Title: Dumps - A Plain Girl

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Release date: July 7, 2013 [EBook #43120]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Nick Hodson of London, England

L.T. Meade

"Dumps - A Plain Girl"

Part 1, Chapter I.

A Lesson in Patience.

The boys were most troublesome. They never would mind in the very least when father had one of his worst headaches. It was not that they did not try to be good—I will say that Alex had the kindest heart, and that Charley was good-natured too—but it seemed to me as though they could not walk quietly; they would stump upstairs, and they would go heavily across the big attic where they slept, and father was so fearfully sensitive; the least sound made him start up, and then he would get into a sort of frenzy and hardly know what he was doing. He would call out to the boys and thunder to them to be quiet; and then his head was worse than ever. Oh, it was all dreadful—dreadful! I sometimes did not know what to do.

I am going to tell the story of my life as far as I can; but before I begin I must say that I do wonder why girls, as a rule, have a harder time of it than boys, and why they learn quite early in life to be patient and to give up their own will. Now, of course, if father comes in after his very hard day's work, schoolmastering, as he calls it, and when he has one of his fearful headaches, I sit like a lamb and hardly speak; but it never enters into Alex's head, or into Charley's, that they ought to be equally considerate. I do not for a minute want to praise myself, but I know that girls have an opportunity very early in life of learning patience.

Well now, to begin my story.

I was exactly fifteen years and a half. I should not have a birthday, therefore, for six months. I was sorry for that, for birthdays are very nice; on one day at least in the year you are queen, and you are thought more of than any one else in the house. You are put first instead of last, and you get delicious presents. Some girls get presents every day—at least every week—but my sort of girl only gets a present worth considering on her birthday. Of all my presents I loved flowers best; for we lived in London, where flowers are scarce, and we hardly ever went into the country.

My name is Rachel Grant, and I expect I was a very ordinary sort of girl. Alex said so. Alex said that if I had beautiful, dancing dark eyes, and very red lips, and a good figure, I might queen it over all the boys, even on the days when it wasn't my birthday; but he said the true name for me ought not to be Rachel, but Dumps, and how could any girl expect to rule over either boys or girls with such a name as Dumps? I suppose I was a little stodgy in my build, but father said I might grow out of that, for my mother was tall.

Ah dear! there was the sting of things; for if I had had a mother on earth I might have been a very different girl, and the boys might have been told to keep their place and not to bully poor Dumps, as they called me, so dreadfully. But I must go on with my story.

I was Rachel or Dumps, and there were two boys, Alex and Charley. Alex was a year younger than I, and ought really to have been very much under my control; and Charley was two years younger. Then there was father, who was quite elderly, although his children were comparatively young. He was tall and had a slight stoop, and his hair was turning grey. He had a very beautiful, lofty sort of expression, and he did wonders in the great school or college where he spent most of his time. Our house belonged to the college; the rooms were large, and the windows looked out on the grounds of the college and I could see the boys playing, Alex and Charley amongst them, only I never dared to look if I thought Alex or Charley could see me; for if they had caught sight of me it would have been all over with me, for they did not particularly want the other boys to know they had a sister.

"If she was a beauty we'd be awfully proud," said Alex, "but being only Dumps, you know,"—and then he would wink at me, and when he did this I felt very much inclined to cry.

Well, these things went on, and I went to school myself and learnt as hard as I could, and tried to keep the house in order for father, whom I loved very dearly, and who sometimes—not very often, but perhaps once or twice, on a birthday or some special occasion of that sort—told me that I was the comfort of his life, and I knew that I was patient, whatever other virtue I might lack.

There came a special evening in the beginning of November. It had been a drizzling sort of day, and rather foggy, and of course the old house looked its worst, and it was six months—six whole months—before I could have a birthday, and the boys were so loud, and father's head was so bad, and altogether it was a most discouraging sort of day. I had invited Rita and Agnes Swan to come and have tea with me. They were my greatest friends. I hardly ever dared to ask them to come, because something would be sure to happen on the nights when they arrived. But at school that morning it had seemed to me that I might certainly enjoy a quiet hour with them, so I said, "If you will come in exactly at four o'clock—father won't be in, I am sure, for two hours, for it is his late day at the school, and it is half-holiday for the Upper Remove and Alex will be out of the way, and if Charley does come in we can manage him—we'll have the entire house to ourselves from four to five, and can have a glorious game of hide-and-seek."

Rita said she would be charmed to come, and Agnes said the same, and I hurried home to do the best I could for my friends.

Rita and Agnes were not exactly beautiful; but they were not like me—no one could have called either of them Dumps. They had soft, pretty hair which waved about their little heads, and their features were quite marked and distinct, and I think their eyes were beautiful, although I am not absolutely sure. They were rather clever, and often got praised at school. I am afraid they were inclined to patronise me, but I thought if I could have them to tea, and could show them over our large house, and let them see what a splendid place it was for hide-and-seek, it being a very old house with lots of queer passages and corners, they might respect me more and get the other girls in the school to do so also.

Accordingly, when I got home about one o'clock on that November day I was in high spirits. But there was my usual lesson in patience waiting for me; for father came in at three o'clock instead of at six, as he had done every single Thursday since I could remember.

"Where are you, Rachel?" he called out when he entered the house.

I ran to him.

"Oh father, is anything wrong?"

"Only this abominable headache," he replied. "It is worse than usual. I am going to my room to lie down. See that the house is kept quiet, Rachel."

"Oh yes," I replied. "Shall I get you a cup of tea?"

"No; I couldn't touch anything. Just keep the house as quiet as possible. If those young rascals come in, tell them about me. I trust you, Rachel, not to allow a sound."

"Very well, father," I said.

He never noticed that I was in my best frock, pale-blue with a sash of the same, and that I had combed and brushed my hair until it fairly shone. I knew that my hair was thick and longer than most girls' hair, and I was proud to let it fall over my shoulders, and I wondered if Rita and Agnes would remark it.

But here at once was a stop to our jolly game of hide-and-seek; we could not play a game of that sort without making a noise. We must sit in the parlour. The parlour was farthest away from father's bedroom. We must sit there and be as still as possible. We might play games, of course; but then one could play games at the Swans' house, which was a very ordinary, everyday sort of place, not a bit like ours, which at least was quaint and out of the common.

I had ordered queen-cakes for tea, and a fresh pot of jam to be opened, and I was all expectation, and primed, as Alex would say, to exert myself to the very utmost to entertain my friends, when who should come thundering up the steps, making a most horrible noise, but the boys, with two other boys bearing them company. I rushed out to the hall.

"You mustn't really, Alex," I said.

"Mustn't what?" he cried, looking at my excited face. "What's up now, Dumps?"

The other boys were strangers. One had red hair, and the other was dark. He looked like a foreigner; his hair fell straight in two lines down his forehead and almost met his eyebrows. He was sparely built, and very tall, and had great big hands. Alex glanced back at him.

"I wanted to take these fellows over the house," he said. "This is Von Marlo"—here he introduced the taller boy—"and this is Squibs. You must have heard me talk of Squibs. Now, don't stand in the way; let us come in. Von Marlo is Dutch, and very proud of his country—aren't you, Von Marlo?"

Von Marlo smiled, and bowed to me.

"Now get out of the way, Dumps," said Alex. "And what have you put on your best frock for, and why are you all prunes and prisms? What is the matter?"

"Only that father is at home. He is lying down; he has a shocking headache. You really mustn't make a noise.—You

must go away, please, Mr Von Marlo and Mr Squibs."

"Oh, how jokingly funny!" exclaimed Alex, and he burst into a loud laugh and sank down on the bench in the hall. But the Dutch boy, Von Marlo, came up to me and made another little bow, and took my hand as though he would kiss it; he raised it to within a few inches of his lips and then dropped it again. I was told afterwards that this was the Dutch way of showing reverence to a lady, and I was immensely touched by it. He said, "Certainly, Miss Grant, we will go away. I did not know when Grant asked me to come in that your father was ill."

"But I say, the Professor was in his class holding forth not half-an-hour back," said Squibs, whose real name was Squire.

"Well, he's lying down now, and there can be no noise," I said.

I had scarcely uttered the words before up the steps came my own two special visitors, Rita and Agnes Swan.

"Oh Jiminy!" cried Alex; and he stepped back as the two young ladies sailed in.

"How do you do, Rachel?" said Rita.

"How do you do, Rachel?" said Agnes.

They were also dressed in their best, and were evidently highly pleased and intended to have a good time. They did not at all object to the fact that four rather tall, ungainly schoolboys were standing about in the hall.

"You know my brothers, don't you, Rita?" I said, presenting Alex and Charley. "And this is Mr Von Marlo, and this is Mr Squire."

Alex and Charley reddened up to the roots of their hair; Squibs looked as though he could not possibly get any redder—he was nearly always scarlet; but the Dutch boy, Von Marlo, bowed in the most graceful style, and then stood quite at his ease, glancing at the girls.

"I say," said Alex, coming up to me and speaking in a very loud semi-whisper, "have they come to tea?"

"Yes—yes. Do go away—please go away—and take the boys with you."

"But are there cookies and good things for tea?"

"Yes; but there really isn't enough for four extra people. Do go away, Alex. I'll have something nice for your supper by-and-by. Do! there's a good boy."

But neither Alex nor Charley would see the fun of that, and I am sure those girls who take the trouble to read my history will guess at my mortification when I tell them that four extra guests sat down to a tea-table only prepared for three.

Now Hannah, our servant, was by no means noted for her good temper. She brought in fresh bread-and-butter, fresh tea, fresh jam; but the fearful difficulty of keeping the room quiet and of making those boys abstain from laughter, of making even Rita and Agnes behave themselves, was enough to wear any poor girl out. I do not know what I should have done but for the Dutch boy, Von Marlo. He saw that I was annoyed, and he came up to me and offered me all the help he possibly could.

"It is quite a shame," he said; "and you looked so nice when you opened the door. I thought you were the very prettiest girl I had ever laid eyes on. You see, I have not been in England more than two months. I have come here to go to this famous school."

"You speak English very well," I said.

"Oh yes, I learnt that in Holland; we all learn it there. We learn English, German, and French as soon as ever we can speak at all, I think; for, you see, our language—Dutch—is not much use to us outside our own country. There is nothing in that," he continued modestly. "Now, what can I do to help you?"

I looked at him, and my ruffled spirits became soothed. After all, why should I not make the best of things?

"I'll try to keep the fellows quiet," said Von Marlo; "and you needn't call me Mr—I am only a schoolboy. You can just say Von Marlo, as I am sure you say Squibs to Squire. We can all be jolly together. What do you say?"

"Done!" I cried; and after that the meal went swimmingly.

It was amazing what those fellows managed to eat; and it was still more amazing to see how Rita and Agnes enjoyed themselves. It was the thought of their disappointment which had so terribly annoyed me when the four boys insisted on bursting into our parlour and forcing themselves into our presence; but I soon saw that Rita and Agnes were only delighted. They laughed and joked, and as they laughed Alex and Charley became like lambs of sweetness and gentleness. Dear, dear! how nice a brother can be to other people's sisters! It is quite extraordinary. I bent over to Rita and whispered to her, "I hope you are not vexed."

"Vexed?" she whispered back. "No; I'm sure I'm delighted. I did not think it was to be a big party of this sort; and really the boys of the upper school are almost like men. It is very nice indeed; I am enjoying myself extremely."

And so she was, and so was Agnes. When tea was over, however, an anxious moment arrived. We could not play any noisy games, and the boys immediately declared that they were not going away.

“We are going to see the fun out now,” said Alex. “Never mind to-morrow’s work. I’ll do that in the small hours—burn the candle, you know.”

Here he winked at Agnes, and she winked back at him, thinking herself exceedingly witty.

Games were proposed, and games were begun; but, alas! how could seven young people keep absolutely quiet? I was trembling all over. If father were but to come down and see the absolute riot in the parlour, I didn’t know what would happen. I was certain of one thing: neither Rita nor Agnes would ever be allowed to have tea with me again.

After a time I did a very injudicious thing. I left the room. I ran upstairs. I listened outside father’s room and heard him moving about. I knocked, and immediately the door was flung open, and there was father in his dressing-gown, with his beautiful grey hair pushed back off his forehead.

“What’s all that murmuring and muttering and shuffling that is going on downstairs?” he said. “And how flushed your cheeks are! And there is a smear of jam on one of them. What have you been doing?”

“Having tea, father.”

“You never offered me a cup.”

“Oh father! when you first came in I offered to get you some.”

“Well, I’d like some now. Bring me up something to eat.”

“Then, father darling, is your head better?”

“Yes, my dear, yes. Go downstairs and bring me up a tray full of food—toast and an egg and some tea. Bring them up with your own hands. See there isn’t a sound. If I have two or three hours of quiet I shall be quite fit to resume my work to-night. I have to lecture in Hall at nine o’clock this evening. I shall not be able to utter a word if this headache continues. Now, Rachel, be off; set to work and get me some food at once, as fast as ever you can.”

I was half-way downstairs when my father’s voice called after me:

“Do stop all that whispering and whistling and noise. I can’t imagine what is happening.”

“I will do what I can, father,” I said.

Part 1, Chapter II.

The Poached Egg.

I returned to the boys and to my school friends.

“Father is awake,” I said, “and he complains of the noise we are making.”

“Noise?” cried Alex. “Why, we are as mum as mice!”

“People must breathe, you know,” said Agnes in what I considered a very impertinent way.

I stared at her. She had no right to speak like that of my father, the great Professor Grant; for my father was a member of the Royal Society, no less, and you can imagine that to hear such talk from a silly little girl like Agnes Swan was, to say the least of it, disagreeable. So I drew myself up; but then I caught Von Marlo’s eyes, and I felt soothed, for he seemed to understand.

“If the Professor wishes it,” he said, “we will, of course, hardly speak at all.—It might be best,” he added, turning to Alex, “if we all went away. What do you think?”

“Please yourself, Von,” said Alex, speaking in a very patronising way, and flinging himself back in a deep chair. “Squibs and Charley and I stay; and as you are the quietest of the party, and inclined to patronise Dumps, I don’t see why you should go.”

Von Marlo came straight up to me and said:

“Can I do anything for you? They say I patronise you, but that is not true. I don’t exactly know what they mean by patronise, but I will do all I can to help you, for you are quite the nicest little girl I have met since I came to England.”

Agnes and Rita seemed neither of them to thoroughly appreciate these remarks of Von Marlo’s, for he was really the biggest and most imposing-looking of the four boys. Even Alex, who was a handsome fellow, looked very young beside him. As to me, I felt soothed. Of course, you must understand that if you have been called Dumps all your life, and told to your face that you haven’t one vestige of good looks, it must be a sort of pleasure to have a person suddenly inform you that you are—oh! better than good-looking—the very prettiest girl he has seen in the whole of the country. I felt, therefore, a flush of triumph stealing to my cheeks, and then I said, “Please keep things as quiet as you can. I must go to the kitchen to get some tea for father. Please don’t let them be noisy.”

“I’ll sit on them if they are,” said Von Marlo.

But Alex called out, “Go along, Von, and help her; that’ll be the best way. Good gracious! she’s in such a state of mind, because you are noticing her and bolstering her up, that she will fall, as likely as not, going down those slippery backstairs. Go along with her, old chap, and help her.”

“Yes, come,” I said, for I could not resist it.

So Von Marlo and I found ourselves in the big hall; then he took my hand and we went along the passage, and then down another passage, and then we opened a door and I called to Hannah.

‘I ’m coming down,’ I said, ‘and I ’m bringing a gentleman with me.’
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“Hannah, are you downstairs?”

We were looking into pitch-black darkness, but we heard a muffled voice say, “Yes, Miss Rachel? Sakes alive! What’s wanted now?”

Then Hannah appeared at the foot of the stairs, holding a lighted candle.

“I’m coming down,” I said, “and I’m bringing a gentleman with me.”

Hannah very nearly fell in her amazement, but I went steadily down, Von Marlo following me.

“It is a very old house,” I whispered, “and some people say it is haunted. But you are not afraid of ghosts, are you?”

“I think they are the jolliest things in the world!” was his reply.

He said the word jolly in a very funny way, as though he was not accustomed to the word, and it sounded quite sweet.

At last we got to the lower regions, and then, guided by Hannah’s candle—which was really only like a very little spark of light—we found our way into the kitchen.

“Once this was a grand house and grand people lived here,” I said. “Father lives here now because it belongs to the college. The house is a great deal too big for us, but it is a glorious place for hide-and-seek. This is the kitchen—monstrous dinners used to be cooked here.”

“Now then, Miss Rachel, what do you want?” said Hannah. “And I think young gents as ought to be at school ought to keep out of the Professor’s kitchen. That’s what I think.”

“Oh, please, Hannah,” I said, “this gentleman is from over the seas—he comes from Holland, where the beautiful tulips are grown, and his name is Mr Von Marlo.”

“Catch me trying to say a mouthful of a name like that!” was Hannah’s rejoinder.

“He is exceedingly kind,” I continued, “and he is going to help us.”

“Yes, I will help you if you will let me,” said Von Marlo, speaking in his slow and rather distinct way, and not gabbling his words as we English do.

“I want tea and toast and an egg for father; he is waiting for them, and we must hurry,” I said. “Hannah, be as quick as you can.”

“My word,” said Hannah, “what a fuss!”

She was really a kind creature. She must have been good to live with us in that queer old house, for she was actually the only servant we kept. She must have been brave, too, to spend so much of her time in that desolate kitchen and in those black passages, for gas had never been laid on in the bottom portion of the old house, and it smelt very damp, and I am sure the rats had a good time there at night. But Hannah, forty-five years of age, with a freckled face and reddish hair, and high cheek-bones and square shoulders, had never known the meaning of the word fear.

“Ghosts?” she would cry. “Don’t talk nonsense to me! Rats? Well, I guess they’re more afraid of me than I am of them. Loneliness? I’m a sight too busy to be lonely. I does my work, and I eats my vittals, and when bedtime comes I sleeps like a top. I’m fond of the Professor, and proud of him, he’s so cliver; and I’m fond of Miss Rachel, whom I’ve known since she was born, and of the boys, although they be handfuls.”

This was Hannah’s creed; she had no fear, and she was fond of us. But she had a rough tongue, and could be very rude at times, and could make things unpleasant for us children unless we humoured her.

It was Von Marlo, the Dutch boy, who humoured her now. He offered to cut the bread for toast, and he not only offered, but he went boldly to the cupboard, found a loaf, and cut most delicate slices, and set to work toasting them before a clear little fire in a small new range at one end of the kitchen before Hannah had time to expostulate. Then he suggested that father’s egg should be poached, not boiled, and he found a saucepan and put it on the fire and prepared to poach the egg. And when Hannah said, “My, what a fuss!” he found the egg, broke it into the boiling water, poached it beautifully, and put it on the toast. Really, he was a wonderful boy; even Hannah declared that never had she seen his like.

