every word and action as it was a part of her nature to observe—yes, intuitively *feel*—every word and action of the young people with whom she came in touch, and the older ones who were likely to bring any influence to bear upon their lives, and this little scene did more to confirm her in the belief that she had not been amiss when she selected Columbia Heights School for Peggy than anything else could have done. Next to her husband, her sister and her nieces, Peggy was the dearest thing in the world to her, and the past year had shown her what tremendous possibilities the future held for the young girl if wisely shaped for her. The two ensuing hours were pleasant and profitable for all concerned and when they ended and Captain Stewart and his party re-entered the taxicab to return to their hotel in Washington, it was decided that Peggy should come to Columbia Heights School on October fifteenth, but Polly's decision was still in abeyance. She wished to have one of her long, quiet talks with her aunt before "shifting her holding ground," she said, and that could only be up in Middie's Haven, cuddled upon a hassock beside Mrs. Harold's easy chair, with the logs lazily flickering upon the brass andirons. So the ensuing two days in Washington were given over to sightseeing and "a general blow-out," as Captain Stewart termed it, insisting that he could not have another for months and meant to make this one "an A-1 affair." Then back they went to Severndale where Mrs. Stewart, to their surprise, had returned the previous day, having failed to find her friend in Baltimore. As she had already overstayed the length of time for which her invitation to Severndale had been extended, she had no possible excuse for prolonging it, and deciding that her schemes had met with defeat largely owing to her own impolitic precipitation in forcing the situation, she did not mean to make an ignominious retreat. So, with well assumed suavity she told her brother-in-law that some urgent business matters claimed her attention in New York, and asked if he could complete his arrangements for Peggy's departure without her aid, as she really ought to go North without delay.

101

102



If Neil Stewart was amused by this sudden change in the lady's tactics, to his credit he said that he did not betray any sign of it. He thanked her for her kind interest in Peggy and his home, for all she had done for them, and left nothing lacking for her comfort upon her homeward journey, even shipping to the apartment in New York enough fruit, game and various other good things from Severndale to keep her larder well supplied for weeks, and supplementing all these with a gift which would be the envy of all her friends. But when he returned to Severndale after bidding the lady farewell at the station, he breathed one mighty sigh of relief. He had escaped a situation of which the outcome was a good deal more than problematical for everyone concerned, and most vital for Peggy.

Then came busy days of preparation for Peggy and Polly, for the outcome of that fireside powwow had been a decision in favor of Columbia Heights School for Polly also, for that winter at least, and when the fifteenth dawned bright and frosty, Mrs. Harold accompanied the girls to Washington, Captain Stewart's leave having meantime expired. But he had gone back to his ship in a very different frame of mind from that in which he had returned to it in July, and with a comforting sense of security in the outcome of his present plans for Peggy. The longer he knew Mrs. Harold the greater became his confidence in her judgment, and she had assured him that Peggy should be her charge that winter exactly as Polly was. Moreover, Mrs. Harold had persuaded Mrs. Howland to close her house in Montgientian for the winter and come to Annapolis, bringing Gail with her, for Constance had decided to follow the *Rhode Island* whenever it was possible for her to do so, and this decision left Mrs. Howland and Gail alone in their home. So to Wilmot Hall came Polly's mother and pretty sister, the former to spend a delightfully restful winter with her sister and the latter to take her first taste of the good times possible for a girl of twenty-one at the Naval Academy.

The first breaking away from Severndale was harder for Peggy than anyone but Mrs. Harold guessed. Somehow intuition supplied to her what actual words could never have conveyed, even had they been spoken, but Peggy, once her resolution had been taken to go away to school, was not a girl to bewail her decision. And now she was a duly registered pupil at Columbia Heights with Polly for her room-mate in number 67, her next-door neighbor Natalie Vincent, Mrs. Vincent's daughter, a jolly, honest, happy-go-lucky girl, who looked exactly as her mother must have looked at fifteen. A long line of rooms extended up and down, both sides of the corridor, the end one, No. 70, with its pretty bay-window overlooking the lawn and Stony Brook beyond, was occupied by Stella Drummond, a tall, striking brunette of eighteen. To the hundred-fifty girls in Columbia Heights School this story can only allude in a brief way but of those who figure most prominently in Polly's and Peggy's new world we'll let Polly give the general "sizing-up." These girls were all about the same age, and, excepting Stella, juniors, as were Peggy and Polly, whose previous work under tutors and in high school had qualified them to enter that grade at Columbia Heights.

It was their first night at the school, and "lights-out" bell had rung at ten o'clock, but a glorious October moon flooded the room with a silvery light, almost as bright as day. Peggy in one pretty little white bed and Polly in the one beside it were carrying on a lively whispered conversation.

"Well, we're *here*," was Polly's undisputable statement as she snuggled down under her bed-covers, "and now that we are what do you think of it?"

"I'm glad we've come. It will seem a lot different, and rather queer to do everything by rules and on time, but, after all, we had to do almost everything by rule up home."

"Yes, but they were nearly always our *own* rules; yours, anyway. Why, Peggy, I don't believe there is a girl in this school who ever had things as much her own way as you have had them."

"Maybe that's the reason I didn't get along with Aunt Katherine," answered Peggy whimsically.

"Aunt Katherine!" Polly's whisper suggested italics. "Do you know Miss Sturgis, the math. teacher, makes me think of her a little. Miss Sturgis is strong-minded, I'll bet a cookie. Did you hear what she said when she was giving out our books on sociology—doesn't it seem funny, Peggy, for us to take up sociology?—'She hoped we would become good American citizens and realize woman's true position in the world.' Somehow I've thought Tanta has always had a pretty clear idea of 'woman's position in the world.' At any rate she seems to have plenty to do in her own quiet way and I've an idea that if anyone ever hinted that she ought to go to the polls and vote she'd feel inclined to spell it pole and use it to 'beat 'em up' with, as Ralph and the boys would say. Oh, dear, how we are going to miss 'the bunch,' Peggy."

"We certainly are," was Peggy's sympathetic reply, and for a moment there was silence in the moonlit room as the girls' thoughts flew back to Annapolis. Then Peggy asked: "What do you think of the girls? You've been to school all your life, but it is all new to me."

Polly laughed a low, little laugh, then replied:

"They are about like most school-girls, I reckon. Let's see, which have we had most to do with since we came here twenty-four hours ago? There's Rosalie Breeze. She's named all right, sure enough, and if she doesn't turn out a hurricane we'll be lucky. We had one just like her up at High. And Lily Pearl Montgomery. My gracious, what a name to give a girl! She needs stirring up. She's just like a big, fat, spoiled baby. I feel like saying 'Goo-goo' to her."

"Don't you think Juno Gibson is handsome?" asked Peggy.

"Just as handsome as she can be, but I wish she didn't look so discontented all the time. Why, she hasn't smiled once since we came."

"I wonder why not?" commented Peggy.

"Maybe we'll find out after we've been here a while. But I tell you one thing, I like her better without any smiles than that silly Helen Gwendolyn Doolittle with her everlasting affected giggling at nothing. She is the kind to do some silly thing and make us all ashamed of her."

107

"How about Stella Drummond?"

"She is a puzzle to me. Doesn't she seem an awful lot older than the rest of us? Rosalie says she is eighteen and that's not so much older, but she seems about twenty-five. I wonder why?"

"Maybe she has lived in cities all her life and gone out a lot. You know most of the girls we met up at New London seemed so much older too, yet they really were not. They looked upon us as children, though the Little Mother said we were years older in common sense while they were years older in worldly experience,—I wonder what she meant?"

"Tanta meant that we had stayed young girls and could enjoy fun and frolic as much as ever, but those girls were not satisfied with anything but dances and theatres and all sorts of grown-up things. We have our fun with our horses, dogs and the nonsense with the boys up home. We want our skirts short and our hair flying and to romp when we feel like it."

"Picture Helen or Lily Pearl romping," and Peggy dove under the covers to smother her laughter at the thought of the fat, pudgy Lily Pearl attempting anything of the sort. Polly snickered in sympathy and then said in her emphatic way:

108

"I tell you, Peggy, which girls I *do* like and I think they will like us: Marjorie Terry and Natalie Vincent. Marjorie is awfully sober and quiet, I know, but *I* believe she's sort of lonely, or homesick or something. Natalie seems more like our own kind than any girl in the school and I'll wager my tennis racquet she'll be lots of fun if she is the Principal's daughter. But we'd better go to sleep this minute. We've made a sort of hash of seven girls, and if we try to size up the whole school this way it will be broad daylight before we finish. Good-night. It's sort of nice to be here after all, and nicer still to have you for a room-mate, old Peggoty."

An appreciative little laugh was the only answer to this and five minutes later the moon was looking in upon a picture hard to duplicate in this great world: Two sweet, unspoiled, beautiful girls in the first flush of untroubled slumber.

The following morning being Saturday and Peggy's and Polly's belongings having arrived, the girls set about arranging their room, half a dozen others having volunteered assistance. For convenience in reaching "up aloft" Peggy and Polly had slipped off their waists and were arrayed in kimonos which aroused the envy of their companions. Captain Stewart had given them to his "twins" as he now called the girls. Peggy's was the richest shade of crimson embroidered in all manner of golden gods and dragons; Polly's pale blue with silver chrysanthemums.

109

"Oh, *where* did they come from?" cried Natalie.

"Daddy Neil brought them to us," answered Peggy, as she stepped toward the door to take an armful of pictures and pillows from old Jess who had followed his young mistress to Washington to care for Shashai and Silver Star, the horses having been sent on also, for Columbia Heights School had large stables for the accommodation of riding or driving horses for the use of its pupils, or they could bring their own if they preferred. So Shashai and Silver Star had been ridden down by Jess, taking the journey in short, easy stages, and arriving the previous evening. Tzaritza, to her astonishment had not been allowed to accompany them, and Roy was inconsolable for days. Peggy's departure from Severndale had left many a grieving heart behind.

"What I gwine do wid all dis hyer truck, Missie-honey?" asked Jess, coming in from the corridor with a second armful: riding-crops, silver bits, a fox's brush, books and what not.

110

"Just plump it down anywhere, Jess. We'll get round to it all in due time," laughed Peggy from her perch upon a small step-ladder where she was fastening up some hat-bands of the *Rhode Island, New Hampshire, Olympia* and the ships which had comprised the summer practice squadron, the girls all gathered about her asking forty questions to the minute and wild with curiosity and excitement. Never before had two "really, truly Navy girls" been inmates of Columbia Heights and it sent a wild flutter through many hearts. What possibilities might lie at the Annapolis end of the W. B. & A. Railroad!

Jess's white woolly head was bent down over the armful of books he was placing upon the floor; Peggy had returned to her decorating; Polly had draped her flag upon the wall and was standing her beloved bugle and a long row of photographs upon book-shelves beneath it, several girls following her with little squeals of rapture, when a pandemonium of shrieks and screams arose down the corridor and the next second a huge creature bounded into the room, tipping Jess and his burden heels over head, and flinging itself upon Peggy. Down came ladder, Peggy, and the white mass in a heap, the girls scattering in a shrieking panic to whatever shelter seemed to offer, confident that nothing less than a wolf had invaded the fold.

111

But Tzaritza was no wolf even if her beautiful snowy coat was mud-bedraggled and stuck full of burrs, nor was Peggy being "devoured alive," as Lily Pearl, who had actually *run* for once in her life, was hysterically sobbing into Mrs. Vincent's arms.

No, Peggy, rather promiscuous as to ladder, hammer, hat-bands and general paraphernalia, was lying flat upon her back, her arms around Tzaritza, half-sobbing, half-laughing her joy into the beautiful creature's silky neck, while Tzaritza whimpered and whined for joy and licked and dabbed her mistress with a moist tongue.

"It is a wolf! A wolf!" shrieked Lily Pearl, who had returned to the scene, "and he is killing her."

"It is a horrid, dirty dog! Why doesn't that man drive him out?" demanded Miss Sturgis, who had followed Tzaritza hot foot, having been in the main hall when the great hound went tearing through and up the stairs, nose and ears having given her the clue to her mistress' whereabouts.

"No, it's only a wolfhound!" laughed Polly, dropping her pictures to fly across the room and fall upon Tzaritza. 112

Then explanations followed. Tzaritza had been left in Shelby's care, but finding it impossible to restrain her when Jess was about to leave with the horses, he had tied her in the barn. The rope was bitten through as clean as a thread and Tzaritza's coat told of the long journey on the horses' trail.

After her wild demonstrations of joy had calmed down, Tzaritza stood panting in the middle of the wreck which her cyclonic entrance had brought about, her great eyes pleading eloquently for restored favor.

Polly still clasped her arms about the big shaggy neck, while Miss Sturgis alternately protested and commanded Jess to "remove that dirty creature at once." Happily, Mrs. Vincent entered the room at this juncture and it must have been the god of animals, of which Kipling tells us, which inspired Tzaritza's act at that moment. Or was it something in the fine, strong face which children and animals in common all trust with subtle intuition? At all events, Tzaritza looked at Mrs. Vincent just one moment and then greeted her exactly as at home she would have greeted Dr. Llewellyn or Captain Stewart; by rising upon her hind legs, placing her forepaws upon Mrs. Vincent's shoulders and nestling her magnificent head into the amazed woman's neck as confidingly as a child would have done. A less self-contained woman would have been frightened half to death. Miss Sturgis came near swooning but Mrs. Vincent just gathered the great dog into her arms as she would have gathered one of her girls and said: 113

"Without the power of human speech you plead your cause most eloquently, you beautiful creature. Peggy, has she ever been separated from you before, dear?"

"Never, Mrs. Vincent. She has slept at my door since she was a wee puppy."

"She shall be appointed guardian of the West Wing of Columbia Heights, and may turn out a guardian for us all. Now, Jess, take her to the stables and make her presentable to polite society. Poor Tzaritza, your journey must have been a long, hard, dusty one, for your silken fringes have collected many souvenirs of it."

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## CHAPTER VIII

### A RIDING LESSON

In spite of the Sturgeon's protests that "it was *most* impolitic to establish a precedent in the school," Tzaritza became a duly enrolled member of the establishment, and from that moment slept at Peggy's door, a welcome inmate of Columbia Heights. Welcome at least, to all but one person. Miss Sturgis loathed all animals. 114

In the ensuing weeks Peggy and Polly slipped very naturally into their places. In her own class and in the West Wing Natalie Vincent had always been the acknowledged leader, for, even though the daughter of the Principal, not the slightest partiality was ever shown her and she was obliged to conform as strictly to the rules as any girl in the school. She was full of fun, eternally in harmless mischief, and, of course, eternally being taken to task for her misdeeds.

By the usual order of the attraction of opposites Marjorie Terry and Natalie had formed a warm friendship. Marjorie the quiet, reserved, rather shrinking girl from Seattle. She never joined in any of Natalie's wild pranks, but on the other hand was a safe confidant, and if she could not follow her more spontaneous friend's lead, she certainly never balked or betrayed her. The other girls had christened them Positive and Negative and they certainly lived up to their names. 115

The girls whom Peggy and Polly had discussed so frankly the night after their arrival all roomed in the West Wing. Stella in her own large, handsome room, for her father was manager of an immense railroad system in the middle West. Rosalie Breeze and oh "cursed spite!" Isabel Boylston—"Is-a-bel," as she pronounced it,—roomed together and squabbled incessantly. At least, Rosalie did the squabbling, *Is-a-bel* affected the superior, self-righteous air which acted upon Rosalie's peppery temper as a red rag upon a bull. It was Miss Sturgis, of course, who had advised placing them together. Isabel was a great favorite of Miss Sturgis, and Rosalie was the reverse.

Mrs. Vincent had not entirely approved the arrangement, but the school was unusually crowded this year and two of the girls' parents had insisted upon single rooms for their daughters. Juno Gibson, from New York, had announced very positively that unless she could have a room to herself in Columbia Heights School she would pack her three trunks and go elsewhere, and Papa Gibson was not in the habit of disputing his daughter's will or wishes unless they conflicted with his own. In this matter he didn't care a straw, so Miss Juno was not compelled to have "a dozen girls eternally under foot and ruining my clothes by crowding the closets full of theirs."

116

Lily Pearl, "Tootsy-wootsy," as her companions had dubbed her, roomed with Helen Gwendolyn Doolittle, "Cutie," and a sweet, sentimental pair they made, though Helen spent every possible moment with the latest object of her adoration, Stella Drummond, for whom she had instantly conceived an overwhelming infatuation; a pronounced school-girl "crush."

Of the other girls in the school only a passing glimpse need be given.

Saturday afternoons were always perfectly free at Columbia Heights, and the girls could do practically as they chose. There was one rule, or rather the absence of it, which had appealed very strongly to Mrs. Harold and gone a long way toward biasing her choice in favor of the school. If the girls wished to go into the city—that is, the girls in the Sophomore, Junior and Senior grades—to do shopping or make calls, they were entirely at liberty to do so unattended by a teacher, though Mrs. Vincent must, of course, know where they were going. With very rare exceptions this rule had always worked to perfection. The very fact that they might do as they chose, and were put upon their honor to uphold the reputation and dignity of the school, usually acted as an incentive to them to do so, whereas the eternal surveillance and suspicion of the average school acts as a mighty inspiration to circumvent all regulations.

117

Another pleasant feature of Saturday afternoons were the long riding excursions through the beautiful surrounding country, with a groom accompanying the party and with one of the girls acting as riding mistress. Besides Peggy and Polly, Stella was the only girl who had her own horse at Columbia Heights, the others riding those provided by the school. They were good horses and the riding-master, Albert Dawson, was supposed to be a good man, conscientious, painstaking, careful. He was conventional to a degree. He taught the English seat, the English rise, the English gait, and his horses were all docked and hogged in the English fashion. Dawson would doubtless have taught them to drop their H's as he himself did, had he been able to do so.

When Shashai and Silver Star arrived upon the scene, manes and forelocks long and silky as a girl's hair, tails almost sweeping the ground and flowing free, poor Dawson nearly died of outraged conventions, though he was forced to admit that the Columbia Heights stables held no horseflesh to compare with these thoroughbreds.

118

"But oh, my 'eart, look at that mess o' 'air and mind their paces. They lopes along for all the world like them blooming little jackals we used to 'ave bout in Hindia when I was in 'is Lordship's service. They'd ruin my reputation if they was to be seen in the Row," he deplored to Jess, who was grooming his pets as carefully as old Mammy would have brushed Peggy's hair.

Jess gave a derisive snort. He had lived a good many more years than Dawson and his experience with horseflesh was an exceptionally wide one.

"Well, yo'-all needn't be a troublin' yo' sperrits 'bout de gait ob dese hyer horses. Dey kin set de pace fo' all dat truck yonder, an' don' yo' fergit dat fac'. Yo's got some fairly-middlin'-good ones hyer," and Jess nodded toward the stalls, "but dey's just de onery class, not de quality. No-siree. Now, honey, don' yo' go fer ter git perjectin' none cause I'se praisin' yo' to yo' face. Tain't good manners fer ter take notice when yo's praised. Yo' mistiss 'll tell yo' dat," admonished Jess, as Shashai reached forward and plucked his cap from his head. "Yo' gimme dat cap, yo' hyer me!"

119

But Shashai's teeth held it firmly as he tossed it playfully up and down, to Jess' secret delight in his pet's cleverness, though he outwardly affected strong disapproval, after the manner of his race.

The horses were like playful, fearless children with him, and Jess was bursting with pride at the result of his handiwork. And certainly, it was worth looking upon, for no finer specimens of faultlessly groomed horseflesh could have been found in the land.

"Yes, but think of the figure I'll be cutting when I take my young ladies for a turn in the park or on the havenue," protested Dawson. "Couldn't ye just knot hup them tails a bit, and mebbe braid that fly-away mane down along the crest? If I'm bordered to take my young ladies into the park or the city this hafternoon, I swear I'll hexpire of mortification with them 'orses."

But this was too much for Jess. Dawson had at last touched the match, and he caught the full force of Jess's wrath:

"Sp-sp-spire ob—ob mortification! Shamed ob dese hyer hosses! Frettin' cause yo's gotter 'scort a pair of animals what's got pedigrees dat reach back ter Noah's Ark eanemost! Why, dey blood kin make you-all's look lak mullen sap, an' dey manners, even if dey ain' nothin' but hosses, jist natchelly mak' yo' light clean outer sight. Sho'! Go long, chile! Yo' gotter live some. Dar, it done struck five bells—*dat* mean ten-thirty, unerstan'—an' you's gotter git half-a-dozen ob yo' bob-tailed nags ready fo' de ridin' lessons yo' tells me yo' gives de yo'ng ladies at *six* bells,—*dat's* eleben o'clock,—Sattidy mawnin's. I's pintedly cur'us fer ter see dem lessons, *I* is. Lak 'nough befo' de mawnin's ober *yo' ll* take a lesson yo'-self," and Jess ended his tirade by throwing an arm across each silky neck and saying to his charges:

120

"Now, come 'long wid ole Jess, honeys. Yo's gwine enter high sassiety presen'ly, and yo's gotter

do Severndale credit. Yo' hyer me?"

Poor Dawson was decidedly perturbed in his mind. Hitherto he had been the autocrat of "form and fashion," the absolute dictator of the proper style. Under his ordering, horses had been bought for the school, cropped, docked and trimmed on the most approved lines, until nothing but a hopeless, forlorn stubble indicated that they had once boasted manes or forelocks, and poor little affairs like whisk-brooms served for tails, or rather did not serve, especially in fly-time. But that was a minor consideration. Fashion's dictates were obeyed.

121

With the aid of his grooms Dawson soon had five horses saddled and bridled, curbs rattling and saddles creaking. There were only two cross saddles. Then he turned to Jess.

"Ye'd better be gettin' them hanimals ready, for I dare say I've to give the young ladies their lessons too."

"Hi-ya!" exploded Jess. Then added: "Come 'long, babies, an' git dressed up. Yo' all's gwine git yo' summons up yonder presen'ly."

Shashai and Star obediently walked over to the bar upon which their light headstalls hung, sniffed at them with long audible breaths, then each selecting his own carried it to Jess in his teeth.

"Well, Hi'll be blowed!" murmured Dawson.

Jess pretended not to notice, but saying unconcernedly: "Dat's all right. Now put 'em on lak gentlemen," he held one in each hand toward his pets. They took the bits in their mouths, slipped their heads into the headstalls and then waited for Jess to buckle the throat-latches, for that was a trifle beyond them. "Now fotch yo' saddles," ordered Jess, pleased to the point of foolishness. The horses went to the saddle blocks, selected their saddles, lifted them by the little pommel and carried them to Jess like obedient children.

122

No mother was ever more gratified than Jess. "Now honeys, yo' stan' right whar yo's at twell yo' summons come from over yander. Yo's gwine hyar it all right," and with this parting admonition to good behavior, Jess went unconcernedly about his business of putting away the articles of his pets' toilets.

"They'll be a-boltin' and raisin' the very mischief if you leave them alone," warned Dawson.

"What dat yo' say? I reckons yo' ain' got *yo'* horses trained like we-all back yonder got *ours*. Paht ob dey eddications must a-been neglected ef dey gotter be tied up ter keep 'em whar yo' wants 'em fer ter *stay* at. Yo' need'n worry 'bout Shashai and Star. *Dey's* got sense."

