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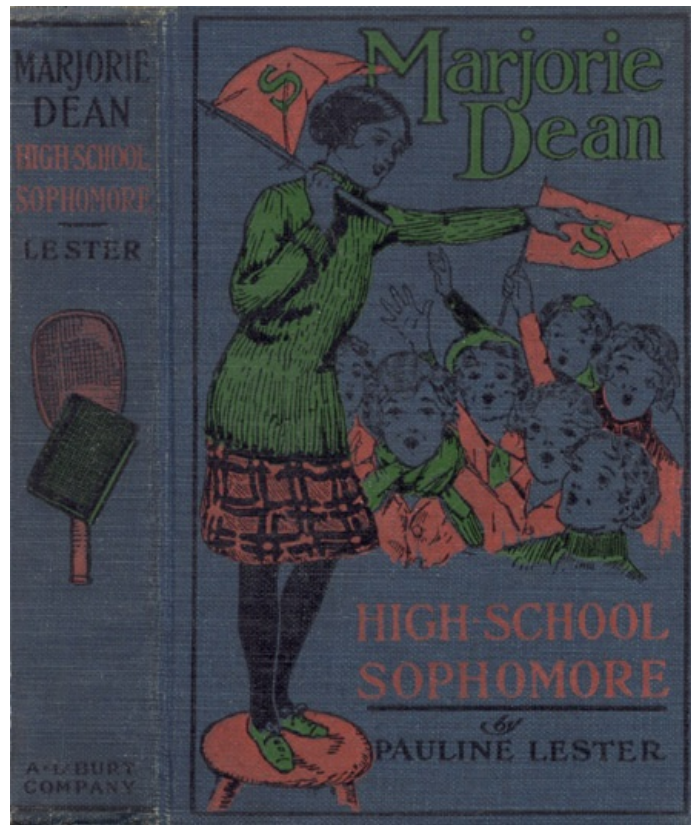
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Marjorie Dean

High School Sophomore



MARY KNELT ON THE DRIVEWAY AND GATHERED CHARLIE INTO HER ARMS.

Marjorie Dean High School Sophomore.

Frontispiece.

MARJORIE DEAN

High School Sophomore

By PAULINE LESTER

AUTHOR OF

"Marjorie Dean, High School Freshman"
"Marjorie Dean, High School Junior"
"Marjorie Dean, High School Senior"



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MARJORIE DEAN, HIGH SCHOOL SOPHOMORE

MARJORIE DEAN, HIGH SCHOOL SOPHOMORE

CHAPTER I

WHEN DREAMS COME TRUE

"COME on in, Connie. The water's fine!" invited Marjorie Dean, beckoning with one round, dripping arm to the girl on the sands, while with the other she kept herself lazily afloat.

The sun of a perfect August morning poured down upon the white beach, dotted here and there with ambitious bathers, who had grasped Time firmly by his venerated forelock, and fared forth with the proverbial early bird for a morning dip in a deceitfully dimpled and smiling sea.

It was not yet nine o'clock, but, fearful of losing a minute of her precious seaside vacation, Marjorie Dean had come down to her favorite playground for her usual early morning swim.

"I know it's fine," laughed Constance Stevens, "but this nice white sand is even finer."

"You'll never learn to swim if you just sit on the beach and dream," reminded Marjorie. "I feel that it's my stern duty to see that your education as a water paddler is not neglected. So here goes!"

With a few skilful strokes she brought up in shallow water. There was a quick rush of lithe feet, the sound of sweet, high laughter, then a little, good-natured gurgle of protest from the golden-haired, blue-eyed girl curled up on the sand as she found herself being dragged into the water by a pair of sturdy young arms.

"Now—sink or swim, survive or perish!" panted Marjorie, as the lapping shallows broke over the yielding figure of her friend. "You'll simply have to be a water baby, Connie, dear. It's as important as being a sophomore in Sanford High, and you know just how important that is! Now, watch me and do likewise."

Her day dream thus rudely interrupted, Constance Stevens laughingly resigned herself to Marjorie's energetic commands, and, now thoroughly awake to the important business at hand, tried her best to follow her friend's instructions. A fifteen minutes' lesson in the art of learning to float followed, and at the end of that time, by common consent, the two girls waded ashore and flung themselves on the warm sand.

"I'll never learn to swim. I feel it in my bones," asserted Constance, as she lazily rose, wrung the water from her bathing suit and seated herself on the white beach beside Marjorie, who lay stretched at full length, her head propped upon her elbows, her alert gaze upon the few bathers who were sporting themselves in the water.

"Then your bones are false prophets," declared Marjorie calmly. "You know how to float already, and that's half the battle. We'll rest a little and talk some more, and then we'll try it again. Next time I'll teach you an easy stroke. Isn't it funny, Connie, we never seem to get 'talked out.' We've been here together five whole weeks and yet there always seems to be something new to say. You are really a most entertaining person."

"That's precisely my opinion of you." Constance's blue eyes twinkled.

The two girls laughed joyously. Two wet hands stretched forth and met in a loving little squeeze.

"It's been wonderful to be here with you, Marjorie. Last year at this time I never dreamed that anything so wonderful could possibly happen to me." The golden-haired girl's voice was not quite steady.

"And I've loved being here with you. What a lot of things can happen in a year," mused Marjorie. "Why, at this time last year I never even knew that there was a town called Sanford on the map, and when I found out there was really such a place, and that I was going to live there instead of staying in B—— and going to Franklin High, I felt perfectly *awful* about it."

It had, indeed, been a most unhappy period for sunny, lovable Marjorie Dean when the call of her father's business had made it necessary for him to remove his family from the beautiful city of B——, where Marjorie had been born and lived sixteen untroubled years of life, to the smaller northern city of Sanford, where she didn't know a soul.

All that happened to Marjorie Dean from the first day in her new home has been faithfully recorded in "MARJORIE DEAN, HIGH SCHOOL FRESHMAN." In that narrative was set forth her trials, which had been many, and her triumphs, which had been proportionately greater, as a freshman in Sanford High School. How she had become acquainted with Constance Stevens and how, after never-to-be-forgotten days of storm and sunshine, the friendship between the two young girls had flowered into perfect understanding, formed a story of more than ordinary interest.

Now, after several happy weeks at the seashore, where the Deans had rented a cottage and were spending their usual summer outing with Constance as their guest, the two friends were enjoying the last perfect days of mid-summer before returning to Sanford, where, in September, Constance and Marjorie were to enter the delightful realm of the sophomore, to which they had won admission the previous June.

There had been only one shadow to mar Marjorie's bliss. She had hoped that her childhood friend and companion, Mary Raymond, might be with them at the seashore, but, owing to the ill-health of Mary's mother, the Raymonds had been obliged to summer in the mountains, where Mary was needed at her mother's side. That Constance and Mary should meet and become friends had ever been Marjorie's most ardent desire. It was Constance's remarkable resemblance to Mary that had drawn her toward the girl in the very beginning.

"It's all been so perfectly beautiful, Connie." Marjorie gave a little sigh of sheer happiness. "I've only one regret."

"I know—you mean your chum, Mary," supplemented Constance, with quick sympathy.

Marjorie nodded.

"It seems strange I haven't heard from her. She hasn't written me for over two weeks. I hope her mother isn't worse."

"No news is good news," comforted Constance.

"Perhaps there will be a letter for me from her when we get back to the cottage. Suppose there should be! Wouldn't that be glorious?"

"Perhaps we'd better go up now and see," suggested Constance. "It must be time for the postman."

"We're not going until after you've had fifteen more minutes' instruction in the noble art of swimming, you rascal," laughed Marjorie. "See how self-sacrificing I am! You don't appreciate my noble efforts in your direction."

"Of course I appreciate them, Marjorie Dean." Constance's habitually wistful expression broke up in a radiant smile that set her blue eyes dancing. "But I must confess, this minute, that I can live and be happy if I never learn to swim."

"That settles it. In you go again."

Marjorie sprang energetically to her feet, and began dragging her protesting friend down the beach to the water. Another fifteen minutes' instruction followed, punctuated by much laughter on the part of the two girls.

"There! I'll let you off for to-day," conceded Marjorie, at last. "Now, come on. I have a hunch that there *is* a letter for me. I haven't had any letters for two whole days."

It was only a few rods from the bathing beach to the "Sea Gull," the cottage in which the Deans were living. As they neared it, a gray-uniformed figure was seen hurrying down the walk.

"It's the postman! What did I tell you?" Marjorie broke into a run, Constance following close at her heels.

The two girls brought up flushed and laughing at the pretty, vine-covered veranda, where Mrs. Dean sat, in the act of opening a letter. Half a dozen other postmarked envelopes lay in her lap.

"Oh, Captain," Marjorie touched a hand to her bathing cap, "how many of them are for me?"

"All of them except this, Lieutenant," smiled her mother, holding up the letter she had been reading. "But why all this haste? I hardly expected you back so soon. Five minutes before luncheon is your usual time for reappearing," she slyly reminded.

"Oh, I had an unmistakable hunch that there was a letter here for me from Mary, so I let Connie off easy on her lesson. I'll make up for it to-morrow."

By this time Marjorie held in her hand the half-dozen envelopes, each bearing its own special message from the various friends who held more or less important places in her regard, and was rapidly going over them.

"Here's one from Jerry and one from Hal." The pink in her cheeks deepened at sight of the familiar boyish hand. "One from Marcia Arnold, another from Muriel Harding. Here's a tiresome advertisement." She threw the fifth envelope disdainfully on the wicker table at her side. "And—yes, here it is, in Mary's very own handwriting!"

Laying the other letters on the table with a carefulness that bespoke their value, Marjorie hastily tore open the envelope that contained news of her friend and drawing out a single closely written sheet of paper said apologetically, "You won't mind if I read this now, will you, Connie and Mother?"

"Go ahead," urged Constance. "We couldn't be so hard-hearted as to object."

Mrs. Dean smiled her assent. Marjorie's thoughtfulness of others was always a secret source of joy to her.

Marjorie read down the page, then uttered a little squeal of delight. "Mother!" she exclaimed joyously, "just listen to this:

"DEAREST MARJORIE:

"You will wonder, perhaps, what has happened to me. I know I have owed you a letter for over two weeks, but I have been so busy taking care of mother that I haven't had very much time to write. Of course, we have a nurse, but, still, there are so many little things to be done for her, which she likes to have me do. She is much better, but our doctor says she must go to a famous health resort in the West for the winter. She will start for Colorado in about two weeks, and now comes the part of my letter which I hope you will like to read. I am going to make you a visit. Father and I are coming to see you on a very mysterious mission. I won't tell you anything more about it until I see you. Part of it is sad and part of it glad, and it all depends upon three persons whether it will ever happen. There! That ought to keep you guessing.

"You wrote me that you would be at home in Sanford by the last of next week. Please write me at once and let me know just exactly when you expect to reach there. We shall not try to come to the seashore, as father prefers to wait until you are back in Sanford again. With much love to you and your mother,

"Yours Mysteriously,
"MARY."

Marjorie finished the last word with a jubilant wave of the letter.

"What do you think of that, Captain? What do you suppose this mysterious mission can be?" Marjorie's face was alight with affectionate curiosity.

"I am not good at guessing," Mrs. Dean smiled tolerantly. The ways of schoolgirls were usually shrouded with a profound mystery, which disappeared into nothingness when confronted with reality.

"It must be something extraordinary. She says it's part sad and part glad. I hope it's mostly glad. I know *I'm* glad that I'm going to see her. Why, it's almost a year since we said good-bye to each other! Oh, Connie," she turned rapturously to Constance, "you two girls, my dearest friends, who look alike, will actually meet at last! You'll love Mary. You can't help yourself, and she'll love you. She can't do anything else."

"I hope she will like me," said Constance a trifle soberly. "I know I shall like her, because she is your friend, Marjorie."

"You'll like her for yourself, Connie," predicted Marjorie loyally, and secure in the belief that neither of these two girls, whose friendship she held above rubies, could fail her, Marjorie Dean dreamed of a kingdom of fellowship into which the three were fated to enter only after scaling the steep and difficult walls of misunderstanding.

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CHAPTER II

THE SHADOW

"LISTEN, Connie! Do you hear that train whistling? I'm sure it's Mary's train."

Marjorie Dean peered anxiously up the track in the direction of the sound. In the distance her alert eyes spied the smoke of the approaching train before it rounded the bend and appeared in full view, and her heart beat high with the thought that the longer-for moment had come at last.

Since her return to Sanford, five days before, Marjorie had been in a quiver of affectionate impatience. How slowly the days dragged! She read and re-read Mary's latest letter, stating that she and her father would arrive at Sanford on Wednesday on the 4.30 train and her impatience grew. It was not alone that she desired to see Mary. There was the "mysterious mission" to be considered. What girl does not love a mystery? And Marjorie was no exception. At that moment, however, as she waited for her childhood's friend, all thought of the mystery was swept aside in the longing to see Mary again.

As the train rumbled into the station and after many groans and shudders stopped with a last protesting creak of wheels, Marjorie's anxious gaze traveled up and down its length. Suddenly, at the far end, she spied a tall, familiar figure descending the car steps. Close behind him followed a slender girl in blue. With a cluck of joy and a "There she is!" Marjorie fairly raced up the station platform. Constance followed, but proceeded more slowly. To Marjorie belonged the right to the first rapturous moments with her chum. In her girlish soul lurked no trace of jealousy. She understood that with Marjorie, Mary must always be first, and she was filled with an unselfish happiness for the pleasure of the girl who had braved all things for her and would forever mean all that was best and highest to her.

"Mary!" Marjorie exclaimed, her clear voice trembling with emotion.

"Oh, Marjorie, it's been ages," quavered Mary Raymond. Then the two became locked in a tempestuous embrace.

"Here, here, where do I come in?" asked an injured voice, as the two young women continued to croon over each other, all else forgotten.

Marjorie gently disengaged herself from Mary's detaining arms and turned to give her hand to Mr. Raymond.

"I'm so glad to see you," she said fervently. "Mother is waiting in our car, just the other side of the station. But first, let me introduce my friend, Constance Stevens. Why, where is she? I thought she was right behind me. Oh, here she comes. Hurry up, Connie!"

Constance approached rather shyly. In spite of the fact that the old days of poverty and heartache lay behind her like a bad dream, she was still curiously reserved and diffident in the

presence of strangers. The decision of her aunt, Miss Susan Allison, to take up her abode in Sanford in order that Constance might finish her high school course with Marjorie had brought many changes into the life of the once friendless girl. Miss Allison had purchased a handsome property on the outskirts of Sanford, and, after much persuasion, had, with one exception, induced the occupants of the little gray house to share it with her. Soon afterward Mr. Stevens, Constance's foster-father, whose name she still bore and refused to change, had accepted a position as first violin in a symphony orchestra and had gone to fulfill his destiny in the world of music which he loved. Uncle John Roland and little Charlie, once puny and crippled, but now strong and rosy, had, with Constance, come into the lonely old woman's household at a time when she most needed them, and, in her contrition for the lost years of happiness which she had so stubbornly thrust aside, she was in a fair way to spoil her little flock by too much petting.

The fact that from a mere nobody Constance Stevens had become the social equal of Sanford's most exclusive contingent did not impress the girl in the least. Naturally humble and self-effacing, she had no ambition to shine socially. Her one aim was to become a great singer, and it was understood between herself and her aunt that when she was graduated from high school she was to enter a conservatory of music and study voice culture under the best masters.

It seemed to Constance that she now had everything in the world that she could possibly hope for or desire, but of the great good which had come to her in one short year she felt that above all she prized the friendship of Marjorie Dean and in whatever lay Marjorie's happiness, there must hers lie also.

This was her thought as she now stepped forward to meet Mary Raymond. She was prepared to give this girl who was Marjorie's dearest friend a loyalty and devotion, second only to that which she accorded Marjorie herself.

"At last my dearest wish has come true!" exclaimed Marjorie when Constance had been presented to Mr. Raymond and she and Mary had clasped hands. "I've been so anxious for you two to know each other. Now that you're here together I can see that resemblance I've told you of. Connie, you look like Mary and Mary looks like you. You might easily pass for sisters."

Constance smiled with shy sweetness at Mary and Mary returned the smile, but in her blue eyes there flashed a sudden, half-startled expression, which neither Constance nor Marjorie noted. Then she said in a tone intended to be cordial, but which somehow lacked heart, "I'm awfully glad to know you, Miss Stevens. Marjorie has written me often of you."

"And she has talked to me over and over again of you," returned Constance warmly.

"Now that you know each other, you can postpone getting chummy until later," laughed Marjorie. "Mother will wonder what has happened to us. She'll think you didn't come on that train if we don't put in an appearance."

Possessing herself of Mary's traveling bag she led the way with Mary through the station and out to the opposite side where Mrs. Dean awaited them. Constance followed with Mr. Raymond. In her heart she experienced an odd disappointment. Was it her imagination, or did Mary's cordiality seem a trifle forced? Perhaps it would have been better if she had not accompanied Marjorie to the station to meet Mary. Perhaps Mary was a trifle hurt that her chum had not come alone. She decided that she would not ride to Marjorie's home with the party, although she had been invited to dine with them that night. She could not bear to think of intruding. She managed to answer Mr. Raymond's courteous remarks, but her thoughts were not centered upon what he was saying. Without warning, her old-time diffidence settled down upon her like an enveloping cloak, and her one object was to slip away as quickly and as unobtrusively as possible.

"I think I had better not go home with you, Marjorie," she said in a low voice. They had reached the waiting automobile and Mary and Mrs. Dean were exchanging affectionate greetings.

"Oh, why not, Connie?" Marjorie's happy face clouded. "You know we'd love to have you, wouldn't we, Mary?"

"Of course." Mary again smiled at Constance, but again her smile lacked warmth.

Constance shook her head almost obstinately.

"I think I had better not come," she repeated, and in her speech there was a shadowy return of the old baffling reserve that had so greatly disturbed Marjorie in the early stages of their friendship.

"But you promised to take dinner with us to-night," remarked Marjorie.

"I—I have changed my mind. It will be best for me to go home, I think. I'll come over tomorrow."

Mrs. Dean added her persuasions, but Constance was firm, and, after bidding a courteous farewell to the Deans' guests, she hurried away, more agitated than she cared to admit.

"Why, what ails Constance, Marjorie?" asked Mrs. Dean in surprise.

"Nothing—that is, I don't know." Marjorie looked after her friend's rapidly disappearing figure, a puzzled expression in her brown eyes.

Mary Raymond viewed Marjorie with a faint frown. It was rather provoking in Marjorie to

express so much concern over this Constance Stevens. After their long separation she felt that her chum's every thought ought to be for her alone. And in that instant a certain fabled green-eyed monster, that Mary had never believed could exist for her, suddenly sprang into life and whispered to her that, perhaps, after all, she was not first in Marjorie Dean's heart.

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CHAPTER III

SOWING THE SEED OF DISCORD

"BEFORE you talk of another single thing, Mary Raymond, please tell me what you mean by a 'mysterious mission' that is 'part sad and part glad,'" exclaimed Marjorie.

Mr. Raymond was occupying the front seat of the automobile, beside Mrs. Dean, who drove the car, a birthday present from her husband, and the two girls had the tonneau of the automobile to themselves. They had scarcely deposited Mary's luggage on the floor of the car and settled themselves for the short ride to the Deans' home when Marjorie had made her eager inquiry into the nature of the "mysterious mission" that had so aroused her curiosity.

"Well," began Mary, brightening, "father and I *have* come to see you on a mission, but the only mystery about it is that you don't as yet know why we've come. I thought 'mysterious mission' looked rather well on paper so I set it down."

"But you're going to tell me about it this instant, you wicked, tantalizing girl," insisted Marjorie with pretended sternness.

"I thought perhaps you might be able to guess certain things from my letter," continued Mary. "You see, I wrote you that mother would have to go to Colorado for the winter and——"

"You are going with her," supplemented Marjorie.

"No, that's a wild guess. I'm not going west with her. Father says I must stay in the East and go through my sophomore year in high school."

"But you can't stay at home by yourself, Mary. Just think how dreadful that would be for you, with your father away most of the time," reminded Marjorie.

Mary's father was a traveling salesman for a large furniture manufactory, and spent the greater part of his time on the road.

"That's just the point," responded Mary. "I know I can't stay at home alone. Mother's illness and what is to become of me when father goes on the road again is the sad part of it, but the glad part is—oh, Marjorie, can't you guess now?" Mary caught Marjorie's hand in hers. "We've come all the way to Sanford to see if," her voice rose high with excitement, "there isn't a little corner in the Dean barracks that a certain lieutenant can call her own for this year and——"

"Mary!" It was Marjorie's turn to become excited. "Do you really mean that you wish to come to live with me and enter Sanford High? That we'll be sophomores together?"

Mary clung to Marjorie's hand and nodded. For a moment she was too near to tears for speech. But they were tears of happiness. Marjorie really desired her for a best friend after all. Her sudden jealousy of Constance Stevens vanished.

"I should say that was a *glad* part of your mission," laughed Marjorie happily. "I don't know what I've ever done to deserve such good fortune. Mother will be glad, too. She loves you almost as much as she loves me."

"Oh, Mother," Marjorie leaned impulsively forward, "Mary's coming to live with me this year while her mother is in Colorado. You'll have two lieutenants instead of one to look after. We are going to win sophomore honors together and be promoted to be captains next June!"

"There," declared Mr. Raymond with comical resignation, "now you have let the cat out of the bag with a vengeance, Mary Raymond. All this time I had been planning to ask Mrs. Dean, in my most ingratiating manner, if she thought she might possibly make room for a certain very frisky member of my family for a while. I had intended to proceed carefully and diplomatically so that she wouldn't be too much shocked at such a prospect, but now——"

"It's all settled, isn't it, Mother?" interrupted Marjorie. "You are just as anxious as I for Mary to come and live with us, aren't you?"

"Shall I stop the car in the middle of the street and assure you of my willingness to increase my regiment?" laughed Mrs. Dean.

"No, no," protested Marjorie. "Let's hurry home as fast as we can and talk it over. We're only two squares from our house now. Besides, I've planned everything already. Mary can have the spare bedroom next to my house." Marjorie always referred to her room as her "house." "There's only the bath between and we'll use that together, and have a regular house of our own. Oh, Mary, won't it be perfectly splendid?"

Regardless of what passersby might think, Mary and Marjorie embraced with an enthusiasm that threatened to land them both in the tonneau of the rapidly moving car, while their elders smiled at this reckless display of affection.

The automobile had hardly come to a full stop on the broad driveway, that wound through the wide stretch of lawn that was one of the chief beauties of the Deans' pretty home, when Marjorie swung open the door and skipped nimbly out of the car with, "Welcome home, Mary!"

Mary was only an instant behind Marjorie in leaving the car, and the two hugged each other afresh out of pure joy of living.

"Take Mary up to her room at once, dear," directed Mrs. Dean. "I'm sure she must be tired and hungry after her long ride in the train. We will have an early dinner to-night. I expect Mr. Dean home at almost any moment," she continued, turning to Mr. Raymond.

"Come on, Mary." Marjorie had lifted Mary's bag from the automobile. Now she stretched forth an inviting hand to Mary, and piloted her across the lawn and up the short stretch of stone walk to the front door. The door opened and a trim, rosy-cheeked maid appeared as by magic. She reached for Mary's bag, but Marjorie waved her gently aside.

"I'll do the honors, Delia. You can look after mother and Mr. Raymond. We are very self-sufficient persons who don't need anything except a chance to go upstairs and talk ourselves hoarse."

A wide smile irradiated the maid's goodnatured face, as she stepped aside to allow Marjorie and Mary to enter the hall.

"What a darling house!" Mary's glance traveled about the pretty Dutch hall to the large, comfortable living room beyond. "You have oceans of room here, haven't you?"

Marjorie nodded. "Yes; when first we came here I felt lost. It was actually lonesome. It took me a whole week to grow accustomed to looking out without seeing rows of brick houses across the street and on each side of me. Don't you remember, I wrote you all about it? You see, I didn't enter high school until we'd been here almost two weeks, and in all that time I never met a single girl. I felt like a shipwrecked sailor on a great, big, lonely, old island. Shall we go upstairs now? I'm so anxious to have you see my 'house.' It's a house within a house, you know. Mother had it all done up in pink and white for me, and I spent hours in it. Your house is blue. I made general and captain let me have one of the spare bedrooms done in blue, so that when you came to visit me you'd feel at home. And now it's going to be your very own for a whole year! It's too good to be true."

Releasing Mary's hand, Marjorie led the way up the stairs to the second floor and down the short hall to her "house." Mary cried out in admiration at her friend's dainty room. She walked about, exclaiming over its perfect details after the manner of girls, then three minutes later the two somehow found themselves seated side by side on Marjorie's pretty white bed, their arms about each other's waists, and fairly launched into one of the good, old-time confabs they were wont to indulge in when the top step of the Deans' veranda in B— had been their favorite trysting place.

Half an hour later Mrs. Dean entered the room to find them still talking at an alarming rate, the rest of their world apparently forgotten.

"I might have known it," she smiled. "Why, you haven't even taken off your hats, and dinner will be ready in ten minutes. Marjorie, you are a most neglectful hostess."

"Oh, we don't mind having dinner with our hats on," returned Marjorie cheerfully. Then, rising, she took off her broad-brimmed Panama, and began gently pulling the pins from Mary's hat. "Make it fifteen minutes, instead of ten, Captain, and we'll be as spick and span as you please."

"Discipline seems to be very lax in these barracks," commented Mrs. Dean. "I am afraid I ought to call upon General to help me enforce my orders. Under the circumstances I'll be lenient, though, and stretch the time to fifteen minutes. There, I hear General downstairs now!"

She disappeared from the doorway and immediately a great scurrying about began, punctuated with much talk and laughter. To Marjorie it seemed as though she had not been so happy for ages. It was wonderful to know that her beloved Mary was actually with her once more, and still more wonderful that she would continue to be with her indefinitely.

At dinner she beamed joyously across the table at the little blue-eyed girl, while their elders discussed and settled her destiny for the coming year. Mr. and Mrs. Dean met Mr. Raymond's request in behalf of his daughter with the whole-heartedness that so characterized them. In fact, they were highly in favor of receiving Mary as a member of their little household.

"Two soldiers are better than one," asserted Mr. Dean humorously. "I believe in preparedness. 'In times of peace prepare for war,' you know. With such a valiant army under my command I

could do wonders if attacked by the enemy."

After dinner they all repaired to the living room, where the discussion of the all-important subject was continued, and when at eleven o'clock two sleepy, but blissfully happy, lieutenants climbed the stairs to bed, Mary Raymond lacked nothing except actual adoption papers, signed and sealed, to admit her into the Deans' hospitable fold.

Yet there was one tiny drawback to Mary's joy. Try as she might she could not forget Constance Stevens and Marjorie's too evident fondness for her. From Marjorie's early letters she had formed the conclusion that Constance was merely a poor nobody, whom her chum, with her usual spirit of generosity had tried to befriend. Marjorie's later letters had contained little pertaining to Constance. Mary had not known of the long period of estrangement between Constance and Marjorie that had so nearly wrecked their budding friendship, and of the many changes that time had wrought in the life of the girl who looked like her. She had, therefore, been quite unprepared to meet the dainty, well-dressed young woman whom Marjorie appeared to hold in such strong affection. She reflected that night, a trifle resentfully, after Marjorie had kissed her good-night and left her, that it was very strange in Marjorie not to have put her in possession of the real facts of the case. Still, it was really not her affair. If Marjorie chose to become chummy with Constance without even writing a word of it to her, there was nothing to do except to be silent over the whole affair. Perhaps Marjorie would tell her all about it later. Certainly she would ask no questions. And then and there, little, blue-eyed Mary Raymond made her first mistake, and sowed a tiny seed of discord in her jealous heart that was fated later to bear bitter fruit.

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CHAPTER IV

INTRODUCING MARY TO THE GIRLS

"WE'VE come for a last inspection, Captain. How do we look?"

Marjorie Dean danced into her mother's room, her brown eyes sparkling with anticipation, her charming face all smiles. Mary Raymond followed her excited chum.

"Halt! Company, attention!" commanded Mrs. Dean, as she turned from her dressing table to pass an opinion upon the waiting brigade of two. Her brown eyes rested approvingly upon the trim figures drawn up in their most soldierly attitude before her. Marjorie's frock of pink linen, with its wide lace collar and cuffs, exactly suited her dark eyes and hair, while Mary's gown of pale blue of the same material served to accentuate the fairness of her skin and the gold of her curls.

"Shall we do, Captain? Are we absolutely spick and span?" Marjorie turned slowly about, then made a laughing dive at her mother and enveloped her in a devastating embrace.

"Now see the havoc you've wrought," complained Mrs. Dean. "I shall have to do my hair over again. Never mind. I'll forgive you, and, being magnanimous, will state that I am very proud of the appearance of my army."

"You're a gallant officer and a dear, all in one." Marjorie caught her mother's hand in hers. "Now, we must be on our way. We are going to school early because Mary will have to see Miss Archer. Besides, I'm anxious for her to meet Jerry Macy and some of the other girls. If only she had come to Sanford sooner, I'd have loved to give a party for her. Then she'd know every one of my friends. Oh, well, there is plenty of time for that. Good-bye, Captain. We'll be back before long. There is never very much to do in school on the first day."

Dropping a gay little kiss on her mother's smooth cheek, Marjorie left the room, followed by Mary, who stopped just long enough to kiss Mrs. Dean good-bye.

Three weeks had slipped by since Mr. Raymond and Mary had come to Sanford upon the so-called mysterious mission that had made Mary Raymond a member of the Dean household. They had returned to the city of B— the following day. From there Mr. Raymond had gone directly to the mountains, for his wife, who, in spite of her ill-health, had insisted on returning to her home to oversee the making of Mary's gowns and the choosing of her wardrobe in general. Two days before coming to Sanford, Mary had seen her mother off on her journey to Colorado in quest of health. She had put on a brave face and smiled when she wished to cry, and it was alone the thought that she was going to live with Marjorie during her mother's absence that kept her from breaking down at the last sad moment of farewell.

It was a sober-faced, sad-eyed Mary that Marjorie had met at the train, but, under the irresistible sunniness of Marjorie's nature, Mary had soon emerged from her cloud, and now the prospect of entering Sanford High School filled her with lively anticipation.

As Marjorie and Mary emerged from the house and swung down the stone walk in perfect step, they beheld a stout, and to Marjorie, a decidedly familiar figure turning in at the gate. In the same instant a joyous "Hello" rent the air, and the stout girl cantered up the walk at a surprising rate of speed. There was a delighted gurgle from Marjorie, that ended in a fervent embrace of the two young women.

"Oh, Jerry, I'm so glad to see you! I was afraid you wouldn't be back in Sanford before school opened. I saw Irma day before yesterday and she said she hadn't heard a word from you for over a week."

"We didn't get here until last night at ten o'clock. Maybe I'm not glad to see *you*." Jerry beamed affectionately upon Marjorie.

"This is my friend, Mary Raymond, Jerry," introduced Marjorie. "She is going to live with us this winter and be a sophomore at dear old Sanford High. There will be six of us instead of five now."

"I'm glad to know you." Jerry smiled and stretched forth a plump hand in greeting. "I've heard a lot about you."

"I've heard Marjorie speak of you, too. I'm ever so pleased to meet you." Mary exhibited a friendliness toward Jerry Macy that had been quite lacking in her greeting of Constance Stevens.

As the three stood for a moment at the gate Jerry's eyes suddenly grew very round.

"Why, Marjorie, your friend looks like Connie, doesn't she?"

"Of course she does," replied Marjorie happily. "Don't you remember I told you long ago that that was why I felt so drawn toward Connie in the first place?"

"Yes, I remember it now. Isn't it funny that your two dearest friends should look alike? Have you met Constance, Mary? I'm going to call you Mary. I never call a girl 'Miss' unless I can't bear her. I'm sure I'm going to like you. Not only because you're Marjorie's chum, but for yourself, you know. If you turn out to be even one half as nice as Constance Stevens, I'll adore you. Connie is a dear and no mistake about it."

The shadow of a frown touched Mary's forehead. Why must she be compelled to hear continually of Constance Stevens? And why should this Jerry Macy place her and Constance on the same plane in Marjorie's affection? She did not propose to share her place in her chum's heart with anyone. Of course, this girl could not possibly know just how much she and Marjorie had always been to each other. Later on they would understand. They would soon see that Marjorie preferred her above all others.

Comforted by this reflection the shadow passed from Mary's face and the trio started down the street for school, chatting and laughing as only carefree schoolgirls can.

Once inside the school building, Jerry said good-bye to them and turned down the corridor toward the study hall. Marjorie smiled with tender reminiscence as she and Mary climbed the familiar broad stairway to the second floor. She was thinking of another Monday morning that belonged to the past, when a timid stranger had climbed those same stairs and diffidently inquired the way to the principal's office. How far away that day seemed, and how much had happened within those same walls since that fateful morning.

"I'll never forget my first morning here," she said to Mary, as they walked down the corridor toward their destination—the last room on the east side. "Captain had a headache and couldn't come with me. I had to march into Miss Archer's office all by myself. I felt like a forlorn stranger in a strange, unfriendly land. Then I met such a nice girl, Ellen Seymour, a friend of mine now, and she took me to the office and introduced me to Miss Archer."

Before Mary had time to reply they had entered the cheerful living-room office that had so greatly impressed Marjorie on her first introduction to Sanford High. A tall, dark girl, seated at a desk at one end of the room, glanced up at the sound of the opening door. She hurried forward with a little exclamation of delighted surprise. "Why, Marjorie!" she exclaimed. "I was just thinking of you. I was wondering if you'd be in for the first day. I had made up my mind to run down to the study hall a little later and see." She now had Marjorie's hands in an affectionate clasp.

"I've been wondering about you, too," nodded Marjorie. "You are another stray who didn't come back until the last minute."

"I'm a working girl, you know," reminded Marcia. "Doctor Bernard was dreadfully disappointed because I wouldn't give up high school and keep on being his secretary. But I couldn't do that."

"Of course you couldn't," agreed Marjorie, "especially now that you are a senior."

Mary Raymond had drawn back a little while Marjorie and Marcia Arnold, Miss Archer's once disagreeable secretary, but now a changed girl through the influence of Marjorie, exchanged greetings. Marjorie turned and drew her chum forward, introducing her to Marcia, who bowed and extended her hand in friendly fashion.

"Is Miss Archer busy, Marcia?" asked Marjorie, after she had explained that Mary was to become a pupil of Sanford High School.

"Wait a moment, I'll see." Marcia went into the inner office, returning almost instantly with, "Go right in. She is anxious to see you, Marjorie."

Miss Archer's affectionate welcome of Marjorie Dean brought a blush of sheer pleasure to the girl's cheeks. Her heart thrilled with joy at the thought that there was now no veil of misunderstanding between her and her beloved principal.

"And so this is Mary Raymond." Miss Archer took the newcomer's hand in both her own. "We are glad to welcome you into our school, my dear. Your principal at Franklin High School has already written me of you. How long have you been in Sanford?"

Mary answered rather shyly, explaining her situation, while Marjorie looked on with affectionate eyes. She was anxious that Miss Archer should learn to know and love Mary.

"I will put you in Marjorie's hands," declared Miss Archer, after a few moments' pleasant conversation. "She will take you to the study hall and see that you are made to feel at home. We wish our girls to look upon their school as their second home, considering they spend so much of their time here. Please tell your mother, Marjorie," she added, as the two girls turned to leave the room, "that I shall try to call on her this week."

"How do you like Miss Archer? Isn't she splendid?" were the quick questions Marjorie put, as they retraced their steps down the long corridor.

"I know I'm going to love her," returned Mary fervently. "I hope I'll be happy here, Marjorie." There was a wistful note in her voice that caused Marjorie to glance sharply at her friend. Mary's charming face was set in unusually sober lines.

"Poor Mary," was her reflection. "She's thinking of her mother." But Mary Raymond's thoughts were far from the subject of her mother. Instead, they were fixed upon what Jerry Macy had said that morning about Constance Stevens. Miss Archer had asked about Constance, too. She had spoken of her as though she and Marjorie were best friends. What had she meant when she said, "Well, Marjorie, you and Constance deserve fair sophomore weather after last year's storms." The flame of jealousy, which Mary had sought to stifle after her first meeting with Constance, was kindled afresh.

"What did Miss Archer mean when she spoke of you and Miss Stevens—and last year's storms?" she asked abruptly.

"Oh, I can't explain now. It's too long a story. Here we are at the study hall." Her mind occupied with school, Marjorie had not caught the strained note in Mary's voice.

"She doesn't wish me to know," was Mary's jealous thought. "She is keeping secrets from me. All right. Let her keep them. Only I know one thing, and that is—I'll *never, never, never* be friends with Constance Stevens, not even to please Marjorie!"

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CHAPTER V

AN UNCALLED-FOR REBUFF

THE great study hall which Marjorie and Mary entered had little of the atmosphere supposed to pervade a hall of learning. A loud buzz of conversation greeted their ears. It came from the groups of girls collected in various parts of the hall, who were making the most of their opportunities to talk until called to order. Marjorie gave one swift glance toward the lonely desk on the platform. It had always reminded her of an island in the midst of a great sea. She breathed a little sigh of relief. Her pet aversion, Miss Merton, was not occupying the chair behind it. This, no doubt, accounted for the general air of relaxation that pervaded the room. Her alert eyes searched the room for Constance Stevens. She was not present. She gave another sigh, this time it was one of disappointment. She had seen Constance only twice since Mary's arrival. On one occasion she had taken dinner at the Deans' home. The three girls had spent, what seemed to Marjorie, an unusually pleasant evening. Constance, feeling dimly that Mary did not quite approve of her, had dropped her usually reticent manner and exerted herself to please. So well had she succeeded that Mary had rather unwillingly succumbed to her charm and grown fairly cordial.