The tea was made fragrant and strong, and we put it on a little tray with a white cloth, and Von Marlo carried it for me up the dark stairs. We reached the hall, and then we stood and faced each other.

“You are going up all those other stairs with that tray?” said Von Marlo. “Then I insist upon carrying it for you.”

“But suppose father should come out? He sometimes does, you know,” I whispered.

“And if he does, what matter?” said Von Marlo. “He won’t eat us! Come along, Miss Rachel.”

I was very glad he did not call me Dumps. He must have heard Hannah call me Miss Rachel, for, as far as the boys were concerned, I might have been christened Dumps, for they never addressed me as anything else.

We went up the stairs, I going first to lead the way, and Von Marlo following, bearing the little tray with its fragrant tea, hot toast, and poached egg. All went well, and nothing would have happened except the pleasant memory of our little adventure if suddenly at the top of the stairs we had not encountered the stern face of father himself. There was gas in that part of the house, and it had been turned on; father looked absolutely black with rage.

“What is the meaning of this?” he said. “Who are you? Von Marlo, I declare! And what, may I ask, are you doing in my house, and venturing up to my rooms, sir?—What is the meaning of this, Rachel? I shall punish you severely.—Go downstairs, sir; go down at once, and leave the house.”

If it had been Squibs, even had it been Alex or Charley, I think he would have turned at once at the sight of that angry, very fierce face; but Von Marlo was like Hannah—he knew no fear. He said quietly, “You are mistaken, sir; I have done nothing that I should be ashamed of. Your son, Mr Alex, invited me to come into the house, and he also invited me to have tea downstairs. Your daughter went to the kitchen to prepare your tea, and I offered to assist her. It is a way we have in my country, sir, to assist the ladies when they have more to do than they can well accomplish. It is the way we gentlemen act, Professor.”

There was something so quaint in Von Marlo’s utterance that even father was appeased. He murmured, “I forgot you were a foreigner. Well then, thanks; but go away now, for goodness’ sake.—Rachel, take the tea into my bedroom.—Von Marlo, you must go; I cannot have any one in my house this evening; my head is very bad.”

“Good-bye, Mr Von Marlo,” I said; “and thank you, thank you.”

Von Marlo boldly took my hand in the presence of father, and then bolted downstairs, I regret to say, with extreme noise; for, notwithstanding his gentlemanly manners, his boots were thick and rough, and the stairs were destitute of carpets.

“Lay the tea on the table, Rachel,” said my father.

He pushed his hands through his hair, which now seemed to stand up on his head and gave him a wild appearance.

“What does this mean? Tell me at once. Speak, Rachel.”

“I think Mr Von Marlo explained, father. I am awfully sorry. I did ask Agnes and Rita Swan to tea this evening. You said—or at least you never said that I wasn’t to ask them.”

“I never gave you leave to ask any one. How dare you invite people to my house without my permission?”

“I am lonely sometimes, father.”

I said the words in a sad voice; I could not help it; there was a lump in my throat. Father gazed at me, and all of a sudden his manner altered. He seated himself in a chair, and motioned to me to take another. He pulled the little tray with the nice tea towards him, poured out a cup, and drank it. Then he looked at the poached egg, put on his glasses, and gazed at it more fixedly.

“That’s a queer sort of thing,” he said; and then he ate it with considerable relish. “It’s very good,” he said when he had finished it. “Who did it?”

“Mr Von Marlo.”

“Rachel, you must be mad!”

“No, father; he isn’t an English boy, you know. He helped me; he is a very nice boy.”

My father sank back in his chair, and suddenly, to my amazement and relief, he burst into a roar of laughter.

“Well, well!” he said, “I admit that I was in a temper; and I was rude to the lad, too. If you ever have headaches like mine you will get into passions too, Rachel. Pray that you may never have them; my misery is something too awful; and when I saw that lad, with his great dark head, and that hair of his coming straight down to his eyebrows, marching up the stairs with you, I really thought a burglar had got into the house. But, after all, it was only the Dutch lad, and he is clever enough, and doesn’t know our English customs. And to think that he poached an egg!”

“And he made the toast, father.”

My father laughed again.

“Whatever he did, he has cured my headache,” was his next remark; “I feel as right as a trivet. I’ll come downstairs, and I’ll turn those lads out, and those girls.”

“But, father—father darling—they have come by invitation. It isn’t their fault.”

My father took my hand.

“So you are lonely, Dumps?” he said. “And why in the world should you be lonely?”

“I want friends,” I said. “I want some one to love me.”

“All women make that sort of cry,” was his next remark. He pulled me close to him and raised my head and looked into my face.

“You have a nice little face of your own,” he said, “and some day you will find— But, pshaw! why talk nonsense to the child? How old are you, Dumps?”

“I’ll be sixteen in six months,” I said. “It is a long way off to have a birthday, but it will come in six months.”

“And then you’ll be seventeen, and then eighteen, and, hey presto! you’ll be a woman. My goodness, child! put off the evil day as long as you can. Keep a child as long as possible.”

“But, father, most children are happy.”

“And you are not? Good gracious me! what more do you want?”

“I don’t know, father; but it seems to me that I want something.”

“Well, look here, you want girls about you, do you?”

“Yes, some girls.”

“And you think Rita and Agnes Swan, the daughters of our local doctor, quite delightful companions?”

I made no answer.

“Just wait for me a minute, Dumps, and I’ll get dressed and come down and inspect them.”

“Oh, but you won’t frighten them?”

“Frighten them? Well, if they’re that sort they won’t be much good to you. But wait outside the door, and I’ll come down. To think that Von Marlo made the toast! And how do you say he prepared the egg?”

“Poached it, father.”

“Poached an egg for me, and cured my headache, and I scolded him as though he were a rascal! I’ll make amends when I see him next. Wait outside the door, Rachel; I’ll join you in a minute.”

I did wait outside the door, and when my father came out he looked quite spruce. He had absolutely put on a less greasy and shabby coat than usual, and he had brushed his grey hair across his lofty brow; his pale face looked its most dignified and most serene. He took my hand, and we went downstairs.

By this time, as I knew there would be, there were high-jinks going on in the parlour. Von Marlo was not present, but Alex, Charley, Squibs, and the girls were playing at blind-man's buff. They were endeavouring not to be too noisy; I will say that. It was Rita who was blindfold when my father appeared. The tea-table was pushed into a distant corner of the room; a guard had been put on the fire; and Rita was running as silently as she could, but also as swiftly, round and round, with one of father's own silk handkerchiefs tied across her eyes. Agnes was in convulsions of laughter, and the boys were also.

"Caught! caught!" she cried, not noticing the entrance of my father, and she clasped him firmly round the waist.

Her horror when the handkerchief was removed, and she found herself holding on to the Professor, may be better imagined than described. Poor Rita! she very nearly turned silly on the spot. I had to convey her to a chair. Father said, "I am your prisoner, Miss Rita Swan. Am I now to be blindfolded?"

"Oh no, father, you couldn't think of such a thing," I said.

He smiled and looked at me.

"Well, young people," he said, "you seem to be having a very merry time. But where's my Knight of the Poached Egg? Why is he not present?"

However inclined to be impertinent and saucy and rude to me Alex and Charley were when father was not present, they never dared to show this spirit when he was by.

Father related the story of Von Marlo and the poached egg to the other children.

"He is a chivalrous fellow, and I shall talk to him about it when I see him, and thank him. I was very rude to him just now; but as to you, Alex and Charley, if you ever let it leak out at college that he did this thing, or turn him into ridicule on account of it, you won't hear the last of it from me. It's a right good flogging either of you'll get, so just keep your own counsel. And now, boys, if I don't mistake, it's time for you to get to your books.—Rachel, my dear, you and your friends can entertain one another; but would it not be nicest and more cheerful if you first of all requested the presence of Hannah to remove the tea-things?"

As father spoke he bowed to the girls, marched the boys in front of him out of the room, and closed the door behind him.

"Well, I never!" exclaimed Agnes. "To be sure, Dumps, you do have exciting times in this house!"

"I am very glad you have enjoyed it," I said, and I sat down and pushed my hair away from my face.

"How flushed your cheeks are! And where is the Knight of the Poached Egg? What a very funny boy he must be!"

"But you two mustn't tell the story about him either," I said. "I mean, if you have any friends at the college, you mustn't relate it, for they might laugh, and he was really very chivalrous. Father thinks a lot of him; I can see that. And as to me, I think he is the most chivalrous boy I have ever come across in the whole course of my life."

"Oh, that's because he said you were pretty. That's a foreigner's way of talking. Alex spoke about it when you had gone out of the room. He said of course his sister was good-looking; he would always stand up for his sister; but it was a foreigner's way."

As Agnes spoke she raised her somewhat piquant little face and glanced at me, as much as to say, "Poor Dumps! you are very plain, but of course your own people must stand up for you."

"Well, we can have some games now," I said, forcing myself to turn the conversation.

But the girls were disinclined for games; they preferred to sit by the fire and talk, and ask me innumerable questions about the school, my brothers, and Mr Von Marlo, and if Mr Von Marlo would be allowed to come to see them on Sunday evenings, and if I would bring him, and all sorts of talk of that sort. I answered that I shouldn't be allowed to do anything of the sort, and that the only boy I knew in the school except my brothers was Squibs, and of course, now, Mr Von Marlo.

"Well, well! we'll come and see you again if you like; and you must have tea with us, you know, Rachel. Come to see us the night after to-morrow, and we'll have some friends who will surprise you a bit. You do look very nice in that pale-blue dress. But good-bye now, for it is getting late."

Part 1, Chapter III.

A Welcome Caller.

Father looked mysterious during the next few days. I mean that he had begun a strange new habit. During meals he used to put down his knife and fork and stare hard at me. Now, until the affair of the poached egg he had hardly noticed me. He had an abstracted way about him, as though he did not see anybody. Sometimes he would address me as though I were one of the schoolboys, and would say, "Hurry up, Stumps, with your lessons;" or, "My dear

Moore, you will never win that scholarship if you don't put your back into the thing." And then he would start violently and say, "Oh, it's only little Dumps, after all!"

But this new sort of staring was quite different. He was looking at me as though he saw me, and as though he were disturbed about something. I used to turn very red and fidget and look down, and look up again, and get the boys to talk, and employ all sorts of devices to get his eyes off me. But it was all of no use; those large, calm, thoughtful eyes of his seemed screwed to my face, and at times I got quite nervous about it.

After a second or even a third day had passed, and this habit of father's had become in a measure confirmed, I went down to the kitchen to consult Hannah.

"Hannah," I said, "I don't think father is at all well."

"And whatever do you come and say that to me for?" said Hannah.

She was crosser than usual. It was the sort of day to make any woman cross, for there was a dreadful fog outside, and a lot of it had got into the kitchen, and the little stove in the farther corner did not half warm it, and Hannah had a cold. That was certain, for she wore her plaid shawl. Her plaid shawl had been left to her by her grandmother, and she never put it on except when she was afflicted with a cold. She then wore it crossed on her chest and tied behind. She did not like to be remarked on when she wore that shawl, and the boys and I respected her on these occasions, and helped her as much as we could, and had very plain things for dinner.

So now, when I saw the shawl, and observed how red Hannah's nose was and how watery her eyes were, I said, "Oh dear, dear! I suppose I oughtn't to come complaining."

"I wish to goodness you'd keep up in your own part of the house—that I do," said Hannah. "This fog makes one choke, and it's so dismal and dark, and one can't get any light from these bits of candles. I misdoubt me if you'll get much dinner to-day, Miss Rachel. But I don't suppose you children will mind."

"I tell you what," I said; "I do wish you'd let me cook the dinner. I can, and I'd love to."

"You cook the dinner!" said Hannah in disdain. "And a pretty sort of mess you'd have for the Professor if you gave him his food."

"Well, at any rate, Hannah, you can't say that you are the only one who can cook. Think of Mr Von Marlo."

"Don't bother me by mentioning that gawky creature."

"I don't think he's gawky at all," I said.

"But I say he is! Now then, we won't discuss it. What I want to know is, why have you come bothering down, and why have you took it into your head that the Professor is ill? Bless him! he ain't ill; his appetite's too hearty."

"He does eat well," I admitted. "But what I wanted to tell you is this—he has taken to staring at me."

Hannah stopped in her occupation, threw her hands to her sides, and then taking up a lighted candle which stood on a table near, she brought it close to me and looked hard into my face. She made a rapid inspection.

"You ain't got any spots on you, or anything of that sort," she said.

"Oh, I hope not, Hannah!" I said. "That would be a terribly uninteresting way of explaining why father stares at me. I am sure I haven't," I continued, rubbing my hands over my face, which felt quite smooth.

"Then I don't see why he do it," said Hannah, "for you ain't anything to look at."

"I know that," I replied humbly; "but that makes it all the more wonderful, for he does stare."

"Then I can't tell you why; but it's no proof that he's ill, for his appetite's that hearty. I've ordered half a pound more rump-steak than usual for his supper to-night. I'm sure I'm pleased he can eat it. As to you children, you must do with a mutton bone and potatoes, for more you won't get."

"Very well, Hannah," I said, and I sadly left the kitchen.

I traversed the dark passages outside, and found the long flight of stairs which led up to the ground-floor; and then I went into the big, big parlour, and sat close to the fire, and thought and thought.

It was dull at home—yes, it was dull. It would be nearly two hours before the boys came home and before father returned. I had finished all my lessons, and had no new story-book to read. The cracked piano was not particularly pleasant to play on, and I was not particularly musical. I could scarcely see through the fog, and it was too early to light the gas, but I made up my mind that if the fog did not lighten a bit in the next half-hour I would put the gas on and get the story-book which I had read least often and begin it over again. Oh dear! I did wish there was some sort of mystery or some sort of adventure about to happen. Even if Mr Von Marlo came in it would be better than nothing, but I dared not ask him, although I wanted to.

I had been to tea with Agnes and Rita Swan, but it had been quite a dull affair, and I had not found on closer acquaintance that those girls were specially attractive to me. They were silly sort of girls; quite amiable, I am sure, but it seemed such utter nonsense that they at their age should talk about boys, and be so interested in a boys' school, and so anxious to get me to bring Alex and Charley, and even poor, ugly Squibs and Mr Von Marlo, to tea. I

said that I could not possibly do it, and then they took offence and became suddenly cool, and my visit to them ended in a decided huff. The last two or three days at school they had scarcely noticed me, and I had become friends instead with Augusta Moore, who was more to my taste, although she was a very plain girl and lived in a very plain way.

Yes, there was nothing at all specially interesting to think about. School was school, and there was no stimulation in the life; and although our house was such a big one, such a barrack of a place, it was bitterly cold in winter; and we were poor, for father did not get a very large income, although he worked so hard. He was also somewhat of a saving turn of mind, and he told me once that he was putting by money in order to help the boys to go to one of the 'varsities by-and-by. He was determined that they should be scholars and gentlemen; and of course I thought this a very praiseworthy ambition of his, and offered to do without a new summer dress. He did not even thank me; he said that he thought I could do quite well with my present clothes for some time to come, and after that I felt my sacrifice had fallen somewhat flat.

But now to-day, just in the midst of my dismal meditations, there came a smart ring at the hall door bell. There were all sorts of ways of pulling that bell; it was not an electric bell, but it had a good ringing sound which none of those detestable new bells ever make. It pealed through the half-empty house as though the person outside were impatient. I started and stood irresolute. Would Hannah trouble herself to attend to it? Hannah was dreadfully rude about the hall door. She often left people standing there three or four minutes, and on a bitterly cold day like this it was not pleasant to be in such an exposed spot. So I waited on tiptoe, and at the first sound of the second ring I went into the hall, deliberately crossed it, and opened the hall door.

A lady was standing without. She looked me all over, began to say something, then changed her mind and stepped into the house, and held out her hand.

"Why, of course," she said, "you are Rachel Grant."

"Yes, I am," I replied.

"I have come to see you. Will you take me somewhere where I can have a chat with you?"

"But what is your name, please?" I could not help saying.

"My name is Miss Grace Donnithorne. The Professor knows all about me, and will explain about me presently; but I have just come to have a little chat with you. May I come in?"

"You may, of course, Miss Donnithorne," I said. I was secretly delighted to see her; I liked her appearance. She was a fat sort of person, not at all scraggy or thin as poor Hannah was. She was not young; indeed, to me she looked old, although I dare say father would have thought her comparatively juvenile. But that sort of thing—the question of age, I mean—depends altogether on your point of view. I thought Hannah a woman almost dropping into the grave, but father spoke of her as an active body in the prime of life. So, as I did not feel capable of forming any correct judgment with regard to Miss Grace Donnithorne's age, I asked her to seat herself, and I poked the fire, and then mounted a chair to turn on the gas. She watched me as I performed these little offices; then she said, "You will forgive me, child, but don't you keep any servants in this great house?"

"Oh yes," I replied, "we keep Hannah; but Hannah has a bad cold and is rather cross. You would like some tea, wouldn't you, Miss Donnithorne?"

"I should prefer a cup of tea at this moment to almost anything in the world," said Miss Donnithorne. "It's this awful fog, you know; it gets into one's throat." Here she coughed; then she loosened her furs; then she thought better of it and clasped them more tightly round her person; then she drew her chair close to the fire, right on the rug, which father rather objected to, and put her feet, which were in goloshes, on the fender. She held out her hands to the blaze, and said, "It strikes me you haven't much of a servant or much of a fire either. Oh, goodness me! I have my goloshes on and they'll melt. Take them off for me, child, and be quick about it."

I obeyed. I had begun by being rather afraid of Miss Donnithorne, but by the time I had got off her goloshes—and they seemed to stick very firmly to her boots—I was laughing; and when I laughed she laughed in unison, and then we were quite on equal terms and got on quite delightfully.

"What about tea?" she said. "My throat is as raspy as though it were a file."

"I'll see about it," I said, speaking somewhat dubiously.

"Why, where's the difficulty?"

"It's Hannah."

"Does she grudge you your tea?"

"No, I don't think so; but, you see, we don't have tea quite so early, and when your house is so big, and there are a great many stairs, and you have only one servant, and she is rather old—although father doesn't think her so—and has got a bad cold in her head, and is wearing her grandmother's plaid shawl, you have to think twice before you ask her to do anything extra."

"It is a long catalogue of woes," responded Miss Grace. "But I tell you what it is—oh, they call you Dumps, don't they?"

"Have you heard?" I said, puckering my brows in distress.

“Yes; and I think it is quite a nice name.”

“But I’d much, much rather be called Rachel.”

“Well, child, I don’t mind—Rachel or Dumps—I must have tea. Go down to the kitchen, fetch a kettle with hot water, bring it up, and also the tea-caddy and sugar and milk if you can get them, and we’ll make the tea ourselves. But oh, good gracious, the coal-hod is empty! What an awful spot!”