Dawson vouchsafed no reply. One must be tolerant with garrulous old niggers, but he'd keep an "hey on them 'orses" all the same.

The riding school used in stormy weather and the circle for fine, were not far from the house. At five minutes before eleven the girls who were to have their Saturday morning lessons prior to the ride in the afternoon, went over to the school and an electric bell notified Dawson that his young ladies awaited their mounts. With due decorum and self-importance he and Henry, the groom, led the horses from the stable, Dawson calling over his shoulder:

123

"You'd better come on with your Harabs, I can't be waitin' with my lessons."

"We-all'll come 'long when we's bid," was Jess' cryptic retort.

Dawson scorned to reply, but mounted on his big dapple-gray horse, Duke, body bent forward and elbows out, creaked away. When he reached the big circle where a group of girls stood upon the platform for mounting, Peggy and Polly, in their trim little divided skirts, looked inquiringly for Shashai and Silver Star. Peggy asked:

"Are our horses ready, Dawson?"

"Yes, Miss, I believe so, Miss, but your man seemed to think I'd best let you ring, or do—well, I don't rightly know *what* 'ee hexpected you to do, Miss. But 'ee didn't let me bring the 'orses, beggin' your pardon, Miss."

"Oh, that's all right, Dawson; Jess is just silly about the horses and us. You mustn't mind his little ways. It's only because he loves us all so dearly. Besides it isn't necessary for anyone to bring them. I'll call them," and placing a little silver bo's'n's whistle to her lips Peggy "piped to quarters." It was instantly answered by two loud neighs and the thud of rapid hoofbeats as Shashai and Silver Star came sweeping up the broad driveway from the stables, heads tossing, manes waving and tails floating out like streamers. The girls with Peggy and Polly clapped their hands and shrieked with delight.

124

"One bell, Shashai! Halt, Star!" cried Peggy and Polly in a breath.

The splendid animals came straight to them, stopped instantly, dropped to their knees and touched the ground with their soft muzzles in sign of obeisance. The girls all scrambled off the platform as one individual, riding lesson and everything else utterly forgotten; here was a new order of things hitherto utterly undreamed of in the school. It had been a case of "pigs is pigs" or "horses is horses" with them. That the animals they were learning to ride *à la mode* might be something more than mere delightful machines of transportation had never entered their heads.

"Oh, how did you make them do it? Will you show us? Will any horse come if you know how to call him? Can they all do that? Didn't it take you forever and ever to teach them? Aren't they beauties! What are they trying to do now?" were the questions rattling like hail about Peggy's and Polly's ears.

For answer Peggy opened a little linen bag which she carried, handing to Polly three lumps of sugar and taking three out for her own pet. The horses crunched them with a relish, their light snaffle bits acting as only slight impediments to their mastication. 125

"Do you always give them sugar? Oh, please give us some for our horses," begged the girls.

"Young ladies, I don't 'old with givin' the 'orses nothin' while in 'arness and a-mussin' them up. They'll be a-slobberin' themselves a sight," expostulated Dawson.

"But Miss Stewart's and Miss Howland's horses are not slobbered up," argued Natalie.

"They've not got curb bits. Just them snaffles which is as good as none whatever," was Dawson's scornful criticism.

"Well, why must ours have curbs if theirs don't," argued Juno Gibson, whose habitual frown seemed to have somewhat lessened during the past five minutes. If Juno had a single soft spot in her heart it was touched by animals. She did not have a horse of her own, though she insisted upon always having the same mount, to Dawson's opposition, for he contended that to become expert horsewomen his pupils must change their mounts and become accustomed to different horses. In the long run the argument was a good one, but Miss Juno did not yield readily to arguments. Therefore she invariably rode Lady Belle, a light-footed little filly, with a tender mouth and nervous as a witch. Her big gentle eyes held a constant look of appeal, she was chafed incessantly by the heavy chain curb, and if anyone approached her suddenly she started back, jerking up her head as though in terror of a blow. But with Juno she was tractable as a lamb, and the pretty creature's whole expression changed when the girl was riding her. Juno had a light, firm hand upon the bit and in spite of Dawson's emphatic orders to "'old 'er curb well in 'and perpetual," she rarely used it, and Lady Belle obeyed her lightest touch. 126

"Our 'orses are 'arnessed as they had orter be, Miss Gibson, and as the Queen 'erself rides them in the hold country. 'Hi'm doing my best to teach you young ladies proper, and I can't 'old with some of these loose Hamerican 'abits. They wouldn't be 'eld with for a minute in the Row."

"Oh, a fig for your old Row, Dawson! *We're* all American girls and there's more snap-to in us in one of your 'minutes' than in all the English girls I've ever seen in my life, and I've seen a good many—*too* many for my peace of mind. I lived there two years," broke in Rosalie Breeze. "I'll bet Miss Howland and Miss Stewart can show you some stunts in riding which would make your old queen's eyes pop out. Why don't you quote Helen Taft to us instead of Queen Mary? We don't care a whoop for the queen of England, but Helen Taft is just a Yankee girl like ourselves and we can see her ride almost any day if we want to. She is big enough for us to see, goodness knows. But come on, girls. Let's do our stunts," and Rosalie scrambled upon the platform once more, ready to mount Jack-o'-Lantern, the horse she was to ride. 127

Meanwhile Lady Bell sniffing something eatable, had drawn near Peggy, half doubtful, half trustful. At that instant Peggy turned rather quickly, entirely unaware of the filly's approach. With a frightened snort the pretty creature started back. Peggy grasped the situation instantly. She made a step forward, raised her arm, drew the silky neck within her embrace, whispered a few words into the nervously alert ear, and the hour was won. Lady Belle nestled to her like a sensitive, frightened child.

"'Ave a care, Miss Stewart! 'Ave a care! She's a snappy one," warned Dawson with bristling importance as he turned from settling *Is-a-bel* Boylston upon a big, white, heavy-footed horse, where she managed to keep her place with all the grace of outline and poise of a meal sack. 128

Now Peggy had been sizing things up pretty thoroughly during the past fifteen minutes, and her conclusions were not flattering to Dawson. There was a cut upon Lady Belle's sensitive nostril which told its little story to her. Jack-o'-Lantern's hoofs were varnished most beautifully, but when he lifted them one glimpse told Peggy the condition of the frogs. The silver mounting upon "The Senator's," Isabel's horse's harness were shining, but his bit was rusty and untidy. A dozen little trifles testified to Dawson's superficiality, and Peggy had been mistress of a big paddock too long to let this popinjay lord it over one whom he sized up as "nothin' but a school girl." Consequently, her reply to his warning slightly upset his equanimity.

"You need not be alarmed, Dawson, but if Lady Belle turns fractious I'll abide the consequences."

"Yes, Miss, yes, Miss, but *'Hi'm* responsible, you understand."

"What for? The horse's well-being or mine? I'll relieve you of mine, and give you more time to care for the horses. Lady Belle's muzzle seems to have suffered slightly. Jack-o'-Lantern's hoofs need your attention, and at Severndale a bit like the Senator's would mean a bad quarter of an hour for *somebody*. So, you'd have a hard time 'holding down your job' there. That's pure American slang. Do you understand it?" and shrugging her shoulders slightly, Peggy cried: "Come on, girls! We're wasting loads of time. Attention, Shashai! Right dress! Right step! Front! Steady!" 129

As Peggy spoke, Shashai and Silver Star sprang side by side, then stood like statues. At "right dress" they turned their heads toward the group of horses. At "right step," they closed up until they stood in perfect line beside them. At "front," "steady" they stood facing the two girls, waiting the next command.

"Come up to the platform. Come up and be ready to mount, young ladies," ordered Dawson.

"We'll mount when you give the word," answered Polly, her hand, like Peggy's, upon her horse's withers.

"You'll never be able to from the ground, Miss."

A ringing laugh from the girls, sudden springs and they were in their saddles. "Four bells!" they cried and swept away around the ring, their gay laughter flung behind them to where their companion's horses were fidgeting and chafing under Dawson's highly conventional restraint, while that disconcerted man whose veneer had so promptly been penetrated by Peggy's keen vision, forgot himself so far as to mutter under his breath:

"These Hamerican girls are the limit, and I'm in for a — of a time if I don't mind my hey. And she Miss Stewart of Severndale, and I not hon to that before! 'Ere's a go and no mistake."

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## CHAPTER IX

### COMMON SENSE AND HORSE SENSE

As has no doubt already been suspected, Alfred Dawson, Riding Master at the Columbia Heights School, was such a complete impostor that he actually imposed upon himself. He is by no means the only one on record. Oddly enough we are all more or less impostors, blind to our own pet foibles, deluded as to our own little weaknesses. Dawson's methods with his charges, both two-footed and four, were the methods of thousands of others, whether they have the directing of young people, or the training of animal's entrusted to them. Like grains of corn—pour them into a hopper and they come out at the other end meal—of some sort—good—bad or indifferent as it happens—that was not *his* concern; his job was to pour in the grains and he knew of but one way to pour—just as someone else had poured before him. That he might devise new and better methods of pouring never entered his square-shaped head. It was left for a fifteen-year-old girl, and an old ducky, whom in his secret heart he regarded as no better than the dirt beneath his feet, to start volcanic eruptions destined to shake the very foundations of his self-complacence. Hitherto he had simply been lord of his realm. He had come to Columbia Heights highly recommended by the father of one of its pupils and had assumed undisputed control. Mrs. Vincent, like hundreds of other women who own horses, but who know about as much concerning their care and well-being as they know of what is needful for a Rajah's herd of elephants, judged wholly by the outward evidences. The horses came to the house in seemingly faultless condition: their coats shone, their harness seemed immaculate; they behaved in a most exemplary manner. Nor had anything ever happened to the young ladies while they were in Dawson's care. What more could a conscientious school Principal ask of her riding master? It had never occurred to her to appear in the stables when least expected; to examine harness, saddles, stalls, feed mangers, bedding; to study the expressions of her horses' faces as she would have studied her girls. How many women ever think of doing so? It never entered her head to argue that there was more reason for it. Few of her girls would have hesitated to express their minds had any one misused them, or to insist upon comfortable conditions should uncomfortable ones exist for them.

Yet Mrs. Vincent, sweet, strong, kind, and just to everyone, was as blind as a babe to the impositions practiced by the oily-tongued, deferential Dawson. True, he did 'get upon her nerves' now and again, but she secretly reproached herself for what she felt to be her American prejudices, and by way of self-discipline overlooked in Dawson many little aggravating peculiarities which she would have felt it her duty to instantly correct in the other servants.

And no doubt things would have gone on in exactly the same way indefinitely had not a little lassie who loved horses and animals as she loved human beings, and whose understanding of them and their understanding of her was almost uncanny, chosen Columbia Heights School for her Alma Mater.

That was a red letter hour for Dawson. He had a vague feeling that some influence, perhaps his evil genius, was bestirring itself. At all events, he was ill at ease, something of his accustomed self-conceit was lacking and he was, as the result, somewhat irritable, though he dared not manifest open resentment.

Now it need hardly be stated that Peggy had no premeditated intention of antagonizing the man. He meant no more to her than dozens of other grooms, for after all he was merely an upper servant, but her quick eyes had instantly made some discoveries which hurt her as a physical needle prick would have hurt her. Peggy had employed too many men at Severndale under Shelby's wonderful judgment and experience of both men and animals, not to judge pretty accurately, and *most* intuitively, the type of man mounted upon big, gray "Duke." Duke's very ears and eyes told Peggy and Polly a little story which would have made Dawson's pale blue eyes open wider than usual could he have translated it.

As Peggy and Polly went cavorting away across the ring, Dawson called rather peremptorily:

"Young ladies, you will be good enough to come back and take your places beside the others. This is a riding lesson, not a circus show, *hif* you please."

Polly shot a quick glance at Peggy. There was the slightest possible pressure of their knees and Shashai and Silver Star glided back to their places beside the other four horses.

"Now you will please 'old your reins and your bodies as the other young ladies do," commanded Dawson.

"Never could do it in this world, Dawson. I'd have a crick in my back in two minutes. Besides, we're not out here for lessons, Miss Stewart and I, but just as spectators. We'll look on and see the other girls learn the proper caper," laughed Polly. 135

"Then I can't for the life of me hunderstand why you came hout at all. Hit's just a-stirrin' hup and a-fidgeting the other 'orses. They're not used to the goin's hon of 'alf broke hanimals."

"Half broken! It seems to me, Dawson, that most horses are *wholly* broken but very few wholly *trained*. If we disturb the others, however, we'll go off for a spin by ourselves. Come, Polly. Full speed, Tzaritza! Four bells, Shashai!" and away sped the trio, Tzaritza, like the obedient creature she was, bounding from the platform where Peggy had bidden her "charge," lest she startle the horses.

"I'll hopen the gate for you, Miss," Dawson hastened to call, a trifle doubtful as to whether he had not been just a little too dictatorial.

"No need. This gate is nothing," called Peggy and as one, they skimmed over the four-foot iron gate as though it were four inches, hands waving, eyes alight, lips parted in gay laughter. Tzaritza's joyful bark mingling with their voices as she rushed away. 136

The girls' cries of admiration or amazement drowned Dawson's:

"Well, 'Hi'll be blowed! Hi couldn't a done hit like that to save me 'ead," which was quite true, for very few could ride as these young girls rode.

Meanwhile back in the circle two of Dawson's pupils were expressing themselves without reserve.

"I mean to learn to ride like *that*," announced Rosalie Breeze. "The idea of bouncing up and down in a stupid old side-saddle when we could just as well sit as Polly and Peggy do. Why, I never saw anything as graceful as those two girls in my life. Can't *you* show me how, Dawson? If you can't you can just make up your mind I am going to find someone who *can*. Jack-o'-Lantern's sure enough disgusted with *this* show-down, and I believe that's the reason he has no more spirit than a bossy-cow."

"I'm going to speak to Mrs. Vincent," announced Juno. "This may be all very conventional and correct, but all I can do is rise and fall in a trot; I'm petrified if Lady Belle breaks into a canter, and if she were to leap over that fence, I'd break my neck. Yet did you ever *see* anything so graceful as those two girls and that magnificent dog when they went over? I tell you, girls, we've got something worth while in this school now, believe me. And just you wait!" and with this cryptic ending Juno jockeyed ahead of her companions. 137

"I wish mother could have seen and heard it all," whispered Natalie.

"Then why don't you tell her, and ask her to come out and see those girls ride," demanded Rosalie.

"That's exactly what I mean *to do*," replied Natalie, with an emphatic little nod. "I'm beginning to believe we don't know half we should know about the stables."

"I should imagine that Mrs. Vincent would be a far better judge of what was proper for young ladies than a couple of perfectly lawless girls who have been brought up on a Southern ranch or something. *I* call them perfect hoydens and they would not be countenanced a moment in the Back Bay," was Isabel's superior opinion.

"A Southern ranch?" echoed Rosalie, "You're mixed in your geography, Isabel. They have plantations and estates in the South, but the ranches are out West. But I don't wonder you prefer bumping along as you do on the old Senator. You match him all right, all right. But just you wait until we leave you behind when we've learned to ride like Peggy and Polly, for we're going to do it, you can just bet your best hat." 138

"Thank you, I never indulge in betting or slang. Both are vulgar in the extreme. And as to riding like a circus performer, I have higher aims in life."

"Going in for the trapeze? They say it's fine to reduce embonpoint."

No reply was made to Rosalie's gibe and the lesson went on in its usual uneventful manner. Meanwhile Peggy and Polly were having a glorious game of tag, for the Columbia Heights grounds were very extensive, and drives led in every direction. When pursued and pursuer were in a perfect gale of merriment, and Tzaritza giving way to her most joyous cavortings, a sudden turn brought them upon Mrs. Vincent. She was seated upon a rustic bench in one of the cosy nooks of the grounds and Tzaritza, bounding ahead, was the first to see her, and Tzaritza never forgot a kindness. The next second she had dropped upon the ground at Mrs. Vincent's feet, her nose buried in her forepaws—Tzaritza's way of manifesting her allegiance and affection. Then up she rose, rested her feet upon the bench and for the second time laid her head upon Mrs. Vincent's shoulder. Before that gratified lady had time to do more than place an arm about the big dog's neck, Peggy's and Polly's chargers had come to a halt in front of her and at word of 139



command stood as still as statues. The girls slipped from the horses' backs, as bonny a pair as ever thrilled an older woman's soul.

"Oh, Mrs. Vincent, we've had such a race!" cried Polly, smiling into Mrs. Vincent's face with her irresistible smile.

"Isn't it good just to be alive on such a day?" smiled Peggy, turning to her as she would have turned to Mrs. Harold, her face alight. Aunt Katherine had been Peggy's only "wet blanket" and, it had not been wrapped about her long enough to destroy her absolute confidence in grown-ups. Perhaps Miss Sturgis would threaten it, but all that lay in the future.

"And to be just fifteen with all the world before you, and such animals beside you," answered Mrs. Vincent, stroking Tzaritza and nodding toward the horses.

"Yes, aren't they just the dearest ever? Who could help loving them?"

"Will they stand like that without being tied?"

"Oh, yes, they have always obeyed me perfectly. I wish you could see Roy and the others. Some day you must come out to Severndale, Mrs. Vincent, and see my four-footed children. I've such a lot of them."

140

"Tell me something of your home and home-life, dear. We are not very well acquainted, you know, and that is a poor beginning."

It was a subject dear to Peggy's heart, and she needed no urging. Seated beside Mrs. Vincent, for half an hour she talked of her life at Severndale, Polly's interjections supplying little side-lights which Mrs. Vincent was quick to appreciate, though Polly did not realize how they emphasized Peggy's picture of her home.

"And you really raised those splendid horses yourself? I have never seen their equal."

"But if you only knew how wonderfully intelligent they are, Mrs. Vincent! Of course, Silver Star is now Polly's horse, but she has learned to understand him so perfectly, and ride so beautifully, that he loves her as well as he loves me and obeys her as well."

For a moment or two Mrs. Vincent's face wore an odd expression.

"Understand" a horse? To be "loved" by one? Did she "understand" those in her stable? Did they "love" her? She almost smiled. It was such a new viewpoint. Yet, why not? The animals upon her place were certainly entirely dependent upon her for their happiness and comfort. But had she ever given that fact a serious thought?

141

Slipping an arm about each girl as they sat beside her she asked:

"What do you think of our horses, and of Dawson? For a little fifteen-year old lassie you seem to have had a remarkable experience."

Peggy colored, but Polly blurted out:

"I think he's a regular old hypocrite and so does Peggy. Why, Shelby would have forty fits if any of our horses' feet were like Jack-o'-Lantern's, or their bits as dirty as the Senator's."

"Oh, Polly, please don't!" begged Peggy. But it was too late. "What is this?" asked Mrs. Vincent quickly.

"Well, I dare say I've made a mess of the whole thing. I generally do, but Peggy and I do love animals so and hate to see them abused."

"Are *ours* abused, Polly?"

"I don't suppose that generally speaking people would say they were. Most everybody would say they were mighty well cared for, but that's because people don't stop to think a thing about it. My goodness, *I* didn't till Peggy made me. A horse was just a horse to me—any old horse—if he could pull a wagon or hold somebody on his back. That he could actually *talk* to me never entered my head. Have you ever seen one *do* it?" asked Polly, full of eager enthusiasm.

142

"I can't say that I ever have," smiled Mrs. Vincent, and Polly quickly retorted, though there was no trace of disrespect in her words:

"Now you are laughing at us. I knew you would. Well, no wonder, most people would think us crazy for saying such a thing. But truly, Mrs. Vincent, we're not. Peggy, make Shashai and Star talk to you. I'd do it, only I'd sort of feel as though I were taking the wind out of your sails. You are the teacher and I'm only your pupil."

"Do you really wish me to show you something of their intelligence, Mrs. Vincent? I feel sort of foolish—as though I were trying to show off, you know."

"Well, you are *not*, and I've an idea that for a few moments we can exchange places to good advantage. It looks as though I had spent a vast deal of my time acquiring a knowledge of higher mathematics and modern languages, at the expense of some understanding of natural history and now I'll take a lesson, please."

"Of course I don't mean to say that every animal can be taught all the things *our* horses have learned any more than all children, can be equally taught. You don't expect as much of the child who has been, misused and neglected as you do of the one who has been raised properly and always loved. It depends a whole lot on that. Our horses have never known fear and so we can do almost anything with them. Shashai, Star, come and make love to Missie."

143

As one the two beautiful creatures came to the seat and laid their soft muzzles upon Peggy's

shoulders. Then raising their heads ran their velvety lips over her cheeks with as gentle, caressing a touch as a little child's fingers could have given, all the time voicing the soft, bubbling whinney of a trustful, happy horse. Peggy reached an arm about each satiny head. After a moment she said:

"Attention!"

Back started both horses to stand as rigid as statues.

"Salute Mrs. Vincent."

Up went each splendid head and a clear, joyous neigh was trumpeted from the delicate nostrils.

"Call Shelby!"

What an alert expression filled the splendid eyes as the horses, actually a-quiver with excitement, neighed again, and again for the friend whom they loved, and looked inquiringly at Peggy when he failed to appear.

"Where's Jess?"

144

Eager, impatient snorts replied.

Peggy rose to her feet and carefully knotting, the reins upon the saddles' pommels to safeguard accidents, said:

"Go fetch him!"

Tzaritza was alert in an instant. "No, not you, Tzaritza. Charge. Four bells, Shashai,—Star!" and away swept the horses.

"Do you mean to say they understand and will really bring Jess here?" asked Mrs. Vincent incredulously.

"Oh, yes, indeed. They have done so dozens of times at home."

"Well, they are wonders!"

The rapid hoofbeats were now dying away in the distance. Perhaps ten minutes elapsed when their rhythmic beat was again audible, each second growing more distinct, then down the linden-bordered avenue came Shashai and Star, Jess riding Shashai. The horses moved as swiftly as birds fly. As they caught sight of Peggy they neighed loudly as though asking her approbation. A lump of sugar awaited each obedient animal, and Jess asked:

"What yo' wantin' ob Jess, baby-honey?"

"Just to prove to Mrs. Vincent that the horses would bring you here if I told them to."

"Co'se dey bring me if Miss Peggy bidden 'em to," answered Jess as though surprised that she should ask such a needless question.

145

"But how did you know she wished you?"

"How'd I know, Mist'ss? Why dem hawses done *tol'* me she want me. Yas'm dey did. Dey done come t'arin' back yonder ter de stable an' dey cotch holt ob my sleefs wid dey teefs, and dey yank and tug me 'long outen de do'. Den dis hyer Shashai, he stan' lak a statyer twell I hike me up on his back, den he kite away like de bery debbil—axes yo' pardon, ma'am!—an' hyer we-all *is*. Dat's all de *how* dar is ob it. *Dey* knows what folks 'specs ob 'em. Dey's eddicated hawses. Dey's been *raised* right."

"I think they have been. Peggy, I want to walk back to the stables with you and Polly. I'd like to see with my own eyes some of the things you have spoken about."