Totally unconscious of the shadow which had darkened the pleasure of Constance's first meeting with Mary, and equally ignorant of Mary's secret resentment of her new friend, Marjorie had retired that night inwardly rejoicing in both girls and planning all sorts of good times that they three might have together.

Several days later Constance had entertained them at luncheon at "Gray Gables," the beautiful, old-fashioned house Miss Allison had purchased, on the outskirts of Sanford. Mary had been

secretly impressed with its luxury and had instantly made friends with little Charlie. The quaint child had gravely informed her that she looked like Connie and immediately taken her into his confidence regarding his aspirations toward some day playing in "a big band." He had also obligingly favored her with a solo of marvelous shrieks and squawks on his much tortured "fiddle." Mary loved children, and this, perhaps, went far toward stilling the jealousy, which, so far, only faintly stirring, bade fair to one day burst forth into bitter words.

"I'll see you in school on Monday," Marjorie had called over her shoulder, as she and Mary had taken their departure from Constance's home that afternoon. But now Monday had come and there was no sign of the girl Marjorie held so dear in the study hall.

"Connie had better hurry. It's five minutes to nine. She'll be late." Marjorie's gaze traveled anxiously toward the door. An unmistakable frown puckered Mary's brows, but Marjorie did not see it.

"Oh, Marjorie Dean, here you are at last. We've been waiting for you." Susan Atwell left a group of girls with which she had been hob-nobbing and hurried down the aisle. "Come over here, you dear thing. We've been looking our eyes out for you." She stopped short and stared hard at Mary. "Why, I thought——" she began.

"You thought it was Connie, didn't you?" laughed Marjorie. She introduced Mary to Susan.

"The girls over there thought you were Constance Stevens, too," smiled Susan, showing her dimples. "You see, Marjorie and Connie are inseparable, so, of course, we naturally mistook you for her. I never saw two girls look so much alike. If we have a fancy dress party this year you two can surely go as the Siamese Twins. Wouldn't that be great?"

Mary smiled perfunctorily. She had her own views in the matter, and they did not in the least coincide with Susan's.

A moment later they were hemmed in by an enthusiastic bevy of girls, each one trying to make herself heard above the others. Marjorie was besieged on all sides with eager inquiries. The girls had discovered, as she neared them, that her companion was not Constance Stevens. Marjorie, at once, did the honors and Mary found herself nodding in quick succession to half a dozen girls.

"You fooled us all for a minute, Miss Raymond," cried Muriel Harding.

"She didn't fool me," announced Jerry Macy, who had joined them just in time to hear Muriel's remark. "I knew she was coming, but I kept still because I wanted to see you girls stare."

"Look around the room, Marjorie," observed Irma Linton in a guarded tone. "Do you miss anyone? Not Constance. I wonder where she is?"

"I don't know." Marjorie's eyes took in the big room, then again sought the door. "She said she would meet me here this morning. Let me see. Do I miss anyone? Do you mean a girl in our class, Irma?"

Irma nodded.

Marjorie cast another quick look about her. "Why, no. Oh, now I know. You mean Mignon."

Again Irma nodded. Under cover of a burst of laughter from the others she murmured, "Mignon won't be with us this year. You will observe, if you look hard, that I'm not weeping over our loss."

Marjorie was silent for a moment. The past rode before her like a panorama, as the thought of the elfish-faced French girl and of how deeply she had caused both herself and Constance Stevens to suffer. Her pretty face hardened a trifle as she said, in a low voice, "I'm not sorry, either, Irma. But why won't she be in high school this year? Has she moved away from Sanford? I haven't seen her since we came home from the beach."

"She has gone away to boarding school," answered Irma. "Between you and me, I think she was ashamed to come back here this year. Susan told me that her father wanted her to stay in high school and go to college, but she teased and teased to go away to school, so finally he said she might. She left here over two weeks ago. One of the girls received a letter from her last week. In it she said she was so glad she didn't have to go to a common high school and that the girls in her school were not milk-and-water babies, but had a great deal of spirit and daring."

Marjorie's lip curled unconsciously. "I'd rather be a 'milk-and-water baby' than as cruel and heartless as she. I'll never forgive her for the way she treated Connie. Let's not talk of her, Irma. It makes me feel cross and horrid, and, of all days, I'd like to be happy to-day. There's so much to be happy over, and I'm so glad to see all of you. Life would be a desert waste without high school, wouldn't it?"

Marjorie's soft hand found Irma's. She was very fond of this quiet, fair-haired girl, who, with Jerry Macy, had stood by her so resolutely through dark days.

"Here she comes—our dear teacher. Look out, girls, or you'll be ushered out of Sanford High before you've had a chance to look at the bulletin board," warned Muriel Harding's high-pitched voice. Her sarcastic remarks carried farther than she had intended they should, as a sudden hush had fallen upon the study hall. Miss Merton, Marjorie's pet aversion, had stalked into the great room. She cast a malignant glance, not at Muriel, but straight at Marjorie Dean.

"Oh," gasped Muriel and Marjorie in united consternation.

"That's the time you did it, Muriel," muttered Jerry Macy. "I always told you that you ought to be an orator or an oratress or something. Your voice carries a good deal farther than it ought to. Only Miss Merton didn't think it was you who made those smart remarks. She thought it was Marjorie. Now she'll have a new grievance to nurse this year."

"I'm awfully sorry." Muriel was the picture of contrition. "I didn't intend she should hear me—but to blame you for it! That's dreadful. I'll go straight and tell her that I said it."

Muriel made a quick movement as though to carry out her intention. Marjorie caught her by the arm. "You'll do nothing of the sort, Muriel Harding. My sophomore shoulders are broad enough to beat it. Perhaps she didn't really hear what you said. She can't dislike me any more for that than she did before she thought I said it."

"Young ladies, I am waiting for you to come to order. Will you kindly cease talking and take seats?" Miss Merton's raucous voice broke harshly upon the abashed group of girls. They scuttled into the nearest seats at hand like a bevy of startled partridges.

"What a horrid woman," was Mary Raymond's thought, as she slipped into a seat in front of Marjorie, and stared resentfully at the rigid figure, so devoid of womanly beauty, in its severe brown linen dress, unrelieved by even a touch of white at the neck.

With a final glare at Marjorie, the teacher proceeded at once to the business at hand. Within the next few minutes she had arranged the girls of the freshman class in the section of the study hall they were to occupy during the coming year. Marjorie awaited the turn of the sophomores to be assigned to a seat with inward trepidation. She had had no opportunity to introduce Mary to Miss Merton. What should she do? She half rose from the seat, then sat down undecidedly.

Miss Merton had arranged the freshmen to her satisfaction. Now she was calling for the sophomores to rise. Perhaps she would not notice Mary. If she did not, then Mary could pass with the sophomores to their section. As soon as the session was dismissed, she would introduce her to Miss Merton.

But Miss Merton was lynx-eyed. "That girl there in the blue dress," she blared forth. "You were not in the freshman class last year."

Mary turned in her seat and shot a glance of appeal to Marjorie. The girl rose bravely in friend's behalf.

"Miss Merton," she said in her clear, young voice, "I brought Miss Raymond here with me. She ___"

"You are not supposed to bring visitors to school, Miss Dean," was the teacher's sarcastic reminder.

Marjorie's eyes kindled with wrath. Then, mastering her anger, she made courteous reply. "She is not a visitor. She expects to enter the sophomore class."

"Come down to this front seat, young woman," ordered Miss Merton, ignoring Marjorie's explanation. "I'll attend to you later."

Mary sat still, surveying Miss Merton out of two belligerent blue eyes.

"Do as she says, Mary," whispered Marjorie.

Mary obeyed. Walking down the aisle with maddening deliberation, she seated herself on the bench indicated.

"No talking," rasped Miss Merton, as a faint murmur went up from the girls in the sophomore section.

Once the classes had been assigned to their places for the year there was little more to be done. Nettled by her recent resentment against Marjorie, Miss Merton took occasion to deliver a sharp lecture on good conduct in general, making several pointed remarks, which caused Marjorie to color hotly. More than one pair of young eyes glared their resentment of this harsh teacher who had never lost an opportunity in the past school year of censuring their favorite.

The moment the short session was over the girls of her particular set gravitated toward Marjorie.

"Well, of all the old cranks!" scolded Geraldine Macy.

"She's the most hateful teacher in the world," was Muriel Harding's tribute.

"I wouldn't pay any attention to her, Marjorie. I'd go straight to Miss Archer," advised Susan Atwell. "Just see her now! She looks as though she'd actually snap at your friend."

Miss Merton was engaged in interviewing the still belligerent Mary, who stood listening to her, a sulky droop to her pretty mouth.

"Oh, I must go and help Mary out. Wait for me outside, girls."

"Do you need any help?" inquired Jerry. "I never was afraid of Miss Merton, if you'll

remember."

"Oh, no." Marjorie hurried toward her friend, and stood quietly at Mary's side.

"Well, Miss Dean, what is it?" Miss Merton eyed Marjorie with her most disagreeable expression.

"I came to tell you, Miss Merton," began Marjorie in her direct fashion, "that Miss Raymond saw Miss Archer this morning before we came to the study hall. She sent us——"

"That will do, Miss Dean," interrupted Miss Merton. "I hope Miss Raymond is capable of attending to her affairs without your assistance. I should greatly prefer that you go on about your own business and leave this matter to me. I believe I have been a teacher in Sanford High School long enough to be trusted to manage my own work."

A bitter retort rose to Marjorie's lips. She forced it back and with a dignified bow to Miss Merton and, "I will wait for you in the corridor, Mary," walked from the room, her head held high, her eyes burning with resentful tears.

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CHAPTER VI

MARY'S DISTURBING DISCOVERY

ONCE outside the study hall Marjorie Dean's proud manner left her. Her recent joy in returning to high school gave place to a feeling of deep dejection. Everything had certainly gone wrong. She had had so many pleasant little thrills of anticipation that she had quite forgotten Miss Merton and the teacher's unreasoning dislike for her, which she had never taken pains to conceal. Muriel's injudicious remarks had made a bad matter worse. Marjorie knew that from now on she would have to be doubly on her guard. It was evident that Miss Merton intended to take her to task whenever the slightest opportunity presented itself. Marjorie even had her suspicions that Miss Merton had known that it was Muriel instead of herself who had uttered those distinctly unflattering words.

"I'll have to be very careful not to offend Miss Merton," she ruminated gloomily, as she stood waiting for Mary, her eyes fastened on the big study-hall door. Then her thoughts switched from Miss Merton to Constance Stevens. Why hadn't Connie come to school? Surely she could not be ill. Perhaps Charlie was sick.

The opening of the study-hall door interrupted her worried reflections. Mary emerged from the hall, looking like a young thundercloud. She closed the door after her with a resounding bang, which conveyed more than words.

"Of all the hateful old tyrants!" she exclaimed, as she hurried toward Marjorie. "I despise her. How dared she treat you so?"

"Oh, never mind," soothed Marjorie. "Let us forget her. Tell me, are you or are you not a sophomore? Or must we go to Miss Archer to straighten things?"

"I'm a sophomore all right enough," said Mary grimly. "I told her what Miss Archer said, and after that she treated me more civilly. Such a teacher is a disgrace to a school. Why is she so bitter against you, Marjorie?"

Marjorie shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. She has always acted like that toward me. It's just a natural dislike, I suppose. Sometimes, after a teacher has taught school a great many years, she takes sudden likes and dislikes. I've been in her black books since my very first day in Sanford High."

"Poor old Lieutenant." Mary patted Marjorie's hand with sympathetic affection.

"Oh, it doesn't matter. I don't really care much. There are so many nice teachers here who *do* like me that I'm not going to worry over Miss Merton. Come along." She linked her arm in Mary's. "The girls will be waiting for us outside. We are all going down to Sargent's for ice cream. Then we'll go home and report to Captain. After luncheon, I think we had better walk over to Gray Gables. I am afraid Connie or, perhaps, little Charlie is sick. You know Connie promised us, when we were there on Friday, that she'd see us at school."

Mary's face clouded. "I—I think I won't go to Gray Gables with you. I must write to mother. Besides, you and Constance may wish to be by yourselves."

Marjorie's brown eyes opened wide. "Why should we?" she asked. "You know you are always first with me. I haven't any secrets from you."

Mary's face brightened. Perhaps she had been too hasty in her conclusions. "I wish you would tell me all about yourself and Constance," she said slowly. "You promised you would."

"Well, I will," began Marjorie. Then she paused and flushed slightly. It had suddenly come to her that perhaps Constance would not care to have Mary know of the clouds of suspicion that had hung so heavily over her freshman year. "I'd love to tell you about it now, Mary, but I think I had better ask Constance first if she is willing for me to do so. You see, it concerns her more than me. I am almost sure she wouldn't mind, but I'd rather be perfectly fair and ask her first. You know Captain and General have always said to us, 'Never break a confidence.'"

A hurt look crept into Mary's face. "Oh, never mind," she managed to say with a brave assumption of indifference. "I don't wish to know about it if you don't care to tell me."

"But I *do* care to tell you, and I will if Connie says I may," assured Marjorie earnestly.

Mary had no time for further remark. They had reached the double entrance doors to the building and were hailed by a crowd of girls at the foot of the steps.

"Oh, Connie," Marjorie Dean cried out delightedly. She had spied her friend among them.

Constance ran forward to meet Marjorie and Mary. "I couldn't come before. I've been to the train. Father is here. He's going to be at home for two days. And what do you think he wishes me to do?"

"You are not going away with him?" asked Marjorie in sudden alarm.

"No, indeed. I couldn't give up my sophomore year here, even for him. It isn't anything so serious. He proposed that as long as he was here to play for us, it would be a good idea to——"

"Give a dance," ended Jerry Macy. "Hurrah for Mr. Stevens! Long may he wave!"

"Yes, you have guessed it, Jerry," laughed Constance. "I'm going to give a party in honor of Mary. I was so excited over it that I left him to go on to Gray Gables by himself, while I rushed over here as fast as I could come. I wanted to catch you girls together so I could invite you in a body. Jerry, do you suppose Hal would be willing to see Lawrie and the Crane and some of our boys? It will have to be a strictly informal hop, for I haven't time to send out invitations."

"Of course he'll round up the crowd," assured Jerry slangily. "If he doesn't, I will. I guess I won't go to Sargent's with you. What is mere ice cream when compared to a dance? Besides, it's fattening—the ice cream, I mean. I've lost five pounds this summer and I'm not going to find them again at Sargent's if I can help it. So long, I'll see you all to-night."

Jerry bustled off on her errand, leaving her friends engaged in an eager discussion of the coming festivity. A little later they trooped down the street to their favorite rendezvous, where most of their pocket money found a resting place.

"We won't have a single bit of appetite for luncheon," commented Marjorie to Mary, when, an hour later, they set out for home.

"I suppose not," assented Mary indifferently. Her thoughts were far from the subject of luncheon. Her jealousy of Constance Stevens was thoroughly aroused and flaming. She wished Marjorie had never seen nor heard of this hateful girl. And to think that Constance had announced that she was going to give a party in honor of *her*, the very person she had robbed of her best friend! It was insufferable. What could she do? If she refused to go, Marjorie and all those girls would wonder. She could give no reasonable excuse for declining to go at this late day. She told herself she would rather die than have Marjorie know how deeply she had hurt her. Oh, well, she was not the first martyr to the cause of friendship. She would try to bear it. Perhaps, some day, Marjorie, too, would know the bitterness of being supplanted.

It was an unusually quiet Mary who slipped into her place at luncheon that day.

"What is the matter, dear?" asked Mrs. Dean, noting the girl's silence. "Don't you feel well?"

"Oh, I am all right," she made reply, torturing her sober little face into a smile.

"Mary had troubles of her own this morning, Captain," explained Marjorie. Then she launched forth into an account of the morning's happenings.

Mrs. Dean looked her indignation as her daughter's recital progressed. She had met Miss Merton and disliked her on sight.

"I have no wish to interfere in your school life, Marjorie," she said with a touch of sternness, when Marjorie had finished, "but I will not hear of either of you being imposed upon. If Miss Merton continues her unjust treatment I shall insist that you tell me of it. I shall take measures to have it stopped."

"Captain won't stand having her army abused," laughed Marjorie.

"At least you must admit that I'm a conscientious officer," was her mother's reply. "To change the subject, would you like to go shopping with me this afternoon?"

"Oh, yes," chorused the two. Even Mary forgot her grievances for the moment. As little girls they had always hailed the idea of shopping with their beloved captain.

The shopping tour took up the greater part of the afternoon, and it was after five o'clock when the two started for home.

"No lingering at the dinner table to-night for this army," declared Marjorie, finishing her dessert in a hurry. "It's almost seven, Mary. We'll have to hurry upstairs to dress for the dance."

"You didn't apply to me for a leave of absence," reminded Mr. Dean. "You know the penalty for deserting."

"We've forgotten it, General. You can tell us what it is to-morrow," retorted Marjorie. "Come on, Mary. Salute your officers and away we go."

In the excitement of dressing for the dance Mary almost forgot that she was about to enter the house of the girl she now believed she disliked. Marjorie's praise of her pretty white chiffon evening frock almost restored her to good humor. Marjorie herself was radiant in a gown of apricot Georgette crepe and filmy lace.

Mrs. Dean had elected to drive them to their destination in the automobile, and when they alighted from the machine at the gate to Gray Gables, waving her a gay good night, Mary felt almost glad that she had come and that the dance was to be given in her honor.

"I've been watching for you." A slender figure in pale blue ran down the steps to meet them. Out of pure sentiment Constance Stevens had chosen to wear the blue chiffon dress—Marjorie's gracious gift to her. She had taken the utmost care of it, and it looked almost as fresh as on the night she had first worn it.

Mary Raymond stared at her in amazement. Could it be—yes, it was the very gown that Marjorie's aunt had given her a year ago as a commencement present. Had not Marjorie declared over and over again that she would never part with it? And now she had deliberately given it to Constance. This proved beyond a doubt where Marjorie's true affection lay. Mary was obsessed with a wild desire to turn and run down the drive and away from this hateful girl. This was, indeed, the last straw.

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CHAPTER VII

THE PROMISE

MARY RAYMOND wondered, as she walked up the steps of Gray Gables, between Constance and Marjorie, and into the brightly lighted reception hall, how she could manage to endure the long evening ahead of her. She was seized with an insane desire to break from Marjorie's light hold on her arm and rush out of the house of this girl who had stolen her dearest possession, Marjorie's friendship. How well she remembered the day on which Marjorie had received the blue dress which Constance was wearing so unconcernedly. It had come by express in a huge white pasteboard box, while she and Marjorie were seated on the Deans' step engaged in one of their long confabs. How excited they had been over it! How they had exclaimed as Marjorie drew the blue wonder from its pasteboard nest. Then a great trying-on had followed. She recalled with jealous clearness how great Marjorie's disappointment had been when she found it too small for her. Then Marjorie had said as she lovingly patted its soft folds, "Never mind, I'll keep it always, just to look at. It was awfully dear in Aunt Louise to send it to me and I wouldn't let her know for worlds that it doesn't fit me." And now, after all she had said, she had lightly given it away—and to Constance Stevens.

Mary forced herself to smile and reply to the friendly greeting of Miss Allison, who stood in the big, old-fashioned hall helping to receive her niece's guests. A moment more and she was surrounded by Geraldine Macy, Irma Linton and Susan Atwell, who had come forth in a body from the long, palm-decorated parlor off the hall to welcome her, accompanied by a singularly handsome youth, a very tall, merry-faced young man and a black-haired, blue-eyed lad, with clean cut, sensitive features.

She was presented in turn to Harold Macy, Sherman Norwood, known as the Crane to his intimate associates, and Lawrence Armitage.

"So, *you* are Marjorie's friend, Mary Raymond, of whom she has spoken to me so often," smiled Hal Macy. "We are very glad to welcome you to Sanford, Miss Raymond."

"Thank you," Mary returned, almost forgetting her first bitter moment. Hal Macy's direct hand-clasp and frank, bright smile of welcome stamped him with sincerity and truth. She liked equally well Lawrence Armitage's deferential greeting and she found the Crane's wide, boyish grin irresistible as he bowed low over her small hand. Yes, the Sanford boys were certainly nice. She was not so sure that she liked the girls. They made too much of Marjorie, and Marjorie had

proved herself disloyal to her sworn comrade and playmate of years.

Once inside the drawing-room, which had been transformed into an impromptu ball-room by taking up the rugs and moving the piano to one end of it, introductions followed in rapid succession.

"Mary, you must meet my foster father." Constance slipped her arm through Mary's and conducted her to the piano where stood a man with an immense shock of snow-white hair, sorting high piles of music arranged on top. "Father."

The man at the piano wheeled at the sound of the soft voice. His stern, almost sad face broke into a radiant smile that completely transformed it.

"This is Mary Raymond. Mary, my father, Mr. Stevens," introduced Constance. "And this is my uncle, Mr. Roland."

Both men bowed and took Mary's hand in turn, expressing their pleasure at meeting her. Old John Roland's faded blue eyes contained a puzzled look. "You are very familiar," he said. "Where have I seen you before?"

"Look sharply, Uncle John," laughed Marjorie, who had joined them. "You have never seen Mary before. She is like someone you know."

"Someone you know," repeated the old man faithfully. He would never outgrow his quaint habit of repetition, although he had improved immensely in other ways since the change in Constance's fortune had released him from the clutch of poverty.

Mary eyed him curiously. Then her gaze rested on Mr. Stevens. What peculiar persons they were. And Marjorie had never written her of them. They must have a strange history. She made up her mind that she would never ask her fickle chum about them. She would find out whatever she wished to know from others. Now that she was a pupil of Sanford High she would soon become acquainted with girls of her class other than those she had already met. Perhaps she might learn to like some one better than— Her sober reflections stopped there. She could not bring herself to the point of breaking her long comradeship with the girl who had failed her.

Uncle John Roland was still staring at her and smilingly shaking his gray head. "I don't know. I can't think, and yet—"

Suddenly a jubilant little shout rent the air, causing the group about the piano to smile. In the same instant Mary felt a small hand slip into hers. "I knew you comed to see Charlie again. Charlie wouldn't go to bed because Connie said you'd surely come. Charlie loves you a whole lot. You look like Connie."

"Look like Connie," muttered Uncle John. Then his faded eyes flashed sudden intelligence. "I know. Of course she's like Connie. I guessed it, didn't I?" He glanced triumphantly at Marjorie.

"So you did, Uncle John," nodded Marjorie brightly.

Mr. Stevens gazed searchingly at the young girl so like his foster daughter. Mary felt her color rising under that penetrating gaze. It was as though this dreamy-eyed man with the dark, sad face had read her very soul. For a brief instant she sensed dimly the ignobleness of her jealousy of his daughter. She felt that she would rather die than have him know it. Perhaps, after all, she was in the wrong. She would try to dismiss it and do her best to enter into the spirit of the merry-making. An impatient tug at her hand caused her to remember Charlie's presence.

"Talk to me," demanded the child. "Connie says I have to go to bed in a minute, so hurry up."

Mary stooped and wound her arms about the tiny, insistent youngster. She clasped Charlie tightly to her and kissed his eager face. And that embrace sealed the beginning of an affection between them, the very purity of which was one day to lead her from the terrible Valley of Doubt into the sunlight of belief.

"Now you've done it," was Marjorie's merry accusation. "You've stolen my cavalier. Oh, Charlie, I thought I was your very best girl." She made reproachful eyes at Charlie, who, delighted at receiving so much attention, sidled over to her with a ridiculous air of importance and took her hand.

"Everybody likes Charlie," he observed complacently. "Now he can stay up all night and listen to the band."

"You'd go to sleep and never hear the band at all," laughed Constance. "No, Charlie must go to bed and sleep and sleep, or he will never grow big enough and strong enough to play in the band."

The half pout on Charlie's babyish mouth, born of Constance's dread edict, died suddenly. Even the joys of staying up all night were not to be compared with the glories of that far-off future.

"All right, I'll go," he sighed. "But you and Marjorie must come again soon in the daytime when I don't have to go to bed. I'll play a new piece for you on my fiddle. Uncle John says it's a marv'lus compysishun."

A burst of laughter rose from the group around him at this calm statement. After kissing

everyone in his immediate vicinity, Charlie made a quaint little bow and marched off beside Constance, well pleased with himself.

"Isn't he a perfect darling?" was Mary's involuntary tribute.

"Yes, I adore Charlie," returned Marjorie. "I used to feel so dreadfully for him when he was crippled. Isn't it splendid, Mr. Stevens, to see him so well and lively?" She turned radiantly to the white-haired musician. His face lighted again in that wonderful smile. He was about to answer Marjorie, when Constance, who had seen Charlie to the door where he had been taken in charge by a white-capped nurse, returned to them, saying:

"What shall we have first, girls, a one step?"

"Oh, yes, do!" exclaimed Jerry Macy, who had come up in time to hear Constance's question, in company with a mischievous-eyed, freckled-faced youth who rejoiced in the dignified cognomen of Daniel Webster Seabrooke, but who was most appropriately nicknamed the Gadfly.

"Mr. Seabrooke, Miss Raymond," introduced Jerry.

The freckled-faced boy put on a preternaturally solemn expression and begged the pleasure of the first dance with Mary. Mr. Stevens had already handed the old violinist the music for the dance and placed his own score in position upon the piano. The slow, fascinating strains of the one step rang out and a great scurrying for partners began.

Marjorie found herself dancing off with Hal Macy, while Lawrence Armitage swung Constance into the rapidly growing circle of dancers. Irma Linton and the Crane danced together, while Jerry Macy, who danced extremely well for a stout girl, was claimed by Arthur Standish, one of her brother's classmates.

Once the hop had fairly begun, dance followed dance in rapid succession. Much to Mary's secret satisfaction there were no gaps in her programme. As it was, there were no wall flowers. An even number of boys and girls had been invited and every one had put in an appearance. At eleven o'clock a dainty repast, best calculated to suit the appetites of hungry school girls and boys, was served at small tables on the side veranda, which extended almost the length of the house.

It was not until after supper, when the dancing was again at its height, that Marjorie and Constance found time for a few words together.

The two girls had slipped away to Constance's pretty blue and white bedroom to repair a torn frill of Marjorie's gown.

"Isn't it splendid that we can have a minute to ourselves?" laughed Constance. "I'm glad you happened to need repairing. I hope Mary is having a good time. As long as it's her party I'm anxious that she should enjoy herself."

"Of course she's having a good time. How could she help it?" returned Marjorie staunchly. "All the boys have been perfectly lovely to her and so have the girls. I knew everyone would like her. You and Mary and I will have lots of fun going about together this winter."

Constance smiled an answer to Marjorie's joyous prediction. Then her pretty face sobered. "Marjorie," she said, then paused.

Marjorie glanced up from the flounce she was setting to rights. Something in Constance's tone commanded her attention. "What is it, Connie?"

"Have you ever said anything to Mary about you—and me—and things last year?"

"Why, no. I wouldn't think of doing so unless I asked you if I might. I——"

"Please don't, then," interrupted Constance. "I had rather she didn't know. It is all past, and, as long as so few persons know about it, don't you think it would be better to let it rest?"

Marjorie bent her head over her work to conceal the sudden disturbing flush that rose to her face. She had intended telling Constance that very night of the remark that Miss Archer had made in Mary's presence about their freshman year. She had felt dimly that, perhaps, Mary ought to be put in possession of the story, although she had not the remotest suspicion of the jealousy that was already warping her chum's thoughts. Her one idea had been to answer all her questions as freely as she had done in the past. She intended to put the matter to Constance in this light. But now Constance had forestalled her and was asking her to be silent on the very matters she wished to impart to Mary.

"It isn't as though it is something which Mary ought to know," continued Constance, quite unaware of Marjorie's inward agitation. "It wouldn't make her happier to learn it and—and—she might not think so well of me. I wish her to like me, Marjorie, just because she is your dearest friend. Don't you think I am right about it? You wouldn't care to have even the friend of your best friend know all the little intimate details of your life. Now, would you?" Constance slipped to her knees beside Marjorie, one arm across her shoulder, and regarded her with pleading eyes.

Marjorie stared thoughtfully into the earnest face of the girl at her side. What should she say? If she told Constance that Mary had twice asked questions regarding her affairs, Constance might think Mary unduly curious. Perhaps, after all, silence was wisest. Mary might forget all

about it, and, in any case, she was far too sensible to feel hurt or indignant because she, Marjorie, was not free to tell her of the private affairs of another.

"Promise me, Marjorie, that you won't say anything," urged Constance. Her natural reticence made her dread taking even Mary into confidence regarding herself.

"I promise, Connie," said Marjorie with a half sigh. "There, I guess that flounce will stay in place. I've sewed it over and over."

The two girls returned to the dance floor arm in arm. Mary Raymond's blue eyes were turned on them resentfully as they entered the room. They had been having a talk together, and hadn't asked her to join them. Then her face cleared. She thought she knew what that talk was about. Marjorie had been asking Constance's permission to tell her everything. She would hear the great secret on the way home, no doubt. Her spirits rose at the prospect of the comfy chat they would have in the automobile and for the rest of the evening she put aside all doubts and fears, and danced as only sweet and seventeen can.

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CHAPTER VIII

THE LATEST SOPHOMORE ARRIVAL

THOUGH the evening of the dance had been deceitfully clear and balmy, dark clouds banked the autumn sky before morning and the day broke in a downpour of rain. It was a doubly dreary morning to poor little Mary Raymond and over and over again Longfellow's plaintive lines,

"Into each life some rain must fall,
Some days must be dark and dreary,"

repeated themselves in her brain. Yes, rain had indeed fallen into her life. The bitter rain of false friendship. All the days must from now on be dark and dreary. Last night she had danced the hours away, secure in the thought that Marjorie would not fail her. And Marjorie had spoken no word of explanation. During the drive home she had talked gaily of the dance and of the boys and girls who had attended it. She had related bright bits of freshman history concerning them, but on the subject of Constance Stevens and her affairs she had been mute. Mary fancied she had purposely avoided the subject. In this respect she was quite correct. Marjorie, still a little disturbed over her promise to Constance, had tried to direct Mary's mind to other matters. Deeply hurt, rather than jealous, Mary had listened to Marjorie in silence. She managed to make a few comments on the dance, and pleading that she was too sleepy for a night-owl talk, had kissed Marjorie good night rather coldly and hurried to her room. Stopping only to lock the door, she had thrown herself on her bed in her pretty evening frock and given vent to long, tearless sobs that left her wide awake and mourning, far into the night. It was, therefore, not strange that lack of sleep, coupled with her supposed dire wrongs, had caused her to awaken that morning in a mood quite suited to the gloom of the day.

A vigorous rattling of the door knob caused her to spring from her bed with a half petulant exclamation.

"Let me in, Mary," called Marjorie's fresh young voice from the hall. "Whatever made you lock your door? I guess you were so sleepy you didn't know what you were about."

Mary turned the key and opened the door with a jerk. Marjorie pounced upon her like a frolicsome puppy. Wrapping her arms around her chum, she whirled her about and half the length of the room in a wild dance.

"Let me alone, please." Mary pulled herself pettishly from Marjorie's clinging arms.

"Why, Lieutenant, what's the matter? You aren't sick, are you? If you are, I'm sorry I was so rough. If you're just sleepy, then I'm not. You needed waking up. It's a quarter to eight now and we'll have to hustle. Captain let us sleep until the last minute. Now, which are you, sick or sleepy?"

"Both," returned Mary laconically. "I—that is—my head aches."

"Poor darling. Was Marjorie a naughty girl to tease her when her was so sick?" Marjorie sought to comfort her chum, but Mary eluded her sympathetic caress and said almost crossly, "Don't baby me. I—I hate being babied and you know it."

Marjorie's arms dropped to her sides. "I didn't mean to tease you. I'm sorry. I'll go down and ask Captain to give you something to cure your headache." She turned abruptly and left the room, deeply puzzled and slightly hurt. What on earth ailed Mary?

The moment the door closed Mary pattered into the bathroom and banged the door. She hurried through her bath and was partly dressed when Marjorie returned with a little bottle of aspirin tablets. "One of these will fix up your head," she declared cheerily.

"I don't want it," muttered Mary. "My head is all right now."

"That is what I would call a marvelous recovery," laughed Marjorie. "I wish Captain's headaches would take wing so easily. You know what dreadful sick headaches she sometimes has. She had one on the first day I went to Sanford High, and I had to go alone."

"I remember," nodded Mary carelessly. "That was one of the things you *did* write me."

"I wrote you lots of things," retorted Marjorie lightly, failing to catch the significance of Mary's words. "But now you are here, I don't have to write them. I can *say* them."

"Then, why don't you?" was on Mary's tongue, but she did not say it. Instead, she maintained a half sulky silence, as she walked to the wardrobe and began fingering the gowns hung there. Selecting a blue serge dress, made sailor fashion, she slipped into it and began fastening it as she walked to the mirror. Marjorie stood watching her, with a half frown. She did not understand this new mood of Mary's. The Mary she had formerly known had been sunny and light-hearted. The girl who stood before the mirror, grave and unsmiling, was a stranger.

"I'm ready to go downstairs." Mary turned slowly from the mirror and walked toward the door. Beneath her quiet exterior, a silent struggle was going on. Should she speak her mind once and for all to Marjorie, or should she go on enduring in silence? Perhaps it would be best to speak and have things out. Then, at least, they would understand each other. Then her pride whispered to her that it was Marjorie's and not her place to speak. Marjorie must know something of her state of mind. At heart she must be just the least bit ashamed of herself for shutting her out of her personal affairs. Had they not sworn long ago to tell each other their secrets. *She* had always kept her word. It was Marjorie who had failed to do so. No, she would not humble herself. Marjorie might keep her secrets, for all *she* cared. She was sorry that she had ever come to Sanford. Now that she was here she would have to stay. If she wrote her father to take her away, her mother would have to be told. Mary was resolved that no matter what happened to her, her mother must be spared all anxiety. She would try to bear it. Marjorie should never know how deeply she was wounded. She would pretend that all was as it had been before.

Mrs. Dean looked up from her letters, as the two girls entered the dining room.

"Hurry, children," she admonished. "You haven't much time to spare. These social affairs completely break up army discipline. Look out you don't go to sleep at your post this morning."

"Who's sleepy? Not I," boasted Marjorie. "I feel as though I'd slept for hours and hours. Your army is ready for duty, Captain. Lieutenant Mary's headache has been put to rout and everything is lovely."

"Are you sure you feel quite well, dear?" questioned Mrs. Dean anxiously. She noted that Mary was very pale and that her eyes looked strained and tired.

"I'm quite well now, thank you." The ghost of a smile flickered on her pale face.

"Did you enjoy the dance? It was nice in Connie to give it in your honor. We are all very fond of her and of little Charlie."

Mary's wan face brightened at the mention of the child's name. "Isn't he dear?" she asked impulsively.

"Mary has stolen Charlie from me," put in Marjorie. "He adores her already. I don't blame him. So do I, and so does Connie, too. We three are going to have splendid times together this winter."

During the rest of the breakfast Marjorie regaled her mother with an account of the dance. Mary said little or nothing, but amid her friend's merry chatter her silence passed unnoticed.

"Wear your raincoats," called Mrs. Dean after them, as, their breakfast finished, they ran upstairs for their wraps.

Fifteen minutes later they had joined the bobbing umbrella procession that wended its way into the high school building.

"You'll have to go to Miss Merton, Mary, and be assigned to a seat. She didn't give you one yesterday, did she?" asked Marjorie. "You can put your wraps in our locker. We are to have the same lockers we had last year. Connie and I have a locker together. There is lots of room in it for your things, too. I'll task Marcia Arnold to let you in with us. She has charge of the lockers."

Mary's first impulse was to decline this friendly offer. On second thought she closed her lips tightly, resolved to make no protest. Later—well, there was no telling what might happen.

"Don't be afraid of Miss Merton," was Marjorie's whispered counsel, as they crossed the threshold of the study hall. "She can't eat you."

"I'm not afraid." Mary's lip curled a trifle scornfully. Marjorie treated her as though she were a baby.

"I have come to you for my seat," was her terse statement, as she paused squarely before Miss

Merton's desk.

Miss Merton glanced up to meet the unflinching gaze of two purposely cold blue eyes. Something in their direct gaze made her answer with undue civility, "Very well. I will assign you to one. Come with me."

She stalked down the aisle, Mary following, to the last seat in one of the two sophomore rows, and paused before it. "This will be your seat for the year," she said.

"Thank you." Mary sat down and took account of her surroundings. Across the aisle on one side, Susan Atwell's dimpled face flashed her a welcome. On the other side sat a tall, severe junior who wore eye-glasses. The seat in front of her was vacant. Marjorie sat far down the same row. Mary could just see the top of her curly head. It still lacked five minutes of opening time and the students were, for the most part, conversing in low tones. Now and then an accidentally loud note caused Miss Merton to raise her head from her writing and glare severely at the offender.

Susan Atwell leaned across the aisle and patted Mary's hand in friendly fashion. "I'm so glad you are going to sit here," she said in an undertone. "I was afraid Miss Merton would put some old slow-poke there who wouldn't say 'boo' or pass notes or do anything to help the sophomore cause along."

"I'm glad she put me near you," returned Mary affably. She had made up her mind to win friends. They would be indispensable to her now that all was over between her and Marjorie. "I don't imagine that tall girl is very sociable."

"She's a dig and a prig," giggled Susan. "You'd get no recreation from labor from that quarter."

Mary echoed Susan's infectious giggle. "Who sits in front of me?" she asked.