Now really, I thought, Miss Donnithorne was becoming too free. It was all very well for her to force herself into the house; I had never even heard of her before; but to put her feet on the fender, and then to complain of the cold and to say she must have tea, and also to grumble because there was no more coal in the hod, rather took my breath away.

“I see,” said Miss Grace, “that I must help you.”

“Oh no,” I answered, “please don’t.”

For this would be the final straw. It was all very well to take Von Marlo down to the kitchen. A boy was one thing, but an elderly, stout lady about Hannah’s own age was quite another thing. So I said, “I’ll do my best, but you must stay here.”

Good gracious! I had imagined the two hours before father and the boys came home would be dull and would pass slowly, but I never was so worked in my life. First of all I had to go to the coal-cellar and fill the empty hod with coals and tug it upstairs. When I got into the parlour I let Miss Grace do the rest, and she did set to work with a will. While she was building up the fire I purloined a kettle from the kitchen while Hannah’s back was turned, and two cups and saucers, for I thought I might as well have tea with Miss Grace. There was some tea upstairs, and some sugar and a little bread-and-butter, and as father always had special milk for himself in a special can, and as this was kept in the parlour cupboard, I knew that we could manage the tea after a fashion. When I got back there was a roaring fire in the grate.

“There,” said Miss Donnithorne; “that’s something like a fire!”

She had unfastened her furs at last; she had even removed her jacket; and when I arrived with the kettle she stamped it down on the bed of hot coals, and looked round at me with a smile of triumph.

“There, now!” she said. “We’ll have our tea, and afterwards I want to have a chat with you.”

I must say I did enjoy it, and I liked the glowing heat of the fire; it seemed to blot away some of the fog and to make the room more cheerful. And Miss Grace, when she got her way, became very cheerful also. She laughed a great deal, and asked me a lot of questions, in especial about father, and what he was doing, and how he passed his time, and if he was a good-humoured sort of man.

Exactly at five o’clock she got up and took her departure.

“Well, child,” she said, “I am warm through, and my throat is much better, and I am sure you look all the better for a bit of heat and a bit of good food. I’ll come again to see you presently, and I’ll bring some new-laid eggs with me, and better butter than that stuff we have just eaten; it wasn’t fit for a Christian’s palate. Good-bye, child. You’ll see more of me in the future.”

Part 1, Chapter IV.

Miss Grace Donnithorne.

When father came in that evening I was quite lively, but he did not specially notice it. I hoped he would. I felt wonderfully excited about Miss Grace Donnithorne. The boys, of course, were also in the room, but they were generally in a subdued state and disinclined to make a noise when father was present.

Hannah came up with the dinner. She dumped down the tray on the sideboard, and put the appetising rump-steak in front of father. It was rump-steak with onions, and there were fried potatoes, and there was a good deal of juice coming out of the steak, and oh, such a savoury smell! Alex began to sniff, and Charley looked with keen interest and watering eyes at the good food.

“There,” said Hannah, placing a mutton bone in front of Alex; “you get on with that. There’s plenty of good meat if you turn it round and cut from the back part. It’s good and wholesome, and fit for young people. The steak is for the Professor. I’ve got some roast potatoes; thought you’d like them.”

The roast potatoes were a sop in the pan; but oh, how we did long for a piece of the steak! That was the worst about father; he really was a most kindly man, but he was generally, when not absorbed in lecturing—on which occasions, I was told, he was most animated and lively and all there—in a sort of dream. He ate his steak now without in the least perceiving that his children were dining off cold mutton. Had he once noticed it, he would have taken the mutton bone for himself and given us the steak. I heard Alex mutter, “It’s rather too bad, and he certainly won’t finish it!”

But I sat down close to Alex, and whispered, “Alex, for shame! You know how he wants it; he isn’t at all strong.”

Then Alex’s grumbles subsided, and he ate his own dinner with boyish appetite.

After the brief and very simple meal had come to an end the boys left the room, and the Professor, as we often called him, stood with his back to the fire. Now was my opportunity.

“Father,” I said, “I had a visitor this afternoon.”

“Eh? What’s that. Dumps?”

“Father, I wish you wouldn’t call me Dumps.”

“Don’t fret me, Rachel; what does it matter what I call you? The thing is that I address the person who is known to me as my daughter. What does it matter whether I speak of her as Dumps, or Stumps, or Rachel, or Annie, or any other title? What’s in a name?”

“Oh father! I think there’s a good deal in a name. But never mind,” I continued, for I didn’t want him to go off into one of those long dissertations which he was so fond of, quite forgetting the person he was talking to. So I added hastily, “Miss Grace Donnithorne called. She said she was a friend of yours. Do you know her?”

“Miss—Grace—Donnithorne?” said father, speaking very slowly and pausing between each word. “Miss—Grace—Donnithorne?”

“Why, yes, father,” I said, and I went close to him now. “She was, oh, so funny—such a fat, jolly sort of person! Only she didn’t like this house one bit.”

“Eh? Eh?” said my father.

He sank into a chair near the fire.

“That is the very chair she sat in.”

My father looked round at it.

“The shabbiest chair in the whole house,” he said.

“But the most comfy, father.”

“Well, all right; tell me about her.”

“She sat here, and she made me have a good fire.”

“Quite right. Why should you be cold, Dumps?”

“But I thought, father, that you did not want us to be extravagant?”

“It is far more extravagant, let me tell you, Dumps, to get a severe cold and to have doctors’ bills to pay.”

I was startled by this sentiment of father’s, and treasured it up to retail to Hannah in the future.

“But tell me more about her,” he said.

Then I related exactly what had happened. He was much amused, and after a time he said, with a laugh, “And so you got tea for her?”

“Yes; she insisted on it. She wouldn’t let me off getting that tea for all the world. I didn’t mind it, of course—indeed, I quite enjoyed it—but what I did find hard was bringing up the hod of coal from the coal-cellar.”

“Good practice, Dumps. Arms are made to be useful.”

“So they are,” I answered. “And feet are made to run with.”

“Of course, father.”

“And a girl’s little brain is meant to keep a house comfortable.”

“But, father, I haven’t such a little brain; and I think I could do something else.”

“Could what?” said father, opening his eyes with horror. “What in the world is more necessary for a girl who is one day to be a woman than to know how to keep a house comfortable?”

“Yes, yes,” I said; “I suppose so.”

I was very easily stopped when father spoke in that high key.

“And you have complained to me that you find life dull. Did you find Miss Grace Donnithorne dull?”

“Oh no; she is very lively, father.”

Father slowly crossed one large white hand over the other; then he rose.

“Good-night, Dumps,” he said.

“Have you nothing more to say?” I asked.

“Good gracious, child! this is my night for school. I have to give two lectures to the boys of the First Form. Good-night—good-night.”

He did not kiss me—he very seldom did that—but his voice had a very affectionate tone.

After he had gone I sat for a long time by the fire. The neglected dinner-things remained on the table; the room was as shabby and as empty as possible, but not quite as cold as usual. Presently Hannah came in. She began to clear away the dinner-things.

“Hannah,” I said, “I told father about Miss Grace Donnithorne’s visit.”

“And who in the name of wonder may she be?” asked Hannah.

“Oh, a lady. I let her in myself this afternoon.”

“What call have you to be opening the hall door?”

“Didn’t you hear a very sharp ring at the hall door about three o’clock?” I said.

Hannah stood stock-still.

“I did, and I didn’t,” she replied.

“What do you mean by you did and you didn’t?”

“Well, you see, child, I wasn’t in the humour to mount them stairs, so I turned my deaf ear to the bell and shut up my hearing one with cotton-wool; after that the bell might ring itself to death.”

“Then, of course, Hannah, I had to go to the door.”

“Had to? Young ladies don’t open hall doors.”

“Anyhow, I did go to the door, and I let the lady in, and she sat by the fire. She’s a very nice lady indeed; she’s about your age, but not scraggy.”

“I’ll thank you, Miss Dumps, not to call me names.”

“But you are scraggy, for that means thin.”

“I may be thin and genteel, and not fat and vulgar, but I won’t have it said of me that I’m scraggy,” said Hannah; “and by you too, Miss Dumps, of all people!”

“Very well, Hannah. *She* was fat and vulgar, if you like, and *you* are thin and genteel. Anyhow, I liked her; she was very jolly. She was about your age.”

“How d’you know what age I be?”

“Didn’t I see father put it down at the time of the last census?”

“My word! I never knew children were listening. I didn’t want my age known.”

“Hannah, you are forty-five.”

“And what if I be?”

“That’s very old,” I said.

“’Tain’t,” said Hannah.

“It is,” I repeated. “I asked Alex one day, and he said it was the age when women began to drop off.”

“Lawks! what does that mean?” said Hannah.

“It’s the way he expressed it. I don’t want to frighten you, but he said lots of people died then.” Hannah now looked really scared.

“And that’s why, Hannah,” I continued, “I don’t like to see you in your grandmother’s shawl, for I am so awfully afraid your bad cold will mean your dropping off.”

“Master Alex talks nonsense,” said Hannah. “You give me a start for a minute with the sort of gibberish you talk. Forty-five, be I? Well, if I be, my grandmother lived to eighty, and my grandfather to ninety; and if I take after him—and they say I have a look of him—I have another good forty-five years to hang on, so there’s no fear of my dropping off for a bit longer.” As these remarks of Hannah’s were absolutely impossible for me to understand, I did not pursue the subject further, but I said, “Father made such a nice remark to-night!”

“And whatever was that? The Professor is always chary of his talk.”

“He said that it was very wrong to be cold, and that the fires ought to be large and good.”

“He said that?”

“Yes, he did. And then I said, ‘I thought you wanted us to be saving;’ and he said, ‘It’s not saving to catch cold and have doctors’ bills.’ So now, Hannah, you have your orders, and we must have a big, big fire in the parlour during the cold weather.”

“Don’t bother me any longer,” said Hannah. “Your talk is beyond anything for childishness! What with trying to frighten a body in the prime of life about her deathbed, and then giving utterance to rubbish which you put into the lips of the Professor, it is beyond any sensible person to listen to. It’s cotton-wool I’ll put in my right ear the next time I come up to see you, Miss Dumps.”

By this time Hannah had filled her tray. She raised it and walked towards the door. She then, with some skill and strength, placed the whole weight of the tray on her right arm, and with the left she opened the door. I have seen waiters in restaurants do that sort of trick, but I never could understand it. Even if Hannah was dropping off, she must have some strong muscles, was my reflection.

The next day I went to school as usual. The fog had cleared and it was fairly bright—not very bright, for it never is in the city part of London in the winter months.

At school I, as usual, took my place in the same form with Agnes and Rita Swan. I was glad to see that I got to the head of the form and they remained in a subordinate position that day. In consequence during play-hours they were rather less patronising and more affectionate to me than usual. But I held up my head high and would have little to do with them. I was much more inclined to be friends with Augusta Moore than with the Swans just then.

Now, Augusta lived in a very small house a long way from the school. She was very poor, and lived alone with her mother, whose only child she was. Augusta was an uncommunicative sort of girl. She worked hard at her books, and was slow to respond to her schoolfellows’ advances of friendship; but when I said, “May I walk up and down in the playground with you, Augusta?” she on this occasion made no objection.

She glanced round at me once or twice, and then said, “I don’t mind, of course, your walking with me, Rachel, but I have to read over my poetry once or twice in order to be sure of saying it correctly.”

I asked her if she would like me to hear her, and she was much obliged when I made this offer; and after a few minutes’ pause she handed me the book, and repeated a very fine piece of poetry with considerable spirit. When she had come to the end she said, “How many mistakes did I make?”

“I don’t know,” I answered.

“You don’t know? But you said you would hear me.”

“I didn’t look at the book,” I said; “I was so absorbed watching you.”

“Oh! then you are no good at all,” said Augusta, and she looked really annoyed. “You must give me back the book and I must read it over slowly.”

“But you know it perfectly—splendidly.”

“That won’t do. I have to make all the proper pauses, you know, just as our recitation mistress required, and there mustn’t be a syllable too many or a syllable too few in any of the words, and there mustn’t be a single word transposed. That is the proper way to say poetry, and I know perfectly well that I cannot repeat Gray’s *Elegy* like that.”

I said I was sorry, and she took the book from my hands. Presently she went away to a distant part of the playground, and I saw her lips moving as she paced up and down. I walked quickly myself, for I wanted to keep warm, and just before I went into the house Rita Swan came up to me.

“Well, Dumps,” she said, “I wonder how you’ll like it?”

“Like what?” I asked.

Rita began to laugh rather immoderately. She looked at Agnes, who also came up at that moment.

“I don’t believe Dumps knows,” she said.

“Know what?” I asked angrily.

“Why, what is about to happen. Oh, what a joke!”

“What is it?” I asked again. I was so curious that I didn’t mind even their rude remarks at that moment.

“She doesn’t know—she doesn’t know!” laughed Rita, and she jumped softly up and down. “What fun! What fun! Just to think of a thing of that sort going to take place in her very own house—in her very own, own house—and she not even to have a suspicion of it!”

“Oh, if it’s anything to do with home, I know everything about my home,” I said in a very haughty tone, “and I don’t want you to tell me.”

I marched past the two girls and entered the schoolroom. But during the rest of the morning I am afraid I was not very attentive to my lessons. I could not help wondering what they meant, and what there was to know. But of course

there was nothing. They were such silly girls, and I could not understand for one moment how I had ever come to be friends with them.

At one o'clock I went home, and there, lying on the parlour table, was a letter addressed to me. Now it is true, although some girls may smile when they read these words, I had never before received a letter. I have never made violent friendships. I met my school friends, for what they were worth, every day; I had no near relations of any sort, and father was always at home except for the holidays, when he took us children to some very cheap and very dreary seaside place. There was really no one to write to me, and therefore no one ever did write. So a letter addressed to Miss Rachel Grant made my heart beat. I took it up and turned it round and round, and looked at it back and front, and did all those strange things that a person will do to whom a letter is a great rarity and something precious.

I heard the boys tramping into the house at that moment, and I thrust the letter into my pocket. Presently father came in, and we sat down to our midday meal. Luckily for me, neither father nor the boys knew anything about the letter; but it was burning a hole in my pocket, and I was dying for the boys to return to school, and for father to go back to his classes, so that I might have an opportunity of opening the precious epistle.

Just as father was leaving the room he turned back to me and said, "You may accept it if you like."

"What, father?" I said in some astonishment.

"When it is offered to you, you may accept it."

He stooped and, to my great astonishment, kissed me on the forehead. Then he left the room, and a minute or two later left the house.

What could he mean? Would the letter explain? Was there anything at all in the strange words of Agnes and Rita Swan?

Of course, any ordinary girl would have relieved her curiosity by tearing open the letter; but I was somewhat slow and methodical in my movements, and wished to prolong my luxury as much as possible. I had the whole long afternoon in which to learn a few stupid lessons, and then to do nothing.

Just then Hannah came up to remove the lunch-things. She seemed so sure that I would tackle her about her age that she had stuck cotton-wool into her right ear. I therefore did not speak at all; I was most anxious for her to depart. At last she did so, banging the door fiercely behind her. I heard her tramping off with her tray, and then I knew that my moment of bliss had arrived.

I got a knife and very deliberately cut the flap of the envelope open at the top. I then slipped my hand into the precious enclosure and took out its contents. I opened the sheet of paper; I could read writing quite well, and this writing was plain and quite intelligible to any ordinary eyes.

On the top of the sheet of paper were written the words, "Hedgerow House, near Chelmsford, Essex," and the letter ran as follows:

> "My dear Rachel or Dumps,—I want to know if you will come on Saturday next to pay me a little visit until Tuesday evening. I have heard that it is half-term holiday at your school, and should like you to see my pretty house and this pretty place. I believe I can give you a good time, so trust you will come.—Yours sincerely, Grace Donnithorne.
> "P.S.—In case you say yes, I will expect you by the train which leaves Liverpool Street at ten o'clock in the morning. I shall be waiting with the pony and cart at Chelmsford at eleven o'clock, and will drive you straight to Hedgerow House.
> "P.S. 2.—I have a great many pets. I trust you will be nice about them. Don't fear my little dog; his bark is worse than his bite.
> "P.S. 3.—Your clothes will do; don't bother about getting a fresh wardrobe."

This extraordinary letter caused a perfect tumult in my heart. I had never gone on a visit in my life. I really was a very stranded sort of girl. Hitherto I had had no outlets of any sort; I was just Dumps, a squat, rather plain girl, who knew little or nothing of the world—a neglected sort of girl, I have no doubt; but then I had no mother.

A warm glow came all over me as I read the letter. The half-term holiday had not been looked forward to with any feelings of rapture by me. I could well guess what, under ordinary circumstances, would happen. I should be indoors all the morning as well as all the afternoon, for the half-term holiday was so planned that it should not in any way clash with the boys' half-term holiday. If Alex and Charley had had a holiday at the same time, I might have coaxed one of them at least to come for a walk with me in Regent's Park, or to take me to the British Museum, or to the Zoo, or to some other sort of London treat; but I shouldn't be allowed to go out alone, and at present I was not in the humour to ask either Agnes or Rita Swan to entertain me. Now I need ask nobody, for I was going away on a visit. Of course, I understood at last the meaning of father's words, "You may accept it;" though it seemed strange at the time, now I knew all about it, and my excitement was so great that I could scarcely contain myself.

The first business was to answer the precious letter. I sat down and replied that I should be delighted to come to Miss Grace Donnithorne on the following Saturday, that I would be sure to be at Liverpool Street in good time to catch the train, that I adored pets, and was not at all afraid even of barking dogs. I did not mind going in a shabby dress, and above all things I hoped she would call me Rachel, and not Dumps.

Having written my letter, which took me a long time, for I was unaccustomed to writing of that sort, I got an envelope and addressed it to Miss Grace Donnithorne, Hedgerow House, near Chelmsford, Essex, and then went out and

dropped it into the nearest pillar-box. When I returned the afternoon had fled and it was time for tea.

Father came in to tea. This was unexpected; he had not often time to leave his classes and rush across to the house to have tea; but he came in on this occasion, and when he saw me in the parlour bending over the warm fire making toast, he said at once, “Have you accepted it?”

“Then you know all about it, father?” I exclaimed. “Oh yes,” he said, with a grave and yet queer smile trembling for an instant on his lips and then vanishing.

“I thought that must be what you meant, and I have accepted it,” I said. “I mean about going to Miss Grace Donnithorne’s.”

“Yes, child; it is very kind of her to ask you.”

“Yes, isn’t it, father? And she is so nice and considerate; she says I may go in my shabby clothes.”

“Your shabby clothes, Rachel!” he replied, putting on his spectacles and looking at me all over. “Your shabby clothes! Why should they be shabby?”