"O Mrs. Vincent, I am so afraid it will make a whole lot of trouble! Dawson knows I criticised him—indeed, I lost my temper and said he couldn't 'hold down a job' at Severndale. Excuse the slang, please, but he rubbed me the wrong way with all his fuss, when he really doesn't know, or doesn't want to know—I don't know which—one thing about horses."

Mrs. Vincent paused a moment. "Perhaps you are right," she said. "At all events, your sense of justice seems to be one of your strong points. Go back to the house and let Jess take your 'children' to the stables. A little diplomacy can do no harm. And Jess, you need not mention seeing me with the young ladies. Your little mistress has begun my *horse* education. I haven't been very wise about them, I fear, but now I am going to make amends."

146

"Yas'm. Amens does help we-all a powerful lot when we's wrastlin' wid we-all's sperrits. I hopes dey fotch yo' froo yo' doubtin's. I'se done had ter say many an amen in ma day."

Jess' face was full of solicitude. He had not the remotest idea of the source of Mrs. Vincent's turmoil of spirit, but if she found it necessary to say "amen," Jess instantly concluded that his sympathies were demanded. At all events he was now a part of Columbia Heights and all within it's precincts came within his kindly solicitude. Tradition was strong in old Jessekiah. Mrs. Vincent had much ado to keep her countenance. She had come to Washington from a Western city and had but slight understanding of the real devotion of the old-time negro to his "white folks." Alas! few of the old-time ones are left. It was with a sense of still having considerable to learn that she parted from the girls and Jess and made her way toward the stables, reaching there some time after Jess had unsaddled his horses and was performing their toilets with as much care as a French maid would bestow upon her mistress, though no French maid would ever have kept up the incessant flow of affectionate talk to the object of her attentions that Jess was maintaining. He took no notice of Mrs. Vincent, but *she* did not miss one shadow or shade

147

of the absolute understanding existing between Jess and his "babies," as he called them.

"Dar now, honeys," he said, as he carefully blanketed them. "Run 'long back yander to yo' boxes. Yo' dinner's all a-ready an' a-waitin', lak de hymn chune say, an' yo's ready fo' it. Dem children ain' never gwine send yo' back to de stable, so het up, yo' cyant eat er drink fo' an hour. No siree! Not *dem*."

At that moment Dawson and his assistant appeared with the horses the girls had ridden. Notwithstanding the cool crispness of the morning, Lady Belle was in a lather where her harness rested. The Senator was blowing like a grampus; Jack-o'-Lantern's bit was foam-flecked and Natalie's pretty little "Madam Goldie" looked fagged.

Mrs. Vincent instantly contrasted the condition of Shashai and Star with the others. Yet Peggy and Polly had been riding like Valkyrie.

As Dawson espied the lady of the manor his face underwent a change which would have been amusing had it not been entirely too significant. Mrs. Vincent made no comments whatever concerning the horses but a veil had certainly fallen from her eyes. She asked Dawson how his young ladies were coming on with their riding lessons, how many had arranged to ride in the park that afternoon, and one or two trivial questions. Then she returned to the house a much wiser woman than she had left it an hour earlier.

148

149

## CHAPTER X

### TZARITZA AS DISCIPLINARIAN

Several days had passed since the riding lesson. It was Saturday evening and study period, which began at five and lasted until six-thirty, was ended. Dinner was served at seven on Saturdays and from eight until ten o'clock the girls were perfectly free. A group was gathered in Stella Drummond's big room and preparations for a fudge party, after the hearty dinner had "somewhat shaken down," were under way. Stella's chafing dish was the most up-to-date one in the school, and Stella's larder more bountifully supplied than the other girls. Indeed, Stella never lacked for anything so far as the others could discover and had a more liberal supply of pocket money than is generally allowed. Mrs. Vincent had expressed doubts as to the wisdom of it when Stella's father mentioned the sum she was to have, but he had laughed and answered:

"Oh, nonsense, my dear Madam! At home she would have double if she wished it. She knows how to use it, and remember she is all I have to spend my income upon. Don't let that little matter worry you. Just give all your attention to polishing her up a bit and teaching her the newest fol-de-rols. Living all over the country is not the best thing for a young lady, I have found out. It may be conducive to physical development, but it leaves something to be desired in educational lines."

150

So Stella, though eighteen, and supposed to be a senior, was really taking a special course in which junior work predominated. She had selected her own room, it had been furnished exactly as she wished, and it certainly resembled a bridal apartment more than a school-girl's bed-room. A large alcove and private bath opened from it, and a balcony which commanded a beautiful view of Stony Brook Park made it luxurious to a degree. In this room, lighted by softly shaded electric drop lights, a cheery log fire blazing upon the shining brass andirons, the girls had gathered. Stella was arranging her electric chafing dish upon its little marble stand. Peggy was opening a box of shelled pecan nuts, Polly measuring out the chocolate, and the other girls were supplying all needful, or needless, advice concerning the *modus operandi*. Tzaritza, now a most privileged creature indeed, had stretched her huge length before the hearth, looking for all the world like a superb white rug, and Rosalie Breeze was flat upon her stomach, her arms around the dog's neck, her face nestled in the silky hair. Juno Gibson reclined gracefully in a luxurious wicker chair, its gorgeous pink satin cushions a perfect background for her dark loveliness—which no one understood better than Juno herself. Helen Doolittle (most aptly named) was gazing in simpering adoration upon Stella from a pillow-laden couch, and now commented:

151

"Oh, Stella, what adorable hands you have. How do you keep them so ravishingly white and your nails so absolutely faultless? I could cover them with kisses, sweetheart."

Stella's laugh held wholesome ridicule of this rhapsody and she replied:

"Don't waste your emotion upon *my* hands. Just save it until somebody comes along who wished to cover *your* hands with kisses—I mean some one in masculine attire. For my part, I don't think I'd care to have a girl try that experiment with me."

"Have you ever had a *boy* cover your hands with kisses?" asked Helen eagerly, starting from her position.

Stella, raised her head, looked at the simple, inconsequent, little doll-faced blonde and with an odd smile said:

"Well, I could hardly have called him a boy."

152

"Oh, was he a man? A real *man*? Did he wear a moustache? Just think, girls, of having a man's moustache brush the back of your hand as he covered it with kisses. Oh, how terribly thrilling. Do tell us all about it, Stella! I knew the moment I met you you must have had a romantic history. Did your father find it out, and what did he say?"

"Yes, I told him all about it and he laughed at me," and again Stella laughed her mystifying laugh.

"Oh, I'd just *adore* having such a ravishing experience as that," said Lily Pearl Montgomery from the window seat, "but how can one have any thrilling experiences in a stupid old school! Now there are Polly and Peggy; think of all they could tell us if they only would. You girls must be fairly bursting with the most wonderful stories if you'd only come down off your pedestals and tell us. I think you're both too tight for words. And all those darling cadets' photographs in your room. You needn't try to make *me* believe that 'Faithfully yours, Bubbles' and 'Your chum, Ralph,' and 'For my Pilot, Captain Polly, Wheedles,' and 'For Peggy Stewart, Chatelaine, Happy,' don't mean a whole lot more."

"What's that?" asked Peggy, catching her name and looking up from her occupation. She caught Polly's eyes which had begun to snap. Polly had also been too busy to pay much attention at first, but she had heard the concluding sentences. She turned and looked at Lily with exactly the expression upon her sixteen-year-old face which had overspread it years before when the thirteen-year-old Polly had surprised the sentimental "Thusan Thwingle" exchanging osculatory favors with "one of thothe horrid boyths" in the basement of the high school at Montgentian. Then she said with repressed vehemence:

153

"I only wish our boys could have heard you say that. If you wouldn't come in for the running of your life my name's not Polly Howland. You'd suit some of the boys back yonder, but not our bunch. Of all the hot air! Stella, is your chafing-dish ready?"

Peggy had colored a rosy pink. She lacked Polly's experience with other girls.

Piqued by Polly's superior rebuff, Helen came to the inane Lily Pearl's support in a manner she knew would hit loyal Polly's most vulnerable spot:

"Look at Peggy's face! Look at Peggy's face! Which is the particular He, Peggy? Polly may be able to put up a big bluff, but your face is a dead giveaway."

"I don't think you would be able to understand if I told you. Middie's Haven and the 'bunch' are just a degree too high up for you to reach, I'm afraid, and there's no elevator in Wilmot Hall," answered Peggy quietly.

154

Polly laid down the things she was holding for Stella, dusted her hands of chocolate crumbs by lightly rubbing her fingers together, and walked quietly over to the couch. Helen looked somewhat alarmed and drew back among her pillows.

Polly, never uttering one word, bent over, swooped up Helen, pillows and all and holding her burden as she would have held a struggling baby, walked straight out of the room and down, the corridor to her own room, the shouts, screams and laughs of the girls following her. Helen was absolutely speechless at the audacity of the act. Bumping her door together by the only available means left her, since both arms were occupied, Polly then plumped Helen, now almost ready to resort to hysterical tears, upon a wooden shirt-waist box and placing herself in front of her, struck the attitude of a little red-headed goddess of vengeance as she said:

"Helen Doolittle, you may run *me* all you've a mind to—it doesn't mean a thing to me; I'm used to it; I've been teased all my life and I'm bomb-proof. But Peggy Stewart's made of different stuff. She hasn't been with girls very much, and never with a *silly* one before. Give her time and she'll understand them a good sight better than they'll ever understand her. And the boys she has known are not the kind who are ever likely to want to know *you*. So there's not much use wasting time explaining things. But I tell you just this, I won't stand for Peggy being run even a little bit, and you can circulate that bit of information broadcast. She's the finest ever, and the girl who can call her friend is in luck up to her ears. So understand: let her alone or reckon with me."

155

"Do you think we are a lot of crazy schoolboys and expect to settle our disagreements with a regular fist-a-cuff bout? You must come from a very queer place."

"Where *I* come from doesn't matter in the least. Peggy is the one under discussion and you know where she comes from and who she is. *What* she is you'll never know."

"I don't see why she should be so very hard to understand."

"She isn't—for people with enough sense. Now just take one good look at those pictures. Is there a weak face among them? One of two things will happen to you if you ever happen to meet the originals: they'll either make you feel like a silly little kid or they won't take a bit of notice of you. It will depend upon how you happen to strike them."

156

"Oh, are they such, wonders as all that?"

"If you ever get an invitation down to Annapolis you'll have a chance to find out. Peggy and I have about made up our minds to have a house party during the holidays, but we haven't quite made up our minds which girls we are going to like well enough to ask to it. Tanta suggested it."

She is anxious to know our friends, and we are anxious to have her. She sizes people up pretty quickly and we are always mighty glad to have her opinion."

Polly spoke rapidly and the effect upon Helen was peculiar. From the pugnacious attitude of an outraged canary, ready to do battle, she was transformed into the sweetest, meekest love-bird imaginable. A veritable little preening, posing, oh-do-admire-me creature, and at Polly's last words she jumped from the box and clasping her hands, cried:

"A house-party! You are planning a house-party? Oh, how perfectly adorable. Oh, which girls are you going to invite? Oh, I'll never, never tease Peggy again as long as I live. I'll be perfectly lovely to her and I'll make the other girls be nice too. To think of going up there and meeting all those darling boys. Oh please tell me all about it! The girls will be just crazy when I tell them. Which of these fellows will be there?"

157

Helen had rushed over to Polly's dresser upon which in pretty silver frames were photographs of Ralph, Happy and Wheedles. On Peggy's dresser Shorty and Durand looked from their frames straight into her eyes, while several others not yet framed looked down from the top of the bookshelf. Silly little Helen was in an ecstasy. Her mamma had never believed in companions of the opposite sex for her "sweet little daughter" but had kept her in a figurative preserve jar which bore the label "you may look but you must not touch." Mamma's instructions to Mrs. Vincent upon placing Helen in the school had been an absolute ban upon any masculine visitors, or visits upon Helen's part where such undesirable, though often unavoidable, members of society might congregate. "She is so very innocent and unsophisticated, you know, and so very young," added mamma sweetly. Mrs. Vincent smiled indulgently, but made no comments: She had encountered such mammas and such sweetly unsophisticated daughters before and she then and there resolved to keep an extra watchful eye upon this innocent one. Thus far, however, nothing alarming had occurred, but Mrs. Vincent knew her material and was prepared for almost anything. She also knew Lily Pearl and felt pretty sure that if an upheaval ever took place it would turn out that Lily Pearl or Helen had touched off the mine. The foregoing scene gives some hint of the viewpoints of the young ladies in question.

158

During this digression Helen had caught up Wheedle's picture and was pressing it rapturously to her fluttering bosom and exclaiming:

"You're a perfect darling! If I could have just one dance with *you* I'd be willing to *die*! Polly, how old is he!"

But Polly had left the room and was on her way back to Stella's. As she reached it she came face to face with the Sturgeon and the Sturgeon's eyes held no "lovelight" for her.

"Miss Howland, what was the cause of the wild shrieks which disturbed me a moment since? Miss Montgomery says you can tell if you will and since none of your companions seem inclined to do so, I will hear your explanation. I was on my way to inform Miss Stewart that Mrs. Vincent wished to see her in her study at once when this hideous uproar assailed my ears."

Polly glanced quickly about the room. Sure enough, Peggy had left it. Some of the girls looked concerned, others quite calm; among the latter were Stella and Juno. Rosalie, with Tzaritza's head in her lap, looked defiant. She hated Miss Sturgis.

159

Polly turned and looked squarely into Miss Sturgis' eyes.

"The girls were screaming because I carried Helen out of the room," she answered quietly.

"It seems to me you must be somewhat in need of exercise. I would advise you to go to the gymnasium to work off your superfluous energy. Why did you carry Helen from the room? Has she become incapable of voluntary locomotion?"

"Not yet," answered Polly, a twinkle coming into a corner of the gray eyes.

"*Not yet?*" emphasized Miss Sturgis. "Are you apprehensive of her becoming so?"

"She needs more exercise than she gets," answered Polly, half smiling.

That smile acted as salt upon a wound. Miss Sturgis' temper rose.

"Please bear in mind that it does not devolve upon *you* to decide that question."

"I did not try to settle that question, Miss Sturgis. If you wish to know why I carried Helen out of the room I did it because she was running—"

"Doing what? I don't think I understand your boyish slang."

"Well, teasing Peggy, and I won't have Peggy teased by anybody if I can stop it. She doesn't understand girls' ways as well as I do because she hasn't been thrown with them. So when Helen teased her I picked her up and carried her down to our room and I don't reckon she will tease her any more."

160

"So you have come into the school to set its standards and correct its shortcomings, have you? Are you so very superior to your companions—you and your protégée?"

Polly looked straight into the narrow eyes looking at her, but made no reply.

"Answer me, instantly."

"I have never considered myself superior to anyone, but I *do* consider Peggy Stewart superior to any girl I have ever known, and I think you will agree with me when you know her better," asserted Polly loyally.

"You are insolent."

"I do not mean to be. Any one who knows her will tell you the same thing."

"I repeat you are insolent and you may go to your room."

Polly made no reply, but started to leave the room. Tzaritza sprang to her side. Miss Sturgis interposed.

"Leave that dog where she is. Go back, you horrible beast," and she raised her hand menacingly. Tzaritza was not quite sure whether the menace was intended for Polly or herself. In either case it was cause for resentment and a low growl warned against further liberties. 161

"Be careful, Miss Sturgis. Tzaritza thinks you are threatening me," said Polly. It was said wholly in the interest of the teacher.

Miss Sturgis' early training and forebears had not been of an order to develop either great dignity, or self-control. Her ability to teach mathematics was undisputed. Hence her position in Mrs. Vincent's school, though that good lady had more than once had reason to question the wisdom of retaining her, owing to the influence which she exerted over her charges. The grain beneath did not lend itself to a permanent, or high polish, and it took only the slightest scratch to mar it. Polly's words seemed to destroy her last remnant of self-control and she turned upon her in a fury of rage. As she seized her by the arm and cried, "Silence!" Polly whirled from her like a flash crying, "Charge, Tzaritza!"

But it was too late, the 'hound had sprung to Polly's defense, only it was Polly's protecting arm into which Tzaritza's teeth sank. The girl turned white with pain. Instantly the beautiful dog relinquished her hold and whining and whimpering like a heartbroken thing began to lick the bruised arm. Then arose a hubbub compared to which the screams of which Miss Sturgis had complained had been infantile plaints. Lily Pearl promptly went into hysterics. Juno shrieked aloud and even the self-contained Stella cried out as she ran to catch Polly in her arms, for the girl seemed about to faint. But Miss Sturgis, now thoroughly terrified at the crisis she had brought to pass, called madly for help. Helen's screams mingled in the pandemonium, for Helen had been brought hack from her romantic air castle with a rush. 162

Notwithstanding the fact that Mrs. Vincent's study was down one flight of stairs and at the other end of the building, she became aware of the uproar and her conversation with Peggy came to an abrupt pause. Then both hurried into the hall to see the tails of Horatio Hannibal Harrison's coat vanishing up the broad stairway and to hear Fräulein Hedwig wailing, "Oh ze house iss burning up *and* down I am sure!"

Meanwhile upon the scene of action Polly had been the first to recover her wits. The skin had not been broken, for Tzaritza had instantly perceived her error and released her grip almost as soon as it was taken. But Miss Sturgis would not have escaped so easily, as well she knew, and her hatred for Tzaritza increased tenfold. When Mrs. Vincent and the others arrived upon the scene she broke into a perfect torrent of invective against the dog, but was brought to her senses by the Principal's quiet: 163

"Miss Sturgis, you seem to be a good deal overwrought. I will excuse you. You may retire to your room until you feel calmer."

"Let me explain! Let me tell you what a horrible thing has happened!" cried Miss Sturgis.

"When you are less excited I shall be glad to listen. Fräulein, kindly accompany Miss Sturgis to her room and call the housekeeper. Now, Polly, what is it?" asked Mrs. Vincent, for Polly was the center of the group of excited girls, though calmer than any of them.

"Tzaritza made a mistake and caught my arm in her teeth, that is all, Mrs. Vincent. But she has done no harm. It doesn't hurt much now; she did not mean to do it any way."

"What!" cried Peggy, aghast, "Tzaritza attacked *you*, Polly?"

Polly nodded her head in quick negative, striving to keep Peggy from saying more. But Tzaritza had crawled to Peggy's feet and was literally grovelling there in abject misery.

"Charge, Tzaritza!"

The splendid creature lay motionless. "Polly, what happened?" demanded Peggy, once more the Peggy of Severndale and entirely forgetful of her present surroundings. Mrs. Vincent smiled and laying her hand gently upon Peggy's arm said: 164

"Don't embarrass Polly, dear. Leave it to me."

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Mrs. Vincent. I forgot," answered Peggy, blushing deeply. Mrs. Vincent nodded forgiveness, then turning to Stella, asked:

"Were you here all the time, Stella?"

"Yes, Mrs. Vincent."

"Then please tell me exactly what happened."

Stella told the story clearly and quietly. When she ended there was a moment's hush, broken by Rosalie Breeze crying:

"And Tzaritza never, never would have done a single thing if Miss Sturgis hadn't lost her temper. She is forever scolding us about losing ours, but she'd just better watch out herself. I wish Tzaritza had bitten her!"

"Rosalie!"

"Well, I do, Mrs. Vincent. It was every bit her own fault. She hates Tzaritza, and I love her," was Rosalie's vehement if perplexing conclusion as she cast herself upon the big dog. Tzaritza welcomed her with a grateful whine and crept closer, though she never raised her head. She was waiting the word of forgiveness from the one she loved best of all, but Peggy was awaiting Tzaritza's exoneration. Mrs. Vincent, who had sent for the resident trained nurse, was examining Polly's arm and now said:

165

"It is all very distressing, but I am glad no more serious for Polly. The arm is badly bruised and will be very painful for some time, but I can't discover a scratch. Miss Allen, will you please look after this little girl," she asked, as the sweet-faced trained nurse entered the room, her white uniform snowy and immaculate, her face a benediction in its sweet, calm repose.

"Go with Miss Allen, dear, and have your arm dressed." Polly paused only long enough to stoop down and kiss Tzaritza's head, the caress being acknowledged by a pathetic whine, then followed the nurse from the room.

Peggy was terribly distressed.

"Do you think I would better send her back to Severndale, Mrs. Vincent?" she asked.

"Has she ever attacked anyone before, Peggy?"

"Never in all her life."

"I hardly think she will again. She may remain. Come here, Tzaritza."

Tzaritza did not stir.

"Up, Tzaritza," commanded Peggy, and the affectionate creature's feet were upon her shoulders as she begged forgiveness with almost human eloquence.

166

"Oh, my bonny one, how could you?" asked Peggy as she caressed the silky head. Tzaritza's whimpers reduced some of the girls to tears. "Now go to Mrs. Vincent," ordered Peggy, and the hound obediently crossed the room to lay her head in that lady's lap.

"Poor Tzaritza, you did what you believed to be your duty, didn't you? None of us can do more. I wish some of my other problems were as easy to solve as the motives of your act. Go on with your fudge party, girls. It will prove a diversion. I must look to other matters now," and Mrs. Vincent sighed at the prospect of the coming interview with Miss Sturgis. It was not her first experience by any means.

167

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## CHAPTER XI

### BEHIND SCENES

The girls were hardly in a mood to return to their fudge-making, so Stella produced a box of Whitman's chocolates and the group settled down to eat them and discuss the events of the past exciting half hour. Polly squatted upon the rug and with her uninjured arm hauled about half of Tzaritza upon her lap. Tzaritza was positively foolish in her ecstatic joy at being restored to favor.

"Poor Tzaritza, you got into trouble because I lost my temper, didn't you? It was a heap more my fault than yours after all."

"Oh, there's nothing wrong with Tzaritza. It's the Sturgeon. Hateful old thing! I just hope Mrs. Vincent gives her bally-hack," stormed Rosalie. "Suppose we did shout and screech? It's Saturday night and we have a right to if we like. But what under the sun did Mrs. Vincent want of you, Peggy?"

"Oh, nothing very serious," answered Peggy, smiling in a way which set Rosalie's curiosity galloping.

168

"Yes, what *did* she want?" demanded Polly, turning to look up at Peggy.

"Can't tell anybody *now*. You'll all know after Thanksgiving," answered Peggy, wagging her head in the negative.

"Oh, please tell us! Ah, do! We won't breathe a living, single word!" cried the chorus.

"Uh-mh!" murmured Peggy in such perfect imitation of old Mammy that Polly laughed outright.

"Aren't you even going to tell Polly?" asked Rosalie, who had arrived at some very definite conclusion regarding these friends, for Rosalie was far from slow if at times rather more self-assertive than the average young lady is supposed to be.

For answer Peggy broke into a little air from a popular comic opera running just then in Washington and to which Captain Stewart had taken his little party only a few weeks before:

"And what is right for Tweedle-dum is wrong for Tweedle-dee," sang Peggy in her sweet contralto voice, Polly following in her bird-like whistle.