"No one, yet. Who knows what manner of girl is in store for us? That's the only vacant seat in the section. The first late arrival into our midst will get it. I don't believe we'll have any more girls, though, unless someone comes into school late as Marjorie came last year. It's too bad. It makes an awkward stretch if one wants to pass a note. I always am caught if I throw one. Last year I threw one and hit Miss Merton in the back. She was standing quite a little way down the aisle. I thought it was a splendid opportunity. I'd been waiting to send one to Irma Linton, who sat two seats in front of me. The girl between us wouldn't pass it. So I threw it, and it went further than I thought." Susan's fascinating giggle burst forth anew. She rocked to and fro in merriment at the recollection.

Mary found herself laughing in concert. Just then the opening bell clanged forth its harsh note of warning. The low buzz of voices in the great study hall died into silence. Every pair of eyes faced front. Miss Merton rose from her chair to conduct the opening exercises. A sudden murmur that swept the hall caused her to say sternly, "Silence." Then, noting that the eyes of her pupils were fixed in concerted gaze on the study-hall door, she turned sharply.

A black-haired, black-eyed girl, whose elfish face wore an expression of mingled contempt and amusement, advanced into the room with a decided air of one who wishes to create an impression.

"Mignon!" gasped Susan. "Well, *what* do you think of that?"

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CHAPTER IX

THE BLINDNESS OF JEALOUSY

AT sight of the newcomer Miss Merton's severe face underwent a lightning change. She stepped from the platform and hurried toward the dark-eyed girl with outstretched hand. Her harsh voice sounded almost pleasant, as she said, "Why, Mignon, I am delighted to see you!"

Mignon La Salle tossed her head with an air of triumph as she took Miss Merton's hand. In her, at least, she had a powerful ally. Lowering her voice, the teacher asked her several questions. Mignon answered them in equally guarded tones, accompanied by the frequent significant gestures which are involuntary in those of foreign birth.

A subdued buzzing arose from different parts of the study hall. Apparently engrossed in her conversation with the girl who had been her favorite pupil during her freshman year, Miss Merton paid no attention to the sounds provoked by Mignon La Salle's unexpected arrival. As a matter of fact, she was quite aware of them, but chose to ignore them solely on Mignon's account. To rebuke the whisperers would tend toward embarrassing the French girl.

"There is just one vacant place in the sophomore section," she informed Mignon. "I think I must

have reserved it specially for you." She contorted her face into what she believed to be an affable smile.

Mignon answered it in kind, with an inimitable lifting of the eyebrows and a significant shrug.

"Look at her," muttered Jerry Macy in Marjorie's ear. "Miss Merton is taffying her up in great style. She always puts on her cat-that-ate-the-canary expression when she's pleased. And to think that we've got to stand for *her* again this year!" Jerry gave a positive snort of disgust.

"Shh! They'll hear you, Jerry," warned Marjorie.

"Don't care if they do. Wish they would," grumbled the disgruntled Jerry. "I'll bet you ten to one she was sent home from boarding school."

There was a general turning of heads and craning of necks as Miss Merton conducted Mignon down the aisle to the vacant seat in front of Mary Raymond. There was a brief exchange of low-toned words between the two, then Mignon seated herself, while Miss Merton marched stolidly back to her desk and without further delay began the interrupted morning exercises.

Mary Raymond viewed the black, curly head and silken-clad shoulders of the newcomer with some curiosity. The subdued ripple of astonishment that had passed over the roomful of girls told her that here was no ordinary pupil. Mignon's expensive frock of dark green Georgette crepe, elaborately trimmed, also pointed to affluence. Mary reasoned that she must be known to the others. A stranger would not have created such a buzz of comment. Then, she remembered Susan's amazed exclamation. She turned to the latter and made a gesture of inquiry, Susan shook her head. Her lips formed a silent, "After school," and Mary nodded understandingly.

"Young ladies, you will arrange your programme of recitations this morning as speedily as possible," was Miss Merton's command the moment opening exercises were over. "You will be given until ten o'clock to do so. Then there will be twenty-minute classes for the rest of the morning. Classes will occupy the usual period of time during the afternoon. Try to arrange your studies so that you will not have to waste valuable time in making changes. Please avoid asking unnecessary questions. The bulletin board will tell you everything, if you take pains to examine it carefully. Let there be no loud talking or personal conversation."

Miss Merton sat down with the air of one who has done her duty, and glared severely at the rows of attentive young faces. She was not in sympathy with these girls. Their youth was a distinct affront to her narrow soul.

The business of arranging the term's studies began in quiet, orderly fashion. The majority of the pupils had long since decided upon their courses of study. Their main duty now lay in making satisfactory arrangements of their classes and the hours on which their various recitations fell.

Marjorie Dean studied the bulletin board with a serious face. She had successfully carried five studies during her freshman year. She decided that she would do so again, provided the fifth subject held interest enough to warrant the extra effort it meant. Plane geometry, of course, she would have to take. Then there was second year French. She and Constance intended to go on with the language of which they were so fond. Her General had insisted that she must begin Latin. She should have begun it in her freshman year. That made three. Then there was chemistry. Should she choose a fifth subject? Yes, there was English Literature. It would not be hard work. She was sure she would love it. Besides, she wished to be in Miss Flint's class.

Once she had decided upon her subjects, she studied the board anew for a proper arrangement of her recitation hours. For a wonder they fitted into one another beautifully, leaving her that last coveted period in the afternoon, free for study. She sat back at last with a faint breath of satisfaction. She wondered how Mary was getting on and what she intended to study. They had agreed beforehand on Chemistry. Only the day before Mr. Dean had half-promised to fit out a tiny laboratory for them in a small room at the rear of the house.

Mary, however, was frowning darkly at the board. She wondered in which section Marjorie intended to recite geometry. She had been so busy with her own woes that gloomy morning that she had quite forgotten to plan with Marjorie. Oh, well, she reflected, what difference did it make? Marjorie wouldn't care whether they recited together or not. Very likely she had already made plans with that odious Constance Stevens that would leave her out. Marjorie had already said that she and Constance intended to go on with French together. Then there were Cæsar's Commentaries. She had finished first-year Latin. She would have to take them next. Suddenly a naughty idea came into her perverse little brain. Why not purposely leave Marjorie out of her calculations? Marjorie had wished her to take chemistry. Very well. She would disappoint her by choosing something else. Then if Mr. Dean fitted out a laboratory, his daughter would have the pleasure of working in it all by herself. She would show a certain person what it meant to cast aside a lifelong friendship. Oh, yes, Marjorie was anxious for her to take English literature. She would take rhetoric instead. She would go still further. If when classes assembled she found herself in the same geometry section with her chum she would make an excuse and change to another period of recitation. The frown deepened on her smooth forehead as she jotted down her subjects on the sheet of paper before her.

Suddenly conscious of the intent regard of someone, she raised her head. A pair of elfish black eyes were fixed upon her in curious intent.

"Who are you?" asked Mignon La Salle with cool impudence. "You look like that priggish Miss

Stevens. I hope for your sake you are not a relative of hers."

"Most certainly I am not," retorted Mary, flushing angrily. It was too provoking. Why must she be constantly reminded of her resemblance to one she disliked so intensely? In her annoyance at the nature of the French girl's remarks, she quite overlooked the impertinence of her address.

A gleam of satisfaction flashed across Mignon's face. "Then there is hope," she returned, holding up her forefinger in an impish imitation of a world-wide advertisement. "Say it again. I can't believe the evidence of my own ears."

"I am not a relative of Miss Stevens," repeated Mary a trifle stiffly. The French girl's mocking tones were distinctly unpleasant. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I wish to know," shrugged Mignon. Then she added tactfully, "Please don't think me rude. I am always too frank in expressing my opinions. If I dislike anyone I can't smile deceitfully and pretend them to be my dearest friend."

Mary's sullen face cleared. Here at last was a girl who seemed to be sincere. She unbent slightly and smiled. Mignon returned the smile in her most amiable fashion.

"Pardon me for a moment." Mignon turned in her seat and began fumbling in a little leather bag that lay on her desk.

Mary felt a quick, light touch on her arm. Susan Atwell began making violent signs at her behind Mignon's back. She desisted as suddenly as she began. The French girl had turned again toward Mary with the quick, cat-like manner that so characterized all her movements.

"Here is my card," she offered, placing a bit of engraved pasteboard on Mary's desk.

The latter picked it up and read, "Mignon Adrienne La Salle."

"What a pretty name!" was her soft exclamation.

"I'm glad you like it," beamed Mignon. "But you haven't told me yours."

"I haven't any cards with me," apologized Mary. "My name is Mary Raymond."

"Have you lived long in Sanford?" inquired Mignon suavely. She had already decided that a girl who was in sympathy with her on one point might prove to be worth cultivating.

"Only a short time. My mother is in Colorado for her health and I am living in Marjorie Dean's home until Mother returns next summer."

Mary's innocent words had an electrical effect on the French girl. Her heavy brows drew together in a scowl and her dark face set in hard lines.

"Then that settles it," she said coldly. "You and I can *never* be friends." She switched about in her seat with an angry jerk.

Mary leaned forward and touched her on the shoulder. "I don't understand," she murmured. "Please tell me what you mean."

The French girl swung halfway about. She regarded Mary with narrowed eyes. Was it possible that Marjorie Dean had never mentioned her to her friend?

"Hasn't Miss Dean ever spoken to you of me?" she asked abruptly.

Mary shook her head. "No, I am sure I never before heard of you. I don't know many Sanford girls yet. I have met Miss Atwell and Miss Macy and a few others who were at Miss Stevens' dance last night."

"So, Miss Stevens is doing social stunts," sneered Mignon. "Quite a change from last year, I should say. I used to be friends with Susan Atwell and Jerry Macy, but this Stevens girl made mischief between us and broke up our old crowd entirely. Your friend, Miss Dean, took sides with them, too, and helped the thing along. She made a perfect idiot of herself over Constance Stevens. Oh, well, never mind. I'm not going to say another word about it. I'm sorry we can't be friends. I'm sure we'd get along famously together. It is impossible, though. Miss Dean wouldn't let you."

Mary suddenly sat very erect. She had listened in amazement to Mignon's recital. Could she believe her ears? Had her hitherto-beloved Marjorie been guilty of trouble-making? And all for the sake of Constance Stevens. Marjorie must indeed care a great deal for her. She had not been mistaken, then, in her belief that she had been supplanted in her chum's heart. And now Mignon was suggesting that Marjorie would not allow her to be friends with the girl whom she had wronged. Mary did not stop to consider that there are always two sides to a story. Swayed by her resentment against Constance, she preferred to believe anything which she might hear against her.

"Please understand, once and for all, that Marjorie has nothing to say about whoever I choose to have for a friend," she said with decision. "I hope I am free to do as I please. I shall be very glad to know you better, Miss La Salle, and I am sorry that you have been so badly treated."

The ringing of the first recitation-bell broke in upon the conversation.

"Oh, gracious, I haven't looked at the bulletinboard. Excuse me, Miss Raymond. I'll see you later and we'll have a nice long talk. I'm sure I shall be pleased to have *you* for a friend."

"Are you going to recite geometry in this first section?" asked Mary eagerly. The students were already filing out of the great room.

"Let me see." Mignon consulted the bulletin board. "Why, yes, I might as well."

"Oh, splendid!" glowed Mary. "Then you can show me the way to the geometry classroom."

"Delighted, I'm sure," returned Mignon. Her black eyes sparkled with triumph. At last she had found a way to even her score with Marjorie Dean. With almost uncanny shrewdness she had divined what Marjorie herself had not discovered. This blue-eyed baby of a girl, for Mignon mentally characterized her as such, was jealous of Marjorie's friendship with the Stevens girl. Very well. She would take a hand and help matters along. Of course there was a strong chance that it might all come to nothing. Marjorie might take Mary in charge the moment school was over and tell her a few things. Yet that was hardly possible. Much as she hated the brown-eyed girl who had worsted her at every point, in her own cowardly heart lurked a respect for Marjorie's high standard of honor. So far Mary knew nothing against her. Perhaps she would never know. Perhaps if Marjorie and Jerry and Irma tried to prejudice Mary against her, the girl would rebel and send them about their business. She had looked stupidly obstinate when she said, "I hope I am free to do as I please." Mignon smiled maliciously as she walked down the long aisle ahead of Mary.

Marjorie had risen from her seat at the sound of the first bell. Now she gazed anxiously up the aisle toward Mary's seat. She looked relieved as she saw her chum approaching. She bowed coldly to Mignon as she passed. "Oh, Mary," she said, "I was looking for you. If you are going to recite geometry now, then please don't go. Wait and recite in my section. You know, we said we'd recite it together."

Mary's blue eyes glowed resentfully. "I've made up my programme," she answered with cool defiance. "I can't change it now. Miss La Salle is going to show me the way to the geometry classroom. I'll see you later."

Without waiting for a reply she marched on, leaving Marjorie to stare after her with troubled eyes.

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CHAPTER X

THE VALLEY OF MISUNDERSTANDING

FOR a brief instant Marjorie continued to stare after the retreating form of her chum, oblivious to the steady stream of girls passing by her. Then, seized with a sudden idea, she slipped into her seat and hastily consulted the bulletin board. The ringing of the third bell found her hurrying from the aisle toward the door. That brief survey of the schedule had resulted in an entire change of her programme. She had decided to recite geometry in the morning section. It meant giving up the cherished last hour in the afternoon which she had reserved for study. She would have to recite Latin at that time. Well, that did not matter so much. Reciting geometry in the same section with Mary was what counted. She had experienced a curious feeling of alarm as she had watched Mary and Mignon La Salle disappear through the big doorway side by side. Mignon was the last person she had supposed Mary would meet. To be sure, there was nothing particularly alarming in their meeting. As yet they were comparative strangers to each other. She had noted that Miss Merton had assigned the French girl to the seat in front of Mary. It was, therefore, quite probable that Mary had inquired the way to the geometry classroom and Mignon had volunteered to conduct her to it.

Marjorie's sober face lightened a little as she hastened down the corridor to the geometry room. Miss Nelson, the instructor in mathematics, was on the point of closing the door as she hurriedly approached. She smiled as she saw the pretty sophomore, and continued to hold the door open until Marjorie had crossed the threshold. The latter gave an eager glance about the room. The classrooms were provided with rows of single desks similar to those in the study hall. Mary was occupying one of them well toward the front of the room. Directly ahead of her sat the French girl. On one of the back seats was Jerry Macy, glaring in her most savage manner, her angry eyes fixed on the black, curly head of the girl she despised.

There was no vacant seat near Mary. Marjorie noted all these facts in that one comprehensive glance. It also seemed to her that the French girl's face wore an expression of mocking triumph. And was it her imagination, or had Mary glanced up as she entered and then turned away her eyes? What did it all mean? Marjorie took the nearest vacant seat at hand, the prey of many

emotions. Then, as Miss Nelson stepped forward to address the class, she resolutely put away all personal matters and, with the fine attention to the business of study which had endeared her to her various teachers during her freshman year, she strove to center her troubled mind on what Miss Nelson was saying.

After a short preliminary talk on the importance of the study the class was about to begin, Miss Nelson proceeded to the business of registering her pupils and giving out the text books. Miss Nelson laid particular stress on the thorough learning of all definitions pertaining to the study in hand. "You must know these definitions so well that you could say them backward if I requested it," she emphasized. "They will be of greatest importance in your work to come." Then she heartlessly gave out several pages of them for the advance lesson. The rest of the period she spent in going over and explaining these same definitions in her usual thorough manner, ending with the stern injunction that she expected a letter-perfect recitation on the following morning.

"Miss Nelson doesn't want much," grumbled Jerry Macy in Irma Linton's ear, as they filed out of class at the ringing of the bell which ended the period. Then, before Irma had time to reply, she continued: "*What* do you think of Mignon? Isn't it a shame she's back again? And did you see her march in here with Mary Raymond? It's a pretty sure thing that neither of them knows who is who in Sanford. I suppose Mary, poor innocent, asked her the way to the classroom. Where was Marjorie all that time, I wonder? I'll bet you a box of Huyler's that they won't walk into geometry again to-morrow morning. Hurry up, there's Marjorie just ahead of us with Mary now. The fair Mignon has vanished. I can see her away ahead of them. I guess Marjorie didn't know who piloted Mary into class. She came in last, you know."

Irma laid a detaining hand on Jerry's arm.

"Oh, wait until after school, Jerry," she counseled. This quiet, unobtrusive girl was a keen observer. She had noted Marjorie's half-troubled expression as she entered the room. The suspicion that Marjorie knew and was not pleased had already come to her.

"All right, I will. Wish school was out now. Those geometry definitions make me tired. I'm worn out already and school hasn't fairly begun yet. I hate mathematics. Wouldn't look at a geometry if I could graduate without it."

But while Jerry was anathematizing mathematics, Marjorie was saying earnestly to Mary, whom she had joined at the door, "I am so sorry I didn't come back to your seat in the study hall before the first bell rang. I really ought to have asked permission to do so, but I was afraid Miss Merton would say 'no.' She never loses a chance to be horrid to me. When you said you were going to recite in this section I hurried and changed my programme to make things come right for us."

Marjorie's earnest little speech, so full of apparent good will, brought a quick flush of contrition to Mary's cheeks. She experienced a swift spasm of regret for her bitter suspicion of Marjorie. Her tense face softened. Why not unburden herself to her chum now and find relief from her torture of doubt?

"Marjorie," she began, laying her hand lightly on her friend's arm, "I wish you would tell me something. Miss La Salle said that Constance Stevens——"

"Mary!" Marjorie's sunny face had suddenly grown very stern. "I am sorry to have to speak harshly of any girl in Sanford High, but as your chum I feel it my duty to ask you to have nothing to do with Mignon La Salle, or pay the slightest attention to her. She made us all very unhappy last year, particularly Constance and myself. I can't help saying it, but I am sorry that she has come back to Sanford. I understood that she was at boarding school. I am sure I wish she had stayed there." Marjorie spoke with a bitterness quite foreign to her generous nature.

Mary's lips tightened obstinately as she listened. Her brief impulse toward a frank understanding died with Marjorie's emphatic utterance. She was inwardly furious at her chum's sharp interruption.

"I am very well aware that you would stand up for Miss Stevens, whether she were in the right or in the wrong," she said with cold sarcasm. "I've been seeing that ever since I came to Sanford. But just because she is perfect in *your* eyes is not reason why *I* should think so. For my part, I like Miss La Salle. She was awfully sweet to me this morning, and I don't think it is nice in you to talk about her behind her back."

In the intensity of the moment both girls had stopped short in the corridor, oblivious of the passing students. Mary's flashing blue eyes fixed Marjorie's amazed brown ones in an angry gaze.

"Why, Ma-a-ry!" stammered Marjorie. "What *is* the matter? I don't understand you." Her bewilderment served only to increase the rancor that had been smouldering in Mary's heart. Now it burst forth in a fury of words.

"Don't pretend, Marjorie Dean. You know perfectly well what I mean. It isn't necessary for me to tell you, either. When I came to Sanford to live with you I thought I'd be the happiest girl in the world because I was going to live at your house and go to school with you. If I had known as much when Father and I came to see you as I know now—well, I wouldn't—ever—have come back again!" Her anger-choked tones faltered. She turned away her head. Then pulling herself sharply together, she turned and hurried down the corridor.

For a second Marjorie stood rooted to the spot. Could she believe her ears? Was it really Mary, her soldier chum, with whom she had stood shoulder to shoulder for so many years, who had thus arraigned her? Her instant of inaction past, she darted down the corridor after Mary. But the latter passed into the study hall before she could overtake her. She could do nothing now to straighten the tangle in which they had so suddenly become involved until the morning session of school was over. She glanced anxiously toward Mary's seat the moment she stepped across the threshold of the study hall, only to see her friend in earnest conversation with Mignon La Salle. An angry little furrow settled on her usually placid brow. Mignon had lost no time in living up to her reputation. Mary must be rescued from her baleful influence at once. When they reached home that day she would tell her chum the whole story of last year. Once Mary learned Mignon's true character she would see matters in a different light. But what had the French girl said about Constance? If only she had held her peace and not interrupted Mary. Even as a little girl Marjorie remembered how hard it had been, once Mary was angry, to discover the cause. In spite of her usual good-nature she was unyieldingly stubborn. When, at rare intervals, she became displeased or hurt over a fancied grievance, she would nurse her anger for days in sulky silence.

"I'll tell her all about last year the minute we get into the house this noon," resolved Marjorie. "When she knows how badly Mignon behaved toward Connie——" The little girl drew a sharp breath of dismay. Into her mind flashed her recent promise to Constance Stevens. She could tell Mary nothing until she had permission to do so. That meant that for the day, at least, she must remain mute, for Constance was not in school that morning, nor would she be in during the day. She had received special permission from Miss Archer to be excused from lessons while her foster father was at Gray Gables.

It was a very sober little girl who wended her way to the French class, her next recitation. Out of an apparently clear sky the miserable set of circumstances frowned upon her dawning sophomore year. But it must come right. She would go to Gray Gables that very afternoon and ask Constance to release her from her promise. Connie would surely be willing to do so, when she knew all. Comforted by this thought, Marjorie brightened again.

"*Bon jour*, Mademoiselle Dean," greeted the cheerful voice of Professor Fontaine as she entered his classroom. "It is with a great pleasure that I see you again. Let us 'ope that you haf not forgottaine your French, I trost you haf sometimes remembered *la belle langue* during your vacation." The little man beamed delightedly upon Marjorie.

"I am afraid I have forgotten a great deal of it, Professor Fontaine." Marjorie spoke with the pretty deference that she always accorded this long-suffering professor, whose strongly accented English and foreign eccentricities made him the subject of many ill-timed jests on the part of his thoughtless pupils. "I'm going to study hard, though, and it will soon come back to me."

"Ah! These are the words it makes happiness to hear," he returned amiably. "Some day, when you haf learned to spik the French as the English, you will be glad that you haf persevered."

"I'm sure I shall," smiled Marjorie. Then, as several entering pupils claimed the little man's attention, she passed on and took a vacant seat at the back of the room.

Professor Fontaine had begun to address the class when the door opened and Mignon La Salle sauntered in. She threw a quick, derisive glance at his back, which caused several girls to giggle, then strolled calmly to a seat. A shade of annoyance clouded the instructor's genial face. He eyed his countrywoman severely for an instant, then went on with his speech.

Marjorie received little benefit that morning from the professor's gallant efforts to impress the importance of the study of his language on the minds of his class. Her thoughts were with Mary and what she had best say to conciliate her. She had as yet no inkling of the truth. She did not dream that jealousy of Constance had prompted Mary's outburst. She believed that the whole trouble lay in whatever Mignon had told Mary.

She was more hurt than surprised when at the last period in the morning she failed to find Mary in the chemistry room. Of course she might have expected it. Nothing would be right until she had chased away the black clouds of misunderstanding that hung over them. Still, it grieved her to think that Mary had not trusted her enough to weigh her loyalty against the gossip of a stranger.

The hands of the study hall clock, pointing the hour of twelve, brought relief to the worried sophomore. The instant the closing bell rang she made for the locker room. It would be better to wait for Mary there, rather than in the corridor. If Mary's mood had not changed, she preferred not to run the risk of a possible rebuff in so prominent a place. There were too many curious eyes ready to note their slightest act. It would be dreadful if some lynx-eyed girl were to mark them and circulate a report that they were quarreling.

Arrived at the locker-room, she opened her locker and took out her wraps. A faint gasp of astonishment broke from her. Only one rain-coat, one hat and one pair of rubbers were there, where at the beginning of the morning there had been two. Mary Raymond's belongings were gone.

CHAPTER XI

CHOOSING HER OWN WAY

MARJORIE stood staring at her locker as one in a dream.

"HURRY up, Marjorie!" Jerry Macy's loud, matter-of-fact tones broke the spell. Behind her were Irma Linton and Susan Atwell. The faces of the three were alive with suppressed excitement. Jerry caught sight of the tell-tale locker and emitted an indignant snort.

"Mary took her advice, Susie! If I were the President of the United States I'd have that Mignon La Salle deported to the South Sea Islands, or Kamchatka, or some place where she couldn't get back in a hurry. It would be a good deal farther than boarding school, I can just tell you," she ended with an angry sputter.

Marjorie faced the battery of indignant young faces. "What is the trouble, girls?" She tried to keep her voice steady, though she was at the point of tears.

"What's the matter with your friend, Mary Raymond, Marjorie?" continued Jerry in a slightly lower key. "Has she gone suddenly crazy or—or——" Jerry hesitated. She could not voice the other question which rose to her lips.

"Girls," Marjorie viewed her friends with brave, direct eyes, "you know something that I don't about Mary. What is it?"

"It's about Mignon," blurted Jerry. "Susie says that the minute she landed in her seat she began talking to Mary."

"I made signs to Mary to pay no attention to her," broke in Susan Atwell, "but she didn't understand what I meant and I couldn't explain, with Mignon sitting right there. The next thing I saw, they were walking down the aisle together as though they'd known each other all their lives."

"Yes, and they came into geometry together, too," supplemented Jerry. "But that's not the worst. Tell Marjorie what you overheard, Susie."

"Well," began Susan, looking important, "when I came back to the study hall just before the last class was called, they were both there ahead of me. Just as I was going to sit down at my desk I heard Mignon tell Mary she'd love to have her share her locker. Mary was looking awfully sober and pretty cross, too, as though she were mad about something. I heard her say, 'How can I get my wraps?' and Mignon said, 'Go to Marcia Arnold and see if you can borrow Miss Stevens' key for a minute. If she hasn't come back to school yet, very likely Marcia has it. Tell her you want to take something from it and don't care to bother Miss Dean. You can easily do it, because you haven't a recitation at this hour. I'd get it for you, but I haven't any good reason for asking her for it.' I couldn't hear what Mary said, but she left her seat and I saw her stop at Miss Merton's desk. Miss Merton nodded her head and Mary went on out of the study hall. Mignon saw me looking after her and smiled that hateful smile of hers. I was so cross I made a face at her. Then the third bell rang and I had to go to class. I wasn't sure whether Mary did as Mignon told her to do until we saw you staring into your locker and Jerry called my attention to it."

Marjorie listened gravely to Susan's recital. She stood surveying the three girls in silence.

"What has happened, Marjorie?" questioned Jerry impatiently. "Or isn't it any of our business? If it isn't, then forget that I asked you."

"Girls," Marjorie's clear voice trembled a little, "I think I'd better tell you about it. At first I thought I couldn't bear to tell anyone, but as long as you all know something of what happened to Connie and I last year, you might as well know this, too. Miss Archer made a remark to me about our misunderstanding yesterday when Mary was with me. Mary asked me afterward what she meant. I wanted to tell her, but I didn't feel as though I had the right to, until I asked Connie if I could. I was going to ask her last night, but before I had a chance she asked me not to tell Mary about it. She was afraid Mary might not understand and—and blame her. Of course, I knew that Mary wouldn't mind in the least, but Connie seemed so worried that I promised I wouldn't."

Jerry Macy's frown deepened. Susan Atwell made a faint gesture of consternation, while Irma Linton looked distressed and sympathetic.

"I thought perhaps Mary would forget about Constance," went on Marjorie. "I never dreamed that Mignon was coming back, let alone she and Mary becoming friendly. I saw them go down the aisle to geometry class together and followed them. You see, Mary and I had planned to recite in the same section. I asked her to wait and recite later, but she wouldn't. Then I changed my hour so as to be in her class. After class I caught up with her. She began to tell me something about what Mignon had said of Connie. It made me so cross that I interrupted her, almost before she had started. I told her she must have nothing to say to Mignon and—she—I guess I hurt her feelings, for she walked off and—left—me." Marjorie ended with a half sob. She turned her face to the locker and leaned against it. The tears that she had bravely forced back now came thick

and fast.

"What a shame!" burst forth Jerry. "Don't cry, dear. We'll straighten things out for you. I'll go to Mary my own self and give her Mignon's history in a few well chosen words." She patted the shoulder of the weeping girl.

"You might know that Mignon would bring trouble, hateful girl," was Susan's indignant cry. "Never mind, we'll fix her."

"I'll do all I can to help you, Marjorie," soothed Irma, who was known throughout the school as a peace-maker.

With a long, quivering sigh Marjorie turned slowly and faced her friends.

"You are very sweet to me, every one of you," she said gratefully, "but, girls, you mustn't say a word. I promised Connie, and I'll keep my word until she releases me from that promise. I'm going over to see her to-night to ask her to do that very thing. She'll say 'yes,' I know. Then I can tell Mary and it will be all right. I'm sorry I made such a baby of myself, but Mary and I have been chums for years—and—" Her voice broke again.

Jerry wound her plump arms about the girl she adored. "You poor kid," she comforted slangily. "If you must cry, cry on my shoulder. It's nice and fat and not half so hard as that old locker."

"You are a ridiculous Jerry," Marjorie laughed through her tears. "There, I feel better now. I'm not going to cry another tear. Are my eyes very red? I don't care to have the public gape at my grief. Come on, children. It must be long after twelve. I suppose Mary is home by this time. Naturally she wouldn't wait for me," she added wistfully.

As a matter of fact, Mary had waited. Once she had removed her wraps to Mignon's locker she had been seized with a sharp attack of conscience. She felt a trifle ashamed of herself and decided that she would ask her chum to forgive her and allow her to put her wraps in Marjorie's locker again. At the close of the session she made a hasty excuse to Mignon, seized her belongings and hurrying out of the building, took up her stand across the street. When at twenty minutes past twelve Marjorie did not appear, her good resolutions took wing, and sulkily setting her face toward home, Mary left the school and the chance for reconciliation behind, and angrily went her way alone, thus widening the gap that already yawned between herself and Marjorie.

It was twenty minutes to one when the latter ran up the steps of her home in an almost cheerful frame of mind. The hall door yielded to her touch and she rushed into the hall, her clear call of "Mary!" re-echoing through the quiet house.

"I'll be down in a minute," answered a cold voice from the head of the stairs.

"I'll be up in a second," laughed Marjorie, making a dive for the stairs. The next instant she had caught the immovable little figure at the landing in an impulsive embrace. "Poor old Lieutenant, I'm so sorry," was her contrite cry. "I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. Listen, dear. I'm going over to see Connie this afternoon after school and ask her to let me tell you everything you wished to know about last year. Then you will understand why—"

Mary freed herself from the clinging arms with a jerk. "If you say a word to Constance Stevens, I'll never forgive you!" she cried passionately. "I won't be made ridiculous. Do you understand me? You could tell me without asking her, if you cared to. I'd never say a word and she'd never know the difference."

"But, Mary, I promised her—" Marjorie stopped in confusion. She had not meant to mention her promise to Constance. She had spoken before she thought.

"So *that's* the reason, is it?" choked Mary, her cheeks flaming with the humiliating knowledge. "Thank you, I don't care to hear your old secrets. You may keep them, for all I care!" She whirled and started toward her room.

Marjorie caught her arm. "I haven't any secrets that I wish to keep from you, Mary," she said with quiet dignity. "Last night at the dance Constance asked me to promise I wouldn't say anything to you about the trouble she had with Mignon La Salle during our freshman year. We were upstairs in her room. I was mending my flounce. It got torn when we were dancing. I had intended asking her permission then to tell you, and when she spoke of it first I hardly knew what to do. I didn't like to let her think that you were curious and—"

"How dare you call me curious!" Mary stamped her foot in a sudden fury of temper. "I'm not. I wouldn't listen to your miserable secret if you begged me to. Now I truly believe what Miss La Salle told me. You and your friend Constance ought to be ashamed of the way you treated that poor girl last year. I'm sorry I ever came to your house to live. I'd write to Father to come and take me away, but Mother would have to know. She sha'n't be worried, no matter what I have to stand. You needn't be afraid, I'll not make a fuss, either, so that General and Captain will know. I'll try to pretend before them that we're just the same chums as ever, and you'd better pretend it, too. But we won't be. From to-day on I'll go *my* way and choose *my* friends and you can do the same."

"Mary Raymond, listen to me." Marjorie's hands found the shoulders of her angry chum. The brown eyes held the blue ones in a long, steadfast gaze. "Mignon La Salle is only trying to make trouble. If you knew her as well as I know her, you wouldn't pay any attention to her. We've been

best friends and comrades since we were little tots, Mary, and I think you ought to trust me. No one can ever be so dear to me as you are."

"Except Constance Stevens," put in Mary sarcastically, twisting from Marjorie's hold. "Why, that very first day when you came to the train to meet me I could see you liked her best. You can imagine how I felt when even your friends spoke of it. If you really cared about me, you would have written to me of every single thing that happened last year. You promised you would. You are very anxious to keep a promise to Constance, but you didn't care whether you kept one to me. As for what you say of Miss La Salle, I don't believe you. I'd far rather trust her than your dear Miss Stevens!"

"What has happened to my brigade?" called Mrs. Dean from the foot of the stairs. "It is five minutes to one, girls. Come to luncheon at once."

"We are coming, Captain," answered Marjorie in as steady a tone as she could command. Then she said sorrowfully to her companion, "Mary, I feel just the same toward you as always, only I am terribly hurt. I wish your way to be my way and your friends mine. If you are sure that you would like Mignon for a friend, then I am going to try to like her for your sake. But we mustn't quarrel or—not—not speak—or—let General and Captain know—that—" Marjorie's words died in a half-sob.

"It doesn't make any difference to me whether you like Miss La Salle or not," retorted Mary, ignoring Marjorie's distress, "but if you say a single word to either General or Captain about us, I'll never speak to you again." With this threat the incensed lieutenant ran heartlessly down the stairs, leaving her sadly wounded comrade to follow when she would.

Luncheon was a dismal failure as far as Marjorie was concerned. She tried to talk and laugh in her usual cheery manner, but she was unused to dissembling, and it hurt her to play a part before her Captain, of all persons. Mary, however, found a certain wicked satisfaction in the situation she had brought about. Now that she had spoken her mind she would go on in the way she had chosen. Marjorie would be very sorry. There would come a time when she would be only too glad to plead for the friendship she had cast aside. But it would be too late.

The moment the two girls left the house for the afternoon session of school, a blank silence fell upon them. It was broken only by a cool "Good-bye" from Mary as they separated in the locker room. But during that silent walk Marjorie had been thinking busily. Hers was a nature that no amount of disagreeable shocks could dismay for long. No sooner did a pet ideal totter than she steadied it with patient, tender hands. True always to the highest, she was laying a foundation that would weather the stress of years. Now she dwelt not so much upon her own hurts, but rather on how she should bind up the wounds of her comrades. What had been obscure was now plain. Mary was jealous of her friendship with Constance. She had completely misunderstood. If only she, Marjorie, had known in the beginning! And then there was Mignon. If she had stayed away from Sanford, all might have been well in time. Mary was determined to be friends with her. Marjorie knew her friend too well not to believe that Mary would now cultivate the French girl from sheer obstinacy. There was just one thing to do. She had said to Mary that she would try to like Mignon for her sake. She stood ready to keep her promise. Perhaps, far under her mischief-making exterior, Mignon's better self lay dormant, waiting for some chance, kindly word or act to awaken it into life. What was it her General had said about the worst person having some good in his nature that sooner or later was sure to manifest itself? How glorious it would be to help Mignon find that better self! But she could not accomplish much alone. She needed the support of the girls of her own particular little circle. She was fairly sure they would help her. But how had they better begin? Suddenly Marjorie's sober face broke into a radiant smile. She gave a chuckle born of sheer good-will. "I know the very way," she murmured, half aloud. "If only the girls will see it, too. But they *must!* It's a splendid plan, and if it doesn't work it won't be from lack of trying on my part."

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CHAPTER XII

THE COMPACT

"DEAR IRMA," wrote Marjorie, the moment she reached her desk, "will you meet me across the street from school this afternoon? I have something very important to say to you.

"MARJORIE."

She wrote similar notes to Muriel Harding, Susan Atwell and Jerry Macy, managing in spite of

the watchful eyes of Miss Merton to convey them, through the medium of willing hands, to her schoolmates. This done, she made a valiant effort to dismiss her personal affairs from her thoughts and settled down to her lessons. The first period in the afternoon was now her study hour, due to the change she had made in her geometry recitation.

Marjorie managed to study diligently for at least twenty minutes, on the definitions in geometry given out by Miss Nelson as an advance lesson. Then her attention flagged. She found herself wondering what she had better do in regard to asking Constance to release her from her promise. She was sure Connie would do it. Then, if Mary could be coaxed to listen to her, she would— Marjorie took a deep breath of sheer dismay. Of what use would it be to plan to help Mignon find her better self, then deliberately turn the one girl who liked her against her by relating her past misdeeds? Here indeed was a problem. She knitted her brows in troubled thought over this new knot in the tangle. One thing she was resolved upon, however. She would open her heart to Connie. Perhaps she might be able to suggest a satisfactory adjustment.

The afternoon dragged interminably to the perplexed sophomore and she hailed the ringing of the closing bell with thankfulness. She had caught distant glimpses of Mary during the session and in each instance had seen her in conversation with the French girl. Mignon was losing no time. That was certain.

As Marjorie rose from her seat to leave the study hall she had half a mind to wait just outside the door for Mary. Then a flash of wounded pride held her back. Mary would undoubtedly pass out with Mignon. If she spoke to her chum, she was almost sure to be rebuffed. She could imagine just how delighted Mignon would look at her discomfiture. Unconsciously lifting her head, Marjorie left the study hall without so much as a backward glance.

Outside the door she encountered Jerry Macy.

"Your note said, 'Wait across the street,' but this is a lot better," greeted Jerry. "Let's hurry and get our wraps. Irma and Susie will probably steer straight for your locker. I haven't seen Muriel to speak to this afternoon, but she'll be on the scene, I guess. The sooner we collect the sooner we'll hear what's on your mind. I can just about tell you what you're going to say, though."

"Then you're a mind-reader," laughed Marjorie. Nevertheless, a quick flash rose to her face at Jerry's significant speech.

"I can add two and two, anyhow," asserted Jerry.

True to Jerry's prediction, three curious young women stood grouped in front of Marjorie's locker, impatiently awaiting her arrival.