“Well, father,” I answered, “they are not very smart. You know you haven’t given me a new dress for over a year, and my best pale-blue, which I got the summer before last, is very short in the skirt, and also in the sleeves. But never mind,” I continued, as he looked quite troubled; “I’ll do; I know I’ll do.”

He looked at his watch.

“I declare,” he said, “this will never answer. I don’t wish my daughter, Professor Grant’s daughter, to go away on a visit, and of all people to Miss Grace Donnithorne, shabby. Look here, Dumps, can these things be bought to hand?”

“What do you mean, father?”

He took up a portion of my skirt.

“Things of that sort—can they be bought ready to put on?”

“Oh, I expect so, father.”

“They’re to be found in the big shops, aren’t they?”

“Yes, yes,” I said warmly, for it seemed to me that a new vista of wonderful bliss was opening out before me. “Of course they are. We could go to—to Wallis’s shop at Holborn Viaduct. I have been there sometimes with the boys, and I’ve seen all sorts of things in the windows.”

“Then go upstairs, put on your hat and jacket immediately, and I’ll take you there. You shall not go shabby to Miss Grace Donnithorne’s.”

Wonder of wonders! I rushed up to my room; I put on my short, very much worn little jacket, and slipped my hat on my head, thrust my hands into my woollen gloves, and, lo! I was ready. I flew down again to father. He looked hard at me.

“But, after all, you *are* quite well covered,” he said. It had certainly never before dawned upon his mind that a woman wanted to be more than, as he expressed it, covered.

“But, father,” I said, “you can be shabbily covered and prettily covered. That makes all the difference; doesn’t it, father?”

“I don’t know, child; I don’t know. When I read in the great works of Sophocles—”

He wandered off into a learned dissertation. I was accustomed to these wanderings of his, and often had to pull him back.

“I’m ready,” I said, “if you are.”

“Then come along,” was his remark.

When the Professor got out of doors he walked very fast indeed. He walked at such a fearful pace that I had nearly to run to keep up with him. But at last we found ourselves at Wallis’s. There my father became extremely masterful. He said to the shopman who came to meet him, “I want new garments for this young lady. Show me some, please—some that will fit—those that are ready-made.”

We were taken into a special department where all sorts of dresses were to be found. Now, I had my own ideas about clothes, which by-and-by would turn out quite right and satisfactory; but father’s ideas were too primitive for anything. He disliked my interfering; he would not consult me. In the end I was furbished up with a long brown skirt which reached to my feet, and a dark-red blouse. My father bought these garments because he said they felt weighty and would keep out the cold. He desired them to be packed in brown-paper, paid for them, and gave me the parcel to carry.

I felt a sense of absolute misery as I walked home with my hideous brown skirt and that dreadful red blouse. It was of a dark brick-red colour, and would not suit me; I knew that quite well. Still, father was highly pleased.

“There, now,” he said, “you won’t go to Miss Grace Donnithorne’s looking shabby. But, good gracious me! I’m five minutes late for class. Good-night, Dumps.”

“Won’t you be in to dinner, father?” I asked.

“I don’t know—don’t expect to. Now, not another word, or I shall have one of my furious headaches. Good-night, my dear.”

He banged the hall door, and I sat down with the brown-paper parcel in front of me.

Part 1, Chapter V.

The Professor Chooses a Dress.

Father was really quite interested about my wardrobe. He asked me two or three questions during the few days which ensued between Wednesday and Saturday, and in particular said what good weight the brown skirt was, and what an age it would last me.

“But it’s just a wee bit too long for me,” I could not help remarking.

He raised his brows very high when I said this, and pushed his glasses up on his forehead. Then he said after a pause, “There’s no pleasing some people. Didn’t you tell me that you had outgrown your clothes, and wasn’t I once and for all going to put a stop to that sort of thing? Do you suppose that a man who is saving his money to send his sons to Oxford or Cambridge can afford to buy dresses often? That skirt leaves room for growth, and as it thins off with age it will be less heavy. It’s exactly the sort you ought to have, Dumps, and I won’t hear a word against it.”

“Of course not, father. It was very kind of you to buy it for me.”

“Perhaps you’d best travel in it,” he said.

But to this I objected, on the score that it might get injured in the train.

“Very true,” he remarked. “But, all the same, I should like Miss Donnithorne to see you looking nice. Well, you can put it on when you get there. Be sure you do that. Go straight up to your room and put on your brown skirt and your red blouse, and go down to her looking as my daughter ought to look.”

“Yes, father,” I said meekly.

The joyful day arrived. Father could not take me to the station himself; but Hannah and I went there in a cab. Hannah was terribly cross. She said she knew I’d come home “that spoilt as would be past bearing.”

“You’re going to that fat, vulgar body,” she said. “Oh, don’t you talk to me about it’s being genteel to put on flesh, for I know better. But, anyhow, you’ll be a good riddance while you are away, Dumps. I’ll have time to give the parlour a rare good turning out.”

“Oh Hannah,” I said, nestling up a little closer to her in the cab, “aren’t you ever a little bit sorry that I’m going away?”

“Well, to be sure, child,” she said, her eyes twinkling, “I’ve no fault to find with you. You can’t help your looks, and you can’t help your aggrawating manners, and you can’t help your perverse ways of going on. But there, there! you’re as you’re made, and I’ve no fault to find with you.”

This was a great deal from Hannah, and I was obliged to be satisfied with it.

“I don’t think I shall ever grow up vain,” I thought, “and I suppose I ought to be satisfied.”

By-and-by I was cosily travelling first-class, for father was peremptory on this point, down to Chelmsford. I had left smoky London behind me, and was in the country. It was very cold in the country; snow was over everything, and the whole place looked so white and so sweet, and I just pined for a breath of the fresh country air. So I flung open the window of the carriage nearest to me and poked out my head.

A poke of another sort was presently administered somewhere in my back, and turning, I saw a most irate old gentleman who had been sitting at the other end of the carriage.

“I’ll thank you, young person,” he said, “to shut that window without a moment’s delay. You must be mad to put your head out like that in such bitter weather. I’m certain to be attacked by bronchitis with your wilful and violent way of letting such extreme cold into the carriage.”

I shut the window in a great hurry and sat down, very red in the face. The old gentleman did not take any further notice of me; he buried himself behind his paper. After a minute or two I heard him sneeze, and when he sneezed he gave me a very angry glance. Then he coughed, and then he sneezed again; finally he buried himself once more in his paper.

By-and-by we got to Chelmsford. It was nice to see Miss Grace Donnithorne standing on the platform. She was so round and so jolly and good-natured-looking, and her eyes, which were like little black beads in the middle of her face, quite shone with happiness.

“There you are, you poor Dumps!” she said. “Hop out, dear—hop out.”

I sprang from the carriage to the platform.

“Where is your luggage, my dear?”

“I have it,” I said; “it is in a brown-paper parcel on the luggage-rack.”

I thought I heard Miss Donnithorne murmur some thing; but all she said was, “Give it to me, dear. Be quick, or the train will move on.”

So I lugged it out as best I could, and there I stood in my shabby grey tweed dress, with my little worn-out jacket and my small hat, clutching at the brown-paper parcel. It was fairly heavy, for I had had to put other things into it besides the now dress and the new jacket; but it was tied very securely with cord, and addressed in my father’s handwriting with my name to the care of Miss Grace Donnithorne, Hedgerow House.

“Now then, child,” said Miss Grace, “we’ll get into my pony-trap and drive home. Why, you poor thing, you’re as cold as charity; and no wonder—no wonder.”

She insisted on carrying the brown-paper parcel herself. Waiting outside the station was a very neat little cart drawn by a shaggy pony. There was a boy standing by the pony’s head. He was dressed in quite a smart sort of dress, which I afterwards discovered was called livery. He sprang forward when he saw Miss Donnithorne and took the parcel, which she told him to put carefully in the back of the carriage, and on no account to trample on it with his feet.

Then we both got in, and a great fur rug was wrapped round us, and a cloak of Miss Donnithorne’s fastened round my neck.

“Now you can’t possibly catch cold,” she said.—“Jump up behind, Jim.”

Jim obeyed. Miss Donnithorne took the reins, and off we flew.

Oh, how wonderful, how delightful was the sensation!

We got to the cottage in about a quarter of an hour. Miss Grace told me that although it was called Hedgerow House, it was really only a cottage; but I could not tell what the difference was. It was a long, low, rambling sort of house, all built in one floor. The walls were so completely covered with creepers that, even though it was winter, you could not see much of the original stone-work; and where there were no creepers in full leaf there was trellis-work, which was covered with the bare branches of what in summer, Miss Donnithorne told me, would be roses.

The arrival at Hedgerow House.

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“Do roses really grow like that?” I asked.

“Oh yes,” she replied; “and jasmine and wistaria and clematis, and all sorts of other things.”

The dog that Miss Donnithorne had warned me about came out to meet us. He was a fox-terrier, with a very sharp nose black as coal, and all the rest of his body was snow-white, except his sparkling, melting, wonderful brown eyes. I must say his eyes flashed very angrily when he first saw me, but Miss Donnithorne said, “Down, Snap—down!” and then she laid her hand on Snap’s collar and said, “You’re to be good to this young lady, Snap.”

Snap, after glancing at me in a crooked sort of way, as though he were not at all sure that he would not prove the significance of his name, condescended to wag his tail very slightly.

Miss Donnithorne took me into a very pretty little sitting-room at one side of the pretty little square hall. This room was filled with all sorts of unaccountable things. There were glass cases filled with stuffed birds of gay plumage. Miss Donnithorne glanced at them.

“I’ll tell you their names presently,” she said. “My brother who died brought them to me from South America.”

There were three of these cases. There were also stuffed animals, a hare, a fox, and a dog, perched above doors and at the top of the bookcase. Where there were not these cases of stuffed creatures there were books, so that you really could not see one scrap of the original paper of the room.

“Is this the drawing-room?” I asked.

“Oh, I don’t call it by that name,” said Miss Donnithorne. “I sit here because I have all my books and papers handy about the room. But come to the fire and warm yourself.”

Certainly the fire in that dear little grate looked very different from the dismal fire which Miss Donnithorne had seen in our big, fog-begrimed parlour. I came close to it, and I even so far forgot proprieties as to drop on my knees and to hold out my hands to the blaze.

“Chilblains, I declare!” said Miss Donnithorne, taking one of my hands between both her own. “The best cure for those is to bathe your hands once or twice a day in a very strong solution of salt and hot water. The water must be as hot as you can bear it. But the best cure of all is a good circulation.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Bless you, child! Don’t you know, and you go to school every day?”

I stood up; my hands were warm, and my feet were tingling with renewed life. I had a curious sensation that my nose, which was by no means my best feature, was very red, for it certainly felt hot. I turned round and said, “I am quite warm now.”

“Then you would like to go up to your room. Nancy will go with you. She’ll unpack your parcel for you.”

“Oh no, thank you,” I replied. Then I added, “Is Nancy one of your servants?”

“I have only one servant in this tiny house, my dear, and Nancy is the one. She is a very good-natured sort of girl, and quite pleased at the idea of your coming to stay with me. I treat her as a sort of friend, you see, as she and I are all alone in the house together.”

I began to like Miss Donnithorne better and better each moment. She was so jolly. Whenever she spoke her eyes sparkled as though they were laughing, while the rest of her face was grave. All the same, I did not want Nancy, and I said so.

“I can help myself,” I argued. “We have only got Hannah in our big house.”

“Well, well, dear! if you can manage for yourself, I am the last one to wish you to do otherwise,” said Miss Donnithorne. “Here is your parcel; you can take it upstairs.”

“But how am I to find my way to my room?”

“You cannot lose it, my dear. Go up that little staircase, and when you reach the landing you will see an open door. Go through that doorway and you will be in your own bedroom. There’s no other bedroom on that landing, so you cannot miss it, can you?”

“No,” I replied, laughing.

I seized my brown-paper parcel and ran upstairs. It certainly was nice in the country, and how delicious a small house was! One could be warm in a small house; it was impossible to be warm in that great, rambling, old-fashioned house which belonged to the college and where father and the boys and I lived.

I found my bedroom. Now, girls who are accustomed to nice bedrooms all their lives take, I suppose, no particular interest in another nice bedroom when they are suddenly introduced into it. But my room at home could never, under any pretext, be considered nice. For some extraordinary reason, big as the house was, I had always slept next to Hannah in one of the attics. There was no earthly reason for this, except perhaps that when I was a child I was nearer to Hannah in case I should turn ill. It had never occurred to me to change my room, and it had certainly never occurred to anybody else to make it comfortable. There was a bedstead and a bed of a sort, and there was a looking-

glass, with a crack right down the middle, which stood on a little deal table. The deal table was, as a rule, covered with a cloth, which seldom looked white on account of the London fogs. There was a huge wooden press—it could certainly not be called by the modern name of wardrobe—in which I kept my clothes; and there was a wooden chair on which I placed my candle at night, and that was about all. One side of the room had a sloping roof, and the window was at the best of times of minute proportions. But the room itself had a vast amount of unoccupied space; it was a huge room, and terribly ugly.

Never had I realised that fact until I went into the sweet little apartment which Miss Grace Donnithorne had ordered to be got ready for me. In the first place, its window looked out on a pure expanse of snow-covered country, and I jumped softly up and down as I gazed at that view, for the sun was shining on it, and the sky overhead was blue—blue as sapphires. Then in the grate there was a fire—a fire just as bright as the one in the little sitting-room with the stuffed birds downstairs; and all the hangings of the room were of white dimity, which had evidently been put up fresh from the wash. It was by no means a grand room; it was simple of the simple, but it did look sweet. There was a little nosegay of chrysanthemums on the dressing-table; there were dainty hangings round my snow-white couch; and on the floor was an old-fashioned carpet made of different shades of crimson, and very thick and soft it felt to the feet. The china in the room was very pretty, being white with scarlet berries on it; it all looked Christmasy and wintry and yet cheery, like the sort of Christmases one reads of in the fairy-tales of long ago.

I unfastened my parcel. I had just taken my long brown skirt out of its wrappings, and was shaking it out preparatory to putting it on, when I heard Miss Grace say from the bottom of the stairs, “Dumps, how long will it be before you are downstairs? I am just having the cutlets dished up.”

“Oh dear!” I said to myself.—“I’ll be down in a very few minutes,” I answered.

Now, I had promised father that I would certainly go down in the brown skirt and red blouse, and I would not break that promise to him for the world; so I quickly divested myself of my shabby little travelling costume and got into the brown skirt. It was a little tight in the waist, for I must say mine was very broad, but in every other single particular it was too big for me; it was so long in front that I could scarcely walk without stumbling. Still, I had no doubt that I made a very imposing figure in it. It was thick, it felt warm, and I remembered my father’s remark that there would be room for growth, and that the thinning process would eventually make it not quite so heavy.

But the brown skirt, although a partial success, was nothing at all to the red blouse. I have said that it was a brick-red, and it did not suit my face. It was of common material, made with thick folds, and the sleeves were much too long. I got into it somehow, and cast a glance at myself in the glass. How funny I looked!—my head not too tidy; my face flushed, in by no means a becoming way; with a brick-red blouse and a brown skirt. Nevertheless, I was dressed, and there was a sort of satisfaction in feeling grown-up just for once. I wished that I had had time to plait my hair and pin it round my head; then I might have impressed Miss Grace Donnithorne with the fact that not a child but a grown-up young lady had come to visit her. But as there was no time for that, and as there was a most appetising smell coming up the narrow stairs, I flew down just as I was, in my new costume. I very nearly stumbled as I ran downstairs, but I saved myself by picking up my skirt, and then I entered the little drawing-room.

“Come, come, child!” said Miss Donnithorne. “Not that way; come into this room now.”

I turned and crossed the little hall and entered the dining-room. The dining-room was twice the size of the little room where the stuffed birds dwelt. It was furnished in quite a modern fashion, and looked very nice indeed to me. The cloth on the table was so white that it did not even look dirty by contrast with the snow outside, and the silver shone—oh, like a number of looking-glasses; and the knives were so clean and new-looking.

Miss Grace just opened her eyes for the tenth of a second when I entered the room, and I wondered what reflection passed through her mind, but she gave utterance to none. She invited me to seat myself, and I had the most delicious meal I had ever partaken of in the whole course of my life. Nancy flew in and out, serving us with more and more dainties: puddings, jellies—oh dear, what delicious things jellies are when you have never tasted them before! Then there was fruit—apples which, Miss Donnithorne told me, had grown and ripened in her own garden; and finally we cracked nuts and became excellent friends, sitting close to the fire. Nancy’s final entrance had been with coffee on a little tray. Miss Donnithorne poured out a cup for me and a cup for herself.

“We’ll go out presently,” she said. “It’s a lovely day for a walk. I shall take you a good way and show you some of the beauties of the place. But what about your boots? Are they strong?”

“Oh, pretty well,” I replied.

“I can lend you some rubbers; but what size are your feet?”

I pushed out one of my feet for inspection.

“Dear, dear!” said Miss Donnithorne, “they’re bigger than mine. Mine are rather small, and yours—you will forgive me, but yours are enormous; they really are. Have you been attended to by a shoemaker?”

“Oh, Hannah gets my boots for me,” I said. “She always has them made to order, as she says they last twice as long; and she always insists on having them made two sizes too large. She says she can’t be troubled by hearing me complain that they are too small.”

“Dear me, child!” said Miss Donnithorne. “Do you know that you aggravate me more each moment?”

“Aggravate you?” I answered.

“Yes. You make something plainer and plainer. There! not a word more at present. But before I go upstairs, do tell

me, was it Hannah or yourself who chose *that*?"

As she spoke she pointed to the red blouse and the brown skirt. She evidently thought of them as a costume, for she did not speak of them in the plural; she spoke of them as "that," and if ever there was condemnation in a kind voice, it was when she uttered that word.

"It was father who got them at Wallis's," I said. "I told him when I was coming to you that my clothes were rather shabby, and he bought them—he chose them himself."

"Bless him!" said Miss Donnithorne.

She looked at me critically for a minute, and then she burst into a perfect shriek of laughter. I felt inclined to be offended. It had never occurred to me that anybody in all the world could laugh at the Professor; but Miss Donnithorne laughed till the tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Mercy! Mercy me!" she repeated at intervals.

When she had recovered herself she said, "My dear, you mustn't be angry. I respect your father immensely, but his gift does not lie in the clothing of girls. Why, child, that is a woman's skirt. Let me feel the texture."

She felt it between her finger and thumb.

"Not at all the material for a lady," was her comment. "That skirt is meant for a hard-working artisan's wife. It is so harsh it makes me shudder as I touch it. A lady's dress should always be soft, and not heavy."

"Father thought a great deal of the weight," I could not help saying. "He thought it would keep me so warm."

"Bless him!" said Miss Donnithorne again. "But after all," she continued, "the skirt is nothing to the blouse. My dear, I will be frank with you; there are some men who know nothing whatever about dress, and that blouse is—atrocious. We'll get them both off, Rachel, or Dumps, or whatever you call yourself."