The little ruse worked to perfection. The girls forgot all about Peggy's "call down," as a summons to Mrs. Vincent's study was banned, and had a rapture over Polly's whistling and Peggy's singing, nor were they satisfied until a dozen airs had been given in the girl's very best style. Then came the story of the concerts at home, and Polly's whistling at the Masquerader's Show when Wharton Van Nostrand fell ill, and a dozen other vivid little glimpses of the life back in Severndale and up in "Middie's Haven" until their listeners were nearly wild with excitement.

"And they are to have a house party there during the holidays, girls. Think of that!" cried Helen.

"Honest?" cried Lily Pearl, leaning forward with clasped hands, while even Juno, the superior, became animated and remarked:

"Really! I dare say you will choose your guests with extreme care as to their appeal to the model young men they are likely to meet at Annapolis, for I don't doubt your aunt, Mrs. Harold, is a most punctilious chaperon."

"Juno's been eating hunks of the new Webster's Dictionary, girls. That's how she happens to have all those long words so near the top. They got stuck going down so they come up easy," interjected Rosalie.

Juno merely tossed her head, but vouchsafed no answer. Rosalie's Western *gaucherie* was beneath her notice. Juno's home was at the Hotel Astor in New York City. At least as much of "home" as she knew. Her mother had lived abroad for the past five years, and was now the Princess Somebody-or-other. Her father kept his suite at the Astor but lived almost anywhere else, his only daughter seeing him when he had less enticing companionship. A "chaperon" did duty at the Astor when Juno was in the city, which was not often. Consequently, Juno's ideas of domestic felicity were not wholly edifying; her conception of anything pertaining to home life about as hazy as the nebula.

"Perhaps if you ever know Tanta you'll be able to form your own opinion," answered Polly quietly, looking steadily at Juno with those wonderfully penetrating gray eyes until the girl shrugged and colored.

Stella laughed a low, odd little laugh and came over to drop upon the rug beside Polly, saying as she slipped her arm around her and good-naturedly dragged her down upon her lap:

"You are one funny, old-fashioned little kid, do you know that? Some times I feel as though I were about twenty years your senior, and then when I catch that size-me-up, read-me-through, look in your eyes, I make up my mind *I'm* the infant—not you. Where did you and Peggy catch and bottle up all your worldly wisdom?"

"Didn't know *I* had so much," laughed Polly, "but Peggy was born with hers, I reckon. If I have any it has been bumped into my head partly by mother, partly by Aunt Janet, and the job finished by the boys Juno has been referring to. It doesn't do to try any nonsense with *that* bunch; they see through you and call your bluff as quick as a flash. We were pretty good chums and I miss them more than I could ever miss a lot of girls, I believe. Certainly, more than I missed the Montgentian girls when I left them."

"Nothing like being entirely frank, I'm sure," was Juno's superior remark:

"That's another thing the boys taught us," replied Polly imperturbably. Just then the bell rang for "rooms."

"There's Tattoo!" cried Polly. "If I get settled down at Taps tonight I'll be doing wonders. Miss Allen has bandaged up my arm as though Tzaritza had bitten half of it off. Come on, 'Ritza. Peggy, you'll have to get me out of my dudds tonight. Good-night, girls. Sorry we didn't get our fudge made. Maybe if I'd let Helen alone you would have had it," and with a merry laugh Polly ran from the room, all animosity forgotten.

"What did she mean by 'Tattoo' and 'Taps,'" asked Natalie of Peggy.

"The warning call sounded on the bugle for the midshipmen to go to their rooms, and the lights out call which follows. Have you never heard them? They are so pretty. Polly and I love them so, and you can't think how we miss them here. Polly always sounded them on her bugle at home. You've no idea how sweetly she can do it," answered Peggy as she walked toward her room beside Natalie.

"Oh, I wish I *could* hear them. I wonder if mother knows anything about them," cried Natalie enthusiastically. "Do you know, I think you and Polly are perfectly wonderful, you have so many original ideas. I am just crazy to know what mother wanted of you tonight. I'm going to ask her. Do you think she will tell me?"

"Why not? The only reason I did not tell was because I felt I had no right to. If Mrs. Vincent wants the others to know she will tell them, but you are different. I reckon mothers can't keep anything from their own daughters. At least Polly and her mother seem to share everything and I know Mrs. Harold is just like a mother to me."

The girls separated and Peggy and Polly were soon behind closed doors discussing Mrs. Vincent's private interview with the former.



The following Tuesday was Hallow E'en and where is your school-girl who does not revel in its privileges? Mrs. Vincent, contrary to Miss Sturgis' preconceived ideas of what was possible and proper for a girls' school, though the latter never failed to quote the rigid discipline of the school which had profited by her valuable services prior to her engagement at Columbia Heights, was given to some departures which often came near reducing Miss Sturgis to tears of vexation.

173

One of these rules, or rather the lack of them, was the arrangement of the tables in the two dining-rooms. In the dining-room for the little girls under twelve a teacher presided at each table as a matter of course, but in the main dining-hall covers were laid for six at each table, one of the girls presiding as hostess, her tenure of office depending wholly upon her standing in the school, her deportment, ability and general average of work. At the further end of the room Mrs. Vincent's own table was placed, and the staff of eight resident teachers sat with her. It was a far happier arrangement than the usual one of placing a teacher at each table and having her, whether consciously or unconsciously, arrogate the entire conversation, interests and viewpoint to herself. Of course, there are some teachers who can still recall with sufficient vividness their own school-girl life to feel keenly the undercurrent of restraint which an older person almost invariably starts when thrown with a group of younger ones, and who possesses the power and tact to overcome it and enter the girl-world. But these are the exceptions rather than the rule, and none knew this better than Mrs. Vincent. Consequently, she chose her own way of removing all possible danger of impaired digestion, believing that the best possible aid to healthy appetites and perfectly assimilated food were untrammelled spirits and hearty laughs. So she and her staff sat at their own table where they were free to discuss the entire school if they chose to do so, and the girls—for, surely, "turn-about-is-fairplay"—could discuss them. It worked pretty well, too, in spite of Miss Sturgis' inclination to keep one eye and one ear "batted" toward the other tables, often to Mrs. Vincent's intense, though carefully concealed amusement.

174

And now came Hallow E'en, and with small regard for Miss Sturgis' prejudices, plump in the middle of the school week! At the end of the last recitation period that afternoon when the whole school of one hundred fifty girls, big and little, had gathered in the chapel, for the working day invariably ended with a few kindly helpful words spoken by Mrs. Vincent and the reading of the thirty-fourth Psalm and singing Shelley's beautiful hymn of praise, Mrs. Vincent paused for a moment before dismissing her pupils. Many of the older girls knew what to expect, but the newer ones began to wonder if their sins had found them out. Nevertheless, Mrs. Vincent's expression was not alarming as she moved a step toward them and asked:

175

"Which of my girls will be willing to give up her afternoon recreation period and devote that time to the preparation of tomorrow's work?"

The effect was amusing. Some of the girls gave little gasps of surprise, others, ohs! of protest, others distinct negatives, while a good many seemed delighted at the prospect. These had known Mrs. Vincent longest.

"Those of you who are ready to return to the main hall at four o'clock and work until five-thirty may be released from all further obligations for the evening, and the attic, laundry and gymnasium will be placed at your disposal for a Hallow E'en frolic and—"

But she got no further. Rosalie Breeze, sans ceremony, made one wild leap from her chair and rushed toward the platform. Miss Sturgis made a peremptory motion and stepped toward her, but Mrs. Vincent raised her hand. The next second Rosalie had flung herself bodily into Mrs. Vincent's arms, crying:

"Oh, if every schoolmarm was just exactly like *you* I'd never, never do one single bad thing to plague 'em and I'll let you use me for your doormat if you want to!"

176

A less self-contained woman would have been staggered by the sudden onslaught and felt her rule and dignity jeopardized. Mrs. Vincent was of different fibre. She gathered the little madcap into her arms for one second, then taking the witch-like face in both hands kissed each flushed cheek as she said:

"I sometimes think you claim kinship with the pixies,—you are half a witch. So you accept the bargain? Good! Have all the fun you wish but don't burn the house down."

By this time the whole school had gathered around her, asking questions forty to the minute.

Mrs. Vincent looked like a fly-away girl herself in her sympathetic excitement, for her soft, curly chestnut hair had somewhat escaped its combs and pins, and her cheeks were as rosy as the girls. Mrs. Vincent was only forty, and now looked about half her age.

Polly and Peggy crowded close to her, Natalie shared her arms with Rosalie, quiet, undemonstrative Marjorie's face glowed with affection, while even Juno condescended to unbend, and Lily Pearl and Helen gave vent to their emotions by embracing each other. Stella, tall, stately and such a contrast to the others, beamed upon the group.

177

But Isabel put the finishing stroke by remarking with, a most superior smile:

"O Mrs. Vincent, what a perfect darling you are! Don't you perfectly dote on her girls? *I* fell in love with her years ago when I first met her and I've simply worshiped at her shrine ever since."

"Rats!" broke out Rosalie, and Mrs. Vincent had just about all she could manage for a moment. Her emotions were sadly at odds. Polly's laugh saved the day and deflected Isabel's scorn.

"I really do not see what is amusing you, Miss Howland; I am sure I am only expressing the sentiments of my better poised schoolmates."

"Oh, we all agree with you—every single one of us—though we are choosing different ways of showing it, you see. If Peggy and I had been down home we'd probably have given the Four-N yell. That's *our* way of expressing our approbation. The boys taught us, and we think its a pretty good way. It works off a whole lot of pent-up steam."

"What is it, Polly?" asked Mrs. Vincent.

"I'm afraid you would have to hear the boys give it to quite understand it, Mrs. Vincent, but I tell you it makes one tingle right down to one's very toes—that yell!"

"Can't you and Peggy give it to us on a small scale? Just as a sample of what we may hear some day? Perhaps if the girls hear it they can fall in. I'd like to hear it myself."

Polly paused a moment, looking doubtfully at Peggy. That old Naval Academy Yell meant a good deal to these two girls. They had heard it under so many thrilling circumstances.

"We will give it if you wish it, Mrs. Vincent, though it will sound funny I'm afraid from just Polly and me. Maybe though, the girls will try it too after we have given it."

With more volume and enthusiasm than would have seemed possible from just two throats, Peggy and Polly began:

"N—n—n—n!  
A—a—a—a!  
V—v—v—v!  
Y—y—y—y!  
Navy! Navy! Navy! Navy!  
Mrs. Vincent! Mrs. Vincent! Mrs. Vincent!"

the ending being entirely in the nature of a surprise to that lady who blushed and laughed like a girl. But before she could escape, Polly had sprung to the platform and as a cheer leader who would have put Wheedler of old to shame was crying: "Come on!"

The girls caught the spirit and swing with a will and the room rang to their voices.

Clapping her hands and laughing happily Mrs. Vincent ran toward the door only pausing long enough to say:

"Four P. M. sharp! Then from seven to ten 'the goblins will get you if you don't watch out!'"

"Let Polly sound 'Assembly' at four. Please do, Mrs. Vincent. It will make us come double time," begged Peggy, running after her and detaining her by slipping her arm about her waist.

"Assembly? I don't believe I quite understand."

"On her bugle, you know. It's so pretty, and we did that way at home if we wanted to bring the bunch together in a hurry."

"Well, I'm learning something new every minute, I believe. Yes, sound your bugle call, Polly, and be sure I shall be on the *qui vive* to hear it. Before we know it we shall have a *girls'* military school."

"Oh, wouldn't it be perfectly splendid if we only could and all wear brass buttons!" cried Rosalie.

"I think some of the discipline would be splendid for all of us, and especially the spirit of the thing," answered Stella. "The trouble with most girls lies in the fact that they don't know how to work together. There isn't much class spirit, or coöperation. Maybe if we tried some of the methods Peggy and Polly seem to know so much about we'd come closer together."

"Team work, I guess you mean," said Polly quickly. "It means a whole lot."

Sharply at four the staccato notes of "Assembly" rang across the terrace as Polly sounded the call upon her bugle. The girls came hurrying from every direction and the ensuing hour and a half, usually free for recreation, was cheerfully given over to study. Dinner was served at six and at seven-thirty the revels began.

At Peggy's suggestion a part of the afternoon had been devoted to devising costumes out of anything at hand, for a fancy dress party had been hastily decided upon. As a result of this some unique and original Hallow E'en sprites, nymphs, dryads or witches foregathered in the big laundry, "cleared for action," Polly said, and two or three aroused little cries of admiration.

Peggy was a dryad. She had rushed away to the woods on Shashai to return with her mount buried from sight in autumn leaves. The dark, rich reds of the oaks, the deep yellow of the beeches, the dogwood's and maple's gorgeous variations and the sweet-gums blood red mingled in a bewildering confusion of color. Stripping the leaves from the twigs she proceeded to sew them upon a plain linen gown, and the result was exquisite, for not a vestige of the fabric remained visible, and Peggy's piquant, rich coloring peeped from a garment of living, burning color. She herself was the only one who did not fully appreciate the picture she presented.

Polly's costume was a character from one of the children's pages in a Sunday newspaper. The entire costume was made of newspapers, with "The Yellow Kid" much in evidence, Polly's tawny hair lending itself well to the color scheme.

Natalie, who was fair as a lily, had chosen "sunlight," and was a bonny little sun goddess. Lily Pearl, after a great deal of fuss and fidgeting had elected to go as Titania, and Helen essayed Oberon. Juno, who was very musical, made quite a stately Sappho. Little, sedate Marjorie was an Alaskan-Indian Princess, and Rosalie rigged up a Puck costume which made her irresistible. Isabel chose to be Portia, though that erudite lady seemed somewhat out of place among the

mythological characters. But Stella was a startling Sibyl, with book, staff, and a little crystal globe (removed from her paper-weight) in which to read horoscopes. The others went in all sorts of guises or disguises.

182

In the laundry they found all properties provided. To tell of all which took place would crowd out too much which must follow. Of course apples were bobbed for, a hat pin was run through them to prod the seeds for the true lover's heart, and they were hung upon strings to be caught in one's teeth (the apples, *not* the hearts) if luckily one did not get one's nose bumped as they swung back. Melted lead was poured through a key into cold water to take the mysterious form which would reveal the occupation, or profession, of the future *He*, and Lily Pearl was thrown into an ecstasy by having *her* sputtering metal take very distinctly the form of a ship. *And that house party "bid" not even hinted at yet!*

They walked downstairs backward, looking into a mirror to discover the particular masculine face which would fill their live's mirrors, though, unhappily some of the potency of the charm was lost because it could not be done upon the witching stroke of midnight.

Dumb cakes were made, *his* initials pricked in the dough, while in perfect silence the cakes were baked on the laundry steam dryer, joy and rapture descending upon the fortunate she if the initials did not vanish in the baking. A ball of twine was thrown out of the kitchen window, but when the thrower hurried out to find the ardent one who had so promptly snatched it up and fled, she discovered Horatio Hannibal Harrison beating a hasty retreat. He had been playing "Peeping Tom" and the ball had caught him squarely upon his woolly crown. A doubtful conscience did the rest.

183

A dozen other tests followed until the girls' occult knowledge reached the limit. Then they danced in the Gym to music furnished by Mrs. Vincent, who ended the prancing by sending in a huge "fate cake," a big basket of nuts, a jug of sweet cider and some of Aunt Hippy's cookies.

Cutting the fate cake ended the Hallow E'en frolic. Lily Pearl was thrown into a flutter by finding the ring in her slice. Juno turned scornful when a plump raisin fell to her share, Helen drew a tiny key from her piece, and the coin dropped into Rosalie's lap.

"Rubbish! I don't want riches. I want a handsome husband," she cried with refreshing frankness.

"I hardly think I would noise that fact abroad," was Isabel's superior criticism.

"No, I wouldn't if I were you, it would be so perfectly preposterous," retorted Rosalie.

Isabel made no reply, but took care that no one else discovered who had found the thimble.

184

## CHAPTER XII

### CHRISTMAS AT SEVERNDALE

By a lucky chance Christmas this year fell upon Monday, thus giving the midshipmen either liberty, or leave, according to their classes, or conduct grade, from Saturday at twelve-thirty to Monday at five-thirty, when those enjoying the latter rare privilege had to report for duty in Bancroft Hall. Christmas leave for the first class was an innovation, which only those on first conduct grade might hope to enjoy. That there was the ghost of a chance of any member of the lower classes coming in for such a rare treat not even the most sanguine dreamed. *But*, and that *BUT* was written in italics and capitals, when Captain Stewart made up his mind to do a certain thing it required considerable force of will, stress of circumstances, and concerted opposition to divert him. But the outcome lies in the near future.

The excitement incident to the rescue of Columbine had barely subsided when a telegram brought Peggy the joyful news that Captain Stewart's ship, which had met with some slight accident to her machinery, was to be dry-docked at Norfolk and her father was to have two weeks' leave. The *Rhode Island* was to be in port at the New York Navy Yard, and this meant the forgathering of all who were nearest and dearest to Peggy and Polly; a rare joy at the holiday season for those connected with the Navy.

185

Consequently, this year's Yuletide was to be a red letter one in every sense, for Mrs. Howland and Gail, who had spent Thanksgiving in New York, would return to Annapolis for Christmas and, joy of joys! Constance, Snap, and Mr. Harold would come with them.

The telegraph and telephone wires between New York, Norfolk, Washington and Annapolis were in a fair way to become fused.

As many of the girls lived at great distances from Washington, the Christmas Recess began on the twenty-second. Captain Stewart had 'phoned to his party "Heavy marching orders, three P.

M., Friday, Dec. 22, 19—" A wild flutter ensued.

The Thanksgiving holiday at Mrs. Harold's had been widely discussed at Columbia Heights and had stirred all sorts of emotions to their very centers. At Captain Stewart's request, Mrs. Harold had sent unique invitations to each of the girls soon after their return to school. They were couched in the formal wording of an official invitation from a battle ship of the fleet and created a sensation.

186

Natalie, Stella, Nelly, Rosalie, Juno and Marjorie were invited. Lily Pearl's and Helen's attentions to Peggy and Polly having proved abortive, they contrived ways and means of their own to reach the Land o' Heart's Desire. Helen's old bachelor uncle, a queer, dull old gentleman, whose mind was certainly *not* active, and whom Helen could, figuratively speaking, turn and twist about her little finger, was persuaded to pass the holidays at Wilmot Hall. He knew a number of people in Annapolis, so the path to a certain extent was cleared for Lily Pearl and Helen, though they would have given up all the uncles in Christendom to have been included in that house party. But half a loaf is certainly better than no bread, and once at Annapolis they meant to make the most of that half. So it was with no small degree of triumph that they announced the fact that they, too, would be at the Christmas hop. Just how they intended to manage it they did not disclose. Sufficient unto the hour was to be the triumph thereof.

Captain Stewart arrived on Friday morning in time for luncheon and, guileless man that he has already shown himself to be, promptly offered to "convoy the two little cruisers to Annapolis." His offer was accepted with so many gushing responses that the poor man looked about as bewildered as a great St. Bernard which has inadvertently upset a cage of humming birds, and finds them fluttering all about him. Lily and Helen were of a different type from the girls he knew best, but he accepted the situation gracefully and enjoyed himself hugely with the others, even Marjorie blossoming out wonderfully under his genial kindness.

187

Isabel amused him immensely. Isabel was to spend her holiday in Boston, *of course*, but was to meet a friend in Baltimore who would chaperone the shrinking damsel safely to Mamma's protecting arms. Captain Stewart would escort her to the Naval Academy Junction, from which point it seemed perfectly safe to let her pursue the remaining half hour's journey to Baltimore unattended. In the course of the journey from Washington to the Junction Isabel elected to make some delayed notes in her diary, greatly to the secret amusement of Captain Stewart, who happened to be sitting just behind her.

"Making a list of all your dances and Christmas frolicings, little-er-ahem—, Miss?"

"Boylston, Captain Stewart. Oh, no, I rarely attend dances; there is so much that is instructive to be enjoyed while at home. I am making some notes in my diary."

188

"Don't say so. Find the outlook inspiring?" Captain Stewart laughed as he looked out upon the dreary landscape, for the afternoon was lowery, and certainly, the cheerless flat landscape between Washington and the Junction was far from thrilling.

"Oh, I am not depending upon my visual sight for my inspiration, Captain Stewart. Don't you think the study of one's fellow beings intensely interesting?"

"Yes, it's a heap cheerier inside the car than outside on this confoundedly soggy day," answered Captain Stewart, preparing to withdraw from an even more depressing atmosphere than that beyond the car windows, by turning to Rosalie, whose eyes were commencing to dance. But Isabel had no idea of foregoing an opportunity to make an impression, little guessing the sort of one she was in reality making.

"Yes, it is exceedingly damp today, but do you think we ought to allow externals to affect us?" she asked.

"Eh? What? I'm afraid you're getting beyond my bearings. Lead won't touch bottom."

Isabel smiled indulgently: One must be tolerant with a person forced to spend his life within the limited bounds of a ship.

189

"Miss Sturgis, our instructor in sociology, advises us to be very observing and to take notes of everything unusual. You know we shall graduate next year and time passes *so* swiftly. It seems only yesterday that I entered Columbia Heights School, and here Christmas is upon us. I have so little time left in which to accomplish all I feel I should, and I could not graduate after I'd passed seventeen. I'd *die* of mortification. And, oh, that fact holds a suggestion. Pardon me if I make a note of it, and—and—*how* do you spell accomplished, Captain Stewart? I really have so little time to give to etymology."

For one second Captain Stewart looked at the girl as though he thought she might possibly be running him. He was more accustomed to the fun-loving, joking girl than to this "cellar-grown turnip" as he mentally stigmatized her. Then the little imp in Rosalie's eyes proved his undoing:

"I'm afraid I'm no good as an English prof. Reckon I'd spell it *akomplish*. Sounds as good as any other way. You'll know what it means when you overhaul it anyhow. But here we are at the Junction. Pipe overside, bo's'n," he cried to Peggy.

190

Good-bys were hastily spoken and Captain Stewart soon had his party hurrying across the platform to the Annapolis car. As he settled Rosalie in her seat he asked:

"How many Miss Boylstones have you got at Columbia Heights?"

"Only one, thank the powers!" answered Rosalie fervently.

It was nearly six when the electric cars rolled up to the rear of Wilmot Hall and the girls saw Mrs. Harold, and a number of the midshipmen of the first class lined up and eagerly watching for the particular "she" who would spend the holidays in Annapolis.

A mob of squabbling boys made a mad rush for the car steps in the hope of securing suitcases to carry into the hotel, and had not the midshipmen swept them aside, further progress for the car's passengers would have been barred. The hoodlums of the town seem to spring from the very ground upon the arrival of a car at Wilmot and certainly make life a burden for travelers trying to descend the car steps.

There was only time for general greetings just then, as all hurried into Wilmot to meet old friends and new ones, Mrs. Howland, Constance, Snap, Gail and Mr. Harold having already arrived. 191

Pending the departure for Severndale, Mrs. Harold had, at Captain Stewart's request, engaged three extra rooms, thus practically preempting her entire corridor for her guests, and a jollier party it would have been hard to find than the one escorted down to the big dining-room that evening by "The Executive Officer," as Captain Stewart called Mrs. Harold, who was acting as chaperone for his party.