"Wait until we are outside, girls. I'll be ready in a jiffy." Marjorie slipped into her raincoat and pulled her blue velour hat over her curls. "We can't talk here. Miss Merton is likely to wander down, and then you know what will happen."

"Oh, bother Miss Merton!" grumbled Jerry. "I can stand anything she says and live. Still, I don't blame you, Marjorie. It tickles her to pieces to get a chance to snap at you. Now if Mignon La Salle wanted to sing a solo in front of her locker at the top of her voice, Miss Merton would encore it."

Susan Atwell giggled. "I can just hear Mignon lifting up her voice in song with Miss Merton as an appreciative audience."

The quartette thoughtlessly echoed her merriment. So intent were they upon their own affairs that they did not notice the two girls who were almost hidden behind an open locker at the end of the room. The black eyes of one of them gleamed with rage. She turned to the fair-haired girl at her side with a gesture which said more plainly than words, "You see for yourself." The other nodded. Mignon laid a finger on her lips. Then noiselessly as two shadows they flitted through the open door without having been observed by the group at the other end.

For the moment Marjorie's back had been turned toward that end of the room. She whirled about just too late to see Mignon and Mary as they hurried away. Unusually sensitive to impressions, she had perhaps felt their presence, for she asked abruptly, "Girls, have you seen Mary? She can't have gone, for I'm sure I left the study hall before she did. I ought to wait for her, but I don't know what to do." She glanced irresolutely about her. Then, her pride again coming to her rescue, she said, "Never mind. Suppose we go on. Perhaps I'd better not try to see her now, because I must tell you my plan and I—well—I can't—if she is with us."

Muriel Harding elevated her eyebrows in surprise. Of the four girls who had received Marjorie's notes, she alone had no suspicion of the purpose which had brought them together.

Five pairs of bright eyes scanned the street across from the school building as the little party came down the wide stone steps.

"The coast is clear," commented Jerry. "Now do tell us what's the matter, Marjorie. No, wait a minute." Jerry fumbled energetically in a small leather bag. "Hooray! Here's a real life fifty-cent piece! I can see it vanishing in the shape of five sundaes, at ten cents per eat. We can't go to Sargent's. They cost fifteen—"

"I've a quarter," insinuated Irma.

"All contributions thankfully received," beamed Jerry. "On to Sargent's! We'll talk about the weather until we get there. It's been such a lovely day," she grimaced. "If it rains much more we'll have to do as they do in Spain."

"What do they do in Spain?" Susan Atwell rose to the bait, despite a warning poke from Irma.

"They let it rain," grinned Jerry. "Aren't you an innocent child?"

Well pleased with her success in putting over this time-worn joke on one more victim, Jerry continued with a lively stream of nonsense that lasted during the brief walk to Sargent's.

Once seated about a small round table at the back of the room, which from long patronage they had come to look upon almost as their own, an expectant murmur went the round of the little circle as Marjorie leaned forward a trifle and began in a low, earnest tone. "Girls, I am going to ask you to do something for me that perhaps you won't wish to do. All of you know what happened last year to Connie and me. You know, too, that if anyone has good reason to cut Mignon La Salle's acquaintance, we would be justified in doing it. I was awfully surprised to see her come into the study hall this morning, and I said to myself that aside from bowing to her if I met her on the street, I would steer clear of her. But since then something has happened to make me change my mind. Mary wishes Mignon for a friend, and so——"

"What a little goose!" interrupted Jerry disgustedly. "I beg your pardon, Marjorie, but I can't help saying it."

"This *is* news!" exclaimed Muriel Harding. "Come to think of it, I *did* see your friend Mary walking into geometry with Mignon, Marjorie. Why don't you enlighten her on the subject of Mignon and her doings?"

"That's just it." Marjorie repeated briefly what she had said to the others at noon. "I'm going to Gray Gables to see Constance before I go home," she continued, addressing the group. "You see, it's like this. Even if Connie says I may tell Mary everything, will it be quite fair to Mignon? And now I'm coming to the reason I asked you to come here with me. Sometimes when a girl has done wrong and been hateful and no one likes her, another girl comes along and begins to be friendly with her. That makes the girl who has done wrong feel ashamed of herself and then perhaps she resolves to be more agreeable because of it."

"Not Mignon, if you mean her," muttered Jerry.

"I do mean Mignon," was Marjorie's grave response. "Every girl has a better self, I'm sure, but if she doesn't know it she will never find it unless someone helps her. We've never even stopped to consider whether Mignon had any good qualities. We've judged her for the dishonorable things she has done. I can't help saying that I don't like her very well. You can't blame me, either. Still, if we are going to be sophomore sisters we must all stand together." She glanced appealingly about her circle, but on each young face she read plain disapproval.

"You might as well try to carry water in a sieve as to reform Mignon," shrugged Muriel Harding.

"You can't tame a wildcat," commented Susan Atwell.

"Look here, Marjorie," burst forth Jerry Macy. "We know that you are the dearest, nicest girl ever, but you are going to waste your time if you try to go exploring for Mignon's better self. She never had one. If you try to be nice to her she'll just take advantage of your goodness and make fun of you behind your back. Let me tell you something. You know Miss Elkins, who sews for people. Well, she's at our house to-day. She is making some silk blouses for me, and when I went upstairs to the sewing-room for a fitting to-day she asked me if Mignon was in school. Her sister is the housekeeper at the La Salle's and she told Miss Elkins that Mignon was expelled from boarding school because she wouldn't pay attention to the rules. She was threatened with dismissal twice, and the other night she coaxed a lot of the girls to slip out of the dormitory and go to the city to the theatre without a sign of a chaperon. One of the girls had a key to the front door and she lost it. They didn't get home until after one o'clock, and then they couldn't get into the dormitory. The night watchman finally had to let them in and he reported them. She and two others were expelled because they planned the affair. I don't know what happened to the rest of them. Anyway, that's why our dear Mignon is with us once more. I only wish that girl hadn't lost the key." Jerry's face registered her disgust.

"I don't believe Mother would like to have me associate with Mignon." This from gentle Irma Linton, who was usually the soul of toleration.

"And you, too, Irma!" was Marjorie's reproachful cry. "Then there isn't much use in asking you girls to help me."

This was too much for the impulsive Jerry.

"Don't look at us like that. As though you had lost your last friend. Just let me tell you, you haven't. I take it all back. I'll promise to go on a hunting expedition for Mignon's better self any old time you say."

"Sieves *have* been known to hold water," acknowledged Muriel, not to be outdone by Jerry's burst of loyalty.

"And wildcats have sometimes become household pets," added Susan with her infectious giggle.

"So have mothers been known to change their minds," put in Irma. "I'm ashamed of myself for being a quitter before I've even heard your plan."

Marjorie's dark eyes shone with affection. "You are splendid," she praised with a little catch in her voice. "I can't help telling you now. After all, it isn't a very great plan, but it's the best I could think of just now, and this is it. Mother said I might give a party for Mary when she first came to live with us, but I wished to wait until she got acquainted with the girls in school. Then Connie gave her dance. So I thought it would be nice to have mine in about two weeks, after we were settled in our classes and didn't have so much to worry us. But now I've changed my mind. I'm going to give my party next week and I shall invite Mignon to it. You girls can help me by being nice to her and making her have a pleasant evening. If we are really determined to carry out our plan we will have to invite her to our parties and luncheons, too, and ask her to share our good times. The only way we can help her is to make her one of us. If we draw away from her she will never be different. She will just become more disagreeable and some day we might be very sorry we didn't do our best for her."

The eloquence of Marjorie's plea had its effect on her listeners.

"I guess you are on the right track," conceded Jerry Macy warmly. "I am willing to try to be a busy little helper. We might call ourselves the S. F. R. M.—Society For Reforming Mignon, you know."

This proposal evoked a ripple of laughter.

"Irma, do you suppose your mother wouldn't like you to—to—be friendly with Mignon?" asked Marjorie anxiously. "We mustn't pledge ourselves to anything to which our mothers might say 'no.'"

"I think I can fix that part of it," said Irma slowly. "If I explain things to Mother, she'll understand."

"Perhaps we all ought to talk it over with our mothers," suggested Susan.

"I guess we'd better," nodded Jerry. "But what about Connie? Suppose she shouldn't be in favor of the S. F. R. M.? You couldn't blame her much if she wasn't."

"I'm going to see her to-night, after dinner. I intended to go to Gray Gables after school, but you see me here instead," returned Marjorie. "I am almost sure she'll say 'yes.'"

"How are we going to begin our reform movement?" asked Muriel Harding.

"That's what I'd like to know. Who is willing to be the first martyr to the cause? Let me tell you right now, I'd just as soon make friends with a snapping turtle. Only the snapper would probably be more polite."

"You are a wicked Jerry," reproved Marjorie smilingly, "and you know you don't mean half you say."

"Maybe I do, and maybe I don't. Anyhow, on in the cause of Mignon! I feel like one of the knights of old who buckled on his armor and went forth to the fray with his lady's colors tied to his sleeve, or his lance, or some of his belongings. I've forgotten just what the style was. We are gallant knights, going forth to battle, wearing Marjorie's colors, and Mignon will have to look out or she'll be reformed before she has time to turn up her nose and shrug her shoulders."

"Suppose we start by being as nice to her as we can in school to-morrow," proposed Irma Linton thoughtfully. "If she meets us in the same spirit, maybe something will happen that will show us what to do next."

"That wouldn't be a bad idea," declared Susan Atwell. "I sit near her, so I'll be the first one to hold out the olive branch. But if you hear something drop on the floor with a dull, sickening thud, you'll know that my particular variety of olive branch was rejected."

"Somehow, I have an idea she won't be so very scornful," said Marjorie hopefully.

"Being expelled from boarding school may have a soothing effect on her," agreed Jerry grimly. "I suppose it really isn't very knightly to say snippy things about a person one intends to reform."

"I think you are right, Jerry," broke in Marjorie with sweet earnestness. "We must try to think and say only kind things of Mignon if we are to succeed." Taking in the circle of girls with a quick, bright glance, she asked: "Then you are agreed to my plan? It is really a compact?"

Four emphatic nods answered her questions.

"Hurrah for the S. F. R. M.!" exclaimed Jerry. "Long may it wave! Only there's one glorious truth that I feel it my duty to impress on your minds. The way of the reformer is hard."

CHAPTER XIII

IN DEFENCE OF MIGNON

"HERE are two letters for you, Lieutenant," called her mother, as Marjorie burst into the living-room, her cheeks pink from a brisk run up the drive. After leaving her schoolmates Marjorie had set off for home as fast as her light feet would carry her. She managed to keep to a decorous walk until she had swung the gate behind her, then she had sped up the drive like a fawn.

"Oh, lovely!" cried Marjorie. "Your permission, Captain." She touched her hand to her hat brim in a gay little salute. Her spirits had been rising from the moment she had left the girls, carrying with her the precious security that they were now banded together in a worthy cause. Surely the snarl would straighten itself in a short time. Mary would soon see that she intended to keep her word about being friends with Mignon. Then she would understand that she, Marjorie, was loyal in spite of her unjust accusations. Then all would be as it had been before. Perhaps Mary wouldn't be quite her old, sunny self for a few days, but the shadow would pass—it must.

"Why, it's from Connie!" she cried out in surprise, as her eyes sought the writing on the uppermost envelope. It was in Constance's irregular, girlish hand. She hastily tore it open and read.

"DEAREST MARJORIE:

"Last night at my dance I didn't know that father was to be concertmeister in the symphony orchestra. It is a great honor and we are all very happy over it. He kept it to himself until the last minute, because he knew that if he told me, I would insist on going back to New York with him for his opening concert. But I'm going with him just the same. I shall be away from Sanford for a week or so, for I want to be with him until he goes to Boston. I'll study hard and catch up in school when I come back. I wish you were going, too, but later in the season he will be in New York City again. Then Auntie says she will take you and Mary and me there to hear him play. Won't that be glorious? I'll write you again as soon as I reach New York and you must answer with a long letter, telling me about school and everything. I am so sorry I can't see you to say good-bye, but I won't have time. Don't forget to answer as soon as I write you.

"Lovingly,
"CONSTANCE."

Marjorie's cheerful face grew blank. Certainly she was glad that Connie would experience the happiness of hearing her father play before a vast assemblage who would gather to do him honor. Nevertheless she was just a trifle cast down over the unexpected flight of her friend to New York. With a start of dismay she remembered that she had intended going to see Constance with the object of clearing away the clouds of misunderstanding. Now she would have to wait until Connie returned. And then, there was Mignon. She felt that it would be hardly fair to begin her crusade without consulting the girl whom Mignon had wronged most deeply. She had perfect faith in the quality of her friend's charity. Constance was too generous of spirit to hold a grudge. Through suffering she had grown great of soul. Still, it was right that she should be asked to decide the question. If she refused outright to sanction the proposed campaign for reform, or even demurred at the proposal, Marjorie was resolved not to carry it forward, even for Mary's or Mignon's sake.

Suddenly she recollected her adjuration to the girls to gain their mothers' consent before going on with their plan. Her brows drew together in a perplexed frown. Had not Mary threatened, in the heat of her anger, that if Marjorie told her mother of their disagreement she would never speak to her again? How could she inform Captain of the compact she and her friends had made without involving Mary in it? Her mother would naturally inquire the reason for this rather remarkable movement. She might be displeased, as well as surprised, over Mary's strange predilection for the French girl. Her Captain knew all that had happened during her freshman year. On that memorable day when she had leaped into the river to rescue Marcia Arnold, and afterward come home, a curious little figure clad in Jerry Macy's ample garments, the recital of those stormy days when she had doubted, yet clung to Constance, had taken place. She recalled that long, confidential talk at her mother's knee, and the peace it had brought her.

All at once her face cleared. She would tell her mother about the compact, but she would leave out the disagreeable scenes that had occurred between herself and Mary. "I'll tell her now and have it over with," she decided.

"What makes you look so solemn, dear?" Her mother had glanced up from her embroidery, and was affectionately scanning her daughter's grave face. "Does your letter from Connie contain bad news? I hope nothing unpleasant has happened to the child."

"Oh, no, Captain. Quite the contrary. It's something nice," returned Marjorie quickly. "Let me read you her letter." She turned to the first page and read aloud rapidly Constance's little note.

"I'm so glad for her sake," she sighed, as she finished, "but I shall miss her dreadfully."

"I suppose you will. Good fortune seems to have followed the Stevens family since the day when my lieutenant went out of her way to help a little girl in distress."

"Perhaps I'm a mascot, Captain. If I am, then you ought to take good care of me, feed me on a special diet of plum pudding and chocolate cake, keep me on your best embroidered cushion and cherish me generally," laughed Marjorie, with a view toward turning the subject from her own generous acts, the mention of which invariably embarrassed her.

"And give you indigestion and see you ossify for want of exercise under my indulgent eye," retorted her mother.

"I guess you had better go on cherishing me in the good old way," decided Marjorie. "But you won't mind my sitting on one of your everyday cushions, just as close to you as I can get, will you?" Reaching for one of the fat green velvet cushions which stood up sturdily at each end of the davenport, Marjorie dropped it beside her mother's chair and curled up on it.

"I've something to report, Captain," she said, her bantering tone changing to seriousness. "You remember last year—and Mignon La Salle?"

Mrs. Dean frowned slightly at the mention of the French girl's name. Mother-like, she had never quite forgiven Mignon for the needless sorrow she had wrought in the lives of those she held so dear.

Marjorie caught the significance of that frown. "I know how you feel about things, dearest," she nodded. "Perhaps you won't give your consent to the plan I—that is, we—have made. But I have to tell you, anyway, so here goes. Mignon La Salle went away to boarding school, but she—well she was sent home, and now she's back in Sanford High again. This afternoon Jerry, Irma, Susan, Muriel Harding and I went together to Sargent's for ice cream. While we were there we decided that we ought to forgive the past and try to help Mignon find her better self. The only way we can help her is to treat her well and invite her to our parties and luncheons. If she finds we are ready to begin all over again with her, perhaps she'll be different. We made a solemn compact to do it, provided our mothers were willing we should. So to be very slangy, 'It's up to you, Captain!'"

"But suppose this girl merely takes advantage of your kindness and involves you all in another tangle?" remarked Mrs. Dean quietly. "It seems to me that she proved herself wholly untrustworthy last year."

"I know it." Marjorie sighed. She would have liked to say that Mignon had already tied an ugly snarl in her affairs. But loyalty to Mary forbade the utterance. Then, brightening, she went on hopefully: "If we never try to help her, we'll never know whether she really has a better self. Sometimes it takes just a little thing to change a person's heart."

"You are a dear child," Mrs. Dean bent to press a kiss on Marjorie's curly head, "and your argument is too generous to be downed. I give my official consent to the proposed reform, and I hope, for all concerned, that it will turn out beautifully."

"Oh, Captain," Marjorie nestled closer, "you're too dear for words. There's another reason for my wishing to be friendly with Mignon. Mary has met her and likes her."

"Mary!" Mrs. Dean looked her astonishment. "By the way, Marjorie, where is Mary? I had quite forgotten her for the time being. You didn't mention her as being with you at Sargent's."

"She wasn't there," explained Marjorie. "She didn't wait for me after school. She must have gone on with—with someone and stopped to talk. I—I think she'll be here soon." A hurt look, of which she was entirely unconscious, had driven the brightness from the face Marjorie turned to her mother.

Mrs. Dean was a wise woman. She discerned that there had been a hitch in the programme of her daughter's daily affairs, but she asked no questions. She never intruded upon Marjorie's little reserves. She knew now that whatever her daughter had kept back had been done in accordance with a code of living, the uprightness of which was seldom equalled in a girl of her years. She, therefore, respected the reservation and made no attempt to discover its nature.

"What are you going to do first in the way of reform, Lieutenant?" she inquired brightly.

"Well, I thought I would invite Mignon to my party, the one you said I could give for Mary. I'd like to have it next Friday night. Friday's the best time. We can all sleep a little later the next morning, you know."

"Very well, you may," assented Mrs. Dean. "Does Mary know of the contemplated reform?"

"No. You see I hated to say much to her about Mignon, because it wouldn't be very nice to discredit someone you were trying to help. Don't you agree with me?"

"I suppose I must. But what of Constance?"

"That's the part that bothers me," was Marjorie's troubled reply. "I'm going to write her all about it. I know she'll be with us. She's too splendid to hold spite. I think it would be all right to invite Mignon to my party, at any rate. But there's just one thing about it, Captain, if Connie objects, then the reform will have to go on without me. You understand the way I feel, don't you?"

"Yes. I believe you owe it to Constance to respect her wishes. She was the chief sufferer at Mignon's hands."

The confidential talk came to a sudden end with the ringing of the doorbell.

"It's Mary." Marjorie sprang to her feet. "I'll let her in."

Hurrying to the door, Marjorie opened it to admit Mary Raymond. She entered with an air of sulkiness that brought dread to Marjorie's heart.

"Oh, Mary, where were you?" she asked, trying to appear ignorant of her chum's forbidding aspect.

"I was with Mignon La Salle," returned Mary briefly. "Will you come upstairs with me, please?"

"I'd love to, Lieutenant Raymond. Thank you for your kind invitation." Marjorie assumed a gaiety she did not feel.

Without further remark Mary stolidly mounted the stairs. Marjorie followed her in a distinctly worried state of mind. The quarrel was going to begin over again. She was sure of that.

Mary stalked past the half-open door of Marjorie's room and paused before her own. "I'd rather talk to you in *my* room, if you please," she said distantly.

"All right," agreed Marjorie, with ready cheerfulness. She intended to go on ignoring her chum's hostile attitude until she was forced to do otherwise.

Mary closed the door behind them and faced Marjorie with compressed lips. The latter met her offended gaze with steady eyes.

"I heard you and your friends making fun of Miss La Salle this afternoon, and I am going to say right here that I think you were all extremely unkind. She heard you, too. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Marjorie Dean!"

"Why, I don't remember making fun of Mignon!" exclaimed Marjorie. "What do you mean?"

"Then your memory is very short," sneered Mary. "But I might have expected you to deny it."

It was Marjorie's turn to grow indignant. "How can you accuse me of not telling the truth?" she flashed. "I did not——" She stopped, flushing deeply. She recalled Jerry Macy's humorous remark about Mignon as they stood talking in front of her locker. "I beg your pardon, Mary," she apologized. "I *do* remember now that Mignon's name was mentioned while we were standing there. But it was nothing very dreadful. We were saying that if Miss Merton heard us talking she would scold us, and Jerry only said that if Mignon chose to sing a solo at the top of her voice, in front of *her* locker, Miss Merton wouldn't mind in the least. Everyone knows that Mignon has always been a favorite of Miss Merton. I am sorry if she overheard it, for truly we hadn't the least idea of making fun of her. It was Jerry's funny way of saying it that made us laugh. I'll explain that to her the first time I see her."

Mary's tense features relaxed a trifle. She was not yet so firmly in the toils of the French girl as to be entirely blind to Marjorie's sincerity. Her good sense told her that she was making a mountain of a mole hill. There was a ring of truth in Marjorie's voice that brought a flush of shame to her cheeks. Still she would not allow it to sway her.

"It wasn't nice in you to laugh," she muttered. "She was dreadfully hurt. She feels very sensitive about being sent home from school. Of course, she knows she deserved it. She said so. But——"

"Did she really say that?" interrupted Marjorie eagerly.

"I am not in the habit of saying what isn't true," retorted Mary coldly.

"Listen, Mary." Marjorie's face was aglow with honest purpose. "I said to you, you know, that if you wished Mignon for a friend I would be nice to her, too. Captain has promised to let me give my party for you on next Friday night. I am going to invite Mignon to it, and we are all going to try to make her feel friendly toward us."

"She won't come," predicted Mary contemptuously. "I wouldn't, either, if I were in her place. I shall tell her not to come, too."

"Then you will be proving yourself anything but a friend to her," flung back Marjorie hotly, "because you will be advising her against doing something that is for her good." With this clinching argument Marjorie walked to the door and opened it.

"Whether I say a word or not, she won't come," called Mary after her. But Marjorie was halfway down the stairs, too greatly exasperated to trust herself to further speech.

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CHAPTER XIV

THE COMMON FATE OF REFORMERS

NEVERTHELESS the session behind closed doors had one beneficial effect. It broke the ice that had lately formed over the long comradeship of the two girls, and, although nothing was as of old, they were both secretly relieved to still be on terms of conversation. Out of pure regard for Mary, Marjorie treated her exactly as she had always done, and Mary pretended to respond, simply because she had determined that Mr. and Mrs. Dean should not become aware of any difference in their relations. She affected an interest in planning for the party and kept up a pretty show of concern which Marjorie alone knew to be false. Privately Mary's deceitful attitude was a sore trial to her. Honest to the core, she felt that she would rather her chum had maintained open hostility than a farce of good will which was dropped the moment they chanced to be alone. Still she resolved to bear it and look forward to a happier day when Mary would relent.

The invitations to the party had been mailed and duly accepted. Much to Mary's secret surprise and chagrin, Mignon had not declined to shed the light of her countenance upon the proposed festivity, but had written a formal note of acceptance which amused Marjorie considerably, inasmuch as the acceptances of the others had been verbal. Despite her hatred for Marjorie Dean and her friends, Mignon had resolved to profit by the sudden show of friendliness which, true to their compact, the five girls had lost no time in carrying out. Ignoble of soul, she did not value the favor of these girls as a concession which she had been fortunate enough to receive. She decided to use it only as a wedge to reinstate herself in a certain leadership which her bad behavior of last year had lost her. She had no idea of the real reason for their interest in her. She preferred to think that they had come to a realization of her vast importance in the social life of Sanford. Was not her father the richest man in the town? She had an idea that perhaps Mary Raymond might be responsible for her sudden accession to favor. She had taken care to impress her own importance upon Mary's mind, together with certain vague insinuations as to her wrongs. After her first brief outburst against Marjorie and Constance Stevens, she had decided that she would gain infinitely more by playing the part of wronged innocence. When she received her invitation she had already heard that Constance was in New York and likely to remain there for a time. This influenced her to accept Marjorie's hospitality. Her own consciousness of guilt would not permit her to go to any place where she would meet the accusing scorn of Constance's blue eyes. Then, too, she had still another motive in attending the party. She had always looked upon Lawrence Armitage with eyes of favor. He had never paid her a great deal of attention, but he had shown her less since the advent of Constance Stevens in Sanford. She resolved to show him that she was far more clever and likable than the quiet girl who had taken such a strong hold on his boyish interest, and with that end in view Mignon planned to make her reinstatement a sweeping success.

Friday afternoon was a lost session, so far as study went, to the Sanford girls who were to make up the feminine portion of Marjorie's party.

"Good gracious, I thought half-past three would never come!" grumbled Jerry Macy in Marjorie's ear as they filed decorously through the corridor. "Let's make a quick dash for the locker-room. I've a pressing engagement with the hair-dresser and I'm dying to get through with it and sweep down to dinner in my new silver net party dress. It's a dream and makes me look positively thin. You won't know me when you see me."

"You're not the only one," put in Muriel Harding. "You won't be one, two, three when I appear to-night in all my glory."

"Listen to the conceited things," laughed Irma Linton. "'I won't speak of myself,' as H. C. Anderson beautifully puts it."

"Who's he?" demanded Jerry. "I know every boy in Sanford High, but I never heard of him."

A shout of laughter greeted her earnest assertion.

"Wake up, Jerry," dimpled Susan Atwell. "H. C. stands for Hans Christian. Now does the light begin to break?"

"Oh, you make me tired," retorted Jerry. "Irma did that on purpose. That's worse than my favorite trap about letting it rain in Spain. How was I to know what she meant?"

"That's all because you don't cultivate literary tastes," teased Muriel.

"I do cultivate them," grinned Jerry. "I've read the dictionary through twice, without skipping a page!"

"It must have been a pocket edition," murmured Marjorie.

"Stop teasing me or I'll get cross and not come to your party," threatened Jerry.

"You mean nothing could keep you away," laughed Irma.

"You're right. Nothing could. I'll be there, clad in costly raiment, to spur the reform party on to deeds of might."

"Do come early, all of you," urged Marjorie as she paused at her corner to say good-bye.

"We'll be there," chorused the quartette after her.

"I hope everyone will have a nice time," was Marjorie's fervent reflection as she hurried on her way. "I do wish Mary would walk home with me once in a while, instead of always waiting for Mignon. I wouldn't ask her to for worlds, though."

To see Mary walk away with Mignon at the end of every session of school had been a heavy cross for Marjorie to bear. Surrounded as she always was with the four faithful members of her own little set, she was often lonely. If only Constance had been in school she could have better borne Mary's disloyalty, although the latter could never quite fill the niche which years of companionship had carved in her heart for Mary. But Connie was far away, so she must go on enduring this bitter sorrow and make no outward sign.

Usually ready to bubble over with exhilaration when on the eve of participating in so delightful an occasion as a party, it was a very quiet Marjorie who tripped into the living-room that afternoon. The big, cosy apartment had undergone a marked change. It was practically bare, save for the piano in one corner, which had been moved from the drawing-room, and a phonograph which was to do occasional duty, so that the patient musicians might now and then rest from their labor.

Mrs. Dean was giving a last direction to the men who had been hired to move the furniture about as Marjorie entered.

"Everything is ready, Lieutenant," smiled her mother. "We have all done a strenuous day's work in a good cause."

"Thank you over and over again, Captain. It's dear in you to take so much trouble for me. I'm afraid you've worked too hard." Her lately pensive mood vanishing as she viewed the newly waxed floor, Marjorie executed a gay little *pas-seul* on its smooth surface and made a running slide toward her mother, striking against her with considerable force.

"Steady, Lieutenant." Her mother passed an arm about her and gave her a loving little squeeze. "Please have proper respect for the aged."

"There are no such persons here," retorted Marjorie, "I see a young and beautiful lady, who ___"

"Must go straight to the kitchen and see what Delia is doing in the way of dinner," finished Mrs. Dean. "Remember, we are to have it at half-past five to-night, so don't wander away and be late. Your frock is laid out on your bed, dear. You had better run along and dress before dinner. Then you will be ready. The time will fairly fly afterward. Where is Mary? Why doesn't she come home with you in the afternoon? For the past week she has come in long after school is out."

"Oh, she stops to talk and walk with Mignon," replied Marjorie, with an air of elaborate carelessness. "They are very good friends."

Mrs. Dean seemed about to comment further on the subject when Delia appeared in the doorway and distracted her attention to other matters.

Marjorie breathed a sigh of relief as she went upstairs. She was glad to escape the further questions concerning Mary which her mother seemed disposed to ask. Her gaiety had been evanescent and she now experienced a feeling of positive gloom as she entered her pretty room and prepared to bathe and dress for the evening. She could not resist a thrill of pleasure at the sheer beauty of the white chiffon frock spread out on her bed. She wondered if Mary would wear her pale blue silk evening frock, or the white one with the lace over-frock. They were both beautiful. But she had always loved Mary in white. She wondered if she dared ask her to wear the white lace gown.

While she was dressing, through her half-opened door she heard Mary's voice in the hall in conversation with her mother. Hastily slipping into her pretty frock, she went to the door hooking it as she walked. Mary was just appearing on the landing.

"Oh, Mary," she called genially, "do wear your white. You will look so lovely in it."

"I'm going to wear my blue gown," returned Mary stolidly, and marched on down the hall to her room, closing the door with a bang. "Just as though I'd let her dictate to me what to wear," she muttered.

The two young girls made a pretty picture as they took their places at the dinner table.

"I wish General were here to see you," sighed Mrs. Dean. Mr. Dean had been called away on a business trip east.

"So do I," echoed Marjorie. "Things won't be quite perfect without him."

Neither girl ate much dinner. They were far too highly excited to do justice to the meal. In spite of their estrangement they were both looking forward to the dance.

At half-past seven o'clock Jerry and the rest of the reform party arrived, buzzing like a hive of bees.

"Is she here yet?" whispered Jerry Macy in Marjorie's ear, after paying her respects to Mrs. Dean and Mary, who, with Marjorie, received their guests in the palm-decorated hall.

"No, she hasn't come. I suppose she will arrive late. You know she loves to make a sensation." Marjorie could not resist this one little fling, despite her good resolutions.

The guests continued to arrive in twos and threes and Marjorie was kept busy greeting them. True to her prediction, it was after eight o'clock when Mignon appeared. She wore an imported gown of peachblow satin that must have been a considerable item of expense to her doting father. Her elfish face glowed with suppressed excitement and her black eyes roved about, with lightning glances, born of a curiosity to inspect every detail of her unfamiliar surroundings.

"I am glad you came," greeted Marjorie graciously, and presented Mignon to her mother.

The French girl acknowledged the introduction, then turning to Mary began an eager, low-toned conversation, apparently forgetting her hostess.

Mrs. Dean betrayed no sign of what went on in her mind, but her thoughts on the subject of Mignon were not flattering. Ill-bred, she mentally styled her, and decided that she would look into the matter of her growing friendship with Mary.

The dancing had already begun when, piloted by Mary, who had apparently forgotten that she was of the receiving party, the two girls strolled into the impromptu ballroom. Mary was immediately claimed as a partner by Lawrence Armitage, who tried to console himself with the thought that, at least, she looked like Constance. Mignon's face darkened as they danced off. Lawrie had merely bowed to her. But he had asked Mary to dance. That was because she resembled that odious Stevens girl. Her resentment against Constance blazed forth afresh. She hoped Constance would never return to Sanford.

Thanks to a long lecture which Jerry had read to her brother Hal, Mignon was not neglected. Although none of the Weston High boys really liked her, she was asked to dance almost every number. Later in the evening Lawrence Armitage asked her for a one-step, and she vainly imagined that, after all, she had made an impression on him. Radiant with triumph over her social success, Mignon saw herself firmly entrenched in the leadership she dreamed would be hers. But her triumph was to be short-lived.

After supper, which was served at two long tables in the dining-room, the guests returned to their dancing with the tireless ardor of first youth. Chancing to be without a partner, Mignon slipped into a palm-screened nook under the stairs for a chat with Mary, who had followed her about all evening, more with a view of hurting Marjorie than from an excess of devotion. From their position they could see all that went on about them, yet be quite hidden from the unobservant. The unobservant happened to be Marjorie and Jerry Macy, who had come from the ballroom for a confidential talk and taken up their station directly in front of the alcove. Save for the two girls behind the palms, the hall was deserted.

"Well, I guess Mignon's having a good time," declared Jerry Macy in her brisk, loud tones. "She ought to. I nearly talked myself hoarse to Hal before he'd promise to see that the boys asked her to dance. This reform business is no joke."

"Lower your voice, Jerry," warned Marjorie. "Someone might hear you."

Mary Raymond made a sudden movement to rise. Stubborn she might be, but she was not so dishonorable as to listen to a conversation not intended for her ears. Mignon pulled her back with sudden savage strength. She laid her finger to her lips, her black eyes gleaming with anger.

"Oh, there's no one around. Say, Marjorie, do you think it's really worth while to go out of our way to reform Mignon? Look at her to-night. You'd think she had conquered the universe. She was all smiles when Laurie Armitage asked her to dance. He can't bear her, he told me so last Hallowe'en, after she made all that fuss about her old bracelet. If we hadn't banded ourselves together to find that better self which you are so sure she's carrying around with her, I'd say call it off and forget it. None of us really likes her. You know that, even if you won't say so. She is——"

The waltz time ended in a soft chord and the dancers began trooping through the doorway to the big punch-bowl of lemonade in one corner of the hall. They were just in time to see a lithe figure in pink spring out, catlike, from behind the palm-screened alcove and hear a furious voice cry out, "How dare you insult a guest by talking about her, the moment her back is turned?"

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CHAPTER XV

AN IRATE GUEST

JERRY MACY and Marjorie Dean whirled about at the sound of that wrathful voice. Mignon La Salle confronted them, her eyes flashing, her fingers closing and unclosing in nervous rage, looking for all the world like a young tigress.

"Oh, for goodness' sake, some one lead her away!" muttered the Crane to Irma Linton. "I told Hal to-day that, with Mignon aboard the good old party ship, we'd be sure to have fireworks. Real dynamite, too, and no mistake. I wonder what's upset her sweet, retiring disposition?" His boyish face indicated his deep disgust.

"I heard every word you said!" screamed Mignon. Rage had stripped her of the thin veneer of civilization. She was the same young savage who had kicked and screamed her way to whatever she desired when years before she had been the terror of the neighborhood. "So, that's the reason you invited me to your old party! You got together and picked me to pieces and decided to reform me! Just let me tell you that you had better look to yourselves. I don't need your kind offices. You are a crowd of hateful, deceitful, mean, horrible girls! I despise you all! Everyone of you! Do you hear me? I despise you! And *you*, Jerry Macy, had better be a little careful as to what you gossip about me. I can tell you——"

There came a sudden interruption to the tirade. Through the amazed groups of young people who could not resist lingering to find out what it was all about, Mrs. Dean resolutely made her way.

"That will do, Miss La Salle," she commanded sternly. "I cannot allow you to make such a disgraceful scene in my home, or insult my daughter and her guests. If you will come quietly upstairs with me and state your grievance, I shall do all in my power to rectify it. Marjorie," she turned to her daughter, who stood looking on in wide-eyed distress, "ask the musicians to start the music for the next dance."

Marjorie obeyed and, somewhat ashamed of their curiosity, the dancers forgot their thirst for lemonade and flocked into the ballroom. Only Jerry Macy and Mary Raymond remained.

"It's all my fault, Mrs. Dean," began Jerry contritely. "I didn't know Mignon was in the alcove. I can't help saying she had no business to listen, but——"

"It *is* my business," began Mignon furiously. "I have a right——"

"Don't begin this quarrel all over again." Mrs. Dean held up her hand for silence. "I repeat," she continued, regarding Mignon with marked displeasure, "if you will come upstairs with me——"

"Mrs. Dean, it's a shame the way Mignon has been treated to-night," burst forth Mary Raymond, "and I for one don't intend to stand by and see her insulted. Miss Macy said perfectly hateful things about her. I heard them. Marjorie is just as much to blame. She listened to them and never said a word to stop them."

"Mary Raymond!" Mrs. Dean's voice held an ominous note that should have warned Mary to hold her peace. Instead it angered her to open rebellion.

"Don't 'Mary Raymond' me," she mocked in angry sarcasm. "I meant what I said, every word of it. Mignon is my dear friend and I shall stand up for her."

"Oh, let me alone, all of you!" With an agile spring, Mignon gained the stairway and sped up the stairs on winged feet. Two minutes later, wrapped in her evening coat and scarf, she reappeared at the head and ran down the steps two at a time. "Thank you so much for a delightful evening," she bowed ironically. "I'm so sorry I haven't time to stay and be lectured. It's too bad, isn't it, Miss Mary, that the reform couldn't go on?" To Mary she held out her hand. "Come and spend the day with me to-morrow, Mary. You may like it so well, you'll decide to stay. If you do, why just come along whenever you feel disposed. I can assure you that our house is a pleasanter place to live in than the one you are in now." With this pointed fling she bowed again in mock courtesy to the silent woman who had offended her and flounced out the door and into the starlit night to where her own electric runabout was standing.

"Can you beat that?" was the tribute that fell from Jerry Macy's lips.

Mrs. Dean looked from one to the other of the three girls. "Now, girls, I demand an explanation of all this. Who of you is at fault in the matter?"

"I told you it was I," answered Jerry. "Marjorie and I were talking about Mignon and saying that she was having a good time. Then I had to go on and say some more things that I don't take back, but that weren't intended for listeners. I didn't know Mignon and Mary were hidden in that alcove. Do you suppose I'd have spoiled our reform, after all the trouble we've had making it go, if I'd known they were there?"

Mrs. Dean could not repress a faint smile at Jerry's rueful admissions. She liked this stout, matter-of-fact girl in spite of her rough, brusque ways.

"No, I don't suppose you would, but you were in the wrong, I am afraid. You must learn to curb that sharp tongue, Jerry. It is likely, some day, to involve you in serious trouble."