"But," I said, "I have nothing else much to wear. I only brought this and my little, shabby everyday dress."

"Now, I wonder," said Miss Donnithorne; but she did not utter her thought aloud. She became very reflective.

"I should not be surprised," she said under her breath. "Well, anyhow, we'll go out in the shabby little things, for I couldn't have you look a figure of fun walking through Chelmsford with me. That would be quite impossible."

"All right, Miss Donnithorne," I said, inclined to be offended, although in my heart of hearts I had no love for the brown skirt and the red blouse.

"That costume will do admirably for that Hannah of yours," said Miss Donnithorne after another pause. "From what you tell me of that body, I should think it would suit her; but it's not the thing for you."

"Only father—" I expostulated.

"I'll manage your father. Now go to your room, child, and get into your other things as fast as possible."

I went away, and Miss Donnithorne still continued to sit by the fire. Could I believe my own ears? I thought I heard her sigh when I got into the hall, and then I heard her laugh. I felt half-inclined to be offended; I was certainly very much puzzled. Truly my cheeks were red now. I looked at myself in the glass. No, I was not pretty. I saw at once now why people called me Dumps. It is a great trial for a girl when her nose is half an inch too short, and her eyes are too small, and her mouth a trifle too broad, and she has no special complexion and no special look of intelligence, and no wonderfully thick hair, and has no beautiful shades of colouring—when she is all made up of drabs and greys, and her nose is decidedly podgy, and her cheeks inclined to be too fat—and yet when all the time the poor girl has a feverish desire in her soul to be beautiful, when she thinks more of beauty of feature and beauty of form, and beauty, in fact, of every sort, than of anything else in the world. It was a girl with that sort of exterior who now looked into the round glass. It was an old-fashioned glass, but a very good one, and I, Dumps, could see myself quite distinctly, and knew at last that it was fit and right that I should have the name. It was absurd to call a creature like me Rachel. Was not the first Rachel always spoken of as one of the most beautiful women in all the world? Why should I dare to take that sacred name? Oh yes, I was Dumps. I would not be offended any longer when I was called by it. My figure very much matched my face, for it was squat and decidedly short for my age. In the hideous red blouse, and with that brown skirt, I looked my very worst. I was glad to take them off. Talk of heat and weight! I knew at last what it was to be too hot and to have too much to carry.

I was delighted to be in my little, worn-out, but well-accustomed-to garments, and I ran down to Miss Donnithorne, feeling as though I, like Christian, had got rid of a heavy burden.

Part 1, Chapter VI.

At Hedgerow House.

We took a long walk. We went right through Chelmsford, and I was enchanted with the appearance of that gay little country town. Then we got out into the country, where the snow lay in all its virgin purity. We walked fast, and I felt the cold, delicious air stinging my cheeks. I felt a sense of exhilaration, which Miss Donnithorne told me the snow generally gives to people.

“It makes the air lighter,” she said; “and besides, there is so much ammonia in it.”

I did not understand what she meant, but then I did not want to understand. I was happy; I was having a good time. I liked her better each moment.

We got back to the little cottage in time for tea, which we had cosily in the sitting-room with the stuffed birds and animals.

After tea Miss Donnithorne showed me some of her treasures—vast collections of shells, which she had been gathering in different parts of the world ever since she was a small child. I was fascinated by them; she told me that I might help to arrange them for her, and I spent a very blissful time in this fashion until it was time for supper. Supper was a simple meal, which consisted of milk and bread-and-butter and different sorts of stewed fruit.

“I don’t approve of late dinners,” said Miss Donnithorne. “That is,” she added, “not for myself. Now, Dumps, do tell me what sort of meal the Professor eats before he goes to bed at night.”

“Oh, anything that is handy,” I answered.

“But doesn’t he have a good nourishing meal, the sort to sustain a brain like his?”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “Hannah sees to it.”

“But don’t you?” said Miss Donnithorne, looking rather severe, and the laugh going out of her eyes. “Don’t you attend to your father’s wants?”

“As much as I can, Miss Donnithorne. You see, I am still supposed to be nothing but a child, and Hannah has the management of things.”

“You are supposed to be nothing but a child?” said Miss Donnithorne, and she looked me all up and down.

How I did hate the length of leg that I showed in my very short skirt! She fixed her eyes in a very obstinate manner on those said legs, clothed as they were in coarse stockings, which, alack and alas! were darned in more places than one. Then her eyes travelled lower and rested on my feet. I had taken off my huge boots now; but what was the good of that when my feet were enveloped in shoes quite as large, and of the very ugliest possible make?

Miss Donnithorne heaved a profound sigh.

“I wish—” I said impulsively.

“You wish what, Rachel?”

“That you would let me wear the brown skirt.”

“And why, child? It is absolutely hideous.”

“But it is long,” I cried. “You would not see my legs nor my ugly feet.”

“Rachel, you want a great deal of attention; you are being sadly neglected.”

“Am I?” I said. Then I added, “Why do you say so?”

“It is but to look at you. You are not such a child that you could not do hundreds of things which at present never enter into your head.”

“How do you know, Miss Donnithorne?”

“I know,” she answered. “A little bird has told me.” Now, all my life I had hated women who spoke about having confidences with little birds; and I now said impulsively, “Please don’t say that. I am so inclined to like you just awfully! But if you wouldn’t speak about that bird—”

“You have heard of it before?” she asked, and the sparkle came back into her eyes. “Well, never mind how I know. I suppose I know because I have got observation. But, to begin with, tell me how old you are.”

“I’ll be sixteen in a little less than six months.”

“Bless us!” said Miss Donnithorne, “why can’t the child say she is fifteen and a half?”

“Oh, that’s because of the birthdays,” I replied.

“The birthdays?” she asked, raising her brows.

“Miss Donnithorne,” I said impulsively, “a birthday is *the* day in the whole year. A birthday makes up for many very dismal days. On a birthday, when it comes, the sun shines and the world is beautiful. Oh, Miss Donnithorne, what would life be without birthdays?”

I spoke with such emotion and earnestness that the little lady’s face was quite impressed; there even came a sort of dimness over her eyes.

“Then most of your days are dull, little Rachel?” she said.

“They are lonely,” I replied.

“And yet you go to school; you have heaps of companions.”

“But no friends,” I replied.

“I wonder if Hermione Aldyce will suit you?” was her next remark.

“Hermione Aldyce! What a queer name! And who is she?”

“You will see her to-morrow. She is different from you, but there is no reason why you should not be friends. She is much the same age.”

“Is she coming here to-morrow?”

“No; you are going to her. Her father and mother have invited us both to dine with them.”

“Oh!” I said.

I looked down at my length of leg and at my ugly feet, and felt a little shiver going through my frame. Miss Donnithorne laid her hand on my arm.

“I wonder, Dumps,” she said, “if you are a very proud girl?”

“Yes,” I said, “I think I have plenty of pride.”

“But there are all sorts,” said Miss Donnithorne. “I hate a girl who has none. I want a girl to be reasonable. I don’t want her to eat the dust and to do absurd things, or to lower herself in her own eyes. I want a girl to be dignified, to hold her head high, to look straight out at the world with all the confidence and sweetness and fearlessness that a good girl ought to feel; but at the same time I want her to have the courage to take a kindness from one who means well without being angry or absurd.”

“What does all this mean?” I asked.

“It means, my dear Dumps, that I have in my possession at the present moment a very pretty costume which you might exchange for the red blouse and brown skirt. I know a person in Chelmsford who would be charmed to possess that red blouse and brown skirt, and if you wore the costume I have now in my mind, why, you would look quite nice in it—in fact, very nice indeed. Will you wear it?”

“What!” I answered; “give away the clothes father bought for me, and take yours?”

“I could make it right with your father. Don’t be a goose, Dumps. Your father only bought them because he didn’t know what was suitable. Now, will you let me give you the costume that I have upstairs?”

“But when did you get it?”

“The fact is, I didn’t get it. I have some clothes by me which belonged to a girl I was once very fond of. I will tell you about her another time.”

“A girl you were fond of—and you have her clothes, and would like me to wear them?”

“Some of them would not fit you, but this costume would. Will you put it on to-morrow? Will you at least wear it to-morrow for my sake?”

Of course there are all sorts of prides, and it did seem wrong to hurt Miss Donnithorne, and the temptation to look nice was great. So I said softly, “I will wear it to-morrow—yes, I will wear it to-morrow—because you wish me to.”

“Then you are a darling child,” said Miss Donnithorne.

She gave a great sigh of relief, jumped up from her seat, and kissed me.

Soon after that, being very tired with the adventures of the day, I went to bed. How delicious that bed was—so warm, so white, so inviting! How gaily the fire blazed in the grate, sending up little jets of flame, and filling the room with a sense of comfort! Miss Donnithorne came in, and saw that I had hot water and everything I required, and left me.

I undressed slowly, in the midst of my unwonted luxury. Perhaps if I lived always with Miss Donnithorne I should be a different sort of girl; I might even grow up less of a Dumps. But of course not. Nothing could lengthen my nose, or shorten my upper lip, or make me big. I must make up my mind to be quite the plainest girl it had ever been my own misfortune to meet. For I had met myself at last in the looking-glass in Miss Donnithorne’s bedroom; myself *and* myself had come face to face.

In the midst of my pleasure a scalding tear rolled down one of my cheeks at the memory of that poor reflection. I had been proud to be called Rachel, but now I was almost glad that most of my world knew me as Dumps.

Notwithstanding these small worries, however, I slept like a top, and woke in the morning to see Nancy busy lighting the fire.

“Oh dear!” I said, “I don’t want a fire to dress by.”

“Yes, you do, miss, to-day, for it’s bitter cold,” said Nancy.

She soon had a nice fire blazing; she then brought me in a comfortable hot bath, and finally a little tray with a cup of tea and a thin slice of bread-and-butter.

“Now, miss,” she said, “you can get up and dress slowly. Missis said she won’t have breakfast until a quarter to nine this morning, and it is only a quarter to eight now. And, miss, them are the clothes. They’re all beautifully aired, and ready to put on, and missis says that you’ll understand.”

Really it was exciting. It seemed to me that I had been wafted into Fairyland. I sipped my tea and ate my bread-and-butter, and thought what a delightful place Fairyland was, and that, after all, none of the children’s books had half described its glories. I then got up and dressed luxuriously, and at last turned to the chair on which lay the costume I was to wear that day. There was a very pretty skirt of a rich dark-blue; it was trimmed all round the edge with grey fur, and I did not think that in all my life I had ever seen anything quite so lovely. It had even further advantages, for when I walked it made a swishing sound, and raising the skirt, I saw that it was lined with silk.

Now, Hannah had once described to me the wonderful glories of a dress which had belonged to her mother, and which was lined with silk. She said she had bought it at a pawnbroker’s, and she knew quite well the last owner had been a duchess, for only duchesses could afford to wear such an expensive thing as silk hidden away under the skirt.

The bodice of this costume was as pretty as the skirt; it was also silk-lined, and full of little quaint puffings, and there was fur round the neck and on the cuffs. It fitted me to perfection, and I do think that even Dumps looked better in that dark-blue dress, with its grey fur, than I had believed it possible for her to appear in anything.

But there were even further delights; for the dark-blue dress had a beautiful dark-blue coat to match, and there was a little grey fur cap to be worn with it, and a grey fur muff. Oh dear, dear, I was made! And yet there were further treasures to be revealed. I had not seen them before, but I had to put them on before I went down to breakfast—neat stockings of the very finest cashmere, and little shoes with rosettes and buckles. There were also walking shoes of the most refined and delicate make. And, wonder of wonders! they fitted me. I felt indeed that I had come to Fairyland!

Miss Donnithorne was far too much of a lady to make any remark when I came into the room in my dark-blue costume for breakfast. She hardly glanced at me, but went deliberately to the sideboard and began to carve some delicate slices of rosy ham.

I sat down facing the fire. I felt almost self-conscious in the glories of that wonderful costume, and Miss Donnithorne must have guessed that I would have such feelings. She therefore began to talk in her most matter-of-fact style.

“We shall have a very busy day, Rachel,” she said. “There is not much time even for us to finish breakfast, for I have a class in the Sunday-school, and you, if you like, can come with me. Of course, if you prefer it, you can come to church later with Nancy.”

“Oh, I should much prefer to go with you,” I replied.

“That’s right—that’s right,” said Miss Donnithorne. “After church we go straight to the Aldyces’; they’ll take us in their carriage. We shall dine with them, and I think you might like Hermione to come back to have tea with us.”

“You are good,” I said. “It does sound wonderful.”

Then I added, as I broke a piece of crisp toast in two, “I have never ridden in a carriage in all my life.”

“Oh, you are not at all remarkable in that,” replied Miss Donnithorne in her frank way. “London girls, unless their fathers happen to be very rich, don’t have carriages to drive in. But there is one thing I would bid you remember, Dumps.”

“What is that?” I asked, raising my eyes to her face.

“You will meet, my dear, in your way through life, all sorts and conditions of men and women, rich and poor, lowly and haughty, and you will have to remember distinctions. One man may be better than his neighbour; one man may be lower than his neighbour; but the thing that makes the difference between man and man is not what he possesses, but what he is in himself. Now, your father, my dear Rachel, happens to be a much greater and much more distinguished man than Squire Aldyce.”

I wondered why she spoke so. Her laughing eyes were not laughing now; they were wonderfully serious; and her lips wore a remarkable expression of great firmness and yet of great sweetness.

“I am proud to know Professor Grant,” she said, “and you ought to be an exceedingly proud girl to be his daughter.”

“Oh, I love him very much,” I said; but then I added a little tremblingly, “My brother Alex has sometimes told me that father is a great scholar, but I didn’t know—I didn’t understand that all the world—I mean that other people knew about him.”

“Bless the child!” said Miss Donnithorne. “She has been brought up, so to speak, in the dark. You are a little mole, Dumps. You have kept your eyes shut. Some day you will realise what the Professor really is. He has a bigger brain than any other man I happen to know about. He is the foremost man in a most advanced realm of thought; his powers of imagination are great. Did he live in another age, he might have been a second Milton. You ought to be very, very proud indeed to be his daughter.”

It was thus she spoke to me, and so I quite forgot about the dark-blue costume, and accompanied her to Sunday-school, feeling composed and at the same time proud.

The Sunday-school was a very nice one, and the children were the ordinary sort of children one meets in the country. The superintendent of the school came up and shook hands with me. He said he was very proud to meet Professor Grant's daughter. It was quite amazing—Fairyland was growing more dazzling each moment. It was not only that I was lifted right out of my ugly surroundings, but that I, plain as I was, was turned into a sort of princess. Surely no princess had ever worn a more lovely dress; and surely no princess could hold her head higher, if what Miss Donnithorne said about my father was true.

In church I regret to say that I more than once stroked the grey fur muff and softly felt the texture of my dress. But after church was over fresh excitement was in store for me.

Hermione Aldyce was waiting in the church porch for us. She was alone. I don't in the least remember what she wore. She was very tall and very slim, and I am sure she was very young, for she wore her hair in two great plaits down her back. Her hair was dark-brown, and her eyes were exactly the same colour. She had a face with a pale, creamy complexion, and when she smiled she showed two rows of little even teeth, white as pearls.

"Dear Miss Donnithorne," she said. "And is this Dumps?"

I could not feel indignant, even though I resented being called Dumps by a total stranger, for Hermione's eyes had a sort of pleading expression in them, and she seemed sorry the moment she had said the word.

"Of course I ought to call you Miss Grant," she said.

"No, no," I answered; "I am Rachel Grant. Nobody in all the world ever yet called me Miss Grant."

"Is the carriage waiting, Hermione?" said Miss Donnithorne. "It is cold here in the porch."

"Yes," replied Hermione. "And father and mother have not come. Father would have had to walk back, for we could not all go in the carriage, and so mother decided to stay with him. Father has a cough—not much—nothing to speak of."

"Come then, dear, we will go at once," said Miss Donnithorne.

She got into the carriage first; then I was desired to step in, and notwithstanding my smart dress, I am afraid I was very awkward as I got into that carriage. Miss Donnithorne and I had the seat facing the horses, and Hermione sat opposite to us. It seemed to me as though we flew over the country; the whole feeling was too delicious—the softly padded cushions, the rhythmic beat of the horses' feet. The girl who was not fortunate enough to possess a father like Professor Grant had some compensations! Such a carriage! Such a nice face! The girl herself impressed me in the most marvellous way. As to the dreadful Swans, I am afraid I gave them anything but kind thoughts at that moment.

By-and-by we got to the house. Then Hermione took possession of me.

"You are my guest," she said. "Come up and I'll show you my room."

We ran upstairs together. I was feeling so very good that I did not think for a moment that anything but good could befall me during that delightful visit. Hermione took me first to her bedroom, and then into a little sitting-room which opened out of it.

"I do my lessons here," she said, "and read here, and entertain my friends. I haven't many friends. I cannot tell you how interested I was at the thought of your coming to-day."

"Were you indeed?" I answered.

I wondered what she would have thought if I had come to visit her in the brown skirt and red blouse.

"You must take off your pretty jacket," she said.

"What a sweet frock that is! In what shop did you buy it?"

"I didn't buy it at all," I said.

I felt my cheeks crimsoning. There was a kind of naughty pride in me that would not tell her the truth that Miss Donnithorne had given it to me.

"I suppose your governess, or whoever takes care of you, arranges your clothes," said Hermione in a careless tone. "Well, it is sweetly pretty, and so becoming! And what nice hair you have!"

"Nice hair?" I responded.

"Why, of course it is nice; it is so thick and such a good colour. It will look very handsome when you have it arranged in the grown-up style."

"I don't want to be grown-up," I said. "I'd like to be a child always—that is, if I could have birthdays all the same."

"Do you think so much of your birthdays?" said Hermione, leaning up against the window-sill as she spoke, and twiddling with a paper-knife. "I think they're rather tiresome. I think birthdays are overdone."

“You wouldn’t if you knew what my birthday was like,” I said.

“Oh, then,” she exclaimed, “you must tell me all about it.”

I was just about to explain, wondering if I could get her to see the vivid picture of the bright day, the presents, the anxious little girl, whose heart had been aching for so many long months just because of this glorious time, when a great gong sounded through the house, and Hermione said, “Oh! we can’t talk at present; it is dinner-time. Come along, Rachel; come downstairs.”

Squire Aldyce was a very aristocratic-looking old gentleman, and his wife was the sort that one would describe as a very fine lady indeed. I did not like her half as much as I liked him. He was quite sweet. He congratulated me on being my father’s daughter, and asked when the Professor was going to bring out another pamphlet on some appallingly learned subject, the name of which I could not possibly pronounce. I said I did not know, and a minute or two later we found ourselves sitting round the dinner-table.

There were a few other guests, and I was introduced to them as Miss Rachel Grant.