Directly dinner ended Captain Stewart and Commander Harold left upon some mysterious mission which threw the girls into a wild flutter of curiosity.

"Oh, what is it all about?" demanded Rosalie.

"Can't tell one single thing until Daddy Neil says I may," laughed Peggy.

"Does Polly know?" asked Natalie.

Peggy nodded.

"You'll have to bottle up your impatience for an hour or two. Go to your rooms and shake out your pretties for tomorrow night's frolic, for I am going to 'pipe down' early tonight. When you have finished stowing your lockers come back to the sitting-room and we'll have a quiet, cozy time until our commanding officers return. Constance, Gail and Snap must make a call this evening, but I'm not going to let anyone claim my time. It all belongs to my girls," said Mrs. Harold gaily, as she and Mrs. Howland seated themselves before the open fire. 192

The girls hurried away to do her bidding, for it had been decided to remain at Wilmot until after the Christmas hop, all going out to Severndale by a special car when the dance was over, Harrison, Mammy and Jerome, under Mrs. Harold's tactful generalship, having made all preparations for the big house party.

In a few moments the girls returned from unpacking their suitcases.

The Thanksgiving visit had removed all sense of reserve or strangeness with Mrs. Harold, but they did not know Mrs. Howland, and for a moment there seemed an ominous lull. Then Peggy crying:

"I want my old place, Little Mother," nestled softly upon the arm of the big morris-chair in which Mrs. Harold sat, and rested her head against Mrs. Harold. The other girls had dropped upon chairs, but Mrs. Harold was minded to have her charges pro tem at closer range, so releasing herself from Peggy's circling arm for a moment, she reached for two plump cushions upon the couch near at hand and flopping them down, one at either knee said: "Juno on this one, Rosalie on the other; Marjorie beside me and Natalie, Stella and Nelly with Polly," for Polly had already cuddled down upon her mother's chair. 193

Before the words had well left her lips, Rosalie had sprung to her coign of vantage crying:

"Oh, Mrs. Harold, you are the dearest chappie I ever knew, and it's already been ten times lovelier than Polly and Peggy ever could describe it."

With a happy little laugh, Natalie promptly seated herself upon the arm of Mrs. Howland's chair, but Juno hesitated a moment, looking doubtfully at the cushion. Juno was a very up-to-date young lady as to raiment. How could she flop down as Rosalie had done while wearing a skirt which measured no more than a yard around at the hem, and geared up in an undergarment which defied all laws of anatomy by precluding the possibility of bending at the waist line? She looked at Mrs. Harold and she looked at the cushion. As her boys would have expressed it "the Little Mother was not slow in catching on." She now laughed outright. Juno did not know whether to resent it or join in the laugh too. There was something about the older woman, however, which aroused in girls a sense of camaraderie rather than reserve, though Juno had never quite been able to analyze it. She smiled, and by some form of contortion of which necessity and long practice had made her a passed mistress, contrived to get herself settled upon the cushion. 194

"Honey," said Mrs. Harold, patting her shoulder, "if you want to live up to your name you'll discard your coat of mail. Your namesake would have scorned its limitations, and your young figure will be far lovelier and more graceful, to say nothing of the benefit to yourself and future generations, if you heave your armor plate overboard."

It was all said half-jestingly, half-seriously, but Juno gave her head a superior little toss as she answered:

"And go looking like a meal sack? To say nothing of flinging away twenty perfectly good dollars just paid to Madam Malone."

"I'm afraid I'm a very old-fashioned old lady, but I have no notion of letting any Madam Malone, or any other French lady from Erin dictate *my* fashions, or curtail the development and use of my muscles; I have too much use for them. Do Peggy and Polly resemble 'meal sacks?' Yet no Madam Malone has ever had the handling of their floating-ribs, let me tell you. Watch out, little girl, for a nervous, semi-invalid womanhood is a high price to pay for a pair of corsets at seventeen. There, my lecture is over and now let's talk of earthquakes."

At her aunt's question regarding Peggy and herself resembling "meal sacks," Polly laughed aloud and being in a position to practically demonstrate the freedom which a sensibly full skirt afforded, cried:

"If I couldn't *run* when I felt like it I'd *die*. I tell you, when I strike heavy weather I want my rigging ship-shape. I'd hate to scud under bare poles."

The subject was changed but the words were not forgotten. The other girls had all gathered about the blazing logs upon cushions or hassocks, and a pretty group they formed as they talked eagerly of the coming hop, and tried to guess what Captain Stewart was planning, Mrs. Harold and Mrs. Howland joining enthusiastically in it all.

"Tanta," asked Polly, "do you know that Lily Pearl Montgomery and Helen Doolittle are here at Wilmot with Helen's uncle? We have christened him 'Foxy Grandpa.' Just wait till you see him. He looks the character exactly."

"Are they to go to the hop?" asked Mrs. Harold, instantly interested, for even though she had heard amusing tales of the two girls, they were still young girls, and she was concerned for their happiness and pleasure.

"We don't know and we didn't like to seem inquisitive," replied Polly.

"Yes, they are going, Little Mother. Helen told me so. Foxy Grandpa knows somebody who knows somebody else, who knows the boys who are to take them, but they didn't tell us their names. I wonder if we know them," was Peggy's laughing explanation.

"I hope they will have a happy time," said Mrs. Howland gently as she stroked back Polly's silky curls.

"You trust them to have the time of their lives, Mumsey. But oh, *isn't* it good to be here!" and Polly favored her mother with an ecstatic hug.

"What time are we to go to Severndale tomorrow, Little Mother?" asked Peggy.

"Not until after the hop, dear. It will be very late, I know, but Christmas is a special day of days. That is the reason I'm going to send you all off early tonight. Nine-thirty gunfire will see you started for the Land o' Nod."

"Aren't we to wait until Daddy Neil comes back?"

"Not unless he gets back before three bells and it looks doubtful, two have already struck. But you'll learn the news the first thing in the morning."

But at that moment Captain Stewart came breezing into the room. Peggy and Polly flew to him crying:

"Did he say yes? Did he say yes? Oh, answer, quick! Do!" they begged, each clasping arms about him.

"If I answer quick you'll both cast loose but the longer I keep you in suspense the longer you'll lay hold," was his quizzical retort.

"We won't stir. We won't budge. Tell us."

For answer Captain Stewart drew an official-looking document from his blouse pocket and waved it high above the girls' heads. A series of ecstatic squeals arose from them. Opening the carefully folded paper he read its stereotyped phrasing, all of which is too serious to be herein repeated. Suffice it to say that it secured for

Durand Leroux, Second Class  
Herbert Taylor, Second Class  
Ralph Wilber, Third Class  
Jean Paul Nichols, Third Class  
Gordon Powers, Third Class  
Douglas Porter, Third Class

leave of absence under Captain Neil Stewart's orders from 6:30 P. M., December 23rd, to 6 P. M., December 25th, 19—.

When the excitement had somewhat subsided, Captain Stewart said:

"Now that I'm sure of it, I must go 'phone out to Severndale or Jerome and Harrison will be throwing fits. We'll have to quarter that bunch in the old wing, but Lord bless my soul, I reckon they'd be willing to go out to the paddock. But mind, you girls, *not one whisper of it to those boys, until I give the word*, or it will be the brig for every mother's daughter of you," and with this terrifying threat he strode off down the corridor.

Just then three bells struck in the tower and at the second stroke the nine-thirty gun boomed out its welcome "Release."

As the sound died away Mrs. Harold walked over to the big window calling to the girls to join

her.

"Stand here a moment," she said, then going over to the electric switch turned off all the lights.

"Why? What?" cried all the girls excepting Peggy and Polly.

"Look at the windows on the third deck of Bancroft, southwest corner," she said, unhooking a drop light from above her desk and crossing the room to the puzzled girls. "Those are Durand's and Bert's rooms. Next to them are Gordon's and Doug's. Watch closely."

Presently from two of the windows lights were flashed three times in rapid succession. Then absolute darkness.

Instantly Mrs. Harold turned the reflector of her drop light toward the academy in such a way that the light would be cast out across the night, then by turning the key on and off quickly she flashed its rays three times, paused a moment, then repeated the signal. 199

Instantly from the rooms mentioned came the answering flashes, which after a brief interval were repeated, Mrs. Harold again giving her reply.

"Oh, who does it? What is it for? What do they mean?" asked her visitors.

"Just our usual good-night message to each other. My boys are all dear to me, but Durand and Gordon peculiarly so. Those rooms are theirs. Shall I tell you the message the flashes carry? It is just a little honor code. I want the boys to stand well this term, but, like most boys they are always ready for skylarking, and the work from seven-thirty to nine-thirty is easily side-tracked. So we have agreed to exchange a message at gunfire if 'all is well.' If they have been boning tomorrow's work my flash light is answered; if not—well, I see no answering flash."

"Do you think they always live up to the agreement?" asked Rosalie.

"I have faith to believe they do. Isn't it always better to believe a person honest until we prove him a thief, than to go the other way about it? Besides, they carry the Talisman." 200

"What is it—Little Mother?" asked Juno, to the surprise of the others, slipping to Mrs. Harold's side and placing her arm about her.

"Would you really like to know, dear? Suppose we throw on a fresh log and leave the lights turned off. Then we'll have a confidential ten minutes before you go to bed. You can all cuddle down in a pile on the big bearskin."

A moment later the flames formed a brilliant background to a pretty picture, and Mrs. Harold was repeating softly, as the upspringing flames filled the room with, their light and rested lovingly upon the young faces upturned to here:

"Each night when three bells strike the hour  
Up in the old clock's lofty tower,  
A flashing beam, a darting ray  
Their message of good faith convey.

"Those wavering, clear, electric beams,  
Who'll guess how much their message means?  
Or dream the wondrous tale they tell?  
'Dear Little Mother, all is well.'

"Yes, out across the peaceful night,  
By moon and stars made silvery bright,  
This message comes in gleaming light:  
We've kept the faith; Good-night! Good-night!

"Our token of a duty done,  
An effort made, a victory won;  
The bond on which we claim the right  
To flash our message, our 'Good-night.'

"Dear Little Mother. Precious name!  
None sweeter may a woman claim,  
No greater honor hope to gain  
Than this which three short words contain. 201

"To win and hold a love so pure,  
A faith so stanch, so strong, so sure—  
To gain a confidence so rare—  
What honors can with these compare?

"No wonder as I flash my ray  
Across the night's dividing way,  
In deepest reverence I say:  
God keep you true, dear lads, alway."

The girls' good-nights were spoken very tenderly. The message of the lights had carried one to them as well.

## CHAPTER XIII

### YULETIDE

"We are one real old-timey family, sure enough," said Captain Stewart heartily, as he gathered his girls about him in Mrs. Harold's sitting-room Saturday morning. "But, my-oh, my! I wish I were that Indian-Chinese-Jap god, what's his name? who has about a dozen, arms. Two are just no account," he added laughingly as he held Peggy in one and Polly in the other, while all the other girls, Gail included, crowded around him, all talking and laughing at once, all demanding to know what would be the very first thing on the day's program.

Mr. and Mrs. Harold, Mrs. Howland, Constance and Snap were seated about the room, highly amused by the group in the center, for the girls had gathered about Captain Stewart as honeybees gather about a jar of sweets.

"Come close! Come close, and I'll tell you. Can't talk at long range," rumbled the kindly man, flopping his arms over Peggy's and Polly's shoulders like an amiable sea lion.

203

Rosalie flew to snuggle beside Polly. Natalie by Peggy, the other girls drawing as close as possible, Stella excepted, who laughed, blushed prettily and said:

"I think Captain Stewart has more than his arms full now, so I'll hover on the outskirts."

"I used to be scared to death of him," confessed Gail, "but those weeks up in New London scared away my scare."

"Well, what is it to be this morning?" asked Peggy.

"Suppose we all go over and take a look around the yard. It may be rather slow with just two old fogies like Harold and me for escorts, but we'll leave the matrons at home and take Snap. That ensign's stripe on his sleeve makes him seem a gay young bachelor even if he is a staid old Benedic, and Constance can lend him to you girls for a little while, anyway."

"I'm game! No telling which one will be responsible for an elopement, Connie," cried Snap, bending over his pretty young wife to rest his dark hair against hers for a second.

She laughed a happy little laugh as she answered:

"Go along, Sir Heartbreaker. People down here have not forgotten auld lang syne and I dare say the rocking chair fleet will at once begin to commiserate me. But you girls had better watch out; he is a hopeless flirt. So beware!" Nevertheless, the light in her eyes as she raised them to the handsome man whose hand rested upon her shoulders held little of apprehension.

204

Ten minutes later the merry group had set forth. Mrs. Harold, Mrs. Howland and Constance were only too glad to have their lively charges out of the way for an hour or two, for a good bit must be attended to before they could leave for Severndale that evening. Captain Stewart and the girls would not return until twelve o'clock and the boys—who had been invited out for luncheon rather than to dine, former experiences having taught Mrs. Harold the folly of inviting dinner guests on a hop night—would arrive immediately after formation.

At twelve o'clock the girls returned from the Yard, and when one bell struck were watching in undisguised eagerness for their luncheon guests. From Mrs. Harold's windows they could see the steady stream of men rushing from Bancroft toward the main gate, and in less time than seemed possible, footsteps were audible—yes, a trifle more than audible—as "the bunch" came piling up Wilmot's stairway; for the promptitude with which "the Little Mother's boys" responded to "a bid" to Middies' Haven was an unending source of wonder to most people and certainly to her school-girl guests.

205

Eight midshipmen, came tramping up the stairs, eager to welcome old friends and ready to meet new ones upon the old ones' recommendations.

To Peggy, Polly and Nelly the happy, laughing, joking lot of lads were an old story, but the influx came near turning some of the other girls' heads.

Juno was sorely divided between Douglas Porter's splendid figure and Durand's irresistible charm, until Miss Juno began to absorb the full significance of "class rates" and gold lace. The "five-striper" or head of the entire brigade was a well set-up chap and rather good looking, though suffering somewhat from a bad attack of "stripitis," as it was termed in Bancroft Hall. He was fairly efficient, a "good enough fellow" but not above "greasing," that is, cultivating the officers' favor, or that of their wives and daughters, if thereby ultimate benefits accrued to himself.

The three-striper of Ralph's, Jean's and Durand's company whom Mrs. Harold had asked to escort Stella, was an all-round popular man, and a great favorite of Mrs. Harold's for his



irreproachable character, sunny, lovable disposition and unfailing kindness to the underclassmen.

206

The others who crowded the room are old friends.

Jean Paul and Rosalie chattered like a pair of magpies. Natalie was the happiest thing imaginable as she and Bert Taylor, who had found the little golden-head most enticing, laughed and ran each other like old chums. Peggy was everywhere, and although Durand strove to break away from Juno in order to "get in a few" with Peggy, he was held prisoner with "big Doug" until Guy Bennett the five-striper arrived and promptly appropriated her. Then Durand got away.

Gordon Powers devoted himself to Nelly, while Ralph hovered over Polly, for they had endless interests in common.

"And you made the crew, Ralph!" cried Polly. "Maybe I wasn't tickled nearly to death when you wrote me about it. And you're out for basketball too? How did you come out in Math and Mech? And who's taken Gumshoe's place this year? And you never wrote me a word about Class President Election, though I guess I've asked you in every letter. What makes you so tight with your news, any way? I write you every little thing about Columbia Heights. Come across with it."

207

Ralph turned crimson. Polly looked first baffled then suddenly growing wise, jumped at him and shook him by the shoulders just as she used to do in the old days as she cried:

"It's *you!* And you never told me! You good-for-nothing boy."

"Hi! Watch out! The Captain's clearing for action," cried Jean Paul. "Told you you'd catch it when she found out."

"Well, Tanta might have told me, anyhow," protested Polly.

"Ralph wouldn't let me. Kept me honor bound not to. But if you are all ready for your luncheon, come down at once. There are—how many of us? Twenty-four? Merciful powers!"

"No, Tanta, only twenty-three. Poor Gail's minus an escort," cried Polly, a shade of regret in her eyes, for Gail meant a great deal to this little sister.

"Why, so she is. Now that's too bad of me," but something in her aunt's voice made Polly look at her keenly. A moment later she understood.

As the merry, laughing, chattering group reached the last landing of the stairs leading down to the Assembly Hall, a tall, broad-shouldered man who stood at the foot looked eagerly upward. Polly gave one wild screech and nearly fell down the remaining steps, to fling herself into the arms outstretched to save her, as a deep voice said:

208

"One bell, Captain Polly! You'll carry away your landing stage if you come head on at full speed."

"Oh, Shortie! Shortie! Where did you come from?" cried Polly, nearly pumping his arm from its socket, while all the others crowded around to welcome the big fellow whom all had loved or esteemed during his undergraduate days.

"Ask the Little Mother. She's responsible, and Gail needs looking after among all this bunch, I know. Come along, young lady. I've got to see you fed and cared for."

And Gail seemed perfectly willing to "come along."

With such an addition to her family, Mrs. Harold had made arrangements to have two large round tables reserved for her in the smaller of the two dining-rooms, the older people at one, with Gail, Stella, Juno, Shortie, Allyn and Guy to make the circle, the younger people with Peggy and Polly as hostesses at the adjoining table. In addition to her own regular waiter, the second head waiter and two assistants had been detailed to serve, but with the Christmas rush and the number of people at Wilmot for the holidays there was more or less delay between courses.

209

"Where is John?" she demanded, as they were waiting for the salad.

"Over yonder. Shall I hail him?" asked Durand, from the next table, promptly putting his fingers to his mouth as though to give one of the ear-splitting whistles which seem to carry for miles.

"If you dare, you scape-grace, right here in this dining-room!" she warned.

"Oh, do it!" cried Polly. "I want to learn how. Show me."

"All right; stick out your tongue," directed Durand and Polly promptly fell into the trap, though unluckily she happened to be looking straight past Durand at the moment, and what proved more embarrassing, right at a table occupied by Foxy Grandpa, Helen and Lily Pearl, whom Mrs. Harold had not yet met, so, of course, did not recognize. (Helen and Lily did not mean to lose sight of Peggy and Polly if they could help it.)

There are some situations where explanations only make matters worse. This was one of them. Polly was in everlasting disgrace and everyone at the table in shouts of laughter, as well as those at other tables near at hand, whose occupants could not have helped hearing and seeing if they would.

210

But at that moment Rosalie diverted attention from Polly by trying to clap her hands regardless of the piece of luncheon roll she held, thus promptly launching it over her shoulder, where it went merrily bounding across the polished floor to be gravely rescued by the irreproachable John. But Rosalie was in the realms of the gods and far above such mundane matters as a luncheon roll's eccentricities.

Mrs. Harold was no whit behind her girls in their fun, and was so well known to every guest in

the hotel that her table was invariably looked upon as a source of amusement for most of the others, and the fun which flowed like an electric current came very near making them forget the good things before them, and the big dining-room full of people found themselves sympathetically affected, each gay bit of laughter, each enthusiastic comment finding an answering smile at some table.

As nearly every member of the first class had gone on Christmas leave, the few who happened to be in Annapolis having remained as the guests of friends, there was a very perceptible thinning out of ranks over in Bancroft that afternoon. Nevertheless, Mrs. Harold had announced an informal tea from four to six and "general liberty" enabled all who chose to do so to attend it. And many chose! But in the interval between luncheon and four o'clock Mrs. Harold "barred out the masculine population" and carried her girls upstairs to change their gowns for her tea. It was during the "prinking process" that some very characteristic comments were made upon the masculine guests now enjoying their post-prandial cigars, or cigarettes, in the smoking-room, below stairs.

211

Mrs. Harold was in her element listening to the girls' frank comments.

"Oh, I know I 'm going to have the very time of my life, Mrs. Harold," exclaimed Natalie, giving a little bounce of rapture.

"Mr. Porter is certainly a remarkably handsome man," was Juno's complacent comment. "But, Mrs. Harold, aren't first classmen really—well—don't they come in for greater privileges? Rate more? Is that what you say down here?"

"Of course. Especially a five-striper, Juno. You'd better cultivate Guy Bennett. It's a great distinction to profit by a five-striper's favors. There are three girls in Annapolis who have reduced that sort of cultivation to a science and if you manage to rival them you will have scored a point, sure enough."

"How many five-strippers are there?" asked Stella.

"Only one, happily, or the girls to whom I allude would have nervous prostration. But the four and three-strippers save the day for them. Nothing below is worth cultivating."

212

"Don't Polly and Peggy 'cultivate' the strippers!" asked Rosalie.

"That depends," was Mrs. Harold's cryptic answer as an odd smile caused her lips to twitch. "Last year's five-striper and a good many other strippers, were with us constantly, and I miss them more than I like to dwell upon. This year's? Well—I shall endeavor to survive their departure."

"Oh, but don't you just love them all!" cried Rosalie.

"Which, the midshipmen or the stripes?" asked Polly.

"Why, the midshipmen, of course!"

"I think a whole lot of some of the boys—yes, of a good many, but there are some whom I wouldn't miss much, I reckon."

"Oh, I think you are perfectly heartless, Polly. They are just the darlinest men I ever met."

With what unction the word "men" rolled from Rosalie's tongue. "Men" had not figured very largely in Rosalie's world, and Mrs. Harold chuckled inwardly at the thought of classing Rosalie's particular little Jean Paul, in the category of grown-ups; anything more essentially boyish, and full to the brim of madcap pranks, than the eighteen-year-old Jean Paul, it would have been hard to picture.

213

Mrs. Harold had dispatched notes to Helen and Lily Pearl asking them in Peggy's and Polly's name to be present at her little tea that afternoon, to meet several of the midshipmen, and, if they cared to do so, to bring with them the men who were taking them to the hop. She did not know who these men were.

Shortly after four Helen and Lily Pearl arrived in a flutter. Mrs. Harold had not felt it incumbent upon her to include Foxy Grandpa, concluding that he could find diversion for an hour or two while his charges were with their school-chums. When Helen and Lily arrived upon the scene, Mrs. Harold's face was a study. Foxy Grandpa was evidently too dull to be critical and Columbia Heights was at a safe distance.

Both Lily Pearl and Helen were gotten up regardless. Each wore extravagant gowns, each had done up her hair and supplemented it by wonderful creations of false puffs. Each wore dangling ear-rings and the complexion of each girl had been "assisted."

Poor Mrs. Harold felt as though a couple of chorus girls had invaded her little sanctum, and Peggy and Polly were furious. But it was too late then to retreat and a few moments later the midshipmen began to pour into the sitting-room, the two who were to take Helen and Lily being men whom Mrs. Harold had always avoided, feeling that they were no companions for the frank, unaffected girls she loved so dearly. She resolved to keep her eye piped.

214

It was a merry afternoon. Rosalie scintillated, and her scintillation proved infectious for Jean Paul, upon whom she had made a deep impression at Thanksgiving; he instantly appropriated her, greatly to Mrs. Harold's amusement, for she was never too fully occupied to notice significant signs.