"I know it." Jerry hung her head. "But, you see, Marjorie understands me. That's why I say to her whatever I think."

"Mary," Mrs. Dean gravely studied Mary's sulky face, "I am deeply hurt and surprised. Later I

shall have something to say to you and Marjorie. Now go back to your friends, all of you, and try to make up to them for this unpleasantness."

Marjorie, who all this time had said nothing, now began timidly. She had seldom seen her beloved Captain so stern. "Captain, we are——"

"Not another word. I said, 'later.'"

Jerry and Marjorie turned to the ballroom. Mary however, with a scornful glance at Mrs. Dean, faced about and went upstairs. She had been imbued with a naughty resolve and she determined to proceed at once to carry it out.

The dancing went on for a little, but the disagreeable happening had dampened the ardor of the guests and they began leaving for home soon afterward.

It was midnight when the last sound of the footsteps of the departing youngsters echoed down the walk. Side by side, Marjorie and her mother watched them go, then the latter slipped her arm through that of her daughter and said, "Now, Marjorie, we will get to the bottom of this affair. Come with me to Mary's room."

They reached it to find the door closed. Mrs. Dean knocked upon one of the panels.

"What do you want?" inquired an angry voice.

"We wish to come in, Mary," was Mrs. Dean's even response.

There was a muttered exclamation, a hurry of light feet, then the door was flung open.

"You can come in for all I care," was Mary's rude greeting. "You might as well know now that I'm not going to live here after to-night. I'm going to Mignon's house to live." Piles of clothing scattered about and a significantly yawning trunk bore out the assertion.

Mrs. Dean knew that the time for action had come. Walking over to the girl, she placed deliberate hands on her shoulders. "Listen to me, Mary Raymond," she said decisively. "You are *not* going one step out of this house without my consent. Your father intrusted you to my care, and I shall endeavor to carry out his wishes. You know as well as I that he would be displeased and sorry over your behavior. I had intended to talk matters over with you and Marjorie now, but you are in no mood for reason. Therefore we will allow this affair to rest until to-morrow. But, once and for all, unless your father sanctions your removal in a letter to me, you will stay here, under my roof. Come, Marjorie."

With a sorrowful glance toward the tense, angry little figure, Marjorie followed her mother from the room.

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CHAPTER XVI

THE PENALTY

MARJORIE awoke the next morning with a dull ache in her heart. It was as though she had been the victim of a bad dream. She stared gloomily about her, struggling to recollect the cause of her depression. Then remembrance rushed over her like a wave. No, she had not dreamed. Last night had been only too real. If anyone had even intimated to her beforehand that the party which had promised so much was fated to end so disagreeably, she would have laughed the prediction to scorn. If only Jerry had kept her unpleasantly candid remarks to herself! Yet, after all, she could hardly blame her very much. What Jerry had said had been intended for her ears alone. As hostess, however, she should not have permitted Jerry to continue. Marjorie blamed herself heavily for this. To be sure, it had been hardly fair in Mary and Mignon to listen. They should have made known their presence. She wondered what she would have done under the same circumstances. Her sense of honor answered her. She knew she would have immediately come forward. She could not understand why Mary had not done so. Loyal to the core, Marjorie's faith in her chum refused to die. The Mary she had known for so many years had not been lacking in honor. What she had feared from the first had come to pass. Mary had been swayed by Mignon's baleful personality. The much-talked-of reform had ended in a glaring fizzle.

For some time Marjorie lay still, her thoughts busy with the disquieting events of the previous night. She had longed to turn and comfort the tense little figure standing immovable in the middle of her room, but her Captain's word was law, and Marjorie could but sadly acknowledge to herself that her mother had acted for the best. So she could do nothing but follow her from the room with a heavy heart.

What was to be the outcome of the affair she dared not even imagine. A reconciliation with

Mary was her earnest desire. This, however, could hardly be brought about. Perhaps they would never again be friends. A rush of tears blinded her brown eyes. Burying her face in the pillow, Marjorie gave vent to the sorrow which overflowed her soul.

The sound of light, tapping fingers on the door caused her to sit up hastily. "Come in," she called, trying to steady her voice.

The door opened to admit Mary Raymond. Her babyish face looked white and wan in the clear morning light. For hours after her door had closed upon Marjorie and her mother she had sat on the edge of her bed in her pretty blue party frock, brooding on her wrongs. When she had finally prepared for sleep, it was only to toss and turn in her bed, wide-awake and resentful. At daylight she had risen listlessly, then fixing upon a certain plan of action, had bathed, put on a simple house gown and knocked at Marjorie's door.

A single glance at Marjorie's face was sufficient for her to determine that her chum had been crying. She decided that she was glad of it. Marjorie had made *her* unhappy, now she deserved a similar fate.

"Why, Mary!" Marjorie sprang from the bed and advanced to meet her. Involuntarily both arms were outstretched in tender appeal.

Mary took no notice of the mutely pleading arms, save to step back with a cold gesture of avoidance.

"I haven't come here to be friends," she said with deliberate cruelty. "I've come to ask you what you intend to say to your mother."

"What *can* I say to her?" Marjorie's voice had a despairing note.

"You can say nothing," retorted Mary. "That is what *I* intend to do. Your friend, Jerry Macy, said too much last night. I cannot see why our school affairs should be discussed in this house. I am sorry that Mignon made a—a—disturbance last night. I didn't intend to listen, but—" Her old-time frankness had almost overcome her newly hostile bearing. She was on the point of saying that she had been ready to step forth from behind the palms at Jerry's first speech. Then loyalty to Mignon prevailed and she paused.

Marjorie caught at a straw. "I *knew* you didn't intend to listen, Mary." The assurance rang out earnestly. "I couldn't make myself believe that you would. I wanted to stay last night and tell you how sorry I was for—for everything, but I owed it to Captain to obey orders. Mary, dear, can't we start over again? I'm sure it's all been a stupid mistake. Let's be good soldiers and resolve to face that dreadful enemy, Misunderstanding, together. Let's go to Captain and tell her every single thing! Think how much better we'll both feel. It almost broke my heart, last night, when you said you were going to Mignon's to live. If Captain thinks it best, I'll break my promise to Connie and tell you—"

At the mention of Constance Stevens' name Mary's face darkened. Touched by Marjorie's impassioned appeal she had been tempted to break down the barrier that roused between them and take the girl she still adored into her stubborn heart again. But the mere name of Constance had acted as a spur to her rancor.

"Don't trouble yourself about begging permission of Miss Stevens on *my* account," she sneered. "I know a great deal too much of her already. What do you suppose the girls and boys of Franklin High, who gave you your butterfly pin, would say if they knew that you let the girl who stole it from you wear it for months? If you had been honorable you would have made her give it back and then dropped her forever."

Marjorie's sorrow disappeared in wrath. "Mary Raymond, you don't know what you are talking about," she flamed. "I can guess who told you that untruth. It was Mignon La Salle. It was *not* Constance who took my butterfly pin. It was—"

Again she remembered her promise.

"Well," jeered Mary, "who was it, then?"

"I shall not say another word until I see Captain." Marjorie's tones were freighted with decision.

"You mean that you can't deny that your friend Constance was guilty," cut in Mary scornfully. "Never mind. I don't care to hear anything more. You needn't consult your mother, either. I'm never going to be friends with you again, so it doesn't matter. But if you ever cared the least bit for me you'll do as I ask and not tell tales to Captain—I mean Mrs. Dean," she corrected haughtily. "If you do, then I repeat what I said the other day. I'll never speak to you again—no, not if I live here forever. But I won't have to do that, for I shall write to Father and ask him to let me go to Mignon's to live. So there!"

With this dire threat Mary flounced angrily from the room, well pleased with the stand she had taken.

It was a most unsociable trio that gathered at the breakfast table that Saturday morning. Mary carried herself with open belligerence. Marjorie looked as though she was on the point of bursting into tears, while Mrs. Dean was unusually grave. A delicate task lay before her and she

was wondering as she poured the coffee how she had best begin. Still she had determined to thresh the matter out speedily, and as soon as Delia had served the breakfast and retired to the kitchen, she glanced from one to the other of the two principals and said, "Now, girls, I am waiting to hear about last night."

A blank silence fell. Marjorie fixed her eyes on Mary. To her belonged the first word.

The silence continued.

"Well, Mary," Mrs. Dean spoke at last, "what have you to say for yourself?"

"Nothing," came the mutinous reply.

"I am sorry that you won't meet me frankly," commented Mrs. Dean. "I had hoped to find you on duty." Her searching gaze rested on Marjorie "Lieutenant, it is your turn, I think."

Marjorie flushed with distress. She was between two fires. Obedience won. She related what had transpired in the hall in a few brief words, shielding Mary as far as was possible.

"But I know all this," said Mrs. Dean, a trifle impatiently. "Jerry told me last night. There is more to this affair than appears on the surface. What has happened to estrange you two, who have been chums for so many years? I have seen for some time that matters were not progressing smoothly between you. Things cannot go on in this way. You must take me into your confidence. It is evident that a reform is needed here at home."

Mary stared fixedly at her plate. She was resolved not to be a party to that reform. If Marjorie failed her, well—she knew the consequences.

Marjorie saw the sullen, mutinous face through a mist of tears. She tried to speak, but speech refused to come.

"I am ashamed of my soldiers." Mrs. Dean spoke sadly. "What would General say, if he were here?"

The grave question rang like a clarion call in Marjorie's soul. A vision of her father's merry, quizzical eyes grown suddenly sober and hurt over the stubborn resistance of his little army was too much for her. One mournfully appealing glance at the unyielding Mary and she burst forth with, "I can't stand it any longer. I must speak. Last year, when—when—Connie and I had so many unhappy days over my lost butterfly pin I didn't write Mary about what was happening, because I felt terribly and wished her to know only the pleasant side of my school life. So she hadn't the least idea that Connie and I had become such friends. She thought Connie was just a poor girl whom I tried to help because I was sorry for her. When I asked Connie to come with us to the station to meet Mary I was so happy to think they were going to meet that I am afraid I made Mary believe that Connie had taken her place with me. You know, Captain, that it couldn't be so. Mary has been and always will be my dearest friend. I never dreamed she would become——" Marjorie hesitated. She could not bring herself to say "jealous."

A smile of contempt curved Mary's lips. "Why don't you say 'jealous'? That's what you mean," she supplemented.

"Very well, I will say it," rejoined Marjorie quietly. "I never dreamed Mary would become jealous of my friendship with Connie. Before long I noticed she was not quite her own dear self. Then she said something that made me see that I ought to tell her all about last year, but I didn't feel that it would be right until I had asked Connie's permission. I told Mary I would do that very thing, but at Connie's dance before I ever had a chance *she* asked me not to say anything. She was still so hurt over that affair of my pin that she was afraid Mary might not like her so much if she knew. I didn't know what to do, then. If I were to say that Mary had asked me to tell her, well—I thought Connie might think her curious."

Mary made a half-stifled exclamation of anger. Then she shrugged her shoulders with inimitable contempt and fixed her gaze on the opposite wall, assuming an air of boredom she was far from feeling.

"Go on," commanded Mrs. Dean. Marjorie had hesitated at the interruption.

"There isn't much more to tell," continued Marjorie bravely, "only that Mignon came back to school and met Mary and made mischief. You know the rest, Captain. You remember what I said to you the other day——"

"Then you *had* told your mother things about me, already!" burst forth Mary furiously. "Very well. You know what I said this morning. Just remember it."

Marjorie gazed piteously at the angry girl. She could not believe that Mary intended to carry out her threat of the morning.

"What did you say to Marjorie this morning?" inquired Mrs. Dean in cold displeasure. She was endeavoring to be impartial, but her clear mental vision pointed that it was not her daughter who was at fault.

Mary's reply was flung defiantly forth. "I said I'd never speak to her again, and I won't! I won't!"

If Mary had expected Mrs. Dean either to order her to reconsider her rash words or plead with her for reconciliation, she was doomed to disappointment. "We will take you at your word, Mary," came the calm answer. "Hereafter Marjorie must not speak to you unless you address her first. Of course, it will be unpleasant for all of us, but I can see nothing else to be done. You may write to your father if you choose. He will undoubtedly write me in return, and naturally I shall tell him the plain, unvarnished truth, together with several items of interest concerning Mignon La Salle which cannot be withheld from him. I shall not forbid you to continue your friendship with her. You are old enough now to know right from wrong. So long as she does nothing to break the conventions of society, I can condemn her only as a trouble-maker. My advice to you would be to drop her acquaintance. When Constance returns it would be well for you and Marjorie to invite her here and clear up this difficulty. However, that rests with you. So far as General and I are concerned, nothing is changed. We shall continue to the utmost to fulfill your father's trust in us. Now, once and for all, we will drop the subject. I must insist on no more bickering and quarreling in my house. That applies to both of you."

"Please let me say just one thing more, Captain." Marjorie turned imploring eyes upon her mother. "If Mary will let me bring Connie here, when she comes back, I'm sure every cloud can be cleared away. Mary," her vibrant tones throbbed with tender sympathy, "won't you take back what you've said and believe in me?"

For answer Mary Raymond rose from the table and left the room, obstinately trampling friendship and good will under her wayward feet. She had begun to keep her vow.

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CHAPTER XVII

A STEP IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

THE days following the final break in the friendship between the two sophomores were dark indeed for Marjorie. The tale of Mignon's stormy outbreak at her party had been retailed far and wide. It furnished material for much speculative gossip among the students of Sanford High School, and, as is always the case, grew out of proportion to truth with each subsequent recital. Although the five girls who had banded themselves together in the reform that met with such signal failure refused to commit themselves, nevertheless the purpose of their compact, revealed by Mignon's sarcastic tirade at the party, was no longer a secret. Regarding the conscientiousness of their motives, opinions were divided. Certain girls who had a wholesome respect for wealth, personified in Mignon, murmured among themselves that it was a shame she had been so badly treated, while under the Deans' roof. A few still bolder spirits went so far as to criticize Mrs. Dean for interfering in a school-girl's quarrel. They asserted that Mary Raymond had behaved wisely in openly defending her. Marjorie Dean was a great baby to allow her mother to run her affairs. There was no one quite so tiresome as a goody-goody.

On the other hand, Marjorie possessed many firm friends who defended her, to the last word. For the time being discussion ran rife, for youth loves to take up arms in any cause that promises excitement, without stopping to consider dispassionately both sides of a story.

After the party Mignon had lost no time in imparting to those who would listen to her that the Deans had treated their guest with the utmost cruelty and it was for her invalid mother's sake alone that Mary had resigned herself to remain under their roof and go on with her school. Her distortion of the truth grew with each recital and, as the autumn days came and went, she found she had succeeded in dividing the sophomore class far more effectually than she had divided it the preceding year, when in its freshman infancy.

At the Hallowe'en dance which the Weston boys always gave to their fair Sanford schoolmates, dissension had reigned and broken forth in so many petty jealousies that the boyish hosts had been filled with gloomy disgust "at the way some of those girls acted," and vowed among themselves never to give another party. There were exceptions, of course, they had moodily agreed. Marjorie Dean and *her* crowd were "all right" girls and "nothing was too good for them." As for some others, well—"they'd wait a long time before the fellows broke their necks to show 'em another good time."

After a three weeks' absence Constance Stevens had returned to Sanford and school. To her Marjorie confided her sorrows. So distressed was the latter at the part she had unwittingly played in the jangle that she wrote Mary Raymond an earnest little note, which was read and contemptuously consigned to the waste-basket as unworthy of answer. Long were the talks Constance and Marjorie had on the sore subject of Mary's unreasonable stand, and many were the plans proposed by which they might soften her stony little heart, but none of them were carried out. They were voiced, only to be laid aside as futile.

To Marjorie it was all a dreadful dream from which she forlornly hoped she might at any

moment awaken. Three times a day she endured the torture of sitting opposite Mary at meals, of hearing her talk with her mother and father exactly as though she were not present. Mr. Dean had returned from his Western trip. His wife had immediately advised him of the painful situation, and, after due deliberation, he had decided that the only one who could alter it was Mary herself. "Let her alone," he counseled. "She has her father's disposition. You cannot drive her. You were right in leaving her to work out her own salvation. It is hard on Marjorie, poor child, but sooner or later Mary will wake up. When she does she will be a very humble young woman. I wouldn't have her father and mother know this for a good deal, and neither would she. You can rest assured of that. Still you had better keep an eye on her. I don't like her friendship with this La Salle girl. Mark me, some day she will turn on Mary, and then see what happens! I'll have a talk with my sore-hearted little Lieutenant and cheer her up, if I can."

Mr. Dean kept his word, privately inviting his sober-eyed daughter to meet him at his office after school and go for a long ride with him in the crisp autumn air. Once they had left Sanford behind them, Marjorie, who understood the purpose of the little expedition, opened her sorrowing heart to her General. Sure of his sympathy, she spoke her inmost thoughts, while he listened, commented, asked questions and comforted, then repeated his prediction of a happy ending with a positiveness that aroused in her new hope of better days yet to come.

Marjorie never forgot that ride. They tarried for dinner at a wayside inn, justly famous for its cheer, and drove home happily under the November stars. As she studied her lessons that night she experienced a rush of buoyant good fellowship toward the world in general which for many days had not been hers. Yes, she was certain now that the shadow would be lifted. Sooner or later she and Mary would step, hand-in-hand, into the clear sunlight of perfect understanding. She prayed that it might dawn for her soon. As is usually the case with persons innocent of blame, she took herself sharply to task for whatever part of the snarl she had helped to make. She did not know that the stubborn soul of her friend could be lifted to nobler things only by suffering; that Mary's moment of awakening was still far distant.

But while Marjorie prayed wistfully for reconciliation, Mary Raymond sat in the next room, her straight brows puckered in a frown over a sheet of paper she held in her hand. On it was written:

"DEAR MARY:

"Be sure to come to the practice game to-morrow. I think you will find it interesting. If it is anything like the last one, several persons are going to be surprised when it is over. I won't see you after school to-day, as I am not coming back to the afternoon session.

"MIGNON."

Mary stared at the paper with slightly troubled eyes. Estranged from Marjorie, she and Mignon had become boon companions. Since that eventful morning when she had chosen her own course, she had discovered a number of things about the French girl not wholly to her liking. First of all she had expected that her latest sturdy defiance of the Deans would elicit the highest approbation on the part of Mignon. Greatly to her disappointment, her new friend, in whose behalf she had renounced so much, had received her bold announcement, "I'm done with Marjorie Dean forever," quite as a matter of course. She had merely shrugged her expressive shoulders and remarked, "I am glad you've come to your senses," without even inquiring into the details. Ignoring Mary's wrongs, which had now become an old story to her and therefore devoid of interest, she had launched forth into a lengthy discussion of her own plans, a subject of which she was never tired of talking. After that it did not take long for the foolish little lieutenant, who had so unfeelingly deserted her regiment, to see that Mignon was entirely self-centered. Other revelations soon followed. Mignon was agreeable as long as she could have her own way. She would not brook contradiction, and she snapped her fingers at advice. She was a law unto herself, and to be her chum meant to follow blindly and unquestioningly wherever she chose to lead. Mary tried to bring herself to believe that she had made a wise choice. It was an honor to be best friends with the richest girl in Sanford High School. She owned an electric runabout and wore expensive clothes. At home she was the moving power about which the household of servants meekly revolved. All this was very gratifying, to be sure, but deep in her heart Mary knew that she would rather spend one blessed hour of the old, carefree companionship with Marjorie than a year with this strange, elfish girl with whom she had cast her lot. But it was too late to retreat. She had burned her bridges behind her. She must abide by that which she had chosen.

To give her due credit, she still believed that Mignon had been misjudged. She invested the French girl with a sense of honor which she had never possessed, and to this Mary pinned her faith. Perhaps if she had not been still sullenly incensed against Constance Stevens, the scales might have fallen from her eyes. But her resentment against the latter was exceeded only by Mignon's dislike for the gentle girl. Thus the common bond of hatred held them together. She had only to mention Constance's name and Mignon would rise to the bait with torrential anger. This in itself was an unflinching solace to Mary.

To-night, however, her conscience troubled her. For the past three weeks basket ball had been the all-important topic of the hour with the students of Sanford High School. It was the usual custom for the instructor in gymnastics to hold basket ball try-outs among the aspiring players of the various classes. Assisted by several seniors, she culled the most skilful players to make the

respective teams. But this year a new departure had been declared. Miss Randall was no longer instructor. She had resigned her position the previous June and passed on to other fields. Her successor, Miss Davis, had ideas of her own on the subject of basket ball and no sooner had she set foot in the gymnasium than she proceeded to put them into effect. Instead of picking one team from the freshman and sophomore classes, she selected two from each class. Then she organized a series of practice games to determine which of the two teams should represent their respective classes in the field of glory.

Marjorie, Susan Atwell, Muriel Harding, a tall girl named Esther Lind, and Harriet Delaney made one of the two teams. Mignon La Salle, Elizabeth Meredith, Daisy Griggs, Louise Selden and Anne Easton, the latter four devoted supporters of Mignon La Salle, composed the other. There had been some little murmuring on the part of Marjorie's coterie of followers over the choice. Miss Davis was a close friend of Miss Merton and it was whispered that she had been posted beforehand in choosing the second team. Otherwise, how had it happened to be made up of Mignon's admiring satellites?

Miss Davis had decreed that three practice games between the two sophomore teams should be played to decide their prowess. The winners should then be allowed to challenge the freshmen, who were being put through a similar contest, to play a great deciding game for athletic honors on the Saturday afternoon following Thanksgiving. She also undertook to make basket ball plans for the juniors and seniors, but these august persons declined to become enthusiastic over the movement and balked so vigorously at the first intimation of interference with their affairs that Miss Davis retired gracefully from their horizon and devoted her energy to the younger and more pliable pupils of the school.

Not yet arrived at the dignity of the two upper classes, the sophomores and freshmen were still too devoted to the game itself to resent being managed. To find in Miss Davis an ardent devotee of basket ball was a distinct gain. Miss Archer, although she attended the games played between the various teams, was not, and had not been, wholly in favor of the sport since that memorable afternoon of the year before when Mignon had accused Ellen Seymour, now a junior, of purposely tripping her during a wild rush for the ball. Privately, Miss Archer considered basket ball rather a rough sport for girls and they knew that a repetition of last year's disturbance meant death to basket ball in Sanford High School.

Two of the three practice games had been played by the sophomore teams. The squad of which Marjorie was captain had easily won the first. This had greatly incensed Captain Mignon and her players. A series of locker and corner confabs had followed. Mary, who did not aspire to basket ball honors, had been present at these talks. In the beginning the discussions had merely been devoted to the devising of signals and the various methods of scoring against their opponents. But gradually a new and sinister note had crept in. Mignon did not actually counsel her team to take unfair advantages, but she made many artful suggestions, backed up by a play of her speaking shoulders that conveyed volumes to her followers. It began to dawn upon Mary that these "clever tricks," as Mignon was wont to designate them, were not only flagrant dishonesties but dangerous means to the end, quite likely to result in physical harm. Her sense of honor was by no means dead, although companionship with Mignon had served to blunt it. She had remonstrated rather weakly with the latter on one occasion, as they walked toward home together after leaving the other girls, and had been ridiculed for her pains.

She now stared at Mignon's irregular, disjointed writing, which in some curious way suggested the girl's elfish personality, with unhappy eyes. Just what did Mignon mean by intimating that several persons were "going to be surprised" when to-morrow's practice game was over? It sounded like a threat. No doubt it was. Suppose—some one were to be hurt through this tricky playing of Mignon's team! Suppose that some one were to be Marjorie! Mary shuddered. She remembered once reading in a newspaper an account of a basket-ball game in which a girl had been tripped by an opponent and had fallen. That girl had hurt her spine and the physicians had decreed that she would never walk again. Mary put her hands before her eyes as though to shut out the mental vision of Marjorie, lying white and moaning on the gymnasium floor, the victim of an unscrupulous adversary. What could she do? She could not warn Marjorie to be on her guard. She had now passed out of her former chum's friendship of her own free will. She could not go privately to Muriel or Susan or the other members of the team. No, indeed! Yet, somehow, she must convey a message of warning.

Seized with a sudden impulse to carry out her resolve, she picked up a pencil and began to scrawl on a bit of paper in a curious, back-handed fashion, quite different from her neat Spencerian hand. Over and over she practiced this hand on a loosened sheet from her note-book. At length she rose and, going to her chiffonier, took from the top drawer a leather writing case. Tumbling its contents hastily over, she selected a sheet of pale gray paper. There was a single envelope to match. Long it had lain among her stationery, the last of a kind she had formerly used. She was sure Marjorie had never seen it, so if it fell into her hands she could not trace it to her. Once more she practiced the back-handed scrawl. Then, with an energy born of the remorse which was to serve as a continual penance for her folly, she wrote:

"TO THE SOPHOMORE TEAM:

"Be on your guard when you play to-morrow. If you are not very careful you may be sorry. Beware of 'tricks.'

Folding the warning, Mary slipped it into its envelope. But now the question again confronted her, "To whom shall I send it?" After a moment's frowning thought she decided upon Harriet Delaney as the recipient. But dared she trust it to the mail service? Suppose it were not delivered until afternoon? Then it would be too late. The Delaneys lived only two blocks further up the street. It was not yet ten o'clock. Mrs. Dean had gone to a lecture. Marjorie was in her room. If she met General she would merely state that she was going to post a letter. That would be entirely true. She would run all the way there and back. Once she had reached Harriet's house she must take her chance of being discovered.

Drawing on her long blue coat, Mary crept noiselessly down the stairs. General was not in sight. The living room was in darkness. Only the hall lights burned. It took but an instant to softly open the door. Mary sped down the walk and on her errand of honor like a frightened fawn. Fortune favored her. No eye marked her cautious ascent of the Delaney's steps. She breathed a faint sigh of relief as she slipped the envelope into the letter slot in the middle of the front door. Then she turned and dashed for home like a pursued criminal.

She had hardly gained the shelter of her room when she heard the front door open to the accompaniment of cheerful voices. Mr. Dean had evidently gone forth to bring his wife home from the lecture. Mary threw herself on the bed, her heart pounding with excitement and the energy of her brisk run. And though she was conscious only of having done a good deed for honor's sake, nevertheless she had faced about and taken a long step in the right direction.

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CHAPTER XVIII

A MYSTERIOUS WARNING

"GOOD-MORNING, Mrs. Dean. Is Marjorie here?" There was a hint of suppressed excitement in the clear voice that asked the question.

"Good morning, Harriet. Come in." Mrs. Dean smiled pleasantly upon her caller, as she ushered her into the hall. "You are out early this morning. Yes, Marjorie is here. She hasn't come downstairs yet. She is a little inclined to linger in bed on Saturday morning."

"I can't blame her," laughed Harriet. "I am fond of doing the same. But I've a special reason for being out early this morning. It's about basket ball. You may be sure of that."

"Basket-ball is enjoying its usual popularity. I hear a great deal about it of late," returned Mrs. Dean. "Pardon me." Raising her voice, she called up the stairway, "Mar-jorie!"

"Coming down on the jump, Captain!" answered Marjorie's voice. Verifying her words, she bounded lightly down the stairs, still in her dressing gown, her hair falling in long loose curls about her lovely face. "I knew who was here. I heard Harriet's voice."

"Oh, Marjorie," burst forth Harriet, taking a quick step forward. "I—something awfully queer has happened!" She glanced nervously about her, but Mrs. Dean had already vanished through the doorway, leading into the dining room. She rarely intruded upon Marjorie's callers longer than to welcome them.

"What is it, Harriet?" fell wonderingly from Marjorie's lips. Her friend's early call, coupled with her agitated manner, betokened something unusual.

"Read this!" Harriet thrust a sheet of pale gray note paper into Marjorie's hand. "It's the strangest thing I ever heard of!"

Marjorie swept the few scrawling lines of which the paper boasted with a keen, comprehensive glance. As its import dawned upon her, her brown eyes grew round with amazement. She re-read it twice. "Where did you receive it?" came her sharp question, as she continued to hold it in her hand.

"I don't know when it came. Mother found it on the floor in the vestibule this morning. I was still in bed. She sent Nora, our maid, upstairs with it. You can imagine I didn't stop to finish my nap. I hurried and dressed, ate about three bites of breakfast and started for your house as fast as I could travel. I thought you ought to see it first. What do you make of it?"

"I hardly know what to think." Marjorie's glance strayed from Harriet's perturbed face to the mysterious letter of warning. "Somehow, I don't believe it was written for a joke. Do you?"

"No, I don't." Harriet shook her head positively. "I think it was intended for just what it is, a

warning to be on our guard to-day. I'll tell you something, Marjorie. I never mentioned it before because—well—you know I've never liked Mignon La Salle since she nearly broke up basket ball at Sanford High last year, and I was afraid it might sound hateful on my part, but the girls of Mignon's squad are as tricky as can be. Twice, in the first practice game we played, I had my own troubles with them. Once Daisy Griggs nearly knocked me over. She pretended it was an accident, but it wasn't. Then, in the second half, Mignon poked me in the side with her elbow. We were bunched so close that not even the referee saw her. I almost had the ball, but my side hurt me so that I missed it entirely. Susan Atwell was awfully cross about something that day, too. I asked her what had happened, but she only muttered that she hoped she'd get through the game without being murdered. She wouldn't say another word, but you can guess from what I've told you that she must have had good reason for getting mad. Did she say anything to you?"

"No; I wish she had." A flash of anger darkened Marjorie's delicate features. "The girls of Mignon's team have played fairly enough with me. They are rough, I'll say that, but, so far they've not overstepped the rules."

"They know better than to try their tricks on *you!*" exclaimed Harriet hotly, "or on Muriel, either. Mignon's afraid of you because you are everything that's good and noble!"

"Nonsense," Marjorie grew red at this flattering assertion.

"It's true, just the same. She's afraid of Muriel, too, because she knows that Muriel would report her to Miss Archer in a minute. She thinks she can harass Esther and Susan and me and that we won't dare say anything for fear Miss Archer will make a fuss. She knows how crazy we are to play and that we'd stand a good deal of knocking about rather than spoil everything. It's different with Muriel. If *she* got mad, she would walk off the floor and straight to Miss Archer's office, and those girls know it."

Marjorie was silent. What Harriet said in regard to Muriel was undoubtedly true. Since the latter had turned from Mignon La Salle to her, she had been the soul of devotion. She had never forgiven Mignon for her cowardly conduct on the day of the class picnic. Muriel revered the heroic, and Mignon had disgraced herself forever in the eyes of this impulsive, hero-worshipping girl.

"We had better show this letter to the other girls," Marjorie said with sudden decision. "Come upstairs to my house. I'll hurry and dress. Suppose you have a few more bites of breakfast with me. Your early morning rush must have made you hungry, and you ought to be well fed, if you expect to do valiant work on the field of battle this afternoon."

"I *am* hungry," conceded Harriet, "and I won't wait to be urged. I'd love to take breakfast with you." Then, lowering her voice, she asked: "Is Mary going to the game?"

A faint wistfulness tinged Marjorie's voice as she said slowly. "I don't know. I haven't asked her. I suppose she is, though."

Although it was whispered among Marjorie's close friends that the unpleasant scene at her party had left a yawning gap between the two friends, never, by so much as a word, had Marjorie intimated the true state of affairs to any one except Constance and Jerry Macy. Not even Susan Atwell and Muriel Harding knew just how matters stood. Harriet remembered this in the same moment of her question, and, flushing at her own inquisitiveness, remarked hurriedly, "Everyone in school is coming to see us play."

"I'm glad of that." Marjorie had recovered again her usual cheerfulness, and answered heartily. She kept up a lively stream of talk as she completed her dressing. Tucking the letter inside her white silk blouse she led the way downstairs to the dining room. She was slightly relieved to see Mary's place at the table vacant. She guessed that the latter had heard Harriet's voice and had purposely remained in her room. She had not gone astray in this supposition. Mary *had* heard Harriet speak and knew only too well what had brought her to the Deans' house so early that morning.

It was nine o'clock when Marjorie and Harriet left the house to call on Susan Atwell, who lived nearest. Susan read the mysterious warning and was duly impressed with its significance. She was equally at sea as to the writer. It soon developed, however, that Harriet had been correct in assuming that Susan's wrath at the first game played against Mignon's team had been occasioned by their unfair tactics. She had been slyly tripped by Louise Selden, she asserted, and had fallen heavily.

"All this is news to me," declared Marjorie, frowning her disapproval. "It must be stopped."

"How?" inquired Susan almost sulkily.

"If necessary, we must have an understanding with our opponents," was the quiet response.

"That is easy enough to say," retorted Susan, "but if we were to accuse those girls of playing unfairly, they would simply laugh at us and call us babies."

"I'd rather be laughed at and called a baby than allow such unfairness to go on." There was a ring of determination in Marjorie's reply.

"Let us hurry on to Muriel and hear her views," suggested Harriet. "She lives next door to Esther Lind, so we can call them together and show them the letter."

Once the team were together they spent an anxious session over the letter left by an unseen hand. Discussion ran rife. With her usual impetuosity Muriel announced her intention of taking Mignon to task before the game. "I'm not afraid of her," she boasted. "I'd rather not play than to feel that at any minute I might be laid up for repairs. I'm much obliged to the one who wrote this. He or she must have had a troubled conscience."

Marjorie cast a startled glance at Muriel. Could it be possible that Mary had written the note? And yet something about the gray stationery had seemed familiar. She was not sure, but she thought she had at some time or other received a letter from her chum written on gray note paper. She resolved to look through Mary's letters to her as soon as she reached home. If Mary had, indeed, sent the warning, it was because she felt constrained to do the only honorable thing in her power. Association with Mignon had not entirely deadened her sense of right and wrong. A wave of love and longing brought the tears to Marjorie's eyes. She winked them back. She must not betray herself to her schoolmates.

"Listen to me, girls," she began earnestly. "We mustn't say a word to our opponents before the game. I know I just said that we ought to have an understanding, and I meant it. But we had better wait until the end of the first half. If everything is all right, then so much the better. If it isn't—well—we shall at least have given them their chance."

The players lingered in the Hardings' living room to discuss the coming contest, go over their signals and prepare themselves as effectually as possible for the fray. It was almost noon when Marjorie sped up the stairs to her room, there to put into execution the search she had decided to make. Mary's letters to her, tied with a bit of blue ribbon, reposed in a pretty lacquered box designed especially to hold them. Marjorie untied the ribbon and fingered them with a sigh of regret for the happy past. Most of them were written on white paper, a few were on pale blue, Mary's color. Almost at the bottom of the box was one gray envelope. The searcher drew a quick breath as she separated it from its fellows. Drawing the envelope from her blouse, she compared the two. They were identical. The mysterious warning was no longer a mystery to her.

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CHAPTER XIX

A BOLD STAND FOR HONOR

THRILLED with the discovery she had just made, Marjorie's first impulse was to seek admittance to the room so long denied her and confront Mary with the knowledge of her good deed. Remembering her General's injunction, "Let her alone," she refrained from yielding to that impulse. Her pride, too, asserted itself. It was not her place to make advances, all too likely to be rebuffed. No, she must keep her secret until time had done its perfect work. Reconciliation lay in Mary's hands, not hers. She decided, however, that the girls must never know who had been the author of the warning. So far as she was concerned, it must remain a mystery to them.

"Where is Mary?" she inquired of her mother, as they sat down to luncheon a little later. Mary's place at the table was vacant.

"Oh, she was invited to luncheon at her friend Mignon's home," returned Mrs. Dean, frowning slightly. "I suppose she is hoping that Mignon's team will win the game this afternoon."

"I suppose so," returned Marjorie absently. Her mind was still on her discovery. Should she tell Captain about it? Perhaps it would be best. Briefly she acquainted her mother with what she had so recently found out.

"I am not greatly surprised," was her mother's quiet comment. "Mary is too good a girl at heart to persist for long in this ridiculous stand she has taken. I am glad you said nothing of it to her. She must clear her own path of the briars she has sown. When she does, she will have learned a much-needed lesson."

"But, Captain, it's dreadful to think of Christmas coming and Mary and—I—not—friends," faltered Marjorie. "I can't give her a present, and I'd love to. I suppose she doesn't care to give me one. We've always exchanged gifts ever since we were little tots."

"Perhaps everything will be all right by that time. If it isn't—well, I have a plan—but I'm not going to say a word about it yet. Wait until nearer Christmas. Then we shall see."

"Oh, Mother, if only you could think of something that would make us friends again, just for a day, I'd be so happy!" Marjorie clasped her hands in fervent appeal.

"Wait and see," smiled Mrs. Dean enigmatically.

As Marjorie set out for the high school that afternoon she hummed a jubilant snatch of song, due to the bright ray of sunlight that had pierced the gloom. She could afford to wait, if waiting

would bring about the miracle that her mother had hinted might be wrought. She quite forgot basket ball until she reached the steps of the high school. There her mind reverted to the coming contest and she set her lips in silent determination. Her team must win to-day. She could not endure the thought that Mignon's team should be the one to play against the freshmen for sophomore honors.

It was half past one o'clock when she entered the building and hurried to the dressing room at one side of the gymnasium, which was reserved for her squad. The first to arrive, she hastily prepared for the game. Meanwhile, she kept up an earnest thinking as to the course she had best pursue if Mignon and her supporters overstepped the bounds of fair play. But she could make up her mind to nothing. Mere contemplation of the subject was so disagreeable she hated to face it.

While she pondered, Susan Atwell bustled in with Muriel Harding. The two remaining members of the team appeared soon after and a lively dressing and talking bee ensued. The sophomore team, which Marjorie captained, had chosen to wear their black basket ball regalia of the year before, but instead of the violet "F" that had ornamented their blouses, a scarlet "S" now replaced it. Black and scarlet were the sophomore colors. Should their team win, they could wear the same suits in the more important game to come. It was reported, however, that Mignon's team would shine resplendently in new suits of gray, ornamented with a rose-colored "S," which Mignon had provided at her own expense. If they won, she had promised her adherents the prettiest black and scarlet suits that could be obtained for the Thanksgiving Day contest. It is needless to say that they had also set their minds on carrying off the victor's palm.