“The daughter of the well-known Professor,” said the Squire after each of these formalities.

The ladies did not take much notice of me, but the gentlemen stared at me for a minute or two, and one man said, “I congratulate you, little girl. To be so closely related to so great a man is an honour, and I hope you appreciate it.”

Dear old father! I did not know that the glories and laurels he had won were to follow me, such a very plain little girl, to such a grand house.

When dinner came to an end we again went upstairs, and Hermione showed me her treasures, and forgot to ask me about my birthdays. We were having a long and very serious talk, in which she spoke of books and music and the delights of the higher sort of education, when I broke in by saying suddenly, “You don’t understand me a bit.”

“What in the world do you mean? What is the matter?” she exclaimed.

“Because I don’t love study, or books, or anything of that sort. I think,” I added, my eyes filling with tears, “that I have come here as a sham, for I am not the least morsel like father—not the least.”

“Perhaps you resemble your mother,” said Hermione in her very calm way.

I had quite loved her up to now, for she had such beautiful manners and such a nice face; but now when she made this reply I looked at her steadily, and saw that, just because of her wealth and high birth and fine clothes, her knowledge of life was limited. She could not see things from my point of view.

“I don’t think I am the least like my darling mother,” I said, “for she was beautiful.”

“And don’t you remember her?”

“I don’t remember her. If she were alive I should be quite a different sort of girl. But oh, Hermione! sometimes at night I think of her just when I am dropping off to sleep. She comes to me when I am asleep. To think of any girl having a mother! Oh, it must be the height of bliss and of joy!”

Hermione stared at me for a minute; then she said, “I don’t understand. I love my father best.”

“Do you?” I said, a little shocked.

“Of course you cannot possibly love your mother’s memory as you do your father, for he is such a great man—a man whom all the world is proud of.”

“But he is only a teacher in a school,” I could not help saying.

“He could be anything; but he will not leave the school. He loves to instruct the boys. But it isn’t for his scholastic work he is known; it is because he is himself, and—and because of those wonderful lectures, so many of which are published. He lectures also at the Royal Society, and he writes pamphlets which set the greatest thinkers all agog. Oh, I should be proud of him if I were you!”

“I am glad,” I said. I knew that I loved the Professor dearly. Had I not all my life sacrificed myself for his sake, as every one else had also done?

Hermione said after a pause, “Miss Donnithorne told me that you were—”

“What?” I asked.

“A little bit—don’t be offended—a little bit neglected.”

“She had no right to say so; I am not.”

As I spoke I laid my hand on the dark-blue dress, and all of a sudden I grew to hate it. I disliked Hermione also.

“What is the matter?” she said. “Have I hurt you in any way? I wouldn’t for all the world. I am so truly glad to make your acquaintance.”

“You didn’t mean to,” I said, recovering my temper; “but the fact is, Hermione, I live one life and you live another.

You are rich, and we are poor; I am not ashamed to say it."

"It must be rather exciting to be poor," said Hermione. "I mean it must be interesting to know the value of money. But you don't look poor, Dumps—or—I mean Rachel. That dress—"

"Oh! don't talk of my dress, please."

"I know it's bad form," she replied, and she seemed to shrink into her shell.

After a minute she spoke on a different subject, and just then a stately but somewhat withered-looking lady entered the room.

"Hermione, Miss Donnithorne says that you and Miss Grant must put on your things now in order to return to Hedgerow House, otherwise you won't be in time to receive the Professor."

"The Professor?" I cried, jumping to my feet. Hermione laughed.

"You don't mean to say that Miss Donnithorne hasn't told you that your father is coming to have tea with you both?"

"I didn't know anything about it. My father? But he never leaves London."

"He has managed to leave it to-day. How queer that you shouldn't know!"

"I had better get dressed; I shouldn't like to be late," I said.

I felt all of a flutter; I was nervous. Would he remark my dark-blue costume, and be angry with me for not wearing my brown skirt and red blouse?

"I'll get dressed in a twinkling," said Hermione. "Come along, Dumps; this is interesting."

I wondered why she was so pleased, and why a sort of inward mirth began to consume her. Her eyes were twinkling all the time. I began to like her a little less and a little less; and yet, of course, she was a most charming and well-bred and nice-looking girl.

We went downstairs a few minutes later. We said good-bye to the Squire and his wife. The Squire said he hoped he would have the honour of entertaining Professor's Grant's daughter again, and the Squire's lady made some remark which I presumed signified the same. Then we went away, driving as fast as ever we could in the direction of Hedgerow House.

Part 1, Chapter VII.

A Surprise Tea.

We were a little late after all, for the Professor was standing on the steps. It does seem so ridiculous to call your own father the Professor, but after all I had heard of him that day I really felt that I could not even think of him under any other title. He was dressed just as carelessly and with as little regard to outward appearances as though he had been giving a lecture to the Sixth Form boys in the college. His hair was rumpled and pushed back from his lofty forehead. His eyes had that somewhat vacant stare which, notwithstanding his genius, I could not help constantly noticing in them. His adorers—and it struck me that the Professor had many adorers—called that his "far-away" or his "abstracted" or his "marvellous thinking" look, but to me it seemed that it was his vacant look. But there! it was very wrong of me to think such a thing about father.

"He has come," said Miss Donnithorne. "Rachel, your father is here. I am more vexed than I can say not to have been ready to welcome him. I hope Nancy saw to his comfort. Jump out, child, and run up the path. Be the first to greet him. I will follow you immediately."

I was almost pushed by Miss Donnithorne out of the carriage, and I ran up the little path which led to Hedgerow House. I felt that Miss Donnithorne and Hermione were following me a few steps behind. I wondered if father would notice the dark-blue dress and the grey fur. If he did he would be sure to say something which would let the cat out of the bag—something which would lower me for ever in the eyes of Hermione. As I had not chosen to tell Hermione at the time that Miss Donnithorne had requested me to wear the dress that day, I should dislike beyond anything to have father blazoning the whole secret abroad. But he did nothing of the kind; he merely said, "Well, Dumps, you look flourishing."

He held out his hand and gave me the tips of his fingers. Then he shook hands with Miss Donnithorne, and Miss Donnithorne presented Hermione to him. I observed that Miss Donnithorne's cheeks were brighter than their wont. She began to speak in a very apologetic way, but father cut her short.

"It doesn't matter," he said; "pray don't apologise." They both went into the house, and it seemed to me that they forgot all about Hermione and me as completely as though we did not exist.

"How queer!" I could not help saying.

"Queer?" said Hermione. "It isn't a bit queer; it's what we ought to expect."

"I don't know what you mean," I said.

She looked at me. I observed then that her soft brown eyes could be quizzical at times. The lids became slightly narrow, and a smile, not the sweetest, trembled on her lips; then it vanished.

“Have you seen Miss Donnithorne’s garden?” she asked.

“Yes,” I replied; “and I am cold; I want to go into the house. Let us go in, Hermione. I want, now father is with us, to be as much with him as I can.”

“Oh, you little goose!” said Hermione. “For goodness’ sake leave them alone. Come upstairs and show me your room.”

“Why should I leave them alone?” I said.

“You are a baby!” said Hermione. She spoke almost crossly.

I certainly absolutely failed to understand her. I said after a minute, “I suppose that I understand father better than you do, and better than Miss Donnithorne does.”

“Better than Miss Donnithorne understands him?” cried Hermione. “Oh Dumps! I must call you Dumps, for you are quite delicious. Never, never since I was born did I meet a little girl quite so much the colour of—the colour of—”

“The colour of what?” I said.

She had her umbrella in her hand. It was very neatly folded. I really don’t know why she brought it, as we had driven in a covered carriage; but now she poked and poked in the snow with it until she came to the grass beneath.

“The colour of that,” she said.

I am sure I turned scarlet; and I can assure you, readers, that I was not at all pretty when I turned that colour, for my complexion was somewhat muddy, and I had none of those delicate pinks and whites in my skin which make people think you so absolutely charming.

“I don’t understand you,” I said. “I think you are very rude.”

She laughed and patted me on the arm.

“You are a very nice girl,” she said. “I know that; but you will forgive me. I perceive that Miss Grace Donnithorne is right and you know nothing of the world.”

“I don’t know anything whatever of the world you live in,” I answered. “I know nothing whatever of the world which suddenly declares that a person whom I scarcely know at all knows more of the heart of the one person whom I have been brought up with all my life than I do myself. I positively declare that Miss Grace Donnithorne does not know as much about father as I do.”

“And I defy you to prove it. If I were a boy I’d make a bet on it,” said Hermione. “But there I never mind; don’t let us talk on the subject any longer. Come and show me your room, and afterwards you can tell me about yourself.”

I had to crush down my gathering wrath, and we went upstairs. Hermione was restless; I tried to talk in a matter-of-fact and yet haughty sort of way, but she hardly replied.

“It is so amusing,” she said.

“What is the matter with you?”

“Oh, to be in the house with *them*, you know.”

“The house with whom?”

“Why, the Professor and Miss Grace Donnithorne.”

“I don’t see that it is the least remarkable,” I answered.

“But it is—very. And dear old Grace, too—dear old Grace—whom I have known ever since I was a baby. I suppose I am glad, but perhaps I am sorry too; I am really not sure. You see, I have hardly looked at your Professor, but I’ll study him tremendously when tea is ready. Now do come downstairs, Dumps, and don’t look so bewildered. You would be quite nice-looking if your hair was properly arranged. Here, let me arrange it for you. Why should it sag in that hideous way over your forehead? Give me your comb.”

Hermione could be very masterful. She folded back my hair in some marvellous fashion, which made my forehead look much broader, and then she plaited it in two thick plaits which hung down my back. Those plaits kept the front quite tidy and in complete order; and then she brought a little hand-glass and made me look at my reflection behind.

“You look quite a nice girl,” she said. “I grant that you have not the most perfect features in the world, but a great many girls who have better features would give up everything for your hair.”

Yes, my hair was very thick, and it was very bright, and somewhat tawny in shade, and the two plaits were massive and very long, for they hung far below my waist.

“I have such a little screw of hair,” said Hermione, “that I shall be delighted when I am allowed to put it up; but

mother won't hear of it until I am seventeen. She says that, as my hair is so rat's-taily, I may as well put it up when I am seventeen, but that won't be for a whole year and three months."

"Then you are not sixteen yet?"

"No."

"I am three months younger than you," I replied, "and I am not a bit anxious to be grown-up; I want to remain a child."

"Perhaps so; with your sort of figure and your thick hair—it won't look nearly so well when it is coiled round your head—I am not surprised. Oh, delightful sound! There's the tinkle of dear Grace's tea-bell. Now come along down; I do want to store at the Professor."

We did go down. There was a very cosy tea; it was laid in the pretty parlour. Father sat at one end of the table and Miss Donnithorne at the other, while Hermione occupied the central position at the side near the fire, and I the opposite one. The Professor kept talking all the time. It did not matter in the very least whether he was answered or not. He was explaining the peculiarities of a fossil which he had discovered by the merest chance a month ago. He was telling the exact age which had produced this fossil, and using most unintelligible names. Miss Donnithorne was listening, and now and then putting in a remark, but neither Hermione nor I uttered a word. I began to day-dream. The Professor was just as he always was. He always talked like that—always. He was a little less interesting than usual when he got on fossils; they were his very driest subject. The boys and I knew quite well what subjects he was best on: he was best when he alluded to the great Greek tragedians; occasionally then an ordinary person *could* get a glimmering of his meaning. I thought I would show those good ladies, Miss Donnithorne and that precious Hermione, that I understood father a little better than they did. So I said after a pause, "Which of the plays of Sophocles do you like best, father?"

It was a very daring remark, and Miss Donnithorne opened her brown, laughing eyes and stared at me as though I had committed sacrilege. Hermione very nearly jumped from her seat. My words had the effect of pulling the Professor up short. He stared at me and said, "Eh, Dumps—eh? What are you talking about, Dumps?"

"Which play of Sophocles do you regard as his greatest?" I said, and I felt very proud of myself as I uttered this remark.

I had now led father into the stream of conversation in which he could show himself off to the best advantage. He took to the bait, forgot the fossils, and began to talk of that other fossil the old Greek tragedian. I leant back in my chair; I had accomplished my object. Father looked as though he were about to fight the whole world in the cause of Sophocles—as though any human being wanted to take any of his laurels from the poor old dead and gone tragedian.

But I was watching my chance. I saw that the ladies were impressed, and by-and-by I swept father once more off his feet into another direction by asking him to explain one of the greatest passages in the works of Milton. Father turned on me almost with fury. Miss Donnithorne muttered something. Hermione said, "Oh, I am so hot with my back to the fire!"

But again father rose to the bait and burst forth in a panegyric on Milton which I suppose a scholar, if he knew shorthand, would have taken down on the spot, for I know it was marvellously clever. But Miss Donnithorne was a little pale when father had finished. Then he and she got up and went into the garden, and walked up and down; and Hermione took my hand and dragged me into the room with the stuffed birds, and flung herself on the sofa and burst into a peal of laughter.

"How rude you are!" I said. "What is the matter?"

"Oh, you are a genius, you greenest of green Dumps!" was her remark. "To think of your daring to oppose that stream of eloquence!"

"Well, you see, I know father, and I know that there are two subjects on which he can be wonderful; one is Sophocles and the other Milton."

"I never heard of Sophocles," said Hermione in her calmest tone.

"You never heard of Sophocles?" I said, for the temptation to crow over her was too great to be resisted. "Why, he was the greatest writer of the tragic muse that ever existed."

"For goodness' sake, Dumps—" Hermione pressed her hands to her ears. "If you talk like that I shall fly."

"I don't know him," I said; "and what is more," I added, "I never mean to. If you had a father like the Professor you'd hate the classics. But after Sophocles," I continued, "the person he loves best is Milton. I haven't read Milton, and I don't mean to."

"Oh, I suppose I shall have to read him," said Hermione. "But poor, poor dear Grace! Does he always talk like that, Dumps?"

"He was particularly lucid to-day," I said. "As a rule he is much more difficult to understand."

"And do you always have your meals with that sort of stream of learning pouring down you?"

"Oh no; most times he is silent."

“That must be much better,” said Hermione, with a profound sigh.

“I don’t know; it’s rather dull. We aren’t allowed to talk when the Professor is silent.”

“Bless him! And Grace is such a chatterbox, you know.”

“She is very, very nice,” I said.

Just then the Professor came in.

“Where is Dumps?” he said.

I jumped to my feet.

“Good-bye, child,” he said, holding out his hand limply. Then he drew me to him and pressed a very light kiss on my forehead.

“Glad you are with Grace—Miss Donnithorne, I mean. Hope you are enjoying yourself. I’ll expect you back on the evening of Tuesday. School begins on Wednesday. You mustn’t neglect your books. As glorious Milton says—”

He rhapsodised for two minutes, then stopped, glanced at Hermione, and said abruptly, “Don’t know this young lady.”

“Oh yes, you do, Professor,” said Miss Donnithorne. “This is my great friend, Miss Hermione Aldyce.”

“My father is a great admirer of yours, sir,” said Hermione, colouring slightly and looking very pretty.

“Eh—eh?” said the Professor. “Don’t like people to admire me. Good-bye, good-bye.—Good-bye, Miss Donnithorne—Grace, I mean—no, Miss Donnithorne, I mean. Good-bye, good-bye!”

He was out of the house and down the path before we had hardly time to breathe. Hermione went away a few minutes afterwards, and Miss Donnithorne and I had the evening to ourselves. We had supper almost in silence. There was a sort of constraint over us. I looked at Miss Donnithorne, and saw that she was very pale. I said to myself, “No wonder, poor thing! She has had some of father’s eloquence dinned into her ears; it is enough to scare any one.”

After a long period of silence, during which I was scraping more and more apple off the core of the baked one I had been eating, and trying to fiddle with my bread and get it to last as long as possible, she said abruptly, “One’s duty is sometimes difficult, is it not, little Rachel?”

“Is it?” I answered. “Yes, I suppose so.”

She looked at me again.

“You are the index-finger which points to the path of duty,” was her next remarkable speech.

This was too much!

“I hate being called an index-finger!” was my answer. “I don’t know what it means.”

She got up, put her arm round me, and kissed me.

“I would be good to you,” she said in her softest voice.

It really was difficult to resist her. She was a very sweet woman. I knew it then by the way she kissed me, and I don’t think in all my life I ever felt anything softer than the soft, soft cheek which was pressed against mine. Had she been a girl of my own age, she could not have had a more delicate complexion.

“You are good to me—you are very good to me,” I said with gratitude.

“I like you and even love you, and I hope you will like me and not misunderstand me.”

“But why should I?” I asked.

“Come into the other room, child,” was her remark.

We went into the room where the stuffed birds were, and Miss Donnithorne sat down and poked up the fire.

Then she said gently, “Does he always talk as much as he did at tea?”

“Who, Miss Donnithorne?”

“Your father, my dear.”

“Not always,” I answered.

She gave a sigh of profound thankfulness.

“But does he at most times?”

“Most times he is silent,” I said, “and we are all silent too. It’s the rule at home for none of us to speak when the

Professor is eating. If he likes he speaks, but none of us does."

"What do you mean by 'none of us'?"

"The boys and I. We sit very still. It isn't difficult for me, because I am accustomed to it; but Alex—he sometimes moves his legs, for they are so long. Father is annoyed then. Father suffers from headache."

"No wonder, with such a brain. His learning is colossal!"

"It is," I said wearily.

"You admire him very much, don't you, Dumps?"

"Naturally, because he is my father." But then I added, "I only wish he wasn't so learned. I hate learning, you know. I never mean to be learned."

Miss Donnithorne laughed, and her favourite expression, "Bless the child!" burst from her lips.

Part 1, Chapter VIII.

Home Again.

I went home on Tuesday evening. I had no more very specially interesting conversations with Miss Donnithorne; but she gave me during the whole of Monday and all Tuesday, until it was time to put me into the train for my return journey, a right royal time. I can speak of it in no other way. I lived for the first time in my whole existence. She managed to open up the world for me. She did not tell me about the dead and gone great people, who to me were very musty and mouldy and impossible; but she talked of living things—of birds and beasts and flowers. She was great on flowers. She said the country was the right place to live in, and the town was a very melancholy abode, and not specially good for any one. But then she added, "It is the lot of some girls and some men and women to live in the town, and when it is they must make the best of it."

I began to consider her not only a most agreeable woman, but also a very noble woman.

"Now, if you lived in our house, would you make things different?" I said.

"I shall—" she began, and then she stopped.

"Oh yes, Dumps—yes. Your house isn't at all what it ought to be; it isn't well ordered."

"How would you manage things? I wish you would tell me, Miss Donnithorne—I really do—for now I have been with you, and eaten such delicious meals, and been in such a pretty, very clean house, I see the difference."