Quiet, dignified Bert Taylor had promptly taken bonny Natalie under his serene protection. And Juno! Well she was sorely divided between Doug's towering seventy-four inches and Gordon's

sixty-nine, though she strove to conceal the exaltation which her uniformed gallants stirred in her soul by bringing to bear upon them all the superlative superiority which she had studied as the acme of success in the habits of the Hotel Astor. With Douglas it worked to a charm. He rose to the corresponding rôle as a trout to a fly, but poor Gordon was only too thankful when the companionship and conversation became more general. The superior young lady from the metropolis was beyond his ken. Little Nelly Bolivar's sweetness and quaint humor filled his ideals to far greater satisfaction. He had met Nelly first at Severndale and several times since with Mrs. Harold, who had often invited her to spend the weekend at Wilmot, where she had looked to the young girl's welfare, knowing how much she must miss Peggy this winter.

215

Nelly was simply dressed in a gown which had once been Peggy's, for most of Peggy's garments went to Nelly, but were given so sweetly and with such evident love, that not even the most sensitive nature could have been wounded, and they were a real blessing to her. No one ever commented upon the fact and before going to Columbia Heights, Nelly had spent many a busy hour with Mrs. Harold remodeling and working like a little beaver under that good friend's guidance, for Nelly was a skilful little needlewoman. As a result, no girl in the school was more suitably gowned. The only girls who had eyed her critically were Lily Pearl, Helen and Juno. The first because she was too shallow to do aught but follow Helen's lead, and Juno from a naturally critical disposition. Juno meant to hold her favor somewhat in reserve. She intended first to see what Nelly's standing at Severndale proved. She might be Polly's and Peggy's friend—well and good—but who was she? Would she find a welcome among the Delacys, the Vanderstacks, the Dryers and heaven knows which-or-whats of New York's glitterers?

216

Juno was hardly in a position to gauge her standards by those who represented the big city's finest and best. She saw the patrons of the great hotels and moved among them, but of New York's sterling worth, she was as ignorant as a babe. Its superficial glamour and glitter, as well as its less desirable contingent, which she was not sufficiently experienced in the world's ways to fully understand, made the strongest appeal to her. Poor little Nelly Bolivar would have been a modest, sleek little Junco compared with the birds of paradise (?), cockatoos, and pheasants of Juno's world, but of all this Nelly was quite unaware and too happy in her present surroundings to care.

It was a merry afternoon for all, but a diversion was created by Polly, shortly before it ended.

She was at the tea-table pouring, and talking to Ralph like a phonograph, when Mrs. Harold became aware of a horrible odor, and cried:

"What under the sun smells so abominably? Why, Polly Howland, look at my perfectly good teakettle! It is red hot, and—horrors—there isn't one drop of water in it!"

217

True enough, absorbed in her conversation with Ralph, Polly had completely overlooked the trifling detail of keeping her kettle filled, though the alcohol lamp beneath it was doing its duty most lampfully.

Damages repaired and the kettle at length filled and singing merrily, the gay little gathering took slight note of time, but soon after four bells struck in the tower clock, Mrs. Harold began to "round up" her masculine guests, for she had no notion of their being late for formation.

"Take your places in the 'firing line!'" she ordered.

"Oh, there's loads of time, Little Mother!" came in protest from Jean Paul.

"Time to burn," from Dick Allyn, who found Stella mighty entertaining.

"Now, Little Mother, you're not going to be so hard-hearted as to turn us out early tonight! Why, it's weeks since we've had the girls here," wheedled Durand.

"Can't help it. Out you all go! There's too much at stake just now to risk any demerits."

"At stake? What's at stake, Little Mother?" were the eager questions.

"Can't tell you a single thing now. I'm tongue-tied until Captain Stewart passes the word."

218

"Oh, what is it? Please come across with it, Little Mother. When may we know," begged Ralph.

"At formation tonight perhaps. No use teasing! Join the firing line!" and with the command of a general Mrs. Harold shooed her brood out into the corridor, where overcoats and caps hung. They were used to these sudden dismissals, and so were Polly and Peggy, who were too familiar with all that which must be crowded into a limited amount of time not to appreciate what it meant to have "the decks cleared" when necessary. But Rosalie, Natalie, Juno, Marjorie, Stella and the other girls accepted the new order of things with divers emotions. Rosalie giggled, Natalie's face expressed wonder. Juno's was just a shade critical, Marjorie and Stella smiled.

"Gee, if we obeyed all orders with as good grace as we obey the Little Mother's what models we'd be," was Jean Paul's jerky comment as he struggled into an overcoat, his eyes still fixed upon Rosalie's winsome face.

Meanwhile, Doug Porter was clawing about among the coats to find his own, but happening to glance at Jean Paul, shouted:

"Well, I'll be hanged! Say, how is it to get out of my coat, Bantam?"

True enough, the garment into which the wee man was wriggling trailed upon the carpet, but Jean Paul was in a realm where overcoats 'never were or e'er had been.'

219

At six-fifteen the lingering good-byes had been said and Mrs. Harold had dismissed those who constituted the "firing line," the name having been bestowed by Wheedles when he first

witnessed the promptitude with which Mrs. Harold sent her boys to the right-about in order to avoid demerits for tardiness.

"Why must they rush back on the very minute?" asked Rosalie, when all were gone, half inclined to resent an order of things which deprived her of her gallant Jean sans ceremony.

"Discipline! Discipline! Little lady," laughed Mrs. Harold, coming up behind Rosalie and turning the piquant face up to hers.

"I should think they'd feel like a lot of school boys to be ordered about so," was Juno's rather petulant comment.

"Better feel 'like a lot of schoolboys' here, than like a lot of simpletons when they 'hit the tree,'" was Mrs. Harold's merry reply. "You've a whole lot to learn about regulations, my bonny lassie."

It was all said so kindly and so merrily that Juno could not resent it.

"But when will they learn about their leave? And if they are to go out to Severndale tonight how will they manage?" asked Rosalie eagerly. 220

"Trust Daddy Neil to manage that. When they get back they'll be called to the office and the officer in charge will notify them of what has taken place and give them their orders."

"Oh, I don't think I can possibly wait to hear what they'll say!" cried Polly. "I never, never knew such a lovely thing to happen before."

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## CHAPTER XIV

### AT SEVERNDALE

"My goodness!" cried Rosalie, "I thought I knew Peggy Stewart, but the Peggy Stewart we know at Columbia Heights, and the Peggy Stewart we saw at Wilmot, and the Peggy Stewart we've found here are three different people!" 221

"And if you stay here long enough you'll know still another Peggy Stewart," nodded Polly sagely.

"She is a wonder no matter where you find her," said Nelly quietly, "and she grows to be more and more of a wonder the longer you know her."

"How long have you been observing this wonderful wonder?" asked Juno.

"I think Peggy Stewart has held my interest from the first moment we came to live at Severndale," was Nelly's perfectly truthful, though not wholly enlightening, answer. Juno thought the evasion intentional and looked at her rather sharply. She was more than curious to see Nelly's home and father, and wondered if the party would be invited there. 222

The Christmas hop, which had been a paradise within flag-draped walls for Captain Stewart's guests, was numbered among delights passed, but so many more were in store and the grand climax of the year, the New Year's eve hop, though, alack! it had to be given on the night of December thirtieth instead of the thirty-first, was looked forward to with eagerness.

The party had come out to Severndale by a special car at twelve-thirty, and a "madder, merrier" group of young people it would have been hard to find.

Upon their return to Bancroft Hall after Mrs. Harold's summary dismissal from "Middie's Haven" the previous Saturday night, Ralph, Jean Paul, Durand, Bert, Gordon and Doug had been ordered to report at the office and had it not been for the hint given at the tea, would have gone in trepidation of spirit. But it so happened that the officer in charge was possessed of a flickering memory of his own midshipman days, and his twinkling eyes and cheerful grin were reassuring. The boys all openly adored him, and even though they had dubbed him *Hercules* Hugh, would have formed a door mat of their bodies had he hinted a desire for it.

When the lucky six finally grasped the fact that Captain Stewart had actually obtained forty-eight hours liberty for them, and they were to go out to Severndale with the house-party, some startling things came very near taking place right in the O C's office. Luckily the favored ones restrained themselves until they reached Durand's room on the third deck, where a vent promptly presented itself, and is too good a story to leave untold. 223

Naturally at Christmas, innumerable boxes of "eats" are shipped to the midshipmen from all over the United States, their contents usually governed by the section of the world from which they are forwarded. New England invariably sends its quota of mince pies, roast turkeys and the viands which furnish forth a New England table at Yuletide. The South and West send their special dishes.

Durand's Aunt Belle never failed him. Each holiday found a box at Bancroft addressed to the lad who was so dear to her, and it was always regarded as public property by Durand's friends, who never hesitated to open it and regale themselves, sure that the generous owner of the "eats" would be only too glad to share with them everything he owned. But like most generous souls, Durand was often imposed upon, and this year the imposition went to the very limit. While Durand and his friends were over in Wilmot Hall his box was rifled, but it could hardly have been said to have been done by his friends, several men who had counted upon "Bubbles being a good old scout" having made way with practically everything the box contained. When he returned to his room the turkey carcass, picked clean as though buzzards had fallen upon it, rested forlornly upon its back in the middle of his study table. It was well for him that the midshipman on duty in his corridor had been one of the marauders, otherwise he would have been speedily reported for that which followed.

224

When the yelling, shouting bunch rushed into Durand's room they stopped short and a few expletives expressed their opinions of the pirates. But Durand's wits worked quickly. Catching up the denuded bird by its greasy neck and giving the yell of a Comanche, he rushed out into the corridor waving his weapon over his head like a war club. The man on duty at the table at the end of the corridor saw him coming and needed no further hint that his Nemesis was upon him. Regardless of duty or anything else, he bounded from his chair and fled around the corner of the corridor, the turkey carcass speeding after him with unerring aim.

Had he remained within range he would have received all and more than his share of the bird. Unluckily, a divisional officer had chosen that moment to turn into the corridor, and the turkey whizzed over his head, for he was one very tiny man. Durand did not wait to make inquiries. He had not removed cap or overcoat, a window was close at hand, the window of the adjoining room was accessible to one as agile as Durand, and the next second he was out of one and through the other, leaving his friends to make explanations.

225

Why it did not result in Durand and all the others losing those precious forty-eight hours of liberty, only their special guardian spirits were in a position to explain, but they kept discreetly silent. The men in Durand's room could truthfully declare that they had not had a thing to do with the launching of that extraordinary projectile and also that Durand was not in his room. It was not necessary to be too explicit, they felt, and twenty minutes later all were over at Middie's Haven, Guy Bennett and Richard Allyn, to Juno's secret disgust, having shifted into civilian clothes as was the privilege of the first classmen "on leave," the difference between "leave" and "liberty" being very great indeed. Stella, although admiring the uniforms, was tantalizingly uncritical. The girls could never quite understand Stella's lack of enthusiasm over the midshipmen.

226

And so had passed that joyful evening of the Christmas hop, the biggest surprise of all awaiting them up at Round Bay upon the arrival of the car at that station.

Nearly every horse and vehicle at Severndale had been pressed into service to carry its guests from the station, and mounted on Shashai and Star, Jess having brought them home for the holidays, were Happy and Wheedles.

They had been unable to leave their ships as soon as Shorty, so taking a later train had gone directly to Severndale. Their welcome by Peggy and Polly was a royal one. When the party arrived at Severndale another surprise greeted it as a very fat, very much-at-home Boston bull-terrier came tumbling down the steps to greet them. To all but Polly he was an alien and a stranger. Polly paused just one second, then cried as she gathered the little beast into her arms, regardless of the evening wrap she was wearing:

"Oh, Rhody! Rhody! who brought you?"

As though to answer her question, Rhody rolled his pop-eyes toward Wheedles.

Of the happy Sunday and happier Christmas day space is too limited to tell. At five P. M. Durand, Ralph, Jean Paul, Bert, Gordon and Doug were obliged to bid their hostesses adieu and return to Annapolis, but each day of Christmas week held its afternoon informal dance at the auditorium, to which Mrs. Harold escorted her party, the mornings being given over to work by the midshipmen, and to all manner of frolicing out at Severndale by Happy, Wheedles, and Shortie, who seemed to have returned to their fun-loving, care-free undergraduate days.

227

Yet how the boys had changed in their seven months as passed-midshipmen. Although full of their fun and pranks, running Peggy and Polly unmercifully, showing many little courtesies to Nelly whom all had grown to love during the old days, and playing the gay gallants to the other girls, there was a marked change from the happy-go-lucky Wheedles, the madcap Happy, and the quaint, odd Shortie of Bancroft days.

But Shortie's interest was unquestionably centered on one golden-haired little lady, and many a long ride did they take through the lovely country about Severndale. Captain Stewart watched proceedings with a wise smile. Gail and Shortie were prime favorites of his.

Happy and Wheedles had to do duty for many during the morning hours, but the girls' especial escorts were punctual to the minute when the launch from Severndale ran up to the Maryland Avenue float at three-forty-five each afternoon, and they had no cause to complain of a lack of attention, for many beside those who had been invited to Severndale were eager for dances with little gypsy Rosalie, tall, stately Stella, winsome Natalie, shy Marjorie or the scornful Juno, whose superiority was considered a big joke.

228

During their week in Annapolis Helen and Lily Pearl had made tremendous strides in a certain

way. Foxy Grandpa had met a gushing, gracious widow, who made Wilmot her home. That the lady's hair was of a shade rarely produced by nature, and her complexion as unusual as her innumerable puffs and curls, Foxy Grandpa was too dull of sight and mind to perceive. He had gone through life somewhat side-tracked by more brilliant, interesting people, and to find someone who flattered him and fluttered about him with the coyness of eighteen years, when three times eighteen would hardly have sufficed to number her milestones, went to the old gentleman's head like wine, and he became Mrs. Ring's slave to the vast amusement of everyone in Wilmot.

And Mrs. Ring promptly took Helen and Lily Pearl under her chaperonage, introduced her son, a midshipman, to them, who in turn introduced his room-mate, and a charming sextet was promptly formed. Poor Mrs. Vincent was likely to have some lively experiences as the result of that Christmas holiday, for Paul Ring and Charles Purdy were one rare pair of susceptible simpletons, if nothing worse. 229

And so passed the week at Severndale for Mrs. Harold's party, Peggy once more the gracious little chatelaine, sure of herself and entertaining her guests like a little queen, a perfect wonder to the other girls. Polly was happy as a grig, and all the others equally so. The older people rejoiced in this rare reunion, and Captain Stewart each day grew more devoted to his "Howland bunch" as he called them. The three girls openly adored him, and dainty, quiet little Mrs. Howland beamed upon everyone, little guessing how often the good Captain's eyes rested upon her when she was unaware of it, or how he was learning to esteem the mother of the three young girls whom he pronounced "jewels of the purest water."

But that lies in the future. It is once more Saturday morning and once more a big dance is pending to which all are going.

This time Shortie was taking Gail, Wheedles had asked Stella, Happy was looking after Juno, Polly would go with Ralph, Peggy with Durand, Rosalie would have cried her eyes out had any one save Jean Paul been her gay gallant, Natalie was Bert's charge, Marjorie and big Doug had become good chums, and, of course, Gordon Powers had made sure of Nelly's company. 230

As this was to be the most magnificent affair of the holiday season, it had been decided to drive into Annapolis directly after luncheon, attend a matinee to be given at the one funny little theatre the town boasted, and for which Mrs. Harold had secured three stalls in order to include "the bunch," then to go to Wilmot to dine and dress, Mammy, Harrison and Jerome having been intrusted with the transportation of the suitcases containing the evening finery.

All went merry as a marriage bell. When the matinee ended the boys were sent to the right about and the girls hurried to their rooms to make their toilets, for a six-thirty dinner had been ordered and everybody would be present.

As the girls, excepting Stella and Gail, were all under seventeen, and still to make their formal bows to the big social world, their gowns were all of short, dancing length, Juno's excepted. Juno was a good deal of a law unto herself in the matter of raiment. Her father supplied her with all the spending money she asked for, and charge accounts at several of the large New York shops and at a fashionable modiste's, completed her latitude. There would be very little left for Juno to arrive at when she made her *début*. 231

There was no time for comment or correction when the girls emerged from their rooms to accompany the older people to the dining-room, but at sight of Juno's gown Mrs. Harold's color grew deeper, and for a moment her teeth pressed her lower lip as though striving to hold back her words. Juno and Rosalie shared one room but Rosalie had known nothing of the contents of Juno's suitcase until it came time for them to dress, then her black eyes had nearly popped out of their sockets, for certainly Juno's gown was a startling creation for a school-girl.

Needless to add, the one which she was supposed to have taken to Annapolis had been replaced by the present one at the last moment, and Mrs. Vincent was not even aware that Juno possessed such a gown as the one she was then wearing.

It was a beautiful pearl white charmeuse, cut low in front and with a V in the back which clearly testified to the fact that the wearer was *not* afflicted with spinal curvature. Its trimmings were of exquisite lace and crystals sufficiently elaborate for a bride, and the skirt was one of the clinging, narrow, beaver-tailed train affairs which render walking about as graceful as the gait of a hobbled-horse, and dancing an utter impossibility unless the gown is held up. It was a most advanced style, out-Parisianing the Parisian. When Juno prepared to get into it, even Rosalie, charming beyond words in a pink chiffon, had cried: 232

"Why, Juno Gibson, it's lucky for you Mrs. Vincent isn't here. You'd never go to the hop in that dress."

"Well, she isn't here, so calm yourself."

But the climax came as they were crossing Wilmot's reception hall on their way up from dinner. Mrs. Harold was walking just behind her flock, Peggy with her, fully conscious of the tension matters had assumed, for modest little Peggy had been too closely associated with Polly and Mrs. Harold not to have stored away considerable rational worldly knowledge and some very sane ideas.

As they were about to ascend the stairs Juno with well affected indifference caught up her train, thereby revealing the latest idiosyncrasy of the feminine toilet. She wore silver slippers and black silk tights and had quite dispensed with petticoats. The stage and the Hotel Astor had developed Juno's knowledge of *la mode en règle* at a galloping pace. 233

Some of the girls gave little gasps, and amused smiles flitted across the faces of the people within range. Mrs. Harold colored to her forehead.

When they reached her corridor she said to Juno:

"Little girl, will you come into my room a moment?"

"Certainly, if you wish it, Mrs. Harold," was the reply in a tone which meant that Juno had instantly donned her armor of repulsion

Seating herself upon a low chair, Mrs. Harold drew a hassock to her side, motioning Juno to it. The seat might have been accepted with a better grace. Mrs. Harold took the lovely, rebellious face in both her hands, pressed her lips to the frowning forehead, and said gently:

"Honey, smoothe them out, please, and, remember that what I am about to say to you is said because Peggy's and Polly's friends are mine and I love them. Yes, and wish them to learn to love me if possible. Nothing is dearer to me than my young people and I long to see all that is best and finest developed in them. You have come to me as a guest, dear, but you have also come to me as my foster-daughter pro tem, and as such, claim my affectionate interest in your well-being. Mother and daughter are precious names."

234

There was a slight pause, in which Juno gave an impatient toss of her handsome head and asked in a bitterly ironical voice:

"Are they? I am afraid I'm not very well prepared to judge."

Mrs. Harold looked keenly at the girl, a light beginning to dawn upon her, though she had heard little of Juno's history.

"Dear heart, forgive me if I wounded you. It was unintentional. I know nothing of earlier experiences, you know. You are just Polly's friend to me. Perhaps some day, if you can learn to love and trust me, you will let me understand why I have wounded. That is for another time and season. Just now we have but a few moments in which to 'get near' each other, as my boys would say, and I am going to make a request which may displease you. My little girl, will you accept some suggestions regarding your toilet?"

"I dare say you think it is too grown-up for me. I know I'm not supposed to wear a low gown or a train."

"I'm afraid I should be tempted to say the gown had been sent to you before it had grown-up enough," smiled Mrs. Harold. "And certainly some of its accessories must have been overlooked or forgotten altogether."

"Why, nobody wears anything but tights under a ball gown nowadays. How would it fit with skirts all bunched up under it? As to the neck, it is no lower than one sees at the opera at home. I know a dozen people who wear gowns made in exactly the same way, and Madam Marie would expire if I did not follow her dictates—why, she would never do a bit more work for me."

235

"Then I beg of you, outrage the lady's ideas forthwith, for—" Mrs. Harold laid her hand upon Juno's—"no dressmaker living should have the power to place a refined, modest little girl in a false position, or lower her womanly standards and ideals. Not only hers, dear, but what is vastly more far-reaching, the ideals of the boys and men with whom she is thrown. You are too young to fully appreciate this; you could hardly interpret some of the comments which are sure to be made upon the ballroom floor from those who are somewhat lacking in finer feeling; nor can you gauge the influence a truly modest girl—I do not mean an ignorantly prudish one, for a limited knowledge of the facts of life is a dangerous thing—has over such lads as you meet."

"You have a beautiful hand, dear," continued Mrs. Harold, taking Juno's tapering, perfectly manicured fingers in hers. "It is faultless. Make it as strong as faultless, for remember—nothing has greater power figuratively. You hold more in this pretty hand than equal franchise can ever confer upon you. See that right now you help to make the world purer—your sisters who would have the ballot are using this crying need as their strongest argument—by avoiding in word or deed anything which can dethrone you in the esteem of the other sex, whether young or mature, for you can never know how far-reaching it will prove. You think I am too sweeping in my assertion? That you never have and never could do anything to invite criticism? Dear heart, not intentionally, I know, but in the very fact that you are innocent of the influence which—say such a gown as you are now wearing, for an illustration—may have, lies the harm you do. If you fully understand you would sooner go to the hop tonight gowned in sackcloth; of this I am certain."

236

For a moment Juno did not speak. This little human craft was battling with conflicting currents and there seemed no pilot in sight. Then she turned suddenly and placing her arms about Mrs. Harold, laid her head upon the shoulder which had comforted so many and began to sob softly.

"My little girl! My dear, dear little girl, do not take it so deeply to heart. I did not mean to wound you so cruelly. Forgive me, dear."

237

"You haven't wounded me. It isn't that. But I—I—don't seem to know where I'm at. No one has ever spoken to me in this way. I'm often scolded and lectured and stormed at, but no one cares enough to make me understand. Please show me how. Please tell me. It seems like a glimpse into a different world."

"First let me dry the tears I have been the cause of bringing to your eyes—if my boys see traces of them I shall be brought to an account. Then we will remedy what might have done harm."

As she spoke Mrs. Harold took a bit of absorbent cotton, soaked it in rose water and bathed the lovely soft, brown eyes. Juno smiled up at her, then nestled against her, again.

"My new little foster-daughter," said Mrs. Harold, kissing the velvety cheeks.

"'It's beauty, truly blent, whose red and white,  
Nature's own sweet and cunning hand laid on.'

Keep it so—it needs no aid—we shall learn to know each other better. You will come again—yes, often—and where I can help, count upon me—always? And now I'll play maid."

Ten minutes later when Juno entered the living-room, an exquisite bit of Venetian lace filled in the V at the back of the bodice; the softest white maline edged the front, and when, she raised her train a lace petticoat which any girl would have pronounced "too sweet for words" floated like sea-foam about her slender ankles.