The game had been set for half past two o'clock, but long before that hour the gallery audience of Sanford School girls, with a fair sprinkling of boys from Weston High, had begun to arrive. Opinion was divided as to the prospective winners. Marjorie's team boasted of seasoned players, whose work on the field was well known. Mignon had not been so fortunate. Neither Daisy Griggs nor Anne Easton had played basket ball, previous to the opening of the season. But Mignon herself was counted a powerful adversary. The sympathy of the boys lay for the most part with Marjorie's squad. The Weston High lads were decidedly partial to the pretty, brown-eyed girl, whose modest, gracious ways had soon won their boyish approbation. Among the girls, however, Mignon could count on fairly strong support.

As it was a practice game no special preparations in the way of songs or the wearing of contestants' colors had been observed. That would come later, on Thanksgiving Day. But excitement ran higher than usual in the audience, for it had been whispered about that it was to be "some game."

"It's twenty-five after, children," informed Jerry Macy, who, with Irma Linton and Constance Stevens, had been accorded the privilege of invading the dressing room of Marjorie's team. Jerry had elected to become a safety deposit vault for a miscellaneous collection of pins, rings, neck chains and other simple jewelry dear to the heart of the school girl. Marjorie's bracelet watch adorned one plump wrist, while her own ornamented the other.

"Look out, Jerry, or you'll make yourself cross-eyed trying to tell time by both those watches at once," giggled Susan Atwell.

"Don't you believe it," was Jerry's good-humored retort. "They're both right to the minute."

"Remember, girls, that we've just *got* to win," counseled Marjorie fervently. "Keep your heads, and don't let a single thing get by you. We've practiced our signals until I'm sure you all know them perfectly."

"We'll win fast enough, if certain persons play fairly," nodded Muriel Harding, "but look out for Mignon."

A shrill blast from the referee's whistle followed Muriel's warning. It called them to action.

The next instant five black and scarlet figures flashed forth onto the gymnasium floor to meet the gray-clad quintette that advanced from the opposite side of the room.

United cheering from the gallery constituents of both teams rent the air. The contestants acknowledged the applause and ran to their stations. A significant silence fell as the referee poised the ball for the opening toss. Mignon La Salle's black eyes were fastened upon it with almost savage intensity. She leaped like a cat for it as it left the referee's hands. Again the screech of the whistle sounded. The game had begun.

It was Marjorie who won the toss-up, however. She had been just a shade quicker than Mignon. Now she sent the ball flying toward Susan Atwell with a sure aim that made the onlookers gasp with admiration. Before the gray-clad girls could comprehend just how it had all happened, their opponents had scored. But this was only the beginning of things. Buoyant over their initial gain, the black and scarlet girls played as though inspired and soon the score stood 8 to 0 in their favor.

Mignon La Salle was furious at the unexpected turn matters had taken. Her players, of whom she had expected wonders, were behaving like dummies. They had evidently forgotten her fierce exhortations to fight their way to victory regardless of expense. Well, she would soon show them their work. It did not take her long to put her resolve into execution. Joining a wild rush for the ball, which Harriet Delaney was valiantly trying to throw to basket, Mignon made good her word. Just what happened to her Harriet could not say. She knew only that a sly, tripping foot, unseen

in the turmoil, sent her crashing to the floor, while the ball passed into the enemy's keeping, and they scored.

Inspired by the sweetness of success, Mignon's "dummies" awoke and carried out the instructions, so often impressed upon them in secret by their unscrupulous leader, in a series of plays that for sly roughness had never been equalled by any other team that had elected to take the floor in that gymnasium. Yet so cleverly did they execute them that beyond an occasional foul they managed to elude the supposedly-watchful eyes of the referee, an upper class friend of the French girl's, and rapidly piled up their score.

When the whistle called the end of the first half it found the score 10-8 in favor of the grays. It also found a quintet of enraged black-clad girls, nursing sundry bruises and vows of vengeance.

"It's a burning shame!" cried Susan Atwell, the moment the teams had reached the safety of their dressing room. "I won't stand it. My ankle hurts so where some one kicked it that I thought I couldn't finish the first half. And poor Harriet! You must have taken an awful fall."

"I did." Harriet Delaney was half crying.

Muriel Harding's dark eyes were snapping with rage and injury. She was nursing a scraped elbow, which she had received in the melee. "I'm going straight to Miss Archer," she threatened. "I won't play the second half with such dishonorable girls. That Miss Dutton, the referee, must know something of the rough way they are playing. But *she* is a friend of Mignon's. I don't care much if Miss Archer forbids basket ball for the rest of the season. I'd rather have it that way than be carried off the floor, a wreck. I'm going now to find her. She's up in her office. Jerry saw her just before she came to the gym. Didn't you, Jerry?" She turned to the stout girl, who had just entered. At the beginning of the game, Jerry, Constance and Irma had hurried to the gallery to watch it. Seasoned fans, they had observed the playing with critical eyes that saw much. The instant the first half was over, they had descended to their friends with precipitate haste.

"Yes, she's in her office." Jerry had appeared in time to hear Muriel's tirade. "I think I *would* go to her, if I were you, Muriel. Those girls are a disgrace to Sanford."

"Let's all go," proposed Harriet Delaney, wrathfully. "I'd rather do that than stay and be murdered."

Marjorie stood regarding her players with brooding eyes. She smiled faintly at Harriet's vehement utterance. "Girls," she said in a clear, resolute voice, "I told you this morning that if anything like this happened I'd go straight to Mignon and have an understanding. I'm going. I wish you to go with me, though. I have a reason for it." She walked determinedly to the door.

"What are you going to say to them, Marjorie?" demanded Muriel. "You might as well save your breath. They'll only laugh at you. Miss Archer is the person to go to."

"Not yet." Marjorie shook her head in gentle contradiction. "Please let me try my way, Muriel. If it doesn't work, then I promise you that I'll go with you to Miss Archer. Oh, yes. I wish you all to stand by me, but don't say a word unless I ask you to. Will you trust me?" She glanced wistfully at her little flock.

"Go ahead," ordered Muriel shortly. "We'll stand by you. Won't we, girls?"

Three heads nodded on emphatic assent.

"All right. Come on. We haven't much time left. How many minutes, Jerry?"

"Eight," replied the stout girl. "Can Irma and Connie and I come, too?"

"No. I'd rather you wouldn't."

"We'll forgive you. Now beat it." Although Jerry was earnestly endeavoring to eliminate slang from her vocabulary, she could not resist this forceful advice.

"Suppose we go around through the corridor and use that side door nearest Mignon's dressing room," suggested Marjorie. "Then we won't be noticed. I'd rather we weren't. This is really private, you know."

Four black and scarlet figures gloomily followed their leader. There were two doors to each dressing room. One led into the gymnasium, which was situated in a wing of the school, the other led into the corridor. Through the half-open door of Mignon's dressing room the sound of exultant voices reached the advancing squad. She stood with her back toward them.

"We were a little too much for them." Mignon's boasting tones brought fresh resentment to her injured opponents. "I told you that——"

"Miss La Salle!" Marjorie's stern voice caused the French girl to whirl about. "We heard what you were saying. We came over here to notify you that we do not intend to play the second half of the game with you unless you give us your promise to play fairly and without unnecessary roughness."

Mignon's black eyes blazed. "What do you mean by stealing into our room and listening to our private conversation?" she demanded passionately.

Marjorie faced the furious girl with calm, contemptuous eyes. Before their steady gaze, Mignon

quailed a trifle.

"We did not *steal* into your room. If you had not been so busy boasting over your own unfairness you could have heard our approach. However, that doesn't matter. What *does* matter is this. Come here, Muriel." She beckoned Muriel to her side. "Show Miss La Salle your elbow," she commanded.

Muriel rolled back her loose sleeve and showed the raw, red spot on her soft, white arm.

Mignon laughed sarcastically and shrugged her scorn of the injury. "You can't be a baby and play basket ball," she jeered.

"Neither can you behave like a savage and expect it to pass unnoticed—by at least a few persons," retorted Marjorie. She was fighting hard to control the rush of temper which this heartless girl always brought to the surface. "Harriet was badly shaken up, because someone purposely tripped her. Some one else kicked Susan on the ankle. It is too much. We won't endure it. Now I give you fair warning, if any girl of my squad is handled roughly during the next half she intends to call a halt in the game. The rest of us will then leave the floor and go to Miss Archer's office. Think it over. That's all."

Marjorie turned on her heel. Without so much as a glance toward the discomfited girls of Mignon's team, she walked from the room, followed by her silently obedient train.

"Well, *what* do you think of that?" gasped Louise Selden. Nevertheless, she had had the grace to turn very red during Marjorie's stern arraignment.

Mignon turned savagely upon the abashed members of her squad. "If you pay any attention to *her*, you are all *babies*," she hissed. "You are to play the second half just as I told you. Don't let that priggish Dean girl scare you. *She* wouldn't go to Miss Archer. She knows better than that."

"You're wrong, Mignon. She meant every word she said." Daisy Griggs' ruddy face had grown suddenly pale. "*I'm* going to be pretty careful how I play the rest of this game."

"So am I," echoed Elizabeth Meredith. "If Miss Dean went to Miss Archer it would raise a regular riot."

Anne Easton and Louise Selden nodded in solemn agreement with Daisy's bold stand. In her heart each of them stood convicted of unworthiness. The righteous gleam of Marjorie's clear eyes had made them feel most uncomfortable.

"You're cowards, every one of you," burst forth Mignon, her dark face distorted with rage, "and if—"

"T-r-r-ill!" The referee's whistle was summoning them to the game.

Mignon ran to her station resolved on vengeance. Four girls followed her to their places divided between two fears. Awe of Miss Archer and the disaster that would surely overtake them if they persisted in their former tactics acted as a spur to their sleeping consciences. Fear of Mignon became a secondary emotion. They vowed within themselves to play fairly and they kept their vow.

The second half of the game opened very well for Marjorie's team. She passed the ball to Susan Atwell, who scored, thereby winning a salvo of hearty applause from the gallery. The watchful spectators had not been blind to the unfair methods of the grays. Two goals followed in their favor. So far the grays had done nothing. Unnerved by Marjorie's just censure and the fear of exposure, they paid little heed to Mignon's glowering glances and frantic signals. They played in a half-hearted, diffident fashion, quite the opposite of their whirlwind sweep during the first half. The black and scarlet girls soon brought the score up to 14 to 10 in their favor, and from that moment on had things decidedly their own way. Time after time Mignon cut in desperately for the basket to receive a pass, but on each occasion her team-mates made a wild throw. Marjorie's team, however, played with perfect unity, working in several successful signal plays. Try as she might, the French girl could do nothing to arouse her players. Their passing became so delinquent that once or twice it brought derisive groans from the male spectators in the gallery. As the second half neared its end, Muriel Harding made a sensational throw to basket that aroused the gallery to wild enthusiasm. It also served to take the faint remaining spirit from the disheartened grays, and the game wound up with a score of 30 to 12 in favor of the black and scarlet girls. They had won a complete and sweeping victory over their unworthy opponents.

It was a proud moment for Marjorie Dean, as she stood surrounded by a flock of jubilant boys and girls, who had rent the gallery air with appreciative howls, then hustled from their places aloft to offer their congratulations to the victors.

"I'm so glad you won, Marjorie," cried Ellen Seymour. Lowering her voice, she added: "I could see a few things. I'm not the only one. But what happened to them? They actually played fairly in the second half—all except Mignon. But she couldn't do much by herself."

Marjorie smiled faintly. "We must have discouraged them, I suppose. We never before worked together so well as we played in that second half. Wasn't that a wonderful throw to basket that Muriel made?"

"Splendid," agreed Ellen warmly. "I predict an easy victory for the sophomores on Thanksgiving

Day."

Marjorie breathed relief. "Are you coming to see us play, or are you going away for Thanksgiving?" was her tactful question.

Ellen plunged into a voluble recital of her Thanksgiving plans, quite forgetting her curiosity over the sudden change of tactics of the defeated grays. Several girls joined in the conversation, and thus the talk drifted away from the subject Marjorie wished most to avoid.

In Mignon's dressing room, however, a veritable tornado had burst. Four sullen, gray-clad girls bowed their heads before the storm of passionate reproaches hurled upon them by their irate leader. They were seeing and hearing Mignon at her worst, and they did not relish it. It may be set down to their credit that not one of them took the trouble to answer her. Beyond a mute exchange of meaning glances, they ignored her scorn, slipping away like shadows when they had changed their basket ball suits for street apparel. Outside the high school they congregated and made solemn agreement that now and forever they were "through" with Mignon.

Several friends of the latter, including Miss Dutton, the referee, dropped into the dressing room, and to them Mignon continued her tirade. But the face of one hitherto ardent supporter was missing. Mary Raymond had fled from the school the moment the game was ended. For once she had seen too much of Mignon. She had tried to force herself to believe that she was sorry for the latter's deserved defeat, but, in reality, she was glad that Marjorie's team had won. She determined to go home and wait for her chum. She would confess that she was sorry for the past and ask Marjorie to forgive her.

Putting her determination into swift action, she left the high school behind her almost at a run. Once she had reached home she paused only to hang her wraps on the hall rack, then posted herself in the living-room window, an anxious little figure. When Marjorie came she would open the hall door for her. She would say, "I surrender, Lieutenant. Please forgive me." She smiled a trifle sadly to herself in anticipation of the forgiving arms that Marjorie would extend to her. She was not sure she merited forgiveness.

But when at last Marjorie came in sight of the gate, Mary vented an exclamation of pain and anger. Marjorie was not alone. Up the walk she loitered, arm-in-arm with Constance Stevens. The old jealousy, forgotten in Marjorie's hour of triumph, swept Mary like a blighting wind. She turned and fled from the hated sight that met her eyes, a deserter to her good intentions.

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CHAPTER XX

HOISTING THE FLAG OF TRUCE

THANKSGIVING Day walked in amid a flurry of snow, accompanied by a boisterous wind, which roared a bleak reminiscence of that first Thanksgiving Day on a storm rock-bound coast, when a few faithful souls had braved his fury and gone forth to give thanks for life and liberty. Despite his challenging roar, the boys of Weston High School played their usual game of football against a neighboring eleven and emerged from the field of conquest, battered and victorious, to rest in the proud bosoms of their families and devour much turkey. In the afternoon, the long-talked-of game of basket ball came off between the sophomores and the freshmen. It was an occasion of energetic color-flaunting, in which black and scarlet banners predominated. It seemed as though almost every one in Sanford High School, with the exception of the freshmen themselves, was devoted heart and soul to the sophomores. The rumor of the unfair treatment they had received in the deciding practice game had been noised abroad, and Marjorie and her team mates were in a fair way to be lionized. A packed gallery, much jubilant singing and frantic applause of every move they made, spurred the black and scarlet girls to doughty deeds, and, although it was a hard-fought battle, in which the freshmen played for dear life, the sophomores won.

Altogether, it was a day long to be remembered, and Marjorie lived it for all that lay within her energetic young body and mind. Only the one flaw that marred its perfection and left her sober-eyed and retrospective when the eventful holiday was ended. She felt that one word of commendation from Mary would have been worth more than all the praise she had received from admiring friends. But Mary was as stony and implacable as ever, giving no sign of the surrender which Constance Stevens had unconsciously nipped in the bud.

Just how Mary spent that particular Thanksgiving Day Marjorie did not learn until long afterward. She knew only that Mary had left the house directly after dinner, merely stating that she intended making several calls, and was seen no more until ten o'clock that night, when she flitted into the house like a ghost and vanished up the stairs to her own room.

After Thanksgiving, basket ball echoes died out in the growing murmur of coming Christmas

joys, and like every young girl, Marjorie grew impatient and enthusiastic over her holiday plans. She did not chatter them as freely to General and Captain when at table as had been her custom each year in the happy days when only they three had been together. As her formerly lovable self, Marjorie would have felt no reserve in Mary's presence, but this strange, new Mary with her white, immobile face and indifferent eyes, chilled her and killed her desire to exchange the usual gay badinage with her General, which had always made meal-time a merry occasion.

"I don't like Mary's effect on our little girl, Margaret. Of late, Marjorie is as solemn as a judge," remarked Mr. Dean one evening as he lingered at the dinner table after Mary and Marjorie had excused themselves and gone upstairs on the plea of studying to-morrow's lessons. "I counseled Marjorie, the night I took her to Devon Inn to dinner, to let matters work out in their own way. That was some time ago. Perhaps I'd better take a hand and see what I can do toward ending this internal war. Christmas will soon be here. We can't have our Day of Days spoiled by one youngster's perversity."

"I have thought of that, too," returned Mrs. Dean, smiling, "and I have a plan. I shall need your help to carry it out, though."

When she had finished the laying out of her clever scheme for a congenial Christmas all around, Mr. Dean threw back his head in a hearty laugh. "It's decidedly ingenious, and in keeping," was his tribute. "I'll help you put it through, with pleasure. But after Christmas——" He paused, his laughing eyes growing grave.

"After Christmas our services as peace advocates may not be needed," supplemented Mrs. Dean. "At least, I hope they may not. I am still of the opinion, however, that Mary must be left to repent of her own folly. If she is coaxed and wheedled into good humor she will never realize how badly she has behaved."

"I suppose that is so. But, naturally, I am more interested in healing our poor little soldier's hurts than in trying to bring a certain stubborn young person to her senses. We will try out our idea. It will insure one satisfactory day, I hope. Unless I prove a poor diplomat."

Although Marjorie's blithe voice was too frequently stilled in Mary's presence, she was uniformly sunny when she and her Captain were alone together. Now fairly familiar with Sanford, Mrs. Dean had made it a part of her daily life to seek and assist certain families among the poor of the little northern city. Now that Christmas was so near she was making a special effort to gladden the hearts of those to whom life had seemed to grudge even daily bread. She had contrived wisely to interest Marjorie in this charitable work, with the idea of taking her mind from the bitter disappointment Mary's change of heart had brought her, and had been touched and gratified at the unselfish eagerness with which Marjorie had taken up the work. The latter had aroused Jerry Macy's, as well as Constance Stevens', interest in planning a merry Christmas for the poor of Sanford. Constance was particularly desirous of helping. She would never forget the previous Christmas Eve, when, laden with good will and be-ribboned offerings, Marjorie had smilingly appeared at the little gray house where Poverty reigned supreme and helped her transform Charlie's rickety express wagon into a veritable fairy couch, piled high with the precious tokens of unselfish love. She felt that the only way in which she might show her lasting gratitude for the gifts of that snowy Christmas Eve was to share her blessings with others who were in need, and she quickly became Marjorie's most faithful servitor.

Good-natured Jerry was also keen to bestow her time and world goods in the Christmas cause, and almost every afternoon when school was over the three girls conspired together in the cause of happiness. Marjorie unearthed a trunk of her childish toys from an obscure corner of the garret, and a great mending and refurbishing movement ensued. Jerry, not to be outdone, canvassed among her friends for suitable gifts to lay at the shrine of Christmas, which rose to life eternal when three wise men placed their reverent offerings at the feet of a Holy Child long centuries before. While Constance Stevens drew largely on a sum of money, which her indulgent aunt had placed in the bank to her credit and enjoyed to the full the blessedness of giving.

"Maybe we haven't been busy little helpers, though," declared Jerry Macy one blustering afternoon, as the three girls sat in the Deans' living room, surrounded by ribbon-bound packages of all shapes and sizes. "Truly, I never had such a good time before in all my life."

"That's just the way I feel," nodded Constance, as she tied an astounding bow of red ribazine about an oblong package that suggested a doll, and consulted a fat note book, lying wide spread on the library table, for the address of the prospective possessor. "Marjorie, will you ever forget how happy Charlie was last year?"

"Dear little Charlie!" Marjorie's lips smiled tender reminiscence of the tiny boy's jubilation over his wonderful discovery that Santa Claus had not forgotten him. "His Christmas will be a merry one this year, even to the good, strong leg that he hoped Santa would bring him."

"He can't possibly be any happier than he was *last* Christmas morning," was Constance's soft reply. "And it was all through you, Marjorie."

"Oh, I wasn't the only one. Your father and you and Uncle John gave him things, and Delia popped the corn for his tree, and, don't you remember, Laurie Armitage brought you the tree and the holly and ground pine?"

Constance flushed slightly at the mention of Lawrence Armitage. A sincere boy and girl

friendship had sprung up between them that promised later to ripen into perfect love.

"That reminds me," broke in Jerry bluntly. "I've something to tell you, girls. Hal told me. He's my most reliable source of information when it comes to news of Weston High. Laurie is writing an operetta. He's going to call it 'The Rebellious Princess,' and he would like to give a performance of it in the spring. There's to be a big chorus and Professor Harmon is going to pick a cast from the boys and girls of Weston and Sanford High Schools."

"Who is Professor Harmon?" asked Constance curiously.

"Oh, he's the musical director at Weston High," answered Jerry offhandedly. "He looks after the singing and glee clubs there, just as Miss Walters does at Sanford High. You can sing, Connie, and Laurie knows it. I wouldn't be surprised if you'd get the leading part."

"I'd be more surprised if I did," laughed Constance, "considering that I don't even know Professor Harmon when I see him."

"Laurie will introduce you to him, I guess," predicted Jerry confidently. "Hal said something about a try-out of voices. I can't remember what it was. I'll ask him when I go home."

"I don't believe I could even sing in a chorus," laughed Marjorie. "I haven't a strong voice."

"You can look pretty, though, and *that* counts," was Jerry's emphatic consolation. "That's more than I can do. I can't see myself shine, even in a chorus. I don't sing. I shout, and then I'm always getting off the key," she ended gloomily.

Constance and Marjorie giggled at Jerry's funny description of her vocal powers. The stout girl's brief gloom vanished in a broad grin.

"Two more days and Christmas will be here!" exclaimed Marjorie with a joyous little skip, which caused a pile of packages on the floor near her to tumble in all directions.

"Easy there!" warned Jerry. Secretly she was delighted at her friend's lightsome mood. Marjorie had been altogether too serious of late. Privately, she had frequently wished that Mary Raymond had never set foot in Sanford.

The early December dusk had fallen when, the last package wrapped, Constance and Jerry said good-bye to Marjorie. "I'll be over bright and early Christmas morning," reminded Constance. "Remember, you are coming to Gray Gables on Christmas night, Marjorie. Charlie made me promise for you ahead of time. I'd love to have you come, too, Jerry."

"Can't do it. Thank you just the same, but the Macys far and near are going to hold forth at our house and poor little Jerry will have to stay at home and do the agreeable hostess act," declared Jerry, looking comically rueful.

"I'll surely be there, Connie. I'll bring my offerings with me. Don't you forget that you are due at the Deans' residence on Christmas morning. Bring Charlie with you."

After her friends had gone, Marjorie went into the living room to speculate for the hundredth time on the subject of Mary's present. It was a beautiful little neckchain of tiny, square, gold links, similar to one her Captain had given her on her last birthday. Mary had frequently admired it in times past and for months Marjorie had saved a portion from her allowance with which to buy it. She had a theory that a gift to one's dearest friends should entail self-sacrifice on the part of the giver. Mary's changed attitude toward her had not counted. She was still resolved upon giving her the chain. But how was she to do it? And suppose when she offered it Mary were to refuse it?

The entrance of her mother broke in upon her unhappy speculations. "I'm glad you came, Captain," she said. "I've been trying to think how I had best give Mary her present."

"Then don't worry about it any longer," comforted Mrs. Dean. Stepping over to the low chair in which Marjorie sat she passed her arm about her troubled daughter and drew her close. "That is a part of my plan. Wait until Christmas morning and you will know."

"Tell me now," coaxed Marjorie, snuggling comfortably into the hollow of the protecting arm.

"That would be strictly against orders," came the laughing response. "Have patience, Lieutenant."

"All right, I will." Sturdily dismissing her curiosity, Marjorie began a detailed account of the afternoon's labor, which lasted until Mr. Dean came rollicking in and engaged Marjorie in a rough-and-tumble romp that left her flushed and laughing.

Despite her many errands of good will and charity, the next two days dragged interminably. On Christmas Eve Mr. Dean took his family and Mary to the theatre to see a play that had had a long, successful run in New York City the previous season and was now doomed to the road. After the play they stopped at Sargent's for a late supper. Under Mr. Dean's genial influence Mary thawed a trifle and even went so far as to address Marjorie several times, to the latter's utter amazement. This was in reality the beginning of Mrs. Dean's carefully laid plan. Marjorie guessed as much and wondered hopefully as to what might happen next.

Nothing special occurred that evening, however, except that Mary bade her a curt "good

night." But Marjorie hugged even that short utterance to her heart and went to sleep in a buoyantly hopeful state of mind.

She was awakened the next morning by a military tattoo, rapped on her door by energetic fingers. "Report to the living room for duty," commanded a purposely gruff voice, which she was not slow to recognize.

"Merry Christmas, General," she called. "Lieutenant Dean will report in the living room in about three minutes." Hopping out of bed she reached for her bath robe. Then the sound of tapping fingers again came to her ears. This time they were on Mary's door. Hastily drawing on stockings and bed-room slippers, she sped from her room and down the stairs. Her father stood stiffly at the foot of the stairway in his most general-like manner. She saluted and came to attention. A moment or two of waiting followed, then Mary appeared at the head of the stairs. She began to descend slowly, but Mr. Dean called out, "No lagging in the line," and long obedience to orders served to make her quicken her pace.

"Twos right, march," ordered Mr. Dean, motioning toward the living room.

Wonderingly the company of two obeyed. Then two pairs of eyes were fastened upon a curious object that stood upright in the middle of the living-room table. It was a good-sized flag of pure white.

"Form ranks!" came the order.

Two girlish figures lined up, side by side.

"Salute the Flag of Truce," commanded the wily General.

Mary gave an audible gasp of sheer amazement. Marjorie laughed outright.

"Silence in the ranks," bellowed the stern commandant. "Pay strict attention to what I am about to say. In time of war it sometimes becomes necessary to hoist a flag of truce. This means a suspense of hostilities. The flag of truce is hoisted in this house for all day. It will remain so until twelve o'clock to-night. Respect it. Now break ranks and we'll enjoy our Christmas presents. I hope my army hasn't forgotten its worthy General!"

"Mary," Marjorie's voice trembled. Tears blurred her brown eyes. "It's Christmas morning. Will you kiss me?"

Mary was possessed with a contrary desire to turn and rush upstairs. She felt dimly that to kiss Marjorie was to declare peace against her will. But her better nature whispered to her not to ruin the peace of Yuletide. She would respect the flag of truce for one day. Then she could give Marjorie the ring she had bought for her before coming to Sanford and laid away for Christmas. Afterward she would show her that she had softened merely for the time being. She returned Marjorie's affectionate kiss rather coolly. Nevertheless, the ice was broken.

Five minutes later she found herself running upstairs for her presents for the Deans in an almost happy mood, and she joined in the present giving with a heartiness that was far from forced. Once she had ceased to resist Marjorie's winning advances she was completely drawn into the divine spirit of the occasion, and she allowed herself to drift once more into the dear channel of bygone friendship.

Marjorie fairly bubbled over with exuberant happiness. The unbelievable had come to pass. She and Mary were once more chums. She longed to tell Mary all that was in her heart, but refrained. For to-day it was better to live on the surface of things. Later there would be plenty of time for confidences. After breakfast she mentioned rather timidly that she expected a call from Constance and little Charlie.

Mary received the statement with an apparent docility that brought welcome relief to Marjorie. She was not sure of her chum on this one point. When Constance and Charlie arrived at a little after ten o'clock, burdened with gaily decked bundles, Marjorie's fears were set at rest. To be sure, Mary showed no enthusiasm over Constance, but Charlie was a different matter. She had conceived a strange, deep love for the quaint little boy and spared no pains to entertain him. While she was putting Marjorie's beautiful angora cat, Ruffle, through a series of cunning little tricks, which he performed with sleepy indolence, Marjorie managed to say to Constance, "I can't come to see you to-night, Connie. I'll explain some day soon. You understand."

Constance nodded wisely. Nothing could have induced her to mar the reconciliation which had evidently taken place. "Come when you can," she murmured. Generously leaving herself out of the question, she purposely shortened her stay, although Charlie pleaded to remain.

"I'll come again soon," he assured Mary, as he was being towed off by his sister's determined hand. "I like you almost as well as Connie."

Marjorie's glorious day was over all too soon. She hovered about Mary with a friendly solicitude that could not be denied. The latter graciously allowed her the privilege, but behind her pleasant manner there was a hint of reserve, which did not dawn upon Marjorie until late that evening. At first she reproached herself for even imagining it, but as bedtime approached the conviction grew that when twelve o'clock came Mary would again resume her hostile attitude.

"It is time taps was sounded," reminded Mr. Dean, looking up from his book, as the

grandfather's clock in the living room pointed half past eleven. Mrs. Dean sat placidly reading a periodical.

"We'll obey you, General, as soon as we've finished our game." Marjorie looked up from the backgammon board at which she and Mary were seated. It had always been a favorite game with them and Marjorie had proposed playing to relieve the curious sensation of apprehension that was gradually settling down upon her.

It was five minutes to twelve when she put the board away. Mary had strolled to the living-room door. Pausing for an instant she said, as though reciting a lesson, "I've had a lovely day. Thank you all for my presents." Without waiting for replies, she turned and mounted the stairs. The sound of a door, closed with certain decision, floated down to the three in the living room.

Marjorie walked slowly to the table, and drawing the flag of truce from its improvised standard, handed it to her father. "I knew it would end like that, General," she commented sadly. "I felt it coming all evening. Just the same it was a splendid plan, and I thank you for it." She lingered lovingly to kiss her father and mother good night, then marched to her room with a brave face. But as she passed the door that had once more been closed against her she vowed within herself that from this moment forth she would cease to mourn for the "friendship" of a girl who was so heartless as Mary Raymond.

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CHAPTER XXI

THE LAST STRAW

It had been Mary Raymond's firm intention when she closed her door that Christmas night to resume hostilities the next day. But when she met Marjorie at breakfast the following morning, her desire for continued warfare had vanished. Some tense chord within her stubborn soul had snapped. Looking back on yesterday she realized that it had not been worth while. Now her proud spirit cried for peace. She wished she had not been so ready to doubt her chum's loyalty and with a curious revulsion of feeling she began to long for a reinstatement into her affections.

But her perfunctory "good night" had cost her more than she dreamed. It had awakened a tardy resentment in Marjorie's hitherto forgiving heart that she could not readily efface. Outwardly Marjorie seemed the same. She returned Mary's greeting pleasantly enough, showing nothing of the surprise it had given her. Mary was not destined to learn for some time to come that a reaction had taken place.

Mr. and Mrs. Dean were relieved to find that Marjorie's prediction was not verified. To all appearances the two girls had definitely resumed their old, friendly footing. Only Marjorie knew differently, but she did not intend then or on any future occasion to betray herself, even to her Captain.

As the winter days glided swiftly along the road to Spring, it was circulated about among Marjorie's intimate friends that she and Mary had settled their differences. Keen-eyed Jerry Macy, however, had seen deeper than her classmates. Although Mary now occasionally walked home with them or accompanied them to Sargent's, spending considerably less time with Mignon, Jerry was quick to feel rather than note the slight reserve Marjorie exhibited toward Mary. "Don't you believe they've made up," she declared to Irma Linton. "Mary may think they have, but they haven't. I guess Marjorie's grown tired of Mary's nonsense. I'm glad of it. She's a silly little goose, I mean Mary, and she's lost more than she thinks."

It was on a sunny afternoon in late March, however, before Mary was rudely jolted into the same conclusion. Mignon La Salle was also possessed of "the seeing eye." Mary was no longer her devoted satellite, although she still kept up an indifferent kind of friendship with the French girl. Mignon soon divined the cause of her lagging allegiance. "You are a little idiot, Mary Raymond, to follow Marjorie Dean about as you do. She doesn't care a snap for you. She may treat you nicely, but that's as far as it goes. She cares more for that miserable Stevens girl in a minute than she cares for *you* in a whole year. Why can't you let her alone and chum with some one who appreciates you."

"I don't follow Marjorie about," contested Mary hotly. "I never go anywhere with her unless she asks me."

"She merely does that through courtesy," shrugged Mignon. "I suppose she thinks it her duty. She's a prig and I despise her."

Mary's face flamed at the obnoxious word "duty." In a flash her mind reviewed all that had passed since that memorable Christmas day. Her cheeks grew hotter at the brutal truth of Mignon's words.

"If you think I care anything about her, you have made a mistake," she retorted, stung to untruthfulness by the taunt. "I'll soon prove to you that I don't."

"Stop running around with her and her wonderful friends and I'll believe you," sneered Mignon.

"I will, if only to show you that I don't care," flung back the angry girl.

"That's the way to talk," approved Mignon. She had kept but few friends among the sophomores since that fatal practice game and she did not intend to lose Mary from her diminished circle. Besides, she was certain that the Deans, one and all, did not approve of Mary's friendship with her and it accorded her supreme pleasure to annoy them.

"I'm going to give a fancy dress party two weeks from Friday night," she went on, with an abrupt change of subject. "Nearly all the girls I'm intending to invite are juniors and seniors. We'll have a glorious time. I don't have to strip our living room of furniture for a place to dance. I have a *real* ballroom in my home. I'll send you an invitation in a day or two."

Surely enough, three days after Mignon's announcement the invitation was duly delivered to Mary through the mail. She read it listlessly. She was not keen about attending the party. Marjorie merely smiled when Mary showed her the invitation and briefly announced her intention of going. She graciously offered the Snow White costume she had worn at the masquerade of the previous Spring. Mary declined it coldly. She had not forgotten Mignon's taunts. Since then she had kept strictly to herself, steadily refusing Marjorie's polite invitations to accompany her here and there. Earlier in the year Marjorie would have grieved in secret over this frostiness, but Marjorie had hardened her gentle heart and now fancied that Mary's movements were of small concern to her. And so the wall of misunderstanding towered higher and higher.

Mrs. Dean willingly helped Mary plan a cunning little girl costume, and when on the night of the party she entered the living room in obedience to her Captain's call, "Come here and let us see how you look, Mary," a lump rose in Marjorie's throat. In her short, white, embroidered frock, with its Dutch neck and wide, blue ribbon sash, she looked precisely like the pretty child that she had been when she and Marjorie played "house" together in the Raymonds' backyard. The blue silk stockings and heelless, blue kid slippers emphasized the babyish effect of her costume, and Marjorie had hard work to keep back her tears. But Mary could not read that sudden rush of emotion in the calm, uncritical face which Marjorie turned to her.

Mignon had sent her runabout for Mary and it was a trifle after eight o'clock when the La Salle's chauffeur drove up the wide, handsome driveway to Mignon's home. It was an unusually mild evening in April and as they neared the port-cochere, a slim figure in gypsy dress ran down the steps. "I've been watching for you," called Mignon, as Mary stepped from the runabout. "The musicians are here and so are most of the girls. I can't imagine why the boys don't come. Only six have appeared, so far. We've had one dance," she went on crossly. "Some of the girls had to dance together. Wasn't that horrid? Take off your cloak and let me see your costume. It's sweet."

The chauffeur had disappeared and the two girls stood for an instant at the foot of the steps.

Advancing suddenly out of the darkness marched a sturdy little figure. Under its arm was thrust a diminutive violin case. "How do you do?" it greeted with a quaint, bobbing bow. "I comed to play in the band."

With a quick exclamation of surprise, Mary Raymond darted toward the tiny youngster. "Charlie Stevens!" she gasped. "What are you doing away over here after dark?"

"I comed to play in the band," repeated Charlie with a jubilant wave of his violin case that almost sent it hurtling from his baby fingers. "Uncle John comed and so I comed, too."

Mary knelt on the driveway and gathered him into her round, young arms. "Listen to Mary, dear little boy. Did Charlie run away?" She had heard from Marjorie of Charlie's frequent attempts to sally forth to conquer the world with his violin.

The child's sensitive face clouded. His lip quivered. "Connie says I have to always tell the truth," he wailed. "I runned away because I have to play in the big band. A man comed to see Uncle John this afternoon. I heard him talk about the band. Uncle John comed to play in it, so I comed, too. Only he didn't see me. I kept behind him till he got to the gate. Then after a while I comed, too!"

Mignon La Salle stood watching the wailing aspirant for the "big band" with frowning eyes. "I suppose this ridiculous child belongs to those Stevens," she sneered.

"Ain't a 'diclus child," contradicted Charlie with dignity. "I'm a mesishun. I can play the fiddle. I like Mary. I don't like you."

"I have heard that this Stevens boy was an idiot. Now I believe it," snapped Mignon. "I suppose I'll have to take him in until some one comes after him. I didn't know his uncle was to be one of the musicians. If I had, I would have made the leader hire some other man. I sha'n't tell his uncle that he's here. He's hired to play for my dance, not to waste his time taking a simpleton home. It's a perfect nuisance."

Her long hoop ear-rings swung and shook with the vehemence of her displeasure.

Mary Raymond's face changed from red to white as she listened to the French girl's callous

speech. A lover of all children, she could not endure the slight put upon this tiny boy. She straightened up with an alacrity that nearly threw Charlie off his balance. Her blue eyes flashed with righteous wrath. "How can you be so harsh with this cunning boy?" she cried. "He isn't an idiot or a simpleton! He's as bright as—as——" (courtesy conquered) "as any child of his age. Why, he's only a baby. He's not going into your house, either, to wait for his family to find him. He's going home now, and I'm going to take him."

"You can't go very far in that short dress and those thin slippers," mocked Mignon. "Don't be a silly. Bring him in, I say, and hurry. I must go back to my guests."