"It would be difficult for you to make much change," she said; "but of course there are always things to be done. Your house wants—"

She paused to consider. There came a frown between her brows.

"Dumps dear," she said after a pause, "I cannot explain just now. Your house wants—well, I will say it—to be turned topsy-turvy, inside out, round about; to be—to be made as different from what it is now as the sun is different from the moon."

"If that is the case I needn't trouble," I said in a sort of desponding tone, "for Hannah won't work any harder, and I don't think I can; and father likes his meals anyhow, and the boys and I—well, I suppose we are poor; I'm sure I don't know, but there doesn't seem to be much money. It will feel so strange when I go home."

"Trust to better times coming," said Miss Donnithorne. "The house can be altered. I will write to you about it."

We were sitting by the fire on the last evening when she said this. I turned to her.

"Why don't you tell me now?"

But she said, "No; it will be best to write. The fact is, I could not tell you now; it will be best to write."

"What a darling little house this is!" was my next remark. "If only we could have a sweet little house like this to live in in town, how happy I should be!"

"It is a nice house," she said. "I don't think I'll give it up. In fact," she added, "I have made up my mind not to."

"Were you thinking of moving?" I asked.

"I have made up my mind that the house shall remain—I mean that I shall keep the house," was her unintelligible remark; and then she got very red—quite scarlet—all over, and she walked to one of the bookcases, opened it, and took out two volumes of *The Daisy Chain* and two more of *The Heir of Redclyffe*, and flung them into my lap.

"You haven't read those, have you?" she asked.

"Oh no," I replied, opening the first volume that came handy, and dipping into its contents.

“I think you will like them,” she said. “Take them back with you; put them into your brown-paper parcel. I mean—” She stopped.

She was a funny woman, after all. Why did she draw herself up each moment? It became almost irritating.

Well, the precious, darling, joyful time came to an end, and I was once more in the train. I was in the train, but on the rack above me there was no longer a brown-paper parcel—a hideous, humiliating brown-paper parcel. On the contrary, there was a neat little trunk in the luggage-van, and the only thing I had with me was my umbrella, which I held in my hand. I was wearing the dark-blue dress with the grey fur, so my hands were warm with my little grey muff, and altogether I was a totally different creature from the girl who had travelled down to Chelmsford on the Saturday before.

Hannah was waiting for me on one of the big platforms at Liverpool Street Station. I was amused at the way she stared at me.

“Sakes!” she cried, “who’s that?”

I went up to her and clapped her on the shoulder.

“It’s I. I am smart, am I not, Hannah?”

“Sakes!” said Hannah again, “I wouldn’t ha’ known you. Here, come along—do. Where in the name of fortune did you get them things from?”

“I’ll tell you presently.”

“And where’s your brown-paper parcel? My word, if it’s lost there’ll be a fuss! I don’t think I dare take you home if the parcel is lost; all your best linen in it, and your night-dress with the frills, and the handkerchiefs, and the stockings, and the dress you went down in, and the new skirt and blouse as the Professor gave you. Wherever be the parcel?”

I felt very dignified and grand. I called a porter.

“My luggage is in the van behind that carriage,” I said—“the van at the end of the train.”

“You ain’t never put a brown-paper parcel in the van, child?” said Hannah, in high dudgeon.

“Oh, come along, Hannah,” I said.

I swept her with me. She was quite neatly dressed, but I saw the cotton-wool sticking in her right ear, and somehow the depression of all that was before me in the ugly house swept over my mind with renewed force. The trunk was small and wonderfully neat. It had my initials, R.G., on it. Hannah gave a snort.

“I suppose the person as togged you up in all that finery give you the trunk as well,” she said.

“You may suppose anything you like, Hannah; the trunk holds my clothes. Ladies cannot go about with brown-paper parcels. Now then!”

The trunk was put on the top of a four-wheeler—nothing would induce Hannah to go in a hansom—and we drove back to the old house belonging to the college. It was dark and dismal, for the dim light of one gas-jet in the hall only made the shadows look the deeper. The parlour, too, was quite hideous to behold. It was more than usually untidy, for there had been no one to put the books in order or keep confusion at bay since Dumps had gone. Not that Dumps was in herself in the very least of the tidy sort, but she was a few shades tidier than the boys, Alex and Charley.

Alex was sitting by the fire with his shoulders hitched up to his ears; he was conning a Latin treatise, muttering the words aloud. I came in, stole softly up to him, and gave him a slap on the back.

“Goodness gracious! who’s that?”

Alex sprang to his feet. He saw a smartly dressed girl. Alex secretly adored girls. He became immediately his most polite self.

“I beg your pardon,” he said, “I—”

He approached in the direction of the nearest gas-jet in order to turn it up higher. Then he recognised me. He recoiled at once; he was angry with me for misleading him.

“Oh, it’s you, Dumps! What in the name of fortune did you steal in like that for, like a thief in the night, and slap me on the back to make me—”

“Oh, you didn’t know me!” I said, catching his hands and jumping softly up and down. “Don’t I look nice in my new dress? Tell me I look nice—tell me—tell me, Alex!”

But Alex was really angry.

“I don’t know anything about it,” he said.

I had counted much on the impression that I should make on Alex with my dress. I thought he would be respectful and treat me as a lady. I thought he would begin to see that even Dumps, with her hair neatly arranged and in a pretty costume, could look nearly as nice as other girls.

But if Alex failed me, Charley did not. Charley came in at that moment, and he was in raptures. On his heels came Von Marlo. And as to Von Marlo, he said quite openly that Miss Rachel was a most charmingly pretty young lady.

“You shut up!” said Alex. “It isn’t the custom here to praise girls to their faces. Sit down, Von, or go away, but don’t stand there looking like a foolish owl.” Nothing could put Von Marlo out of countenance. He sank down on the nearest chair, hitched up his great, square shoulders, and gazed at me from under his penthouse of inky-black hair.

“Very, very nice indeed,” he said. “And where did you get the dress, Miss—Miss Dumps?”

I was inclined to be friendly with Von Marlo and with Charley, but I would be quite cold to Alex.

Just at that moment Hannah bustled in with the supper. I did think she might have made a little struggle to have something appetising for me to-night; but no, there was the invariable cold mutton bone and potatoes, boiled this time, and not too well boiled at that. There was a dear little dish of something fried, which smelt very good, for father.

Then the Professor came in without his glasses. He could never see much without them. He called out to me, as though I had never left the house, “Go and hunt for my spectacles, Dumps.”

Away I went, and of course I found them and brought them to him. He put them on his nose, and his eyes fell on Von Marlo.

“Is that you, Von Marlo?” he said. “Sit down, my dear fellow, and have some supper.—Alex, help Von Marlo to whatever there is.”

He pulled the contents of the hot dish towards himself and began to eat ravenously. There was not even a welcome for me. He had evidently quite forgotten that I had been away. After a time I said, “Father, I have come back.”

“Eh?” said the Professor. “By-the-bye, Von Marlo, did you notice the grand passage you and the other fellows were construing this afternoon? There was a fellow in the form inclined to mock at the magnificent words, but that could not have been you.”

“Oh no, sir,” replied Von Marlo.

“Father, I have come back,” I repeated. “I have come back from Miss Grace Donnithorne’s.”

“Ah!” he said. The fact that I had come back did not move him, but the words “Miss Grace Donnithorne” seemed to rouse him, for he got up, came straight towards me, and put a hand on my right shoulder and a hand on my left, and drew me towards him.

“How is Grace Donnithorne?” he said.

“She seems quite well, father.”

“Then that is all right.”

“Aren’t you glad I am back?” I said.

The Professor returned to his seat. “Alex, I shall be obliged to stay up until the small hours. That paper for the Royal Society must be finished to-night. I shall send it to be typed the first thing in the morning. You must get up half-an-hour earlier than usual, and come to my room for copy, and take it to the typewriting office in Chancery Lane.”

Not a word about me. I felt a sense of pain at the back of my eyes. What was the good of having a learned Professor for a father when he hardly noticed you? I had been so hoping that my pretty dress would be seen and admired in the home circle.

I went to bed that night in my comfortless and hideous room. It was so cold that I could not sleep for some time, and as I pressed and pressed the bedclothes round me I could not help thinking of the jolly life some girls had, and even a few tears rolled down my cheeks. To be very ugly, to be in no way endowed with any special talent, and to have a great father who simply forgot your existence, was not the most enviable lot in all the world for a girl.

“If only mother had lived!” I could not help saying to myself.

Then in my dreams mother seemed to come to me; she took me in her arms and kissed me and called me her little darling; and when she did this it seemed to me that looks mattered nothing and love mattered everything. I was her child; I was with her; she was all my own.

When I went down to breakfast I was surprised to find that the only person in the parlour was father. He was not eating; he was standing on the hearth-rug. His hair was ruffled up, but his face looked calmer than usual. He was evidently in one of those moods in which he could be approached. I had on, of course, my everyday school dress, and I must start almost immediately for school. I went up to him and took one of his long hands.

“Father,” I said, “may I ask you something?”

He looked down at me with quite a gentle expression.

“What is it my little Rachel wants?”

“Father, have you got anywhere a picture of my mother?”

He dropped my hands as though they hurt him.

“You want it?” he said.

“I should love to have it.”

“You have missed your mother’s care?”

“Yes.”

“If I—” He stopped.

“Why do you stop?” I said. “You are just like Miss Donnithorne. She is always beginning sentences and stopping. But oh! please,”—for he seemed to be going off into one of his Demosthenes or Sophocles monologues—“please, if you have a picture of my mother, give it to me.”

For answer he went out of the room. He was gone two or three minutes. When he returned he put a little case into my hand.

“You can keep it; it is yours now by every right. I treasured it. Understand that I have not forgotten her; but you can keep it. It is yours by every right.” Before I could reply he had left the room. I heard him bang the door, and I heard Hannah’s step on the stairs. I could not stand the thought of Hannah seeing the little case in my hands. She was the sort of woman who could be devoured by curiosity. This was more than I could bear. I flew to my room and put the dear little case into one of my drawers. I forbore to open it just then. My heart was warm and full of bliss. I possessed it; I would look at it to-night. It should lie in my arms when I slept; I could kiss it in the morning. It was next best to having mother to have a picture of mother. I was happy.

A few minutes later I was on my way to school. There I met the Swan girls. They came up to me.

“Well, well,” they said, “how are you? How do you like her?”

“What do you mean?” I said.

“Why, all the world knows that you have been staying with Miss Donnithorne. Do tell us about her. We are dying with curiosity. It is no secret, you know.”

“What is no secret?”

“Why, that you have been staying there,” said Rita Swan, giving her sister a nudge at the moment.

“I don’t want it to be a secret,” I said. “I have had a very happy time. I’ll tell you about her and her nice house later on.”

“Oh dear! we are likely to know plenty of her in the near future,” said Agnes. “But there’s the bell; we must go in. Come along, Dumps. Why, to be sure, you do look smartened up! But you will be twice as smart as this in the future.”

Part 1, Chapter IX.

The Professor Leaves Home.

As I took my place in class I observed that all the girls stared at me; and after staring, one whispered to another, and then they stared again. It was really very confusing. After a time I did not like it. I thought they were impertinent. I could have borne with the stares and all the nudges and the whispers if I had been wearing my dark-blue dress with the grey fur, for I should have put down the curious behaviour of my schoolfellows to the fact of the dress: they were admiring the dress; they were jealous of the dress. But I had gone to school that morning just the ordinary Dumps—Dumps in clothes she had grown out of, Dumps with a somewhat untidy head, Dumps with her plain face. Why should the girls look at me? It was not possible that the good food I had eaten and the happy life I had led at Miss Donnithorne’s could have made such a marvellous difference in so short a time—just about three days and a half.

But my lessons were more absorbing than usual, and I forgot the girls. In the playground I resolved to avoid the Swans, and in order to do this I went up to Augusta Moore and slipped my hand through her arm.

“Do let us walk about,” I said, “and let us be chums, if you don’t mind.”

“Chums?” said Augusta, turning her dreamy, wonderful eyes upon my face.

“Yes,” I said.

“But chums have tastes in common,” was her next remark.

“Well, you are very fond of books, are you not?” I said.

“Fond of books!” cried Augusta. “Fond of books! I love them. But that is not the right word: I reverence them; I have a passion for them.”

She looked hurriedly round her. “I shall never marry,” she continued in a low whisper, “but I shall surround myself with books—the books of the great departed; their words, their thoughts, shall fill my brain and my heart. I shall be

satisfied; nothing else will satisfy me but books, books, books!”

“Do come to this corner of the playground,” I said. “You speak as though you were reciting, and if you raise your voice the least bit in the world some one will hear you, and we shall have a crowd round us.”

She obeyed me. She was in a world of her own. As I looked at her I thought she was marvellously like the Professor in her mind.

“It is a dreadful pity,” I said.

“What is a pity?” she asked.

“That you are not me, and I am not you.”

“Oh dear,” she said, “how you do mix things up! How could I be you?”

“Well, if you lived with the Professor—if you were his child—you’d have books; you’d live in the world you love.”

Her eyes lit up then. They really were fine eyes, although she was—I could not help feeling it—a most provoking girl.

“That would be paradise,” she said. “But that can never happen. It never does happen. Men like your marvellous, your wonderful father have commonplace children like you. Now I, who have all the instincts and all that soul within me that just burns for books, and books alone, have a painfully commonplace mother. It is a mixed world. It is painfully mixed.”

“Well, at any rate let us be chums,” I said, for the Swans were getting nearer and nearer.

“Oh, as you please, Dumps. But you mustn’t interrupt my work; I always avoid having a girl chum, because she is sure to interrupt. If you like to walk with me in recess you may.”

“Oh, I should, Augusta—I should! I find the other girls so chattery and so queer. I don’t understand them.”

“Well, naturally, to-day they’re excited,” said Augusta.

She looked full at me.

“What about?” I said.

“Why, about you.”

“But why in the world about me? What has happened to me? Have I grown—grown beautiful?”

I coloured as I said the words. Another girl would have laughed, but Augusta did not; it was not her way.

“You are very plain indeed,” she said calmly; “you have not one feature which could possibly, at any time, grow into a beautiful feature. But that doesn’t matter. You have privileges. Every evening you can look at the Professor and think how marvellous is his brain and how beautiful is his face. Oh, do you think there is any chance of my being able to get a ticket for the next meeting of the Royal Society? He is going to speak. I could listen to him; I could hang on his words.”

I made no answer; but I made a special resolution. It was quite impossible for me to be friends with Augusta Moore. She was looking at me at that moment, however, with great attention.

“I tell you what it is,” she said; “if you are inclined to be friends with me, you might now and then get me tickets for your father’s lectures. I mean, of course,” she added, colouring very much, “that is, when you do not want them yourself.”

“I never go to them,” I said fervently. “I would not go to them for all the world.”

“How queer of you!”

“I think I can promise to get you two tickets for the next meeting of the Royal Society,” I said, “if it will make you really happy. Father was busy over his lecture last night. It has gone to be typed this morning.”

“Oh, don’t!” said Augusta, with a shudder.

“Don’t what?”

“Make the thing so realistic. Leave it, I beseech of you, leave it in the clouds. Don’t show me the ropes, but get me the tickets. Do! I shall worship you. I will even think you beautiful if you can get me tickets for your father’s lectures.”

“I’ll see; I’ll speak to him to-day.”

Augusta glanced nervously round.

“Do you think it would be possible for you to bring them to our house? We live just outside Inverness Terrace, Bayswater. You could come by the Tube. I would meet you, and I’d bring you home. We have only three rooms, mother and I—a sort of flat at the top of the house. I come every day to this school because it is thought quite the best in London. It doesn’t take long by the Twopenny Tube. You have a station not far from your house. You could

come, could you not?”

“I could come, of course.”

“Well then, let me see. Shall I meet you at four o’clock to-day just outside the Bayswater Station? I’ll be there when you come.”

The bell rang for us to return to school.

“I’ll come,” I said.

“I’ll have quite a nice tea for you—that is, if you care for food.”

“I do—I love it,” I said in a stout voice. Augusta did not smile. She went very gravely back to the school. She had forgotten me; she was a sort of female Professor. I certainly did not like her, and yet I would get her the tickets and go to her house. She was better than the Swans.

Agnes Swan came up to me when school was over.

“You have been nasty in your ways to-day, Dumps,” she said. “Can’t you stay a minute now?”

“No,” I said, “I cannot I must run all the way home; I am late.”

“Nonsense! Well, will you come to tea with us to-night?”

“No, thank you,” I replied; “I have an engagement.”

“Oh, she’ll have heaps of engagements from this out!” said Rita. “Don’t worry her. She’ll be much too grand to speak to us by-and-by.”

“I have an engagement,” I replied. “I am going to tea with Augusta Moore.”

“Oh, with that old frump!”

“She is an exceedingly clever girl.”

“But you and she have nothing in common, Dumps.”

“Yes, we have,” I replied. “Have we not a Professor in common?” I murmured to myself; and then I left the Swans standing discomfited, their faces all agog with longing to tell me something which I would on no account hear from their lips.

I hurried back to the house. To my joy, father was in. He was very neatly dressed. I had not seen him so smart for a long time. “Why, father!” I said.

“I am leaving home to-night,” was his remark. “I shall be away for a little. I shall be back presently. You will get a letter from me.”

“But, father, the lecture at the Royal Society?” I said.

“That is not until next Wednesday, this day week. I shall be back again by then. I shall return probably on Sunday, or Monday morning. My dear child, don’t gape. Another man is taking my place at the school. Here, Dumps, here; you’d like five shillings, wouldn’t you?”

“Oh yes, father.”

It did not really greatly matter to me whether my dear father was in the house or not. I was bewildered at his going; it was quite amazing that he should get any one else to take his boys in the middle of term, but it did not seriously affect my interests or my peace. “You have a very smart coat on,” I said.

“Have I?” he replied, shrugging his shoulders. “Well, if it pleases you it will please other women. Can’t understand why people look so much at the exterior. Exterior matters nothing. It is how the brain is worked, how the mind tells on the body, how the soul is moved. Those are the things that matter.”

“Father, have you had any food?”

“Yes; Hannah gave me a chop.”

There was a bone from a mutton-chop on a plate near by, but there seemed to be no appearance of a meal for me, and I was very hungry.

“The boys are dining at the school to-day,” said my father. “Now, my child, it is time for me to be off.”

“But one minute first. There is a girl at school—”

“There are two hundred girls at your school. Which special one do you now allude to?”

“Her name is Augusta Moore. She has a love for books, somewhat as you have a love for books.”

The Professor raised one hand.

“I beseech of you, Dumps,” he said, “don’t speak of any girl’s immature admiration for the great works of the mighty dead. Don’t! Your words will get on my nerves.”

“Well, I won’t; but she wants to learn, and I suppose she has a right to,” I said in a somewhat dogged tone. “She has begged of me to ask you to give her two tickets for next Wednesday when you are lecturing at the Royal Society. She wants two, for she would not be allowed to go alone.”