No comments were made and all set forth for the hop. And was the experiment a red letter one? Well!

238

239

## CHAPTER XV

### IN SPRING TERM

"Well, we all came back to earth with a thud, didn't we? But, was there ever anything like it while it lasted," ended Natalie with a rapturous sigh.

"And do you suppose there can ever be anything like it again?" Rosalie's tone suggested funeral wreaths and deep mourning, but she continued to brush her hair with Peggy's pretty ivory-handled brush, and pose before Peggy's mirror. The girls were not supposed to dress in each other's rooms but suppositions frequently prove fallacies in a girl's school and these girls had vast mutual interests past and pending.

Several weeks had passed since the Christmas holidays, but the joys of that memorable house-party were still very vivid memories and recalled almost daily.

It was the hour before dinner. The girls were expected to be ready promptly at six-fifteen, but dressing hour might more properly have been termed gossiping hour, since it was more often given over to general discussions, Stella's pretty room, or Peggy's and Polly's, proving as a rule a rendezvous. All of the Severndale house party were assembled at the moment, and two or three others beside, among them Isabel, Helen and Lily Pearl.

"I hope there may be a good many times like it again," said Peggy warmly. "It was just lovely to have you all down there and Daddy Neil was the happiest thing I've ever seen. I wish we could have him at Easter, but he will be far away when Easter comes."

"Shall you go home at Easter?" asked Helen, flickering hopes of an invitation darting across her mind.

"I hardly think so. You see it is only two weeks off and the Little Mother has not said anything about it, has she, Polly?"

"No, in her last letter she said she thought she'd come down to Washington for Easter week and stop at the Willard, but it is not settled yet. I'd rather be in Annapolis at Easter and go for some of our long rides. Wasn't it fun to have Shashai and Silver Star back there during our visit! I believe they and Tzaritza and Jess had the very time of their young—and old—lives. And wasn't Tzaritza regal with Rhody?"

"It was the funniest thing I've ever seen," laughed Stella. "That dog acted exactly like a royal princess entertaining a happy-go-lucky jackie. Rhody's life on board the *Rhode Island* since you and Ralph rescued him seems to have been one gay and festive experience for a Boston bull pup."

"It surely has," concurred Polly. "Snap says he's just wise to everything, and did you ever see anything so absurd as those clown tricks the jackies taught him?"

"I think you are all perfectly wonderful people, dogs and horses included," was Rosalie's climax of eulogy, if rather peculiar and comprehensive.

"Well, we had one royal good time and we are not likely to forget it either. Peggy, weren't you petrified when you struck 'eight bells' at the hop, for the death of the old year? Goodness, when those lights began to go out, and everybody stopped dancing I felt so queer. And when 'taps' sounded little shivery creeps went all up and down my spine, and you struck eight bells so beautifully! But reveille drove me almost crazy. When the lights flashed on again I didn't know whether I wanted to laugh or cry I was so nervous," was Natalie's reminiscence.

"It was the most solemn thing I ever heard and the most beautiful," said Marjorie softly. "It

240

241

242



made me homesick, and yet home doesn't mean anything to me; this is the only one I have known since I was eight years old."

"Eight years in one place and a school at that!" cried Juno. "Why, I should have done something desperate long before four had passed. Girls, think of being in a school eight years." Juno's tone implied the horrors of the Bastille.

"If you had no other, what could you do?" Marjorie's question was asked with a smile which was sadder than tears could have been.

Juno shrugged her shoulders, but Polly slipped over to Marjorie's side and with one of Polly's irresistible little mannerisms, laid her arm across her shoulder, as hundreds of times the boys in Bancroft demonstrate their good fellowship for each other. Another girl would probably have kissed her. Polly was not given to kisses. Then she asked:

"Won't your father come East this spring for commencement? You said you hoped he would.

"I've hoped so every spring, but when he writes he says it takes four whole months to reach Washington from that awful place in the Klondyke. I wish he had never heard of it."

"I'm so glad you went to Severndale with us. We must never let her be lonely or homesick again, Peggy." 243

"Not while Severndale has a spare hammock," nodded Peggy.

Marjorie was more or less of a mystery to most of the girls, but the greatest of all to Mrs. Vincent to whom she had come the year the school was opened. Mrs. Vincent had more than once said to herself: "Well, I certainly have four oddities to deal with: *Who* is Marjorie? She is one of the sweetest, most lovable girls I've ever met, but I don't really know a single thing about her. She has come to me from the home of a perfectly reliable Congregational minister, but even he confesses that he knows nothing beyond the fact that she is the daughter of a man lost to civilization in the remotest regions of the Klondyke. He says he believes her mother is dead. Heigho! And Juno? What is likely to become of *her*, poor child? What does become of all the children of divorced parents in this land of divorces? Oh, why can't the parents think of the children they have brought into the world but who did not ask to come?

"And Rosalie? What is to become of that little pepper pot with all her loving impulses and self-will? I believe her father has visited her for about one hour in each of the four years she has been here, and I also believe his visits do more harm than good, they seem to enrage the child so. Of course, it is all wounded pride and affection, but who is to correct it? And this year comes Stella, the biggest puzzle of all. Her father? Well, I dare say it is all right, but he sometimes acts more like—" but at this point Mrs. Vincent invariably had paused abruptly and turned her attention to other matters. 244

"Can't the boys ever get leave to visit their friends?" asked Lily Pearl. "I think it is perfectly outrageous to keep them stived up in that horrid place year in and year out for four years with only four months to call their own in one-thousand-four-hundred-and-sixty days!"

"Lily's been doing the multiplication table," cried Rosalie.

"Well, I counted and I think it's awful—simply awful!" lamented Lily. "I'd give anything to see Charlie Purdy and have another of those ravishing dances. I can just feel his arms about me yet, and the way he snuggles your head up against him and nestles his face down in your hair—m—m—m! Why, his clothes smell so deliciously of cigarette smoke! I can smell it yet!"

A howl of laughter greeted this rhapsody from all but Helen, who bridled and protested:

"Oh, you girls may laugh, but you had to walk a chalk line under the eyes of a half dozen chaperones every minute. Lily and I got acquainted with our friends." 245

"Well, I hope we did have a chaperone or two," was Polly's retort. She had vivid memories of some of the scenes upon which she and Ralph had inadvertently blundered during the afternoon informals of Christmas week. The auditorium in the academic building where informals are held, has many secluded nooks. Upon one occasion she had run upon Helen and Paul Ring, the former languishing in the latter's arms. Perhaps mamma would not have been so ready to intrust her dear little daughter to Foxy Grandpa's protection had she dreamed of the existence of Mamma Ring and dear Paul.

At all this sentimental enthusiasm Stella had looked on indulgently and now laughed outright, "What silly kids you two are," she said.

"Well, I don't see that you had such a ravishing time, anyway," cried Helen.

"Why, I'm sure Mr. Allyn was as attentive as anyone could be. He was on hand every minute to take me wherever I wanted to go." Stella's expression was quizzical and made Helen furious.

"Oh, a paid guide could have done as much I don't doubt." 246

"Father *is* a little fussy at times, so perhaps it is just as well. You see I should not have been at Severndale at all if he had not been called to Mexico on business. So I'd better be thankful for what fun I did get. But there goes the first bell. Better get down toward the dining-room, girls," laughed Stella good-naturedly, and set the example. A moment later the room was deserted by all but Helen who lingered at the mirror. When the others were on their way down stairs she slipped to Nelly's room and took from her desk a sheet of the monogram paper and an envelope, which Mrs. Harold had given her at Christmas. As she passed her own room she hid them in her desk for future use. After dinner when the evening mail was delivered, Helen received a letter

bearing the Annapolis postmark. Nelly had one from her father. As she read it her face wore a peculiar expression. The letter stated that her father was coming to Washington to consult with Shelby concerning a matter of business connected with Severndale's paddock. As Nelly ceased reading she glanced up from her letter to find Peggy watching her narrowly. Peggy had also received a letter from Dr. Llewellyn in which he mentioned the fact that Bolivar felt it advisable to run down to Washington. In an instant the whole situation flashed across Peggy's quick comprehension.

247

During the girl's visit at Severndale Jim Bolivar had never come to the house. Nelly had many times slipped away for quiet little talks with her father in their own cottage and had asked him more than once why he did not come up to the big house to see her, and his reply had invariably been:

"Honey, I don't belong there. No, 'tain't no use to argue,—I don't. Your mother would have; she come of quality stock, and what in the Lord's name she ever saw in me I've been, a-guessin' an' a-guessin' for the last eighteen year."

"But Dad, Peggy Stewart has never, never made either you or me feel the least shade of difference in our stations. Neither has Polly Howland. They couldn't be lovelier to me, though I know you have never been at Severndale as guests have been there. But it has never seemed to strike me until now. And down at the school the girls are awfully nice to me; at least, most of them are. Those who are patronizing are that way because they are so to everybody. But the really nice girls are lovely, and I am sure they'd never think of being rude to you."

"Little girl, listen to your old Dad: There are some things in this world not to be got around. I'm one of 'em. Peggy Stewart and Polly Howland are thoroughbreds an' thoroughbreds ain't capable of no low-down snobbishness. They know their places in the world and there's nothing open to discussion. An' they're too fine-grained to scratch other folks the wrong way. But, some of them girls up yonder are cross-breeds—oh, yes, I've been a-watchin' 'em an' I know,—tain't no use to argue. They kin prance an' cavort an' their coats are sleek an' shinin', but don't count on 'em too much when it comes right down to disposition an' endurance, 'cause they'll disappoint you. I ain't never told you honey, that your mother was a Bladen. Well, she was. Some day I'm going to tell you how she fell in love with a good-lookin' young skalawag by the name o' Jim Bolivar. He comes o' pretty decent stock too, only he hadn't sense enough to stay at St. John's where his dad put him, but had to go rampagin' all over the country till he'd clean forgot any bringin'-up he'd ever had, and landed up as a sort o' bailiff, as they call 'em over in the old country, on an estate down on the eastern shore. Then he met Helen Bladen and 's sure's you live she 'changed the name and not the letter and changed for a heap sight worse 'n the better' when she eloped with me. Thank the Lord she didn't live long enough to see the worst, and you hardly remember her at all. But that's my pretty history,—a no-count, ne'er do well, and if it weren't for Peggy Stewart, God bless her! you'd a been lyin' 'long side o' yo' ma out yonder this minute, for all I'd ever a-done to keep you here, I reckon, much less give you the education you're a-gettin' now. No, honey, I won't go up to the great house. If I'd a-done right when I was a boy I'd be sittin' right up there with the rest o' that bunch o' people this minute. But I was bound to have my fling, and sow my wild oats and now I can have the pleasure of harvestin' my crop. It ought to be thistles, for if ever there was a jackass that same was Jim Bolivar."

248

249

Nelly had listened to the pitiful tale without comment, but when it ended she placed her arms about her father's neck and sobbed softly. She had never mentioned this little talk to anyone, but it was seldom far from her thoughts, and now her father was coming to Washington.

Peggy slipped her arm about her and asked:

"What makes you look so sober, Nellibus?"

"Because I'm a silly, over-sensitive goose, I dare say."

Peggy looked puzzled.

Nelly handed her her father's letter. Peggy read it, then turned to look straight into Nelly's eyes, her own growing dark as she raised her head in the proud little poise which made her so like her mother's portrait.

250

"When he comes I think matters will adjust themselves," was all she said.

The following Friday afternoon Jim Bolivar was ushered into the pretty little reception room by Horatio Hannibal, who went in quest of Nelly. As she had no idea of the hour her father would arrive, she was preparing to go for a ride with a number of the girls, for the day was a heavenly one; a late March spring day in Washington.

"Miss Bol'var, yo' pa in de 'ception room waitin' fo' to see yo', Miss," announced Horatio.

"I'll go right down. Sorry I can't go with you, girls."

"May we come and see him just a minute before we start!" asked Peggy quickly, while Polly came eagerly to her side.

"Of course you may. Dad will love to see you," was Nelly's warm response.

"We won't keep you waiting long, girls," said Peggy, "we'll join you at the porte cochere."

Arrayed in their habits, Peggy, Polly and Nelly hurried away.

"Wonder what he looks like," said Juno idly as she drew on her gauntlets.

251

"Bet he's nice if he's anything like Nelly," said Rosalie.

"Isn't it funny you girls never saw him while you were at Severndale?" said Lily Pearl.

"Perhaps he's not the kind Nelly Bolivar cares to have seen," was Helen's amiable remark, accompanied by a shrug and a knowing look.

"Why, what do you mean, Helen?" asked Natalie with some spirit.

"Just what I say. I believe Nelly Bolivar is as poor as Job's turkey and that Peggy Stewart pays all her expenses here. And I know she wears Peggy's cast-off clothes. I saw Peggy's name in one of her coats. You know Peggy has her name and the maker's woven right into the linings. Just you wait and see what her father looks like and then see if I'm far wrong."

"Why, she's nothing better than a charity pupil if that's true," sneered Lily Pearl, who never failed to follow Helen's lead.

"If Mrs. Vincent opens her school to such girls I think it would be well for our parents to investigate the matter," was Isabel's superior criticism.

"Yes, you'd better. Mother would be delighted to have an extra room or two; she has so many applicants all the time," flashed Natalie, her cheeks blazing. 252

"Children, children, don't grow excited. Wait until you find out what you're fuming about," said Stella in the tone which always made them feel like kids, Rosalie insisted. "And come on down. The horses have been waiting twenty minutes already and Mrs. Vincent will have a word or two to say to us if we don't watch out."

As they crossed the hall to the porte cochere, Peggy, Polly and Nelly came from the reception room, Mr. Bolivar with them. The lively curiosity upon the girls' faces was rather amusing. Juno favored him with a well-cultivated Fifth Avenue stare. Helen's nose took a higher tilt if possible. Lily Pearl giggled as usual. Stella smiled at the girls and said: "Glad you're coming with us." Isabel murmured "Horrors!" under her breath and waddled with what she believed to be dignity toward the door. Marjorie only smiled, but Rosalie and Natalie stopped, the former crying impulsively:

"Introduce your father to us, Nelly; we want to know him."

The man the girls looked upon had changed a good deal from the despondent Jim Bolivar whom Peggy had seen sitting upon the upturned box in Market Square so long ago. Prosperity and resultant comforts had done a good deal for the despairing man. There were still some traces of the handsome Jim Bolivar with whom pretty, romantic Helen Bladen had eloped, though the intermediate years of sorrow and misfortune had changed that dapper young beau into a careless, hopeless pessimist. What the end might have been but for Peggy is hard to guess, but the past two years had made him think and think hard too. Though still slipshod of speech as the result of associating with his humbler neighbors, he was certainly making good, and few lapses occurred as he shook hands with Nelly's friends and then went out to help them mount. In his dark gray suit, Alpine hat and his gray gloves, something of the gentleman which was in him became evident. 253

He helped each girl upon her horse, greeted Junius Augustus, patted Shashai, Star and Tzaritza; deplored poor Columbine's shorn glories, smiled an odd smile at Isabel's bulky figure upon the more bulky Senator, then said:

"I'll see you when you come back, honey. I've got to have a talk with Shelby. Some things is—are —bothering me back yonder. Have a fine gallop. It's a prime day for it. Good-bye, young ladies," and raising his hat with something of the gallantry of the old Bolivar he followed Junius toward the stables.

That night Mrs. Vincent asked him to dine with her, but he declined on the score of an engagement with a friend. He and Shelby dined in Washington and during that meal he made just one allusion to Nelly and her surroundings. 254

"It's all very well for a man to make a plumb fool of himself and waste his life if he's a-mind to, but he ain't got any business to drag other folks along with him. If I hadn't a-been a fool among fools I might a-been sittin' beside my little girl this minute, and not be scared to either, Shelby. My dad used to say something about 'man being his own star,' I don't recollect it all, but I know it meant he could be one of the first magnet if he'd a mind to. I set out to be a comet, I reckon, all hot air tail, and there isn't much of me left worth looking at."

"How old are you!"

"Forty-four."

"Well, you've got twenty-five years to the good yet. Now get busy for the little girl's sake."

"Shake," cried Jim Bolivar, extending his hand across the table.

Meanwhile back yonder at the school, Friday night being "home letters night" the girls were all busily writing, but Helen kept the monogram upon her paper carefully concealed. 255



256

## CHAPTER XVI

### A MIDNIGHT SENSATION

But two weeks remained of the spring term. School would close on May twenty-eighth. Already Washington had become insufferably warm, and even Columbia Heights School situated upon its hill, was very trying. The girls were almost too inert to work and spent every possible moment out of doors.

The moment school ended Peggy, Polly and Nelly would go back to Annapolis and Rosalie was to go with, them as Peggy's guest for a month. Mrs. Harold had invited Marjorie, Natalie, and Juno to be Polly's guests for June week under the joint chaperonage of herself and Mrs. Howland, after which plans were being laid for the entire party to go to Provincetown with "all the Howland outfit," as Captain Stewart and Mr. Harold phrased it, there to live in a bungalow as long as the Atlantic fleet made that jumping-off place its rendezvous. It bid fair to be a tremendous house party, though the lads whom the girls had grown to know best would not be there. The practice squadron was going to Europe this summer. However, "the old guard" as Happy, Wheedles and Shortie, as well as dozens of others from earlier classes were called, would be there and things were sure to be lively. But all this lies in the future.

257

Helen and Lily Pearl had been invited to Annapolis for June week, by Mrs. Ring, and were to go to the June ball with dear Paul and Charles Purdy. They had not been asked to dance the German since they had made no special friends among the first classmen. Peggy and Polly were to dance it, one with Dick Allyn, the other with his room-mate, Calhoun Byrd, who, in Bancroft's vernacular "spooned on Ralph" and had always considered Polly "a clipper." Juno was to go with Guy Bennett, Nelly, Rosalie, Marjorie and Natalie had, alack! to look on from the gallery, escorted by second-classmen.

But now of immediate happenings at Columbia Heights School.

It had been arranged that Shelby should take Shashai, Star and Tzaritza back to Severndale on the twenty-second, as it was now far too warm to ride in Washington. Moreover, Shelby's engagement with Mrs. Vincent expired May fifteenth and he was anxious to get back to Severndale. Then at the last moment, Mrs. Vincent decided to send all the saddle horses to Severndale for the summer months and keep only the carriage horses and the white groom at the school. So Shelby wrote Jim Bolivar that "he'd better come along down and get on the job too." Consequently, about a week after the girl's visit to Annapolis and Rosalie's escapade, Jim Bolivar arrived at the school and took up his quarters in the pretty little cottage provided for Shelby. He expected to spend about two days helping to get matters closed up for the summer,

258

then start on with Junius Augustus in charge of Columbine, Lady Belle, the Senator, and Jack-o'-Lantern, Shelby following a day later with Shashai, Star, Madame Goldie and Old Duke. So far so good out in the stables. Within the school Nelly was learning the difference between being the daughter of patrician blood come upon misfortune, and cheerfully making the best of things, and some extremely plebeian blood slopped unexpectedly into fortune, and trying to forget its origin. Had not Nelly possessed such loyal old friends as Peggy and Polly, and made such staunch new ones as Rosalie, Natalie, Stella and Marjorie, her position might have been a very trying one. And now only eight days remained before vacation would begin. Already the girls were in a flutter for June week at Annapolis. Would it be fair? Would it be scorching hot? Would there be moon-light nights?

259

"There'll be moon-light if the old lady has half a chance to show herself," said Polly's assured voice and nod.

"We had a new moon on the eighteenth," said Peggy. "That means brim-full in June week, and, oh, girls, won't it be fairy land! How I wish, though, you were all to dance the German. I can't help feeling selfish to leave you out of that fun."

"You aren't leaving us out. We understand that even the Little Mother can't ask her boys to take a girl to the German! But we aren't likely to pine away with all the other fun afoot," cried Natalie gaily, doing a pirouette across the room just by way of relieving pent-up anticipation.

"Helen said she might be invited to dance the German after all. Dear Paul's Mamma has a grease with a first classman," laughed Rosalie.

"When I see her on the floor I'll believe it," said Juno.

"Where is Helen tonight?" asked Marjorie.

"Up in her room. Lily has a sick headache and she went up with her. Guess that cousin of Helen's who came down from Baltimore, Foxy Grandpa's daughter, or niece, or something, I believe, and spent this afternoon with her, gave those girls too many chocolates. Wasn't she the limit? And big? Well, I'll wager that woman was six feet tall, and she was made up perfectly outrageously. Her skin was fair enough, and her color lovely and I never saw such teeth, if they weren't store ones, but there was something about the lower part of her face that looked queer. Did you notice it, girls?" asked Polly.

260

"I did. There was such a funny dull tinge, like a man who had just been shaved," commented Rosalie, with a puzzled frown.

"Her voice struck me funniest. Do you remember Fräulein Shultz who was here the first year school opened, Marjorie?" asked Natalie.

"Yes, we used to call her Herr Shultz. Such a voice you never heard, girls!"

"Well, this cousin's was exactly like Herr Shultz."

"Her clothes were the climax with me. I believe she must have been on the stage sometime. Oh, yes, they were up-to-date enough, but, so sort of—of—tawdry," criticised Juno.

"Do you know, she reminded me of somebody I know but who it is I just can't think," and Peggy puckered her forehead into wrinkles.

"Oh!" cried Nelly, then stopped short.

"What's the matter? Sat on a pin?" asked Rosalie, laughing.

261

"Something made me jump," answered Nelly, pulling her skirt as though in search of the pin Rosalie had suggested. Then in a moment she said:

"Reckon I'll go in, girls, I've got to send a note home by father and he starts pretty soon."

"Why do they start at night?" asked Juno.

"Cooler traveling for the horses. They leave here about eight, travel about nine miles an hour, for two hours, stop at — for the night, start again at seven in the morning, and will reach Severndale by ten o'clock at latest. It seems like a long trip, but that makes it an easy one. Shelby will start tomorrow or next day. And won't all those horses have the time of their lives! I am so glad that they're to be there," explained Peggy.

"So is mother, Peggy Stewart," cried Natalie.

Meanwhile Nelly had gone to her room. It was next Helen's and Lily's. On beyond was Stella's sitting-room. Nelly roomed with a girl who had been called home by illness in her family. Consequently Nelly now had the room to herself. She wrote her note and then went to find Mrs. Vincent to ask permission to run out to the stables to give it to her father.

As she passed Helen's and Lily's door she heard them whispering together and also heard a deeper voice. Whose could it be? It was so unusual that she paused a moment in the dimly lighted hall. She did not mean to be an eavesdropper, but she thought all the girls from the west wing were down on the terrace where she had left them that perfect May night. They had gone out there immediately dinner ended, for study hour had lately been held from five to seven on account of the warm evenings, Mrs. Vincent objecting to the lights which made the house almost suffocating.

262

Presently the deep-voiced whisper was heard again. Nelly started as though from an electric shock. Had Helen's cousin returned, but when? And that whisper was a revelation. Then she went on her way. Consent was promptly given and Nelly ran across the shadow-laden lawn to

the stables. She found her father, Shelby and the men just preparing to set forth. Her father was to ride the Senator to set the pace. Junius rode Jack-o'-Lantern. Columbine and Lady Belle were to be led.