"Please go to them," Mary spoke in icily dignified tones. "As for me, I have my cloak." She held forth one bare arm on which swung her long, gray evening cape. "I should never forgive myself if I neglected this little tot. I'm sorry to be so rude, but I can't help it. I'm going now. Good night. Come, Charlie." Wrapping her cloak about her, Mary gently disengaged the violin case from Charlie's clutch, tucked it under one arm and took firm hold of the youngster's hand. Charlie was still regarding Mignon's swaying ear-rings with childish fascination.

"You are a orful naughty girl," he pouted reproachfully.

"If you leave me now to take that impudent child home, I'll never speak to you again," threatened Mignon, her black eyes snapping.

"Very well. You may do as you please," was Mary's laconic response over her shoulder. She had already started down the driveway with her venturesome charge. The little boy had been momentarily awed into silence at Mignon's menacing features.

"She's a cross girl," he observed calmly, as he marched along beside Mary, "but we don't care, do we?"

"*No, we don't,*" came emphatically from Mary's lips. And she meant it.

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CHAPTER XXII

FACE TO FACE WITH HERSELF

ALTHOUGH Mary Raymond had deliberately snapped the chain that bound her to Mignon La Salle, she now found herself confronted by a far more difficult task. How was she to return little Charlie to Gray Gables without meeting Constance Stevens or another member of her family? It was not yet nine o'clock. It was, therefore, barely possible that Charlie had not been missed. Perhaps Constance and her aunt were not at home. It stood to reason that if they had been, Charlie would never have succeeded in slipping away and following John Roland to his evening's assignment.

Once outside the La Salle's gate, Mary paused uncertainly. Charlie tugged impatiently at her hand. "Come on, Mary. Take Charlie home," he demanded.

Apparently unmindful of the child's presence, Mary stood still, staring thoughtfully up and down the moonlit street. It was an unusually mild night for that time of year, and the ground was bare of snow. March was in a deceptive, springlike mood, smiling and sunny by day, with the merest touch of snappiness by night. Nevertheless, it was scarcely an occasion for a walk in thin kid slippers and silk stockings, and Mary shivered slightly as she stood there trying to decide what was to be done.

"Listen to Mary, Charlie boy," she began suddenly, bending down and looking seriously into the child's bright, black eyes. "Where were Connie and Auntie when you ran away?"

"*They* runned away from Charlie," was the prompt reply, given with an aggrieved pout. "Charlie wanted to go, too, and Connie said 'no.' They wented to the the'ter where the band plays all the time."

"And where was nurse?"

"She wented away, too, but Connie didn't know it. She thought Charlie didn't know, either. But she told Bessie, and Charlie heard."

"So, that is the reason," murmured Mary. Then she said to Charlie, "If Mary takes you home will you promise her something?"

"Yes," nodded Charlie.

"Then promise Mary that you won't tell anyone you ran away, or that Mary brought you home."

"Aren't you going to tell Connie that Charlie was a naughty boy?" came the anxious question.

"No, not unless someone sees Charlie when he goes home and asks about it."

"Then Charlie won't tell, either," was the calm response. The boy was proving himself anything but a simpleton.

"All right. Now we must hurry." Mary took firm hold of the tiny hand and the two started for Gray Gables as fast as the boy's small feet would permit of walking. It was not far from the La Salle's home to Gray Gables. Mary was thankful for that. Not in the least oppressed with a sense of his own shortcomings, Charlie kept up an animated conversation during the short walk. He even proposed stopping in the middle of the street to demonstrate for her special edification his prowess as a fiddler. Mary vetoed this proposal, however. She was bent on reaching Gray Gables as soon as possible.

Just inside the grounds she halted and viewed the house with speculative eyes. Lights gleamed from the hall, the living room, and from one upstairs window. Then, with Charlie's hand still in hers, she walked boldly up the driveway and mounted the steps. Within the shielding shadow of the veranda she paused for a long moment and listened. Turning to the child she laid her finger on her lips with a gesture of silence. Charlie beamed understandingly. Mary's strange behavior was as interesting to him as though it were a new game invented for his pleasure. He entered completely into the spirit of it.

"Now," whispered the girl, "Mary is going to ring the bell and run away. Charlie must stand still and wait until someone opens the door. If no one comes, Charlie must ring the bell again. And remember, he mustn't tell who brought him home!"

"Charlie won't tell," gravely assured the youngster.

Mary pressed a firm finger on the bell and held it there for a second. Then she darted down the steps, around a corner of the house and across a wide stretch of frozen lawn. She remembered that she could climb the low fence at the back of the grounds, cut across a field which lay below them and emerge on a small street not far from the Deans' home. She did not pause for breath until she reached the street she had in mind. Flushed and panting from her wild flight it was several minutes before she could compose herself sufficiently to go on toward home. Luckily for her she met but two persons, a boy of perhaps fifteen and a laboring man. Neither gave her more than the merest glance.

But her last ordeal was yet to come. What would Marjorie and her mother think when they saw her? They would immediately guess that something unusual must have happened to bring her home from the party before it had hardly more than begun. Her recent experience had left her in no mood for explanations. She decided to try slipping quietly in at the rear door of the house. There was, of course, a possibility that it might be locked, but if it were not—so much the better for her.

There was an instant of breathless suspense as she noiselessly turned the knob. It yielded to her touch, and she stole into the kitchen and up the back stairs like an unsubstantial shadow of the night, rather than a very tired and sore-hearted girl. Once in her room she sat down on her bed to think things over. She dared not move about for fear of being heard by Marjorie or her mother. Long she sat, moodily reviewing the year that had promised so much, yet had yielded her nothing but dissension and sorrow. One bare, ugly fact confronted her, looming up like a hideous monster whose dreadful claws had shredded her peace of mind and now waved at her the tattered fragments. It had all been her fault. For the first time she saw herself as she really was. A jealous, suspicious, hateful girl. It was she, not Marjorie, who had been unfaithful to friendship. But she had gone on blindly, unreasoningly, preferring to think the worst, until now it was too late to bridge the gap that she had daily widened between herself and her chum by her absurd jealousy. She could never regain her lost ground. She felt that Marjorie's patience with her had long since been exhausted. She dared not, could not, plead for reinstatement. All that remained to be done was to go through the rest of that dreadful year alone. When she and Marjorie had finished their sophomore course she would go quietly away, and they would, perhaps, never meet again.

Alone with her bitter remorse, Mary wept until she could cry no more. As is usually the case with youth, she was sweeping in her self-condemnation. But that bitter hour of self-revelation did more to arouse within her the determination to conquer herself and establish the foundation for a noble womanhood than she could possibly believe.

At last she pulled herself together to play the final scene in her evening's drama. Mrs. Dean had given her a latchkey, in order that she might let herself into the house, should she return from the party after the Deans had retired. At half-past ten o'clock she heard Marjorie and her mother come up the stairs to their rooms. Mr. Dean was away from home on a business trip. When all sounds of conversation between the two women had ceased and the house had apparently settled down for the night, Mary crept softly out of her room and down the stairs. Opening the hall door with stealthy fingers, she stepped into the vestibule. She listened intently for a sign from above that her soft-footed journey down the stairs had been discovered. But none came. Turning deliberately about, she retraced her steps, closing the hall door with sufficient force to announce her arrival. Without attempt at stealth she walked across the hall, up the stairs and into the pretty blue room that she had lately left. The closing of her own door purposely sounded her home coming.

"Is that you, Mary?" called Marjorie's voice from the next room.

Mary trembled with positive relief at the signal success of her manoeuvre. Steadying her voice, she replied, "Yes, it is I."

"Did you have a nice time?"

Mary read merely polite inquiry in the tone. It lacked Marjorie's former warmth and affection.

"Not particularly." Impulsively she added, "I missed you, Marjorie. I'm sorry you weren't there." Breathlessly she waited for a response.

But Marjorie was only human. Resentment against Mignon, rather than Mary, permeated her reply. "It's nice in you to say so, but I am very glad I wasn't there. I should consider an invitation to Mignon La Salle's party as anything but an honor." It was the first deliberately cutting speech that Marjorie Dean had ever uttered. Realizing its cruelty she called out contritely, "That was hateful in me, Mary. Please forget what I said."

"Oh, it doesn't matter. Good night." Mary managed to force the indifferent answer. She felt that she deserved even this and more. She was rapidly learning to her sorrow that, when one plants nettles, in time they are sure to grow up and sting.

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CHAPTER XXIII

FOR THE FAME OF SANFORD HIGH

WHEN Marjorie Dean went down to breakfast the following morning it was with the feeling that her sharp answer to Mary's unexpected comments of the night before had been unworthy of her better self. Mary's reply, "Oh, it doesn't matter," had somehow sounded wistful rather than indifferent. To be sure, Mary had literally forced upon her the reserved stand which she had at last taken. Yet underneath her proud attitude of distant courtesy toward the girl who had once taken first place in her friendship still lurked the faint hope of reconciliation. But she had made her last advance on that memorable Christmas day when Mary had shown her so plainly that she respected the flag of truce for the day only and had returned to her former state of antagonism at the first opportunity. In the beginning it had been hard to stifle her impulsive nature, and appear courteous yet wholly unconcerned regarding her chum's welfare, but in time she found it comparatively easy. Friendship was dying hard, yet it *was* dying, nevertheless. This thought had startled Marjorie a little as she recalled how easy it had been to be disagreeable, where once it would have seemed absolutely impossible to allow those cutting words to pass her lips. It came soberly to her that morning as she walked into the dining room that, after all, she did not wish that friendship to die. Something must be done to keep it alive until Mary was quite herself again.

The faint line of concern which appeared between her dark brows deepened as this latest conviction took hold of her. As she pondered, the object of her thoughts appeared in the doorway. Mary's face wore an air of listlessness that quite corresponded with her subdued, "Good morning, Marjorie. Good morning, Captain."

"You look all tired out, my dear," remarked Mrs. Dean solicitously. There was a curiously pathetic droop to Mary's mouth which gave her the appearance of a very tired child who had played too hard and was ready to be put to bed, rather than to begin the day's round of events. "Did you dance too much?"

"No." A peculiar little smile flickered across the girl's pale features. She wondered what Mrs. Dean would say if she told her just how she had spent her evening.

Marjorie regarded Mary almost curiously. In some indefinable way she had changed. Then it flashed across her that Mary's usual stubborn expression had given place to one of distinct sadness. With a kindly endeavor toward lightening her chum's heavy mood, she tried to draw her out to talk of the party. She met with little success. As Mary, in reality, knew nothing further of it than the fact that Mignon had worn a gypsy costume and that the majority of the boys invited had not put in an appearance, she was hardly prepared to describe the affair. She, therefore, answered Marjorie's questions in brief monosyllables and volunteered no information whatever.

"I am going over to see Jerry Macy this morning. Would you like to go with me?" asked Marjorie, after her attempt to discuss the party had proved futile.

"No; I thank you just the same. I have several things to buy at the stores, and then I am going for a walk. I would ask you to go with me, only you are going to Jerry's."

"I'd love to," a touch of Marjorie's old heartiness came to the surface, "but I promised Jerry I'd surely go to see her to-day."

"Perhaps we can take a walk some other day," remarked Mary vaguely as they rose from the table.

"I will take you both for a ride this afternoon, if you are good," volunteered Mrs. Dean. She had been observing the signs. She decided, within herself, that matters were assuming a more hopeful turn. Yet she had long since left the two girls to work out their problem in their own way.

"That will be splendid!" cried Marjorie.

"I should like to go," acceded Mary almost shyly.

Mrs. Dean smiled to herself and saw light ahead. The barrier seemed about to crumble.

But as the days went by, both she and Marjorie grew puzzled over the change in blue-eyed Mary. She had, indeed, lost her belligerent spirit of animosity, but a profound melancholy had settled down upon her like a pall. Gradually it became noised about in school that Mary Raymond and Mignon La Salle were no longer on speaking terms. Why this was so, no one knew. Mary was mute on the subject. For once, also, the French girl had nothing to say. As it happened, she believed that no one of the guests had witnessed the scene between herself and Mary, and to try to relate it, even with emendations of her own, would hardly redound to her credit. She was too shrewd not to know that the average person resents an affront against childhood. Then, too, Constance Stevens was making rapid strides toward popularity among the girls of Sanford High School and her cowardly nature warned her to be silent. But her chief reason for silence lay in the fact that Mary had curtly informed her on the Monday morning following the party that she had seen Charlie safely home, that so far as she could learn his family did not know who had escorted him home, and that if she, Mignon, were wise she would say nothing whatever of the occurrence. Without further words, Mary had walked away, but that same afternoon she had removed her wraps to another locker, a significant sign that she was done with the French girl forever.

When it came to Marjorie's ears that Mary and Mignon had quarreled, she decided a trifle sadly that Mary's melancholy was due to the French girl's defection. She was sure that, whatever the quarrel had been about, Mignon was to blame. Until then she had never quite believed in the sincerity of Mary's affection for this unscrupulous, headstrong girl, and it hurt her to see Mary take the estrangement so to heart.

She said as much to Constance Stevens as they walked home from school together on the Monday following the Easter vacation. To Marjorie the Easter holidays had been a continuous succession of good times. She had attended half a dozen parties given by her various schoolmates, and numerous luncheons and teas. To all these Mary had received invitations also. She had politely declined them, however, going on long, lonely walks by day and moping in the living room or her own room by night.

"Somehow," Marjorie confided to Constance, "I never believed Mary could be so deceived in a person. But she must think a lot of Mignon, or she wouldn't be so dreadfully sad all the time."

"It's queer," mused Constance. "I don't think she knows to this day the truth about last year."

"I am sure she doesn't. Mary is really too honorable to stand by a—a—person that you and I know isn't worthy of loyalty. That sounds rather hard, especially from one of the reform party. But I can't help it. I am quite ready to say and mean it, Mignon La Salle hasn't a better self. She never had one!"

"It hasn't been very pleasant for you this year, has it?" was Constance's sympathizing question. "It's too bad. After all the nice things we had planned. Sometimes I think it is better not to make plans. They never turn out as one hopes they will."

"I know it," rejoined Marjorie with a sigh. "Jerry Macy says that Mary has something on her mind besides Mignon."

"Perhaps she is sorry that she——" Constance hesitated.

"That we aren't chums any more?" finished Marjorie. "I don't think so. If she had been truly sorry she would have come to me and said so. I thought so the day after Mignon's party. Then I heard that they had quarreled, and I changed my opinion." There was a faint touch of bitterness in Marjorie's speech. "Suppose we don't talk of it any more. I wish to forget it, if I can. It doesn't do much good to mourn over what can't and won't be changed. Did Jerry tell you that Laurie Armitage has finished his operetta? Professor Harmon is going to have a try-out of voices in the gymnasium next Saturday morning."

"Laurie told me himself. He brought the score of the operetta to Gray Gables last night and we tried it over on the piano. The music is beautiful. It is so tuneful it lingers. I've been humming snatches of it ever since he played it for me. The 'Rebellious Princess' has some wonderful songs. That clever young man, Eric Darrow, composed the libretto and thought out the plot. It's about a princess who grew tired of staying at home in her father's castle and going to state dinners and receptions, so she put on the dress of a peasant girl and ran away from the castle to see the world. She took some gold with her, but it was stolen from her the very first thing. No one paid any attention to her because she was poor, and she had a dreadfully hard time. But she was so stubborn she wouldn't go back to her father and say she was sorry, so she wandered on until her clothes were ragged and her shoes were worn out. Then an old woman took the poor princess to

live with her and she had to work terribly hard and wait on the woman's daughter, who loved nothing but pretty clothes and to have a good time. No one was good to her except the woman's adopted son, who was left on her doorstep when he was a baby. At last the princess grew so tired of it all she went back to her father, but to punish her he pretended he didn't know her. So she had to go away again, but the woman's son had followed her and when he saw her leave the castle, crying, he told her he loved her and asked her to marry him. She said 'yes,' because he was the only person in the world who cared for her. But her father hadn't really intended that she should go away. He sent his courtiers after her to bring her back to the castle. She wanted to go back, but she wouldn't go unless the young man went with her. When he found out that she was really a great princess he said he would never dare to ask her to marry him. But she said that true love was better than all the wealth in the world, and she would not go back unless he went with her, and so he said he would go. That is where the operetta ends. They sing a duet, 'True Love Is Best,' and you have to imagine what the king said. There isn't so much in the plot, but it is very sweet, and the music is delightful," finished Constance.

"I know I shall love to hear it!" exclaimed Marjorie. "I do hope you will be chosen to sing the part of the princess."

Constance flushed. "Laurie wishes me to have it," she said almost humbly. "But there are sure to be others who can sing it better than I. However, the try-out will settle that. At any rate, I may be chosen for a court lady in the chorus. I hope you'll be in it, too."

"I can't sing well enough," laughed Marjorie. "But I'll be there on Saturday, and perhaps I'll be lucky enough to get into it somehow. Won't it be fun to rehearse? Hal Macy ought to have a part. He has a splendid tenor voice, and the Crane can sing bass. I can hardly wait until Saturday comes. I am so anxious to see who will be chosen."

Marjorie's pleasant anxiety was shared by the majority of the girls of Sanford High School. The proposed operetta became the chief topic for discussion as the unusually long week dragged interminably along toward that fateful Saturday. Even the high and mighty seniors condescended to become interested. Among their number, more than one ambitious seeker after fame secretly imagined herself as carrying off the rôle of the Rebellious Princess, and conducted assiduous practice of much neglected scales in the hope of glory to come.

As the star singer of her class, Constance Stevens' name was often brought up for discussion among her classmates as the possibly successful contestant in the try-out. Besides, was it not Lawrence Armitage's opera? It was generally known that the dark-haired, dreamy-eyed lad had a decided predilection for Constance's society. Rumor, therefore, decreed that if Laurie Armitage had the say, Constance would have no trouble in carrying off the leading rôle.

But the most determined aspirant for fame was none other than Mignon La Salle. With her usual slyness, she kept her own counsel. Nevertheless, she believed she stood a fair chance of winning the prize of which she dreamed. For Mignon could sing. From childhood her father had spared no expense in the matter of her musical education. An ardent lover of music he had decreed that Mignon should be initiated into the mysteries of the piano when a tiny girl, and, although Mr. La Salle had allowed her undisputed liberty to grow up as she pleased, on one point he was firm. Mignon must not merely study music; she must each day practice the required number of hours. In the beginning she had rebelled, but finding her too indulgent parent adamant in this one particular, she had been forced to bow her obstinate head to his decree. In consequence she profited by the enforced practice hours to the extent of becoming a really creditable performer on the piano for a girl of her years. At fourteen she had begun vocal training. Possessed of a strong, clear, soprano voice, three years under the direction of competent instructors had done much for her, and, although she was far too selfish to use her fine voice merely to give pleasure to others, she never allowed an opportunity to pass wherein she might win public approval by her singing.

The mere fact that "The Rebellious Princess" was Lawrence Armitage's own composition served to spur her on to conquest. Given the leading rôle, she believed that she might awaken in the young man a distinct appreciation of herself which hitherto he had never demonstrated toward her. Once she had brought him to a tardy realization of her superiority over Constance Stevens, by outsinging the latter, along with all the other contestants, she was certain that admiration for herself as a singer would blot out any unpleasant impression he might earlier have conceived of her. She had heard that "the Stevens girl" could sing. It was to be doubted, however, if her voice amounted to much. Another point in her favor lay in the fact that Professor Harmon was a close friend of her father. He would surely give her the preference.

But while she dreamed of triumphantly holding the center of the stage before a spellbound audience, her rival to be, Constance Stevens, was seriously debating within herself regarding the wisdom of even entering the contest. Of a distinctly retiring nature, Constance was not eager to enter the lists. On the Friday afternoon before the try-out she was still undecided, and when the afternoon session of school was over, and she and the five girls with whom she spent most of her leisure hours were walking down the street, headed for Sargent's and its never-failing supply of sweets, she was curiously silent amid the gay chatter of her friends.

"I suppose you girls know that our dear Mignon has designs on the Princess," announced Jerry Macy, with the elaborate carelessness of one who gives forth important news as the commonest every-day matter.

"Mignon!" exclaimed Marjorie Dean in amazement. "I never even knew she could sing."

"She thinks she can," shrugged Muriel Harding. "Goodness knows she ought to. She has studied for ages. I'm surprised to hear that she is going to enter the try-out, considering it's Laurie's operetta. You know just how much he likes her. She knows, too."

"Who told you, Jerry?" quizzed Susan Atwell. "The way you gather news is positively marvelous. Was it big brother Hal?"

"No, he doesn't know it. If I told him, he'd tell Laurie and Laurie would promptly have a spasm. One of the girls in the senior class mentioned it to me."

"Mignon really sings well," put in Irma. "Don't you remember the time she sang at Muriel's party, two years ago? She has been studying ever since. She must have improved a good deal since then."

"Oh, I've heard her sing more than once," said Jerry Macy, "but I don't like her voice. It's—well, it isn't sweet and sympathetic."

"Neither is she," put in Susan with her customary giggle.

"Wait until Connie sings at the try-out. Then someone can gently lead Mignon to a back seat," predicted Jerry. "It would give me a good deal of pleasure to be that 'someone.'"

"I don't think I shall enter the try-out," remarked Constance, flushing.

"Why not?" was the questioning chorus.

"Oh, I don't know, only I just don't care to. If I do, someone might say that I went into it because——" She hesitated, and the flush on her cheeks deepened.

"Because you expected Laurie to choose you, you mean," finished Jerry.

"Yes; that is what I meant," admitted Constance. "Of course, I know there are other girls who are better singers than I, and that I couldn't possibly be chosen. Still, I'd rather not go into it at all, unless I could just be in the chorus."

"You are a goose; a nice, dear goose, but a goose, just the same," was Jerry's plain sentiment.

"Connie Stevens, if you don't try for that part, I'll never speak to you again," threatened Muriel.

"I'll disown you," added Susan in mock menace.

"Connie," Marjorie's voice vibrated with sudden energy, "I think you *ought* to try for the Princess. I am almost sure no other girl in Sanford High can sing so beautifully. Then there is Laurie. He has always been nice to you. It would hurt his feelings dreadfully if you didn't try for a part in his operetta. Besides, I know it sounds hateful, but I can't help saying that I'd be glad to see you take the Princess away from Mignon. That is, if she really stands a good chance of winning it. I suppose that is what Miss Archer would call 'an ignoble sentiment,' but I mean it, just the same." Marjorie glanced half defiantly around the bright-eyed circle. They were now in Sargent's, seated about their favorite table.

"Hurrah for you, Marjorie!" cried Jerry, flourishing her hand as though it were a pennant of triumph. "That's what I say, too. You are really a human, everyday person, after all. I used to think you were almost too forgiving toward certain persons, but now I can see that you aren't such a model forgiver, after all."

"That is rather a doubtful compliment, isn't it?" laughed Marjorie.

"Frankness is the soul of virtue," jeered Muriel.

"Oh, now, you know what I mean," protested Jerry, looking somewhat sheepish. "You girls do like to tease me. All right, I'll do the forgiving act and order the refreshments. I'll pay for them, too. I've a whole dollar. I am supposed to buy some stationery with it, but I'll just let my correspondence languish and treat instead. Name your eat and you can have it. Fifteen cents apiece is your limit. I need the other ten to buy stamps."

"What is the use in buying stamps if you don't intend to correspond?" put in Irma mischievously.

"I might need them some day," was Jerry's calm retort. "Besides, if I don't spend the ten cents I may lose it. Now the bureau of information is closed. Order your fifteen cents' worth!"

After changing their minds several times in rapid succession to the infinite disgust of the waitress, the sextette finally made unanimous decision for a new concoction in the way of a fruit lemonade, known as Sargent Nectar.

"Now," announced Jerry, as the long-suffering waitress deposited the tall glasses on the table and retired to the back of the room to grumble uncomplimentary comments to a fellow-worker on the ways of high school girls who didn't know their own minds, "let us all drink a toast to Miss Connie Stevens, the celebrated star of 'The Rebellious Princess.' But remember, we can't drink it until the star says she will shine.

"Twinkle, twinkle, little star,

Shall we see you from afar?
On the Sanford stage so
shy,
For the fame of Sanford
High.'

"Who says I'm not a poet?"

"Connie, you can't resist that poetic appeal," giggled Susan.

Constance's blue eyes shone misty affection upon the circle of fresh, young faces, alight with the honest desire for her success. Her voice trembled a little as she said: "I'll take it all back, girls. Now that I know just how you feel about the try-out, *I'd* be an ungrateful girl to say I wouldn't do my best. I'll sing to-morrow, but if I'm not chosen, please don't be disappointed."

"To Connie, our Princess! Long may she warble!" Jerry raised her glass of lemonade. "Drink her down!"

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CHAPTER XXIV

THE MOMENT OF TRIUMPH

It was a buzzing and excited assemblage of young men and women that gathered in the gymnasium of Weston High School on Saturday morning for the much-discussed try-out. As it had been strictly enjoined upon the students of both high schools that unless they desired to take part in the coming operetta their presence was not requested, nor would it be permitted, on the momentous occasion, the great room was only comfortably filled. Weston High School was represented by not more than twenty-five or thirty ambitious aspirants for fame, but at least a hundred girls from Sanford High cherished hopes of gaining admission to the magic cast. After much discussion, Marjorie and her four friends had decided to make a bold attempt at chorus celebrity, purely for the sake of seeing what happened. Constance had earnestly urged them to do so, declaring that she could not sing unless they were present to encourage her.

"I wonder if all this crowd expects to be chosen," was Jerry Macy's blunt comment, as the sextette of girls stood grouped at one side of the room, waiting for the affair to begin. "I hope I'm not asked to sing alone. Not so much for my own sake. I hate to make other people feel sad. I practised 'America' and 'Marching through Georgia' last night, just to see what I could do. One of our maids came rushing into the living room because she said she wondered who was making all that noise. Then Hal poked his head in the door and asked if I was hurt. So I quit. It was time."

Jerry's painful experience as a soloist provoked a burst of laughter from her friends. It had hardly died away when Professor Harmon, a stout, little man, with a shock of bushy hair and an expression of being always on the alert, bustled in. With him came Lawrence Armitage and a tall, dark-haired young man, a stranger to those present. The professor trotted to the piano, opened it, held a hurried conference with his companions, then, stepping forward, ran a searching eye over the assembled boys and girls. The more ambitious contestants of both sexes carried music rolls containing the selections they intended to offer, but the majority of that carefree congregation aspired to nothing higher than the chorus, looking upon the whole affair as a grand lark.

Professor Harmon proceeded to make a short speech, briefly outlining the plot of the opera and stating the nature of the try-out. "We shall ask those who wish to try for principals to step to that side of the room," he said, indicating the left. "I wish to hear them sing, first. Afterward, I shall select the chorus, and hear them sing together."

"That lets me out," was Jerry's relieved, inelegant comment to Susan Atwell, as she moved to the right. Susan stifled an irrepressible chuckle and sobered her face for what was to come.

Over among the groups of possible principals Constance became obsessed with sudden shyness. The majority of the girls were of the upper classes, and she felt lonely and ill at ease. She noted that she and Mignon La Salle were the only representatives of the sophomore class. Mignon, looking radiant self-possession in a smart old-rose suit and hat to match, carried herself with the air of one whose success was already assured. Her black eyes were snapping with excitement as they darted from the professor to the two young men standing beside the piano. She fingered her gray morocco music roll nervously, her thin fingers never still.

Stepping over to the piano the professor seated himself. "That young lady on the right, please come to the piano." The girl indicated, a dignified senior, obeyed the summons, coolly handed the professor her music, stationed herself at his side and awaited trial with the air of a Spartan. After a short prelude she began to sing a popular air that was at that time going the round of Sanford.

She sang one verse, then the professor dropped his hands from the keys, inquired her name, made a memorandum on a pad, and, dismissing her, signaled another girl to take her place.

The try-out proceeded with a business-like snap that bade fair to end it with speedy commission. So far nothing startling in the way of voices had been discovered. Constance listened to the various girl soloists and wondered if she could do as well as they. Mignon leaned far forward with breathless interest. She was firmly convinced that her singing would create a sensation. When at last her turn came, she walked boldly forward. Professor Harmon smiled approval and encouragement. He desired particularly to see her carry off the honor of the leading rôle. She darted a lightning glance at Lawrence Armitage as she approached the piano, but in his impassive features she could read neither approval nor indifference.

She had chosen a French song, full of difficult runs and trills, and it may be set down here to her credit that she sang it well. As her clear, but somewhat unsympathetic voice rang out, a faint murmur of approbation swept the listeners. Her long training now stood her in good stead. Professor Harmon allowed her to go on with her song, instead of halting her in the middle of it, as he had in the case of the previous aspirants. When she had finished singing, she was greeted with a round of genuine applause, the first accorded to a singer since the beginning of the try-out. The brilliancy of her performance could not be denied, even by those who had reason to dislike her.

"Excellent, Miss La Salle," was Professor Harmon's tribute, as he handed her her music. Flushing with pride of achievement, the French girl returned to her place among the others, tingling with the sweetness of her success.

There now remained not more than half a dozen untried soloists. Constance Stevens was among that number. By this time Marjorie was becoming a trifle anxious. There was just a chance that Connie might be overlooked. Naturally retiring, she would be quite likely to make no sign, were Professor Harmon to pass her by, under the impression that she had already sung. But Marjorie's fears were needless. Constance had a staunch friend at court. During the try-out Lawrence Armitage's blue eyes had been frequently directed toward the quiet, fair-haired girl of his choice. Locked in his boyish heart was a secret knowledge that he had composed the operetta chiefly because he had wished Constance to have the opportunity of singing the part of the Princess. He had consented to the try-out merely to please Professor Harmon. He was convinced that no other girl could compare with Constance in the matter of voice. He was glad that she was to sing last, and a smile of proud expectation played about his mouth as Professor Harmon abruptly cut off an enterprising senior, the last contestant before Constance, in the midst of a high note.

The smile quickly faded to an expression of dismay as he saw the professor rise from the piano, his eyes on his memorandum pad. At the same instant a faint ripple of consternation was heard from a group of girls of which Marjorie formed the center. The latter took a hurried step forward. Marjorie was determined that Connie must not be cheated of her chance. She had caught a glimpse of Mignon, her black eyes blazing with insolent triumph and positive joy at the possibility of this unexpected elimination of the girl she hated.

But Marjorie's intended protest in behalf of her friend was never uttered. Laurie Armitage had come to the rescue. She saw him halt Professor Harmon, as he was about to address the company. She saw the little man's eyebrows elevate themselves in a glance toward Constance, following Laurie's low, energetic communication. Then she felt herself trembling with relief as Professor Harmon announced apologetically, "I understand that I almost made the mistake of overlooking one of Sanford's promising young singers. Will Miss Stevens please come forward?"

Pink with the embarrassment of the professor's words, Constance made no move to comply with the request. Good-natured Ellen Seymour, who was one of the contestants, pushed her gently forward. Ellen's light touch awoke Constance to motion. She walked mechanically toward the piano, as though propelled against her will by an unseen force. The humiliation of being even accidentally passed by looked forth from her sensitive features. Quick to note it, Lawrence Armitage advanced toward her, took her tightly rolled music from her hand, and, conducting her to the piano, introduced her to Professor Harmon, apparently unmindful of the many pairs of eyes intently watching the little scene.

"Now we are ready." The professor nodded to Constance, who stood with her small hands loosely clasped, her grave eyes fastened upon him. He half smiled, as his experienced fingers began the first soft notes of Mendelssohn's Spring Song. Long ago her foster father had written a set of exquisitely tender words that had exactly seemed to fit those unforgettable strains, so familiar to every true lover of music. Constance had sung them so many times that she knew them by heart. Now she fixed her eyes on the east wall of the gymnasium, and, leaving the world behind her, rendered the beautiful selection as though she were in her own home, with only her dear ones to listen to the flood of ravishing melody that issued from her white throat.

Marjorie Dean felt a swift rush of tears flood her brown eyes as she listened to her friend. She recalled the time when she had halted at the door of the little gray house, in wonder at that glorious voice. Conquering her emotion, she began to take stock of the effect of the song upon those assembled. She saw the proud flash of gladness that leaped to Laurie's fine face. His faith in Connie's powers was being amply fulfilled. She read the profound surprise and admiration of Professor Harmon, as he accompanied the singing girl. She glimpsed enthusiastic admiration in the countenances of the spell-bound students, many of whom had never before heard Constance

sing. Then her gaze centered upon Mignon. Anger, surprise and chagrin swept the elfish face of the French girl. She read vocalization more flawless than her own, as well as greater sweetness and an intense sympathy, which she lacked, in the full, sweet, rounded tones that issued from her rival's lips. This was the voice of a great artist.

Professor Harmon turned from the piano as the last golden note died away and held out his hand. "Allow me to congratulate you, Miss Stevens. You——" His voice was drowned in tumult of noisy and fervent approbation on the part of the delighted audience. Boys and girls forgot the dignity of the occasion, and the next instant the surprised Constance found herself surrounded by as admiring a throng as ever did honor to a triumphant basket-ball or football star. If signs were true presagers of victory, if the united acclamation of the majority counted, then Constance Stevens had, indeed, come into her own.

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CHAPTER XXV

AN UNHAPPY PRINCESS

It took Professor Harmon several minutes to reduce the noisy enthusiasts to the decorous state of order in which they had entered the gymnasium. Far from being elated over her triumph, Constance Stevens received the ovation with the shyness of a child brought before an audience against its will to speak its first piece. She heaved an audible sigh of relief when at last she was left to herself and retired behind Marjorie and her friends with a flushed, embarrassed face.

The boys' try-out was shortened considerably by the fact that there were fewer singers to be heard. When it was over it was announced that Hal Macy had carried off the rôle of the poor, neglected son, which was in reality the male lead. The Crane was selected for the king, while freckle-faced Daniel Seabrooke was chosen for the jester, greatly to his delight and surprise. There was an emphatic round of applause when Professor Harmon announced that Constance Stevens had been selected to sing the Princess. Ellen Seymour captured the rôle of the queen, and to Mignon La Salle was allotted the part of the disagreeable step-sister. It was second in importance to that of the Princess, but the French girl's face was a study as she received the announcement. She tried to smile, but the baffled anger and keen disappointment which was hers blazed forth from her elfish eyes. The minor parts were soon given out, and then came the trial of the chorus.

The hope of Marjorie and her four friends that they might be chosen was fulfilled. A number of the girls who had sung solos were also selected, and, with one or two disgruntled exceptions, resigned themselves to the lesser glory, gratefully accepting what was offered them. It was evident, however, that pretty faces had much to do with the Professor's choice of the chorus, and when he had gathered the elect together and heard them sing "The Star Spangled Banner" as a test, he expressed himself as satisfied, and appointed a rehearsal for the following Tuesday afternoon at four o'clock.

With the exception of Constance, it was a most jubilant sextette that set out for Sargent's, at Marjorie's invitation, after the try-out was over. She was still somewhat dazed over her success. Although she smiled as the five girls paid her affectionate tribute, she had little to say.

"Girls, did you see Mignon's face when Connie was singing?" began Muriel Harding, as soon as they were out of earshot of any possible participants in the try-out.

"Did we see it? Well, I guess so." Jerry made prompt answer. "At least, I did. While Connie was singing I was dividing my seeing power between her and the fair but frowning Mignon. Maybe she wasn't mad! She tried to pretend she wasn't listening, but she never missed a note. She had sense enough to know good singing when she heard it."

"I was watching her, too," nodded Muriel Harding. "Her eyes positively glittered when Professor Harmon almost missed hearing Connie sing. I knew she was hoping he would. Then Laurie Armitage came to the rescue."

"I was going to say something," was Marjorie's quiet comment. "I had made up my mind that Connie shouldn't be overlooked. I was so glad when Laurie spoke to the professor."

"I thought you were," declared Jerry. "I was going to say something, if no one else did."

"I don't believe any one of us could have stood there and seen Connie miss her turn without making a fuss," said gentle Irma Linton. "I am so glad it all came out nicely. Laurie Armitage is a splendid boy."

"So is the Crane," put in Jerry slyly.

"Of course he is," agreed Irma, placidly ignoring Jerry's attempt to tease. "So is your brother

Hal. There are lots of nice boys in Weston High."

Jerry merely grinned cheerfully at this retort and returned to the subject of the coming opera. "Is Laurie going to help you with your songs?" she asked, addressing Constance.

"Yes," replied Constance simply. "He said he would. I can't quite believe yet that I am to sing the Princess. I may be able to manage the songs, but I can't act. I imagine Mignon would make a better actress than I."

"She ought to," jeered Muriel Harding, who could never resist a thrust at the French girl. "She never does anything else. I don't believe she'd know her real self if she came face to face with it in broad daylight."

"Oh, forget Mignon. Who was that tall, dark man with Laurie and Professor Harmon?" interposed Susan Atwell. "You ought to know, Connie. I saw Laurie introduce you to him."

"His name is Atwell," answered Constance. "He is an actor, I believe. I don't know why he happened to be at the try-out to-day. Perhaps Professor Harmon invited him."

"I'll find out all about him and tell you," volunteered Jerry. "Hal may know. If he doesn't, some one else will."

"For further information, ask brother Hal," giggled Susan.

It was not until Marjorie and Constance had said good-bye to the others and were strolling home in the spring sunshine that the latter asked, "Where was Mary to-day?"

"I don't know." Marjorie spoke soberly. "She left the house before I did this morning. She said last night that she wasn't interested in the try-out. I thought perhaps she might like to be in the chorus, but she doesn't appear to care about it. She has a sweet, soprano voice and can sing well."

"I am sorry," was Constance's brief answer.

"So am I." Marjorie did not continue the painful subject. They had talked it over so many times, there was nothing left to be said. "I am glad you were chosen for the Princess," she said after a little silence, during which the two girls were busy with their own thoughts.