For answer my father stalked across the room. He crossed the wide hall and entered his own study, a room he seldom used, for he did most of his home work in his bedroom. He came back presently with a couple of tickets and threw them on the table.

“There,” he said; “don’t say anything more about her. Don’t worry me on the subject. Good-bye, my little girl.”

He stooped and kissed me; his kiss was more affectionate than usual.

“Be a good girl, Dumps. What I do I do for my children’s sake.”

“Of course, father;” I said, touched by the feeling which seemed to be in the kiss he had just bestowed upon me.

“By the way, Dumps, I gave you that picture of your mother?”

“Oh yes, father; but I have not looked at it yet.”

“It is a good likeness,” he said. “She was a pretty woman, and a good wife to me; I never forget that. I don’t forget it now. Good-bye, Dumps.”

“You will write, father?”

“Yes, yes; anyhow you will hear. Good-bye, child; good-bye.”

I followed him into the hall. There was a neat little Gladstone bag on a chair. It really was brand-new, and it had his initials on it.

“Why,” I said, taking it up in my hand, “this is exactly the same sort of bag as my trunk—I mean it is such very new-looking leather. How pretty! When did you get it?”

“Don’t be inquisitive, child. Is it new? Upon my word! Well, that’s all right. Good-bye, good-bye, Dumps.”

He snatched up the bag and went out, banging the hall door. I went straight back to the parlour and pulled the bell. I pulled it twice in desperation. There was no response of any sort.

“Hannah gets worse and worse,” I thought. I was ravenously hungry. There was not a scrap of preparation for a meal on the table, only the glass out of which father had drunk his accustomed quantity of beer, and the bone of the mutton-chop, and a small piece of bread. Hannah was certainly in her deafest and worst humour, and the cotton-wool was sticking firmly into her right ear.

I ran downstairs. I entered the kitchen.

“Sakes!” said Hannah.

I went close to her and dexterously put out my hand and removed the cotton-wool from her ear.

“Miss Dumps, how dare you?”

“I want my dinner,” I said.

“Sakes! What with frying chops for the Professor, and him going off in a hurry, why, my head is in a moil.”

“Hannah,” I said, “I must have some food. I am awfully hungry.”

“Well, set down right there by the kitchen table and I’ll give you another chop,” said Hannah. “I hear the Professor’s not coming back to-night. It’s the very queerest thing I remember happening since your poor mother died. But you set there and I’ll grill a chop for you, and you shall have it piping hot, and potatoes as well. There, now, what do you say to that?”

I thought I would oblige Hannah to any extent with the prospect of such a meal in front of me, and accordingly I sat down while she prepared the chop and potatoes. Presently she brought them to me, and I ate them with the satisfaction which only a hungry schoolgirl can feel when she is seldom given a satisfying meal.

“Master said to me just before he left, ‘Tidy up the house a bit, Hannah.’ Never heard him make such a remark before in all my life since your poor mother were took.”

“You remember mother very well, don’t you, Hannah?”

“Bless her! yes, I have memories.”

Hannah looked very thoughtful.

“Do sit down,” I said. “You and I are alone in the house.”

“You are her mortal image,” said Hannah as she sank into her chair.

“I like mother?”

“Not in face, but in ways. You have a sort of coaxing way with you, and your temper is good—I will say that. But God only knows who you hark back with regard to face, for you are plain, Dumps, there’s no doubt of that.”

“So every one says—that is, every one except Mr Von Marlo.”

“That queer Dutch boy—that foreigner? Nobody minds what foreigners say.”

“Still, it is nice sometimes, by somebody, to be called even fairly good-looking,” I responded.

“Maybe you’re in Dutch style,” said Hannah. “I always was told they had flattened-out faces, same as the Dutch dolls, you know.”

This remark was scarcely flattering; but then Hannah, on principle, never did flatter.

“Tell me about mother,” I said. “What was she really like?”

“Mr Alex takes after her. Eyes blue as the sky, a tender, gentle face, rather tall, rather slim, the sweetest of voices.”

“Why did she die?” I asked.

My own voice trembled.

“Killed, child—killed.”

“Killed?” I exclaimed. “I never heard that.”

“Oh, there are ways of doing the job! She weren’t killed by any accident—not by fire, nor by water, nor by a street accident—but just she wanted what she couldn’t get.”

“And what was that?”

“Why, the understanding of the sort of man she had married. He is real good is the Professor, downright good at heart, but he wanted a different sort of wife from your mother, some one as could rouse him and take him by the shoulders and shake him. That’s the sort he wanted, and she weren’t the kind. So, you see, she hadn’t enough sunshine, and by-and-by the want of sunshine killed her. Yes, she were killed if ever a woman were killed; yes, that’s it—killed.”

I started to my feet.

“You really are very melancholy, Hannah.”

“And why in the name of fortune should I be merry? What’s to make me merry?”

“Well, we all have to make the best of things. Miss Donnithorne says so.”

“Don’t you mention the name of that hussy to me!”

“Hannah, you have no right to call her that. She is a most sweet, dear, charming woman.”

“Get you out of my kitchen, Dumps!”

“Hannah, what do you mean?”

“Mean? I don’t want that woman coming fussing round the place, making up to you, dressing you up—I know what it means. Don’t you talk to me. Get along, Dumps, or I’ll say something angry. Now then, out you go!”

Hannah pushed the cotton-wool well into her ear with her thumb, and after that I knew that I might as well talk to a deaf and dumb image.

Part 1, Chapter X.

A Very Queer Chum.

I went to tea with Augusta Moore. She was full of raptures with regard to the tickets which I had brought her. She turned in the street and kissed me quite demonstratively; but the next moment she lapsed into one of her brown studies.

“Do look out,” I said; “you will be run over.”

“As if that mattered,” said Augusta.

“As if what mattered?” I asked.

“Why, what you said just now. Don’t interrupt me. I am puzzling out a thought which will lead to—oh! it has gone—

don’t speak; it will come back if you keep quiet. There, I’ve nearly caught it!”

“Oh Augusta!” I said, “you mustn’t talk in that way while we are walking in this street.”

I clutched her by the arm.

“Guide me, Dumps; guide me, commonplace Dumps; then I shall be able to think in peace.”

I guided her then very steadily. We walked up Queen’s Road. Queen’s Road is a long street.

“I thought,” I said, “that you lived somewhere near Inverness Terrace, close to the Twopenny Tube.” Augusta pulled up short.

“What have you been doing?” she said.

“What have I been doing?” I answered.

“Why, you’ve led me more than half a mile away from home, and mother will be very much annoyed.”

“Well, you must wake up and get me there in some sort of fashion,” I said, “for I cannot possibly guide myself when I don’t know where you live.”

Thus adjured, and by dint of constant pokes, and even pinches, I did manage to take Augusta to her own home. There was a lift which would take us to her mother’s flat at the top of the great house; but she was a quarter way up the stairs before I was able to remind her of the fact. She then said it didn’t matter, and began to quote from *The Ancient Mariner*, saying the words aloud. People looked at her as they came downstairs. One lady said, “How do you do, Miss Moore?” but Augusta did not make any reply.

At last we arrived at the very top of the house, and as there were no more stairs of any sort to go up, we had to pause here.

“Now, which door are we to knock at?” I said. Augusta pointed to one.

“We’re awfully late,” she said. “Mother will be terrible I shall go into my own room until she subsides. You won’t mind listening to her; you will probably agree with her. You are fearfully commonplace yourself. Two commonplaces together make—oh! I ought to be able to say something very smart and witty on that subject, but I can’t. I am going to cultivate smart sayings. I believe it is possible to cultivate them. The spirit of repartee can be produced with care. I have read about it; it is possible. A person who can make good repartees is much appreciated, don’t you know?”

“Oh yes, yes; but do knock at the door, or let me.” She approached the door, but before she could raise her hand to ring the bell she turned to me again.

“What is the subject of your father’s next lecture?”

“I’m sure I don’t know from Adam,” I replied.

“What a vulgar way of expressing it! How terrible to think you are his child!”

“Augusta,” I said, “there is one thing that puzzles me. I am the Professor’s child, and doubtless I am commonplace; but I am glad of it, for I wouldn’t be like you for all the world.”

“I don’t want you to envy me,” she said. “I never ask any one to envy me. Those who are geniuses are above anything of that sort.”

“But I should like to ask you a question.”

“What is it? Has it something to do with the great departed, or—”

“It has not,” I said. “It is, how do you ever manage to get to school in the morning? Are you awake? Can you get along the streets? Are you always in a dream as you are now?”

“Mary Roberts, who also comes to the school, but who is in a very inferior class, calls for me. She has done that ever since I lost my way in a distant part of Regent’s Park and was very much scolded by my teacher. I forgot the school; I forgot everything that day. I was puzzling out a problem. Your father could reply to it.”

I made no answer to this, except to pull the bell vigorously myself. This brought Mrs Moore on to the scene. It was a great relief to see a placid-looking, blue-eyed little lady, neatly and nicely dressed, who said, “Augusta, late as usual! And this is your dear little friend.—How do you do, Miss Grant? Come in, dear—come in.”

“Mother,” said Augusta, “while you are on the scold, you may as well scold Miss Grant, or Dumps, as we call her. I am going to my room. I have received two tickets for the next great meeting of the Royal Society. I shall live in bliss with the thought of those tickets until that night. You are to come with me.”

“What night is your father’s lecture?” asked Mrs Moore, glancing at me.

“Next Wednesday,” I answered.

“We cannot possibly go on Wednesday; you know that, Augusta. It is your uncle Charles’s birthday, and we have both been invited to dine with him; he would never forgive us if we did not go.”

“Just as you please, mother, as far as you are concerned. I shall go,” said Augusta; and she went into her bedroom and slammed the door behind her.

Mrs Moore gave one patient sigh. “Would you like to take your jacket off?” she said.

I hastily removed it. She began to pour boiling water into the teapot. The little room was very neat and clean, and there was quite a cosy, appetising tea spread on the board.

“I have heard a great deal about your father, my dear,” said Mrs Moore after a pause. “And now I also hear about you. I am glad to welcome you here. You are Augusta’s special friend, are you not?”

“Oh, I know her very well,” I said.

“She told me to-day at dinner that you wished to be a chum of hers. She said she was willing. I felt quite relieved, for I think it would be very good for Augusta to have a sort of human influence; she needs human influence so badly.”

“But can’t she get it, Mrs Moore?” I asked. “Surely it is all round her?”

“Well, dear, the fact is, she always stays amongst the dry bones; that’s what I call that terrible sort of learning which she so clings to. Not a word when she comes out, my love. I assure you it is quite a comfort to confide in you.”

She motioned to me to draw my chair to the table. I sat down.

“You look quite an interesting person,” said Mrs Moore.

“Oh no, I am not at all interesting,” I replied.

“Here is a cup of tea, love.” She handed me one.

“Ought I not,” I said, “to wait for Augusta?”

“Dear me, no! on no account. She will probably not come in at all. Doubtless by now she has forgotten that you are in the house.”

I could not help laughing.

“But doesn’t she ever eat?”

“I bring her her food. She takes it then without knowing what she is taking. She is a very strange child.”

“Well,” I said as I helped myself to a very nice piece of hot cake, “I don’t think I should have got her here to-day without pinching and poking her. She took me quite a long way round. I believe,” I added, “that I shall not be able to get back, for I don’t know this part of London well.”

“I will take you to the Twopenny Tube myself, dear. Don’t imagine for a single instant that you will see anything more of Augusta.”

When I discovered that this was really the case I gave myself up to the enjoyment of Mrs Moore’s pleasant society. She was a very nice woman, not at all commonplace—at least, if that meant commonplace, it was a very good thing to be. She was practical, and had a great deal of sense. She talked to me about my life, and about my father, and said she wished we lived a little nearer.

“You must sadly want a lady friend, my dear,” she said.

Then she stared at me very hard, and I saw a curious change come over her face.

“Perhaps you will have one in the future,” was her next remark.

“Oh yes,” I answered briskly, “I have one now—a most dear, sweet lady. She came to see me quite a short time ago, and I went to stay with her last Saturday, and came home only last night. I love her dearly; her name is Miss Grace Donnithorne.”

“Then that is excellent—excellent,” said Mrs Moore. She looked at me wistfully, as though she meant to say something, but her next remark was, “It is a very nice, suitable arrangement.”

When tea was over I said I thought I ought to be going home. I had a hunger which was filling my heart. My body had been well fed—surprisingly well fed for me—that day. Had not Hannah supplied me with mutton-chops and potatoes, and Mrs Moore with hot cakes and fragrant tea? But I was hungry in another sort of way. I wanted to look at my mother’s picture. I wanted to gaze at the face of my very own mother. I meant to do so when I was quite alone in my bedroom that night. So I said hastily, “I must go back now;” and Mrs Moore went to put on her bonnet.

While she was away I knocked at Augusta’s door.

“Who’s there?” she called out.

“It’s I. I want to say good-bye.”

“Don’t come in, I beg of you. Good-bye.”

“Good-bye,” I answered, feeling somewhat offended. I heard her muttering words inside the room. They became louder:

> “And like a dying lady, lone and pale,
> Who totters forth wrapped in a gauzy veil.”

Mrs Moore opened her door.

“What is the matter with Augusta?” I said.

“Nothing; she is only reciting. She is mad on Shelley at present.—Good-bye, Gussie; I am going to see your friend, Miss Grant, to the Twopenny Tube.”

Augusta replied in a still louder rendering of the words:

> “Art thou pale from weariness
> Of climbing heaven and gazing on the earth—”

We went into the street. Mrs Moore took me to the station, and saying she had something to do in another part of the street, she bade me on affectionate good-bye.

I returned to our own house, and when I got there I found Alex and Charley and Von Marlo, as we always called him, waiting for me.

“Then it’s quite true,” said Alex, “that we are to have the whole evening to ourselves? I have brought some grub in, and we are going to cook it ourselves in the parlour. You must help us, Dumps. It doesn’t matter how shabby your frock is; you have got to be the cook.”

“Oh, how scrumptious!” I cried. I felt just in the humour.

“And we can be as noisy as ever we like,” said Charley.

“Only we won’t do anything to hurt your feelings, Miss Rachel,” said Von Marlo.

“The main thing of all is,” said Charley, “that Hannah isn’t to know.”

“Oh, we can easily manage that,” I said. “She won’t come upstairs unless we ring for her. She never does.”

“I’ve taken precious good care that she doesn’t come upstairs,” said Alex, “for I’ve locked the door at the top of the kitchen stairs;” and he produced the key in triumph from his pocket.

“Oh Alex, suppose by any sort of manner or means she wanted to come! Why, she would never forgive us.”

“Serve her right. She won’t answer our rings of late, so now we’ll keep her downstairs in that sweet spot in which she so loves to dwell.”

“But,” I said, “our dinner?”

“Oh, here it is—a mutton bone, barer than usual, and a few potatoes. I thought we’d have a real feast. Did father give you any of the needful when he was going away to-day, Dumps?”

“Why, yes,” I said, “he gave me five shillings.”

“And he gave me the same.”

“And me the same,” said Charley.

“You’ll have to pay us back your share of the grub to-morrow,” said Alex; “but we bought it beforehand.”

“Well, we can’t cook without cooking things,” I said.

“Sakes!” replied Alex; “do you suppose that while you were wandering about London by yourself—highly improper for any young lady, I call it—that we were idle? Charley and Von Marlo and I went down into the kitchen and purloined a frying-pan, a saucepan, a kettle, cups and saucers, glasses, knives and forks galore, and plates. Table-cloths don’t matter. Now then, to see the array of eatables.”

Alex produced out of his bag first of all, in a dirty piece of paper, a skinned rabbit, next a pound of sausages, next a parcel of onions.

“These will make a jolly good fry,” said Alex, smacking his lips as he spoke.

From Charley’s pockets came a great piece of butter, while Von Marlo rid himself of a huge incubus in the shape of a loaf of very fresh bread.

“There are lots of things beside,” said Charley: “potatoes—we’re going to fry them after the rabbit and sausages—and fruit and cakes. We thought if we had a good, big, monstrous fry, and then satisfied the rest of our appetites with cake and fruit, as much as ever we can eat, that we’d do.”

“What about tea or coffee?” I said.

“Bother tea or coffee!” said Alex. “We’ll have ginger-beer. We brought in a whole dozen bottles. It was that that nearly killed us. If it hadn’t been for Von Marlo we’d never have done it. Now then, Dumps, who’ll cut up the rabbit, and who’ll put it into the pan with the sausages? They ought to be done in a jiffy. We’ll cut up the onions and strew them over the rabbit and sausages. I want our fry to be real tasty.”

I became quite interested. What girl would not? To have the whole of the great house to ourselves, to have three lively, hungry boys gloating greedily over the food, and to think that I alone knew how to cook it!

But, alas and alack! my pride was soon doomed to be humiliated; for Von Marlo, who had poached the egg so beautifully, now came forward and told me that I was not cutting up the rabbit with any sense of its anatomical proportions. He took a sharp clasp-knife out of his pocket, and in a minute or two the deed was done. He then objected to my mode of preparing the sausages, declaring that they ought to be pricked and the skins slightly opened. In the end he said it would be much better for him to prepare the fry, and I left it to him.

“Yes, yes,” I said; “and I’ll put on the table-cloth. Oh, but there isn’t a table-cloth!”

“Who wants a table-cloth?” said Alex. “Let’s have newspapers. Here’s a pile.”

We then proceeded to spread them on the centre table, and placed the knives and forks and glasses upon them. The sausages popped and frizzled, the rabbit shrank into tiny proportions, the onions filled the air with their odorous scent, and by-and-by the fry was considered done. When we had each been helped to a goodly portion, Von Marlo began to fry the potatoes, and these turned out to be more delicious than the rabbit and sausages. What a meal it was! How we laughed and joked and made merry!

“Three cheers for father’s absence!” shouted Alex, holding his glass high, as he prepared to pour the foaming contents down his throat.

There came a knocking—a violent and furious knocking—in a part of the house which was not the front door.

“It’s Hannah! Hannah!” I cried. “She wants to come out. Oh Alex, we must let her out!”

“Nothing of the sort,” exclaimed Charley. “Let her knock until she’s tired of knocking.”

‘Here ’s your supper,’ he said.

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The door was shaken violently. We heard a woman’s voice calling and calling.

“Charley, I must go,” I said. “I cannot eat anything. Poor old Hannah! Oh, do let me open the door!”

“When the feast is over we’ll cook a little supper for her, and bring her in and set her down in front of the fire, and make her eat it,” said Von Marlo. “Now, that will do, won’t it? Sit down and eat your nice, hot supper,” he continued,

looking attentively at me with his honest brown eyes.

I coloured and looked at him. It was so pleasant to have eyes glancing at you that did not disapprove