As Nelly drew near, Columbine neighed a welcome.

"What's brought you down here, honey?" asked Bolivar. "I was going to stop at the house to say good-bye."

"I wanted to see you alone a minute, daddy."

"Go 'long for a little private confab with her, Bolivar. All right, Nelly, no hurry," said Shelby genially. 263

The thin sickle of the new moon cast very little light as Nelly and her father walked a short distance down the path, Nelly, talking earnestly in a low voice. When she ceased Bolivar said:

"Oh, you must be mistaken, Nelly, why, I never heard of such a fool stunt; yet that kid's capable of most any, I understand. Of course, I'll take the hint and watch out, but just like you say, it's better to keep it dark. It'd only stir up a terrible talk and make Mrs. Vincent's school,—well; she don't want that sort of thing happening. Run 'long back and keep your eyes open. Shall I say anything to Shelby?"

"Not a word, daddy! Not one word! Just get him out of the way if you can."

"That's easy. He's going to ride into the city when I start and none of the boys sleep in the stable. I kind of suspicion your plan but I won't ask no more questions."

At eight-thirty the first "batch o' beasties" "shoved off." The girls ran down the driveway to bid them good-bye and the horses seemed to understand it all perfectly. Then Bolivar and his charges, accompanied by Shelby, set forth upon their ways. It was a wonderful, star-sprinkled night, though the moon had sunk below the horizon. When they had gone a little way Shelby bade them good-bye and good-luck and turned into the broad boulevard leading into Washington. Bolivar followed the quieter road on the outskirts of the city. Presently he said to Junius: 264

"Land o' love, I'd as soon ride an elephant as this horse. His back's as broad. Hold on a minute, I'm going to shift my saddle to Columbine. I know her and she knows me, don't you, old girl?"

"She's de quality, sure," agreed Junius.

"This is something like," sighed Bolivar, falling easily into Columbine's smooth fox-trot. They had gone perhaps a mile when Bolivar suddenly clapped his hand to his breast-pocket and pulled up short.

"What done happen, Mr. Bol'var?" asked Junius.

"I'm seven kinds of a fool. Left my wallet in that old coat Shelby let me wear round the stable! Now that's the limit, ain't it? I got to go back. Ain't got a cent with me. You ride on slow and stop at the Pine Cliff Inn up the road a-piece, and wait there till I come. Columbine's fresh as a daisy and the three miles or so will be just a warm-up for her this night. Now wait there. Don't budge a step till I come." 265

"I'll do like you say."

Jim Bolivar started back slowly, but once beyond Junius' sight gave Columbine the rein and was soon within a quarter of a mile of Columbia Heights School.

Meanwhile, in that usually well-ordered establishment some startling events were taking place.

When Nelly left her father she stopped on the terrace to talk a few minutes with the girls. It was then after nine o'clock but during these long, sultry evenings Mrs. Vincent allowed the girls to remain upon the terrace until ten.

Examinations were over, there was no further academic work to be done and most of the preparations for commencement were completed. Indeed, most of the little girls had already left, and several of the older ones also. A general exodus takes place from Washington early in May and the schools close early.

"Whow, I'm sleepy tonight," laughed Nelly, suppressing a yawn. "Reckon I'll go upstairs. Good-night, everybody."

"You'll smother and roast if you go to bed so early, Nell. Stay here with us," cried Polly, catching Nelly's skirt and trying to pull her down beside her.

"Can't. I'd drop asleep right on the terrace," and turning Nelly ran in-doors. Once in her room she speedily shifted into her linen riding suit, then slipping down the back stairs, sped across the dark lawn to the stables. They were dark and silent. Not a soul was in Shelby's cottage where the stable key was kept and a moment later Nelly had taken it from its hook and was at the stable door. A bubble of nickers, or the soft munching of feeding horses, fell upon her ears. Star knew her voice as well as Polly's and Peggy's. Nelly went straight to Star's stall. In less time than it takes to tell it she had him saddled, bridled and led softly out upon the lawn. Keeping within the shadows of the trees she led him to a thick pine grove and taking his velvety muzzle in her hands planted a kiss upon it as she whispered: 266

"Now stand stock still and don't make a sound. I may need you and I may not. If I do it will be in a hurry and you will have to make time." Then she slipped back into the house.

But we must go back to the invalid, Lily Pearl, and her devoted attendant in the west wing. Also the cousin. Ten minutes after Nelly had left her room to carry her note to her father, Helen went to Mrs. Vincent's study.

"Oh, Mrs. Vincent, cousin Pauline came back to see if she had left her engagement ring in my room. She did not miss it until she got back to her friends' house and then she was frightened nearly to death and came all the way back here." 267

"Couldn't she have telephoned?"

"I suppose so, but she never takes it off except to wash her hands. She left it on my dresser. She is going back now. May I walk to the gate with her?"

"Yes, but come directly back, Helen. How is Lily?"

"She's just fallen asleep. Thank you, Mrs. Vincent."

A few moments later Helen and her cousin left the house but not by the door giving upon the terrace. The side door answered far better. Then slipping around the house they paused beneath Stella's balcony and the cousin gave a low whistle. Instantly, Lily Pearl's head was bobbed up over the railing and she whispered:

"Oh, take it quick! I hear Peggy's voice down in the hall!" and a suitcase was lowered from the balcony, the cousin's strong right arm grasped it, as the cousin's deep voice said:

"You're a dead game sport, Lil. You bet we'll remember this."

But Lil did not wait to hear more. She fled to her room pell mell, not aware that in her flight she had overturned a tiny fairy night-lamp which Stella always kept burning in her room at night. Quickly undressing, Lily dove into bed and drawing the covers over her head was instantly sound asleep. The voice which had alarmed her soon died away as Peggy rejoined her friends upon the terrace. 268

Helen and the cousin had meanwhile reached the gate and also a cab which waited there, and were soon bowling along toward Washington.

And what of Nelly? As she was returning to the house she caught sight of the two figures hurrying toward the main gate. Back she sped to Star, and mounting him, rode along the soft turf as silently as a shadow, until she saw the two figures enter the cab.

For a moment she was baffled. What could she do alone? She knew it would be worse than senseless to attempt to stop the runaways unaided. She must have help. Yet if she lost sight of them what might not take place? She had long since recognized Paul Ring in spite of his make-up. She had seen him too many times in the Masquerader's Shows at Annapolis. For a short time she flitted behind the cab like an avenging shadow. It would never do to let Helen make such an idiot of herself, and bring notoriety upon the school where Peggy and Polly were pupils, or so humiliate Mrs. Vincent and Natalie. Nelly did some quick thinking. There was but one road for the elopers to follow. Her father, to whom she had confided her suspicions and begged him to aid her, must be on his way back by this time. Wheeling Star she shot back as she had come, and making a wide detour around Columbia Heights School, put Star to his best paces. Half a mile beyond the school she met her father coming at a fairly good clip. 269

Ten words were enough.

"Thank the Lord we're riding Empress stock!" ejaculated Bolivar as he and Peggy gave the two beautiful creatures their heads and they settled into the long, low stride which seems never to tire, muscles working swiftly and smoothly as the machinery of a battleship, heads thrust forward, nostrils wide and breathing deep breaths to the rhythmic heart-throbs. But the runaways had a good start.

Presently Bolivar said:

"If Shelby has ridden easy he's somewheres ahead on that selfsame road."

"Oh, dad, if he only is!"

"Well, by the god Billiken he is! Look yonder."

A more dumbfounded man than Shelby it would have been hard to overtake.

"Had he seen the cab?"

"Certain. It was hiking along ahead. Passed him just a little time before, the horse a-lather. Wondered who the fools were." 270

"Well, you know now. How far ahead do you reckon they are?"

"Quarter mile beyond that turn if the horse ain't fell dead. Let me break away, overhaul them and then you two come in at the death," he laughed.

Shelby was riding Shashai, and at his word a black streak passed out of sight around the bend of the boulevard. Star and Columbine chafed to follow, but their riders held them back for a time.

True enough, as Shelby had said, the cab was still pounding along toward Washington, though the poor horse was nearly done up.

Shelby came abreast the poor panting beast, leaned quietly over, caught the bridle and cried, "Whoa!" The horse was only too delighted to oblige him. Not so "Cabby."

With wrath and ire he rose to mete out justice to this highwayman. Had the butt of his whip hit Shelby he would have seen more stars than twinkled overhead. But it didn't. It was caught in one hand, given a dexterous twist and sent flying into the road as Shelby said in his quiet drawl:

"Don't get excited. At least, don't let *me* excite you. I ain't got nothing against you, but you can't take those 'slopers no further this night."

271

"'Lopers nothin'! Me fares is two ladies on their ways to the Willard. 'Tis a niece and aunt they are."

"Say, you're easy. I thought you fellows wise to most any game. Niece and aunt! Shucks! Come 'long out aunt, or Cousin Pauline, or whatever you are, and you, Miss Doolittle, just don't do nothin' but live up to that name you've got. Lord, whoever named you knew his or her business all right, all right! Here come Bolivar and his daughter to bear a hand. Now don't set out to screech and carry on, 'cause if you do you'll make more trouble and it looks like you'd made a-plenty a-ready. And you shut up!" cried Shelby, now thoroughly roused, as Paul Ring, his disguise removed and stowed in his suitcase blustered from the cab. "Quit! or I'll crack you're addle-pated head for you, you young fool. Do you know what it will mean if I report you at Annapolis? Well, unless you make tracks for Bancroft P. D. Q.—that means pretty decidedly quick, Nelly,—you're going to get all that is comin' to you with compound interest. Beat it while your shoes are good. We'll escort your girl back to home and friends. Nelly, get into that cab. Cabby, these are two school girls and this man is this one's father. Now go about and head for the home port. No rowing. Yes, you'll get paid all right, all right. I'll stand for the damage and so will Bolivar here. But are *you* going to dust?" the last words were addressed to Paul Ring to whom Helen was clinging and imploring him not to leave her. But, alas! It was four to one, for cabby's wrath was now centered upon "that hully show of a bloomin' auntie."

272

Amidst violent protests upon Helen's part, Nelly entered the cab. She would "not go back!" And she would "go with dear Paul!" Her heart was breaking. Nelly Bolivar was "a good-for-nothing, common tattle-tale and the whole school probably knew all about her elopement already," etc., etc.

Nelly tried to assure her that no one suspected a thing. Mr. Bolivar corroborated that statement, but Helen continued to sob and berate Nelly till finally Shelby's deep voice cried:

"Halt, cabby!" Then dismounting he opened the cab door, took Helen by the arm and shook her soundly, then thundered:

"If you was a boy I'd yank you out o' that cab and whale you well, for that's what you rate. Since you're a fool-girl I can't. Now stop that hullabaloo instanter. We'll get you back to the school and nobody'll know a thing if you keep your senses. Nelly here ain't anxious to have that school and her friends figurin' in the newspapers. Now you mind what I'm tellin' you. I've stood for all the nonsense I'm going to, and I promise to get you home without you're being missed, but if you let out another peep I'll march you straight to the Admiral's office, and don't you doubt my word for a single minute." Then Shelby remounted Shashai, and leading Star, the odd procession started back, Shelby cudgeling his brain to devise a way of getting the romantic maiden in as secretly as he had promised. He need not have worried about that. The inmates of Columbia Heights were meantime having lively experiences of their own.

273

274

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## CHAPTER XVII

### A SEND-OFF WITH FIREWORKS

When Lily Pearl fled from Stella's room leaving the overturned fairy lamp to bring about the climax of that evening, her one thought was to get to bed, and hardly had she tumbled into it than sleep brought oblivion of all else. Lily Pearl was a somnolent soul in many senses.

Mrs. Vincent was busy in her study at the other end of the house. Miss Sturgis was dining with friends. Fräulein, who was a romantic creature, was seated under a huge copper beech tree entertaining a Herr Professor straight from the Vaterland. The other teachers were either out or in their rooms in other parts of the building, and the servants had drifted out through the rear grounds. Consequently, the fairy lamp had things pretty much its own way and it embraced its opportunity.

What prompted Polly to go upstairs just at that crisis she could never have told, but she did, and a second later Peggy followed her. The moment the girls reached their corridor the odor of smoke assailed their nostrils. For an instant they stopped and looked at each other, then Peggy cried:

275

"Polly, something's afire. Quick, the bugle call!" Polly bounded forward and, as upon another



occasion back in Montgentian she had roused the neighborhood and saved the situation, now she sounded her bugle call, but this time it was "fire call," not "warning." Clear, high and sharp the notes rang through the house. Mrs. Vincent down in her study sprang to her feet. The teachers rushed to their posts, the girls ran in from the terrace. Well for Columbia Heights School that Polly had taught them the different calls and that she and Peggy had begged Mrs. Vincent to let the girls learn the fire drill as the boys in Bancroft did it.

Not far off was a fire engine house and the members of the company had more than once come to see the two girls put their schoolmates through their drill. It was all a grand frolic then, for none believed it would ever be put to practical use. But the fire chief had nodded wisely and said to Mrs. Vincent:

"Those two young girls have long heads. It may all be a pretty show-down now, but some day you may find it come in handy."

It came in very handy this time. In two minutes an alarm was turned in and the engines were tearing toward Columbia Heights. The girls had rushed to their rooms, scrambled what they could into blankets, and ran downstairs with their burdens. At least many of them had. All the fire drills in the world will not keep some people's heads upon their shoulders in a crisis. 276

Roused from sleep by the bugle, Lily Pearl, uttering shriek upon shriek, plunged her feet into a pair of pink satin slippers newly bought for commencement, caught up and pinned upon her head the new hat, of which Rosalie had said: "Well, of all the lids! Lily, did the milliner put the trimming on the box and forget to send home the hat?" Then grabbing her fur coat from the closet she ran screaming down to the lawn, certainly somewhat promiscuous as to raiment, for her nightie was an airy affair and she carried her coat over her arm.

But the stately Juno was one of the most amusing objects. She carefully put on a pair of evening gloves and took a lace pocket handkerchief from her bureau drawer. That was all she even attempted to save.

It was well for the school that Polly and Peggy had kept their wits. All were soon out of the building and the firemen battling bravely to confine the fire to the west wing, but poor Stella's room was surely doomed, for what smoke and flames might possibly spare water would certainly ruin. 277

In the midst of the uproar Shelby, Bolivar, Nelly and Helen came upon the scene.

"Good Lord Almighty! Look out for the girls, Bolivar. Guess they'll have no trouble gettin' in unnoticed now," cried Shelby, and sent Shashai speeding to the stables.

Bolivar paused only long enough to hand cabby a ten-dollar bill and cry:

"Clear out quick and keep your mouth shut too!" Then he hurried the terrified girls to the lawn where dozens of other girls were huddled, and nobody asked any questions about the suitcase. Nor did anyone think to ask how Bolivar and Shelby happened to be there when they were supposed to be miles away. Many details were quite overlooked that night, which was a fortunate circumstance for Miss Helen Doolittle, and her hard-hit midshipman, who had "frenched" out of Bancroft not only with mamma's knowledge, but with her coöperation. To have formed an alliance with Foxy Grandpa's niece and clinched that end of the scheme of things would have been one step in the direction of securing an ample income, and once that lover's knot was tied, Helen was to be whisked back to the school and the secret kept. Mamma was at the Willard waiting for "those darling children" to come, and when, much later than he was expected, "dear Paul" arrived alone and in a greatly perturbed state of mind, mother and son had considerable food for thought until the midnight car carried them back to Annapolis, where Paul "clomb" the wall at the water's edge and "snoke" into quarters (in Bancroft's vernacular) in the wee, sma' hours, a weary, disgusted and unamiable youth. Perhaps had he suspected what was happening back at Columbia Heights his prompt oblivion in slumber would not have taken place, though Paul was a philosopher in his way. Helen was with friends and "she'd knock off crying when she found she had to; all girls did." Selah! 278

But during all this time things had not been moving so tranquilly at Columbia Heights. Given over a hundred girls, and a seething furnace of a building in which the belongings of a good many of them were being rapidly reduced to ashes, for the whole west wing was certainly doomed, and one is likely to witness some stirring scenes. The firemen worked like gnomes in the murk and smoke, and Shelby and Bolivar seemed to be everywhere, saving everything possible to save, with many willing hands from the neighborhood to help them. And some funny enough rescues were made. Sofa pillows were carried tenderly down two flights of stairs and deposited in places of safety upon the lawn by some conscientious mortal, while his co-worker heaved valuable cut glass from a third-story window, or pitched one of the girls' writing desks into the upstretched arms of a twelve-year-old boy who happened to stand beneath. 279

Mrs. Vincent was everywhere at once, keeping her girls from harm's way, and the other teachers kept their heads and coöperated with her. At least all but one did, and she was the one upon whom Mrs. Vincent would have counted most surely. When the fire was raging most fiercely Miss Sturgis returned from her visit and a moment later rushed away from the group of girls supposed to be under her especial charge, and disappeared within the house in spite of the firemen's orders that all should stand clear. The girls screamed and called after her but their voices were drowned in the uproar, and none knew that the incentive which spurred the half-frantic woman on was the photograph of the professor with whom she had gone automobiling the day of the fly-paper episode. Poor Miss Sturgis. Her first and only hint of a romance came pretty near proving her last.

Straight to her room in the west wing she rushed, stumbling over hose lines, battling against the stifling clouds of smoke which rolled down the corridor. The room was gained, the picture secured, and she turned to make good her escape, all other valuables forgotten. But even in that brief moment the smoke had become overpowering. Her room was dense. For a moment she sought for the door, growing more and more confused and stifled, then with a despairing moan she fell senseless. Luckily the flames were eating their relentless way in the other direction, the firemen fighting them inch by inch until they felt that they were winning the battle.

280

Meantime, down upon the lawn, the girls had found Mrs. Vincent and told her of Miss Sturgis' folly. She was beside herself with alarm. Men were sent in every direction to find her, but none for a moment suspected her of the utter fool-hardiness of returning to her own room in the blazing wing. But there was one person who did think of that possibility and she quickly imparted her fears to one other.

"She never would," cried Polly.

"She had something there she wanted to save. I don't know what, but she was so excited that she acted just like a crazy person, wringing her hands and crying just before she ran back; I saw her go. Wait! Tzaritza, find Miss Sturgis," said Peggy into the ears of the splendid hound who had never for a single moment left her side, and who had more than once caught hold of her skirts to draw her backward when a sudden volume of smoke or sparks shot upward.

281

For a moment the noble beast hesitated. Little had Miss Sturgis ever done to win Tzaritza's love and in her dog mind duty lay here. But the dear mistress' voice repeated the order and with a low bark of intelligence Tzaritza tore away into the burning building.

"Oh, call her back! Call her back! She will be burned to death" cried a dozen voices. Polly dropped upon the lawn and began to sob as though her heart would break. Peggy never moved, but with hands clinched, lips set and the look in her eyes of one who has sacrificed something inexpressibly dear she stood listening and waiting. When she felt most deeply Peggy became absolutely dumb.

Those minutes seemed like hours, then through an upper window giving on the piazza roof scrambled a singed, smoke-begrimed, and uncanny figure, dragging, tugging, and hauling with her a limp, unconscious woman. She made the sill, hauled her burden over to safety, then lifting it bodily carried it to the roof's edge, where putting it carefully beyond the volume of smoke now pouring from the window, she threw up her head and emitted howl upon howl for aid.

282

It was Shelby who heard and recognized that deep bay, who rushed with a ladder to the spot, and scrambling up like a monkey, caught up Miss Sturgis' seemingly lifeless form and carried her down the ladder, where a dozen willing hands waited to receive her, while Tzaritza's barks testified to her joy. Then back Shelby fled for the faithful creature, but just as he reached the roof a sheet of flame darted out of the window and enveloped her. In a second the exquisite silky coat was a-blaze, and poor Tzaritza's joyous barks became cries of agony.

"Quick, somebody down there hand me one of those blankets!" shouted Shelby.

Ere the words had left his lips a little figure scrambled up the ladder, a blanket in her arms. Polly had seen all and had not waited for orders. Gym work back in Annapolis stood in good stead at that moment. Shelby flung the blanket about Tzaritza's sizzling fur, smothered out the flame, then by some herculean mustering of strength, caught the huge dog in his arms and crawled step by step down the ladder from which Polly had quickly scrambled. A dozen hands lent aid and poor burned Tzaritza was carried to the stables, Peggy and Polly close beside her. Others could now care for Miss Sturgis, who, indeed, was little the worse for her folly, while Tzaritza, the lovely coat quite gone, was moaning from her burns.

283

"Hear, Jim, you stay here and don't you leave Miss Peggy or that dog for a minute. Now mind what I tell you," he ordered.

Peggy knew exactly what to do. It was the Peggy Stewart of Severndale who worked over the suffering dog, bandaging, bathing, soothing, and Tzaritza's eyes spoke her gratitude.

Several of the girls ran out to offer help or sympathy, and their tears testified to their love for Tzaritza.

It was dawn before the excitement subsided, and the firemen had withdrawn, leaving one on guard against the possibility of a fresh outbreak. And that west wing and its contents? Well, let us draw a curtain, heavier even than the smoke which, so lately poured from it. Some things were saved—yes—but the commencement gowns, essays, and all which figures in Commencement Day were fluttering about in little black flakes. There would be no Commencement for Columbia Heights School this year!

A telephone message brought Mrs. Harold and Mrs. Howland upon the scene before many hours, as well as a good many other interested parents. True, a large insurance covered most of the valuables and the building also, but a house after such a catastrophe is hardly prepared to hold a function, so it was unanimously agreed that the girls should all go quietly away as quickly as those whose belongings had been saved could pack them.

284

Mrs. Harold and Mrs. Howland remained over night and on the twenty-fourth instead of the twenty-eighth escorted a nondescript sort of party up to Severndale, for wearing apparel had to be indiscriminately borrowed and lent.

Helen's anxious mamma took her to Philadelphia, where June week's joys were not. Lily Pearl's

parents wired her to come home at once, and Lily departed for the south-land, June week's joys lamented also. Stella's father came in instant response to her telegram and though the one to suffer the heaviest losses, made light of them and asked Stella if she couldn't tear herself from Columbia Heights without such an expensive celebration.

*Is-a-bel*, who had really lost very little, was inconsolable because her "essay," to be read at Commencement, had been burned up, and departed for the Hub, still lugubrious.

Mrs. Vincent asked Shelby to remain a few days longer, which he willingly did. Bolivar had gone on to look up Junius and his charges as soon as he could leave the school.

Peggy insisted upon Mrs. Vincent coming to Severndale for the month when it was finally agreed that the earlier plans should hold, Juno and Natalie extending their visit. So back went the merry party to Annapolis to participate in all the delights of June week, and all which can crowd into it.

So ho! for Severndale! Tzaritza conveyed there an interesting, though shorn convalescent, the horses seeming to sniff Round Bay from afar, Polly wild to see her old friends, and Peggy eager to greet those who were so much a part of her life in her lovely home. And Nelly? Well, no one has ever learned of her night ride, though Helen's peace of mind is not quite complete.

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\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK PEGGY STEWART AT SCHOOL \*\*\*

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