"I am going to try to sing well, if only to please you and Laurie," was Constance's earnest avowal.

"I'm glad Mignon didn't get the part. It won't be very pleasant for you to have to sing with her. I wouldn't say this to anyone else, but if I were you I would keep a watchful eye on her, Connie."

"If she tries to be disagreeable, I shall simply pay no attention to her."

"That will be best," nodded Marjorie. Nevertheless, she reflected that as a member of the chorus she would have opportunity to observe the French girl and mentally decided to keep an eye on her.

"Has Mary come in, Delia?" was Marjorie's quick question, as the maid answered her ring.

"Here I am," called Mary from the living room. She had heard Marjorie's question. Now she appeared in the doorway of the living room, viewing her former chum with sombre gravity. "Who is going to sing the Princess?" she asked abruptly.

"Connie was chosen. She sang beautifully."

"I'm glad Mignon didn't get the part," muttered Mary. Wheeling about, she walked into the living room, and, taking up a book she had turned face downward on the table, became, to all appearances, absorbed in its pages.

For a moment Marjorie stood watching her through the half-drawn portieres. She would have liked to continue the conversation, but pride forbade her to do so. Mary's mood presaged rebuff. Later, at luncheon, she unbent sufficiently to question Marjorie further regarding the try-out. Although she did not say so, she was sorry that Mignon had been given a principal's part in the operetta. Privately, she wished she had made an attempt to get into the chorus. She, too, was of the opinion that the French girl would bear watching. Failure to carry off the highest honors would act as a spur to Mignon's unscrupulous nature, and sooner or later some one would pay for her defeat.

Mary was quite correct in her conjecture that Mignon would not allow matters to rest as they were. From the moment that Constance had been announced as the Princess she had made a vow that by either fair or unfair means she would supplant "that white-faced cat of a Stevens girl," who had been awarded the honor that should have been hers. The first step consisted in holding a private session with Professor Harmon after the others had gone, to ascertain if by any chance he might be relied upon to help her. She found him engaged in conversation with the dark young man. He eyed her with interest, bowed affably when presented to her by the professor, and expressed somewhat profuse pleasure at meeting her. In the presence of a stranger, Mignon dared not ask Professor Harmon openly to reconsider his recent decision in her favor. Three minutes' conversation with him showed her that, had she made the request, it would have availed her nothing. The brisk little man's mind was made up. He congratulated her on capturing second

honors with a finality that could not be assailed. Then a brilliant idea entered her wily brain.

"Professor Harmon," she began, with a pretty show of girlish confusion, quite foreign to her usual bold method of reaching out for whatever she coveted, "I would like to ask you if I might understudy the Princess. Of course, I know that I can't sing as Miss Stevens sings, and I wouldn't for the world wish anything to happen to prevent her from singing on the great night, but I am so fond of music that it would be a pleasure to understudy the rôle. I shouldn't like anyone to know that I was doing so, though. It is just a fancy on my part."

"Certainly you may, Miss La Salle," was the professor's hearty response. "Your idea is excellent. It is a mistake, even in an amateur production, not to provide an understudy for an important rôle, such as Miss Stevens will sing. I must provide an understudy for Mr. Macy, and others of the cast, also. But you are too modest in your request that no one else must know. I am sure Mr. Armitage will be pleased with your suggestion."

"Oh, please don't tell him!" exclaimed Mignon. A shade of alarm crossed her dark face, which was not lost on the professor's companion, Ronald Atwell. A mere acquaintance of Professor Harmon's, he had lately arrived in Sanford, at the close of a season as leading man in a popular musical comedy, to visit a cousin. Brought up in that hard school of experience, the stage, he was an adept at reading signs, and he was by no means deceived as to the true character of the girl who stood before him. Far from being displeased with his deductions, he became mildly interested in her and mentally characterized her as being worth cultivating. He had watched her during the try-out, and he had glimpsed her true self in the varying expressions that animated her dark face. He had attended the try-out on the polite invitation of Professor Harmon, and at the latter's earnest solicitation had agreed to take charge of the stage direction of the operetta. The professor had congratulated himself on obtaining such valuable assistance, while the actor looked upon the affair as a pastime which would serve to lighten his stay with his rather dull cousin. He had come to Sanford for a period of relaxation before going to New York to begin rehearsals with a summer show, and the prospect of directing the operetta promised to be amusing.

"Very well, I will say nothing," promised the professor amiably. He had come to the try-out, hoping to see the daughter of his friend capture the rôle of the Princess, but the enthusiasm of the artist had driven that hope from his mind when he had heard Constance sing. Now he dwelt only on the success of the operetta, and was distinctly relieved to find that Mignon was in an amiable frame of mind over the unexpected change in his plans. Knowing her tempestuous disposition, he decided that it would be policy to humor her whim.

"Thank you so much," beamed Mignon. "I must go now. Good-bye."

"I find I must leave you, also," said Ronald Atwell, glancing at his watch, "or I shall be late for luncheon."

Mignon had already walked toward the east door of the gymnasium. With a hurried "Good-bye, Professor. I will be here for rehearsal on Tuesday," the dark, young man strode after Mignon and overtook her in the corridor.

"I wonder if our ways lie in the same direction," he said pleasantly. "I am the guest of Mr. and Mrs. Horton. Mr. Horton is a cousin of mine."

"I pass their house on my way home," was the prompt reply.

Elated at receiving the marked attention of this distinguished stranger, Mignon exerted herself to the utmost to be agreeable during their walk. From the few words she had heard pass between the professor and Mr. Atwell as she approached them, she had gathered the information that the latter was to manage the stage and coach the actors in the operetta. She determined that, if it were possible, she would enlist his services in her behalf. She had counted on Professor Harmon, and he had failed her. In this good-looking, affable young man she foresaw a valuable ally. The presentation of "The Rebellious Princess" was still four weeks distant. A great many things might happen in that time.

Her companion's suave comment, "I think Professor Harmon made a mistake in assigning the Princess to the young woman who sang last," uttered with just the exact shade of regret, caused Mignon to thrill with new hope. Mr. Atwell, at least, was of the same mind as herself. She brightened visibly when he went on to say that as stage manager he would try to give her every advantage that lay in his power. "I am certain that you have within you the possibilities which go to make a great actress, Miss La Salle," was his parting remark to her, and these flattering words, which were, in reality, merely idle on the part of the actor, she accepted as gospel truth. It was always very easy for her to accept that which she wished to believe, for self-analysis was not one of her strong points.

When the cast and chorus for the operetta met in the gymnasium the following Tuesday afternoon, it did not take the lynx-eyed feminine contingent long to discover that Mignon La Salle had a friend at court. Laurie Armitage, also, soon became aware of the fact. He was secretly displeased that Mignon had been chosen to sing in his operetta, and almost on first acquaintance he had formed a dislike for Ronald Atwell. Behind his polished manners he read insincerity, and he was sorry that Professor Harmon had asked this newcomer to assist in managing the production. But, manlike, he kept his prejudice to himself, admitting reluctantly that Atwell seemed to know what he was about.

In the frequent rehearsals that followed, however, many irritating incidents occurred to try his boyish soul. Most of all he disapproved of the actor manager's brusque manner toward Constance Stevens. He found fault continually with her in the matter of the speaking of her lines, and developed a habit of rehearsing her over and over again in a single scene until she was ready to cry of sheer humiliation at her own failure to please him. More than once Laurie made private protest to Professor Harmon, but the latter invariably reminded him that despite Miss Stevens' beautiful voice, she was far from grasping the principles of acting, and that Mr. Atwell was a striking example of a conscientious director.

Lawrence Armitage was not the only one whose resentment against the too conscientious stage manager had been aroused. His unfair attitude toward Constance was the subject of many indignant discussions on the part of the girls who comprised her coterie of intimate friends.

"It's a shame," burst forth Jerry Macy in an undertone to Marjorie, as they stood together at one side of the gymnasium and watched the impatient manner in which the actor ordered their idol about. "I wouldn't stand it, if I were Connie. I guess you know who is to blame for it, don't you?"

Marjorie nodded. A faint touch of scorn curved her red lips. Mignon's growing friendship with Ronald Atwell was the talk of the cast. He frequently accompanied her home from school, invited her to Sargent's, and it was rumored that he was often a guest at dinner or luncheon at her home. Proud of the fact that his daughter was to sing an important rôle in "young Armitage's opera," Mr. La Salle had treated his daughter's new acquaintance with considerable deference and allowed Mignon to do as she pleased in the matter of entertaining him.

"Laurie told Hal that he was sorry Professor Harmon had asked that old crank to help. Laurie didn't say 'old crank,' but I say it, and I mean it," continued Jerry vindictively. "Don't breathe it to anyone, though. It was a brotherly confidence and Hal would rave if he knew I repeated it."

"Jerry," whispered Marjorie. Her brief scorn had faded into a faint frown of anxiety. "I don't think Mr. Atwell is really the best sort of person for Mignon to go around with. He is ever so much older than she and, somehow, he doesn't seem sincere. Someone told Muriel that he told Mignon she would make a wonderful actress. Mignon was boasting of it. Suppose she were to get an idea of going on the stage. She is so headstrong she might run away from home and do that very thing if she happened to feel like it. I don't like her, but I can't help being just a little bit sorry for her. You know, she hasn't any mother to help her and love her and advise her. Her father is so busy making money, he doesn't pay much attention to her. Fathers are splendid, but mothers are simply splendiferous. I don't know what I'd do without my Captain." Marjorie sighed in sweet sympathy for all the motherless girls in the universe.

"Mothers are a grand institution," agreed Jerry, looking a trifle solemn. "I think mine is just about right. I never thought of Mignon in that way before. Now, I suppose I'll have to be sorry for her, too. She doesn't look as though she needed much sympathy just now. She's so pleased with the way Connie is being ordered about that she can't see straight. There, he's through with the poor child at last. Come on. It's time for the chorus to perform. Try to imagine that this good old gym is the king's palace and that our mutual friend the Crane is a kingly king. He looks more like a clothes-pole!"

Marjorie was forced to laugh at Jerry's uncomplimentary comparison. They had no further opportunity for conversation in the busy hour that followed. Professor Harmon drilled them rigidly, his short hair positively standing erect with energy, and they were quite ready to gather their little band together and hurry off to Sargent's for rest and ice cream when the rehearsal was at last over.

"See here, Connie, why don't you tell that Atwell man to mind his own business," sputtered Jerry as the six girls walked down the street in the direction of their favorite haunt.

"He *is* minding his business," returned Constance ruefully. Her small face was very pale and her blue eyes were strained and unhappy. "It is my fault. But he makes me nervous, and then I can't act. When I am at home I can say my lines just as I ought, but the minute he begins to tell me what to do, everything goes wrong. Then he finds fault and almost makes me cry. I wish I hadn't tried for a part. If it weren't so late I'd resign from the cast."

"And let Mignon sing the Princess!" came from Muriel in deep disgust.

"Don't you do it," advised Susan. "That's precisely what she'd like you to do."

"It's a plot between Mignon and Mr. Snapwell—I mean Atwell," declared Jerry. "She's crazy to be the Princess and he is trying to help her along. A blind man could see that."

"I think so, too," said Irma Linton slowly. "You must try not to mind him, Connie, then you won't be nervous."

"Why don't you ask Laurie to interfere?" proposed Jerry. "He looked crosser than I look when I'm mad when that Atwell man was worrying you about your lines this afternoon. I'll ask him myself, if you say so."

"No." Constance shook her head. "I wouldn't for the world complain to Laurie. He has enough to think of now, without bothering his head over my troubles. I suppose I am too easily hurt. I must learn not to mind such things, if ever I expect to become a real artist."

"That's the way you ought to feel, Connie," put in Marjorie's soft voice. She had been thinking seriously, while the others talked, as to what she might say to cheer up her disconsolate schoolmate. "You were chosen to sing the part of the Princess, and I am sure no one else can sing it half so well. Try to think that, all the time you are rehearsing. Remember, Laurie believes in you, and so do we. When the great night comes you won't have to listen to that horrid Mr. Atwell's nagging, or say your lines over and over again. You will truly be the Princess, and that will make you forget everything else. If you believe in yourself, nothing can make you fail. For your own sake, don't think for a minute of giving up the part."

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CHAPTER XXVI

MAKING RESTITUTION

GREATLY to Mr. Ronald Atwell's chagrin, Constance Stevens began suddenly to show a marked improvement in her work that did not in the least coincide with his plans. Influenced by Mignon's tale of her wrongs, laid principally at Constance's door, albeit Marjorie, too, came in for her share of blame, he had taken a dislike to the gentle girl and lost no opportunity to humiliate her. Privately, he regarded the entire cast, Mignon included, as a set of silly children, and his only regard for Mignon lay in a wholesome respect for her father's money. At heart he was not a scoundrel, he was merely vain and selfish, and imbued with a profound sense of his own importance. It had pleased his fancy to assume the charge of the staging of the operetta, but now he was growing rather tired of it and wished that it were over.

Long before this he and Mignon had come to a definite understanding regarding the operetta. Mignon had informed him boldly that she wished to sing the part of the Princess, and he had assured her that he would arrange matters to her satisfaction. It, therefore, became incumbent upon him to keep his word. He had begun his persistent annoying of Constance, convinced that, unable to endure it, she would resign and leave the field of honor free to the French girl. But Constance did nothing of the sort. She stood her ground, half-heartedly at first, but afterward, with Marjorie's words ringing in her ears, she exhibited a steadiness of purpose that he could not shake.

At the dress rehearsal, the last before the public performance, she was a brilliant success, compelling even his reluctant admiration. It was now too late even to consider the possibility of Mignon replacing her, and he informed the latter rather sheepishly of this, as he rode home with her in her electric runabout.

For the first and last time he had the pleasure of seeing Mignon in a royal rage, and when they reached her home, he declined her sullen offer to send him home in her automobile, and made his escape with due speed. Deciding he had had enough of amateurs and amateur operettas, he mailed a note to Professor Harmon excusing himself from further service on the plea of a telegram summoning him to New York. Whether the telegram were a myth, history does not record. Sufficient to say that he actually went to New York the following afternoon. And thus "The Rebellious Princess" lost a stage manager and Mignon the hitherto chief factor in her plans. She was also the recipient of an apologetic note from the actor, which caused her to clench her hands in rage, then shrug her thin shoulders with a gesture that did not spell defeat. Somehow, in some way, she would accomplish her purpose. Even at the eleventh hour she would not acknowledge herself beaten. Yet as the day wore on toward evening she could think of nothing to do that would bring her her unreasonable desire.

The operetta was to be sung in the Sanford Theatre, where the dress rehearsal had been held. Furious almost to tears at her inability to bring about the impossible, Mignon at last ordered her runabout and made sulky preparations to start for the theatre. The possession of an automobile gave her the advantage of being able to don her first act costume at home, but her really attractive appearance in the fanciful gown of the heartless step-sister afforded her no pleasure. She hooked it up pettishly, made a face at herself in the mirror of her dressing table, and, drawing her evening cloak about her, flounced downstairs to her runabout, completely out of humor with the world in general.

She drove along recklessly, as was her custom, and when half way to the theatre narrowly missed running down a small, sturdy figure that was marching across the street.

"Naughty old wagon," screamed a familiar voice after her.

At sound of that piping voice, Mignon stopped her car and peered out. Trotting along the sidewalk a little to her rear was a small boy with a diminutive violin case tucked under his arm. Little Charlie Stevens had come forth once more to see the world. In a flash wicked inspiration came to Mignon. The Stevens child was running away again, but this time he had chosen an evening exactly to her liking. Slipping out of her car she ran toward the boy. "Why, good evening,

little boy," she called pleasantly. "Where are *you* going?"

"I know you. You're a naughty girl!" observed Charlie with more truth than courtesy. He braced himself defiantly and regarded Mignon with patent disapproval.

"I am so sorry you think so." Mignon affected a sadness which she was far from feeling at this unvarnished statement. "I was going to take you for a ride and buy you some ice cream."

Charlie considered this astonishing offer in silence. He stared frowningly at Mignon. "Is it chok'lit ice cream?" he asked, eyeing her in open disbelief.

"Of course it is. As much as you can eat."

"All right. I want some. But you're a naughty girl, just the same. Mary said so."

Mignon shrugged indifferently. She was not greatly concerned at either his or Mary's opinion of her. "Come on, if you want a ride," she urged.

Charlie obeyed with some show of reluctance. He was not sure that even the prospect of ice cream warranted his surrender. Mignon caught him up and swung him into the runabout. Her wrist watch pointed to fifteen minutes past seven. She had no time to lose. She drove rapidly through the town to a small confectioner's store at the other end. Charlie kept up a lively chatter as they rolled along. Stopping before it she lifted the boy from the automobile, and, taking his hand, hurried him into the brightly lighted store. Seating him at a table, she ordered two plates of chocolate ice cream and sat down opposite the boy, her black eyes glittering as she watched him eat. From time to time she glanced at her watch. When the child had finished his plate of cream, she pushed her own toward him. "Eat it," she commanded.

Charlie responded nobly to the command. When she saw the last spoonful vanish, she smiled elfishly. It was eight o'clock. The operetta began at half past eight. Allowing herself fifteen minutes to reach the theatre and carry out the last step in her plan, she would arrive there at fifteen minutes past eight.

The wandering musician made strenuous objection, however, to leaving the ice cream parlor. "I could eat more chok'lit cream," he informed her.

"You are a greedy boy," she said, her former friendliness vanishing into angry impatience. "Come with me this minute."

"You're a cross old elefant," was Charlie's crushing but inappropriate retort.

Mignon was in no mood for an exchange of pleasantries. Seizing Charlie by the arm she hustled him out of the shop into her runabout, and was off like the wind. When half way between the shop and the theatre, she halted her car. Lifting the boy out she set him on the sidewalk before he had time to protest. "Now go where you please. I'll tell Connie to come and find you," was her malicious farewell. Stepping into the runabout she drove away, leaving Charlie Stevens to take care of himself as best he might.

Although Mignon was unaware of the fact, there had been an amazed witness to the final scene in her little drama. A fair-haired girl had come up just in time to hear her heartless speech and see her drive away, leaving a small, perplexed youngster on the sidewalk. That girl was Mary Raymond. She had steadily refused Marjorie's earnest plea that she attend the much-talked-of performance of "The Rebellious Princess," and directly after dinner that evening, on the plea of mailing a letter, had slipped from the house on one of her melancholy, soul-searching walks which she had become so fond of taking. Convinced that she was an utter failure, imbued with a daily growing sense of her own unfitness to be the friend of a girl like Marjorie Dean, Mary was plunged into the depths of humiliation and unhappiness. This alone had been the cause of the marked change in her that Marjorie had innocently attributed to Mignon's defection. In her sad little soul there was now no bitterness against Constance Stevens. Quite by chance she had one day not long past encountered Jerry Macy in Sargent's, alone. Touched by her woe-begone air, Jerry had taken pains to draw her out. With her usual shrewdness the stout girl had discovered the real cause of Mary's depression, and kindly advised her to have a heart-to-heart talk with Marjorie. Jerry had also made it a point to inform Mary, so far as she knew the details, of the trouble over the butterfly pins during Marjorie's freshman year, and of Mignon's cruel treatment of Constance. Distinctly to Jerry's credit, she told no one afterward of that chance meeting, yet she secretly hoped that what she had said would have its effect upon Mary.

Overwhelmed with shame, Mary had left the talkative, stout girl and dragged herself home, in an agony of humiliation that can be better imagined than described. She felt that she could never forgive herself for the ignoble thoughts she had harbored against innocent Constance Stevens, and she was still more certain that she could never ask either Marjorie or Constance to forgive *her*. Again and again she had tried to bring herself to approach Marjorie and humbly sue for pardon. The weight of her own troubled conscience prevented her from yielding, and thus she kept her sorrow locked in her aching heart and waited dejectedly for the day when she must leave the Deans' pleasant home, taking with her nothing but bitter self-reproach for her own folly.

It was in this black mood that Mary had wandered forth that evening and straight into the path of the very thing that was destined to bring her peace. Mignon had hardly driven away when Mary caught the venturesome youngster in her arms. The boy gave a jubilant little shout as he

saw who held him. Mary, however, was still at a loss regarding the meaning of what she had seen.

"Every time the cross girl scolds Charlie, you come and get him," was the joyful exclamation. "She wasn't cross all the time. She gave Charlie a ride and lots of ice cream. Then she went away. She said she'd tell Connie to come and find me. Connie's gone to the the'tre. I wented, too, but the naughty girl got Charlie."

"Charlie boy, try to tell Mary, where was he when the cross girl got him?"

"Way over there." Charlie waved an indefinite hand in the wrong direction.

Mary stood still, in a perplexed endeavor to read meaning in the nature of Mignon's strange action. Suddenly the light burst upon her. "Oh!" she cried, dismay written on every feature. "Now I begin to understand!" She glanced wildly about her. Far up the street shone the light of an oncoming street-car. Seizing Charlie by the hand she hurried him to the corner. It was not more than two minutes until the car came to a creaking stop before them. Mary helped Charlie into it and fumbled in her purse. She had just two nickels. Breathing her relief, she paid the fares, deposited Charlie on a seat beside her, then stared out the window in an anxious watch of the streets.

But while Mary Raymond was making a desperate attempt to redeem herself by at least one kind act, Mignon La Salle had reached the theatre. Dropping all appearance of haste, she strolled past the groups of gaily attired boys and girls, nodding condescendingly to this one and that, and switched downstairs to the dressing room which she occupied with several other girls. Leisurely removing her cloak, she plumed herself before the mirror. Her black eyes constantly sought her watch, however. At last she turned from the mirror with a peculiar smile and abruptly left the room. Straight to the star's dressing room she walked. Her thin fingers beat a sharp tattoo on the door. It opened, and she stood face to face with Constance Stevens, who was just about to take her place in the wings, preparatory to the beginning of the opera. She was to make her first entrance directly after the opening chorus.

"I came to tell you, Miss Stevens," said Mignon with an indescribable smile of pure malice, "that I saw your brother, Charlie, wandering along the street as I drove to the theatre. I suppose he has run away."

With a frightened cry, Constance dashed past her and up the stairs. Mignon laughed aloud as she watched the vanishing figure. "That settles her," she muttered. "Harriet Delaney can sing my part. She has understudied it." Springing into sudden action she ran to her dressing room, eluding a collision with the feminine portion of the chorus who were scurrying for the stage in obedience to a gong that summoned them to the wings. Reaching to a hook in the wall, from which depended her several costumes, hung over one another, she took from under them an almost exact copy of the gown Constance Stevens was wearing in the first act and held it up with a murmur of satisfaction. Stripping off the gown she wore she hastily donned this other costume. Then she sat down to await what she believed would happen.

But while Mignon busied herself with her own affairs, Constance was making a hurried search for Laurie Armitage. Unluckily, he had gone, for the moment, to the front of the house. Professor Harmon, too, was not in sight. He also had gone to the front to take his place in the orchestra pit. What could she do? The performance was about to begin. To leave the theatre on a search for Charlie meant disaster to Laurie's operetta. To leave Charlie to wander about the streets alone was even more terrifying. She flitted past the waiting choristers, drawn up for action, without a word of explanation. Marjorie Dean caught one look at her friend's terrified face. It was enough to convince her that something unusual had happened. Slipping out of her place in the line she followed Constance, who was making directly for the stage door. Marjorie saw her fling it open and glance wildly into the night. She ran toward Connie, calling out, "What is the matter?"

As the question crossed her lips both girls saw a familiar girlish figure, strangely burdened, running toward them as fast as the weight she carried would permit her to run. With a cry which rang in Marjorie's ears for days afterwards Constance darted forward. She wrapped the girl and her burden in a tumultuous embrace, laughing and crying in the same breath.

"The cross girl got Charlie, then she runned away and Mary comed and found him. Charlie's goin' to the the'tre to play in the band. Mary said so." He wriggled from the tangle of encircling arms to the stone walk. "Hello, Marj'ry," he greeted genially.

Marjorie turned from the marvelous sight of the two she loved best in each other's arms. It was too wonderful for belief. Tardy remembrance caused her to utter a dismayed, "You'll be late, Connie! Hurry in. Mary and I will take care of Charlie. It doesn't matter if I do miss the opening number."

With a swift glance at Mary that contained untold gratitude, Constance faltered, "I—love—you—Mary, for taking care of Charlie! I'll see you again as soon as I can. Good-bye!"

She was gone in a flash, leaving Mary and Marjorie to face each other with full hearts.

"You are my own, dear Mary again." Marjorie's clear voice was husky with emotion, "and my very first and best chum, forever!"

Mary nodded dumbly, her blue eyes overflowing. "I've—come—back—to—you—to stay," she

whispered. And on the stone steps, worn by the passing of the feet of those who had entered the theatre to play many parts, these two young players in Life's varied drama enacted a little scene of love and forgiveness that was entirely their own.

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CHAPTER XXVII

THE FULFILLMENT

THE chorus were tunefully lifting up their voices in their initial number, their watchful eyes on Professor Harmon's baton, when the belated Princess hurried to her position in the wings. Laurie Armitage had returned to the stage and was instituting a wild search for Constance. Failing to find her upstairs, he had hastened below, and was rushing desperately up and down the corridors, peering into the open doorways of the deserted dressing rooms. Only one door was closed. Behind it a black-haired girl awaited a call to fame. He called Constance by name, again and again, then, receiving no answer, he dashed up the stairs, encountering the object of his search at the very height of his alarm. Marjorie Dean stood on guard beside her. She advanced toward the excited composer, saying briefly, "Let her alone, Laurie. She's awfully nervous and upset. She has just had a dreadful fright. I'll tell you about it later."

Constance cast a reassuring glance at Laurie. She had heard Marjorie's protecting words. "I'm all right now," she nodded. "I won't fail you."

The dulcet notes of her opening song, "I'm tired of being a Princess," brought immeasurable relief to Lawrence and Marjorie, as they stood in the wings, their anxious gaze fixed upon Constance. In one of the dressing rooms below, the silver strains came faintly to the ears of Mignon La Salle. During her interval of waiting she had been softly humming that very song, confident of the summons she believed she would receive. She had no doubt that her cowardly plan had worked only too well. Knowing Constance Stevens' deep affection for her tiny foster brother, she could readily see a vision of the terrified girl rushing out into the night in search of him, her duty to the operetta completely forgotten. As the sound of that hated voice reached her, she sprang to the door of her dressing room and half opening it, halted to listen. A wave of black rage swept over her. Forgetting her recent change of costume, she took the stairs, two at a time, and ran squarely against Lawrence Armitage and Marjorie Dean.

Marjorie could not resist a low laugh of contemptuous scorn as she viewed the stormy-eyed girl whose unscrupulous plan had failed. The contempt in her pretty face deepened as her quick eyes took in the details of Mignon's costume. The French girl's indiscreet haste to make ready had convicted her. Marjorie had already learned from Mary all that had occurred. It needed this one proof to complete the evidence. Lawrence Armitage was regarding Mignon with perplexed brow. "That is not the costume you wore last night, Miss La Salle," he said with cold abruptness. Scrutinizing her closely, amazement began to dawn on his clear-cut features. "When did you——"

With a low cry of mingled humiliation and fury, Mignon turned and ran down the stairs, her slender body trembling with the anger of a defeat born of the failure of her plan and her own betraying haste. Gaining the shelter of her dressing room, she gave herself up to a paroxysm of rage that ended in a burst of hysterical sobs.

The end of the first act brought a troop of hurrying, laughing girls downstairs. Instead of the alert, self-possessed Mignon who had swept proudly into the dressing room that night, those who shared the room with her found a convulsive weeper lying face downward on the floor.

"What's the matter?" was the concerted cry.

A good-natured senior took Mignon gently by the shoulders. "Get up, Mignon," she commanded. "If you don't stop crying, you won't be able to go on when your cue comes, let alone trying to sing." Mignon's first entrance took place in the second act and occurred directly after the rise of the curtain.

The French girl half raised herself at this reminder, then sank back to her original position with a fresh burst of racking sobs. Finding her good-natured ministrations ineffectual, the senior left Mignon to herself and began to change methodically to her peasant costume of the second act, the scene of which was laid in a village and in front of the cottage where she supposedly dwelt.

"Ten minutes," called the warning tones of the freshman who was serving as call boy. Still Mignon refused to heed the admonitions of her companions.

"Better call Laurie Armitage," suggested one girl. "She can't possibly go on. Harriet Delaney will have to take her place. Mignon isn't even dressed for her part. Where do you suppose——" The senior did not finish her sentence. Something in the familiar details of the gown Mignon wore aroused an unpleasant suspicion in her active brain. A swift-footed messenger had already

sped away to find the young composer, who, with the departure of Ronald Atwell had taken the arduous duties of stage manager upon his capable shoulders.

When the information of Mignon's collapse reached him, he made no move to go to her. Instead, he beckoned to Harriet Delaney, who had just come upstairs, and whispered a few words to her which caused her colorful face to pale, then turn pinker than usual.

"But I haven't a suitable costume," several girls heard her protest.

"Go on as you are. Your costume is suitable," reassured Laurie.

But down in the dressing room Mignon had struggled to her feet. The knowledge that her unfairness was to cost her her own part in the operetta aroused her to action. In feverish haste she began to tear off the gown she wore.

"Second act," rang out through the corridor. With a low wail of genuine grief, Mignon dropped into a chair. She heard Harriet Delaney begin her first song. Unable to bear the chagrin that was hers, she sprang up. Readjusting the gown she had partly thrown off, she seized her cloak and wrapped it about her. Then she fled up the stairway, and into the calm, starlit night to where her runabout awaited her, the victim of her own wrong-doing.

It was a happy trio of girls that, shortly before midnight, climbed into the Deans' automobile, in which Mr. and Mrs. Dean sat patiently awaiting their exit from the stage door. Lawrence Armitage's operetta had been an artistic as well as a financial success. It had been a "Standing Room Only" audience, and the proceeds were to be given to the Sanford Hospital for Children. Laurie had decreed this as a quiet memento to Constance's devotion to little Charlie during his days of infirmity. The audience had not been chary of their applause. The principals had received numerous curtain calls, Constance had received an enthusiastic ovation, and many beautiful floral tokens from her admiring friends. Laurie had been assailed with cries of "Composer! Speech! Speech!" and had been obliged to respond. Even the chorus came in for its share of approbation, and to her intense amazement Marjorie Dean received two immense bouquets of roses, a fitting tribute to her fresh, young beauty. One of them bore Hal Macy's card, the other she afterward learned was the joint contribution of a number of her school friends.

Only one person left the theatre that night who did not share in the enthusiasm of the Sanford folks over the creditable work of their town boys and girls. Mignon La Salle's father had, for once, put business aside and come out to hear his daughter sing. Why she had not appeared on the stage, he could not guess. His first thought was that she had told him an untruth, but the printed programme carried her name as a principal. He arrived home to be greeted with the servant's assertions that Miss La Salle was ill and had retired. Going to her room to inquire into the nature of her sudden illness, he was refused admittance, and shrewdly deciding that his daughter had been worsted in a schoolgirl's dispute in which she appeared always to be engaged, he left her to herself. It was not until long afterward, when came the inevitable day of reckoning, which was to make Mignon over, that he learned the true story of that particular night.

It had been arranged beforehand that Constance was to spend the night with Marjorie. Shortly after Charlie had been comfortably established in Constance's dressing room, Uncle John Roland had appeared at the stage door of the theatre, his placid face filled with genuine alarm. He had been left in charge of Charlie, and the child had eluded his somewhat lax guardianship and run away. Finding the little violin missing, he guessed that the boy had made his usual attempt to find the theatre, and the old man had hastened directly there. Charlie was sent home with him, despite his wailing plea to remain, thus leaving Constance free to carry out her original plan.

The Deans exchanged significant smiles at sight of Marjorie, Mary and Constance approaching the automobile, three abreast, arms firmly linked.

"Attention!" called Mr. Dean. "Salute your officers!" Two hands went up in instant obedience of the order. Constance hesitated, then followed suit.

"I see my regiment has increased," remarked Mr. Dean, as he sprang out to assist the three into the car.

"Yes, Connie has joined the company," rejoiced Marjorie. "I am answering for her. She needs military discipline."

"Three soldiers are ever so much more interesting than two," put in Mary shyly. Her earnest eyes sought the face of her Captain, as though to ask mute pardon for her errors. Mrs. Dean's affectionate smile carried with it the absolution Mary craved, and Mr. Dean's firm clasp of her hand, as he helped her into the car, was equally reassuring.

Mrs. Dean had ordered a light repast especially on account of Constance and Marjorie. She had not counted on Mary, but she was a most welcome addition. Their faithful maid, Delia, had insisted on staying up to make cocoa and serve the supper party.

"Captain," begged Marjorie, as the three girls appeared in her room, after going upstairs, "please let us stay up as late as we wish to-night? We simply must talk things out. To-morrow is

Saturday, you know."

"For once I will withdraw all objections. You may stay up as late as you please." The three girls kissed her in turn. Mary was last. Mrs. Dean drew her close and kissed her twice. "Have you won the fight, Lieutenant?" she whispered.

Mary simply nodded, her blue eyes misty. She could not trust herself to speak. "To-morrow—I'll—tell you," she faltered, then hurried to overtake Constance and Marjorie, who were half-way upstairs.

The "talk" lasted until two o'clock that morning. It was interspersed with laughter, fond embracing and a few tears. When it ended, Marjorie's dream of friendship had come true.

Mary had more to say than the others. She confessed to writing the letter of warning that had so mystified the basket-ball team.

"I knew you wrote it," Marjorie said quietly. "I found it out by comparing the paper it was written on with a letter I had received from you. I was so glad. I knew you couldn't be like Mignon, even if you were her friend."

"I was never her friend, nor she mine," asserted Mary with a positive shake of her head. "I was jealous of Constance and was glad to find someone besides myself who didn't like her. I never knew the true story of the pin until Jerry—" She paused, coloring deeply.

"So Jerry told you. That is just like her. She is the kindest-hearted girl in the world. Next to you two, I like her best of all my schoolmates." Marjorie's affectionate tones bespoke her deep regard for the stout girl whose matter-of-fact ways and funny sayings were a perpetual joy.

"If only I had listened to you and Connie in the first place." Mary sighed. "I've spoiled my sophomore year and tried hard enough to spoil yours. And there's so little of it left! I won't have time to show you how sorry I am and how much I care."

"We will begin now and make the most of what is left of it," proposed Marjorie gently. Then she added, "Jerry didn't know all that happened last year. I would like to tell you about it."

"Please do," urged Mary humbly.

Marjorie told the story of her first year in Sanford, frequently turning to Constance for confirmation. When she had finished Mary was silent. She had no words with which to express her utter contrition.

"Now you know our sad history," smiled Marjorie, with a kindly attempt at lightening the burden of self-reproach Mary bore.

"But neither of you has told *me* how Mary happened to find Charlie to-night," reminded Constance. "I am anxious to know. This is the first time he ever ran so far away."

"Oh, no, you forget the night he went to Mignon's—" Mary broke off shortly, red with embarrassment. She had not intended to speak of this. Constance's positive assertion had caught her off her guard.

"Went to Mignon's?" was the questioning chorus of her two listeners.

Mary was obliged to enlighten them. "I wondered if he ever told you, Connie. He promised he wouldn't," she ended.

"And he never told, the little rascal," was Constance's quick reply. "No one except the maid knew it, and you may be sure she never said a word."

"It was that night I came to my senses." Mary smiled a trifle wistfully. "I saw myself as others saw me. You thought I was grieving over Mignon, Marjorie. But I wasn't. It was my own shortcomings that bothered me. Now I must tell you about to-night, and then you will know everything about me."

Constance received the account of Mignon's attempt to supplant her in the operetta with no trace of resentment. "I ought to be angry with her, but I can't. She has suffered more to-night than I would have if her plan had succeeded. Poor Mignon, I wonder if she will ever wake up?"

"That's hard to say. At any rate, she did some good, even if she didn't intend to," reminded Marjorie. "I'm going to try to keep my junior year in high school free of snarls. There is no use in mourning for the past. Let us set our faces to the future and be glad that we three are done with misunderstandings. Marjorie Dean, High School Junior, is going to be a better soldier than Marjorie Dean, High School Sophomore has ever been."

Both Constance Stevens and Mary Raymond smiled at this earnest resolve. In their hearts they felt that Marjorie Dean need make no vows. She stood already on the heights of loyalty and truth, steadfast and unassailable.

How fully Marjorie Dean carried out her resolve and what happened to her as a junior in Sanford High School will be told in "Marjorie Dean, High School Junior," a story which every friend of this delightful girl will surely welcome.

THE END

Transcriber's Note:

A table of [contents](#) has been added.

Alternative spelling and variations in hyphenated words have been retained as in the original publication.

The following changes have been made:

who were [maknig](#) the *changed to* who were [making](#)
[Do](#) you miss anyone? *changed to* "Do you miss anyone?"
[racuous](#) voice *changed to* raucous voice
[atuomobile](#), and when *changed to* automobile and when
[asperin](#) tablets *changed to* aspirin tablets
strange [predeliction](#) *changed to* strange [predilection](#)
[sinmply](#) because she *changed to* simply because she
[atlhough](#) the latter *changed to* although the latter
[stayled](#) her, and *changed to* styled her,
continual [penace](#) for *changed to* continual [penance](#) for
the previous Christmas [eve](#) *changed to* the previous Chistmas
Eve
please don't be [disappointed](#) *changed to* please don't be
disappointed
[Who](#) says I'm not a poet *changed to* "Who says I'm not a poet
That [let's](#) me out *changed to* That lets me out
was [alloted](#) the part *changed to* was allotted
red with [embarassment](#) *changed to* red with [embarrassment](#)
soldier than [Marjorie, Dean](#) *changed to* soldier than [Marjorie](#)
Dean

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MARJORIE DEAN, HIGH SCHOOL
SOPHOMORE ***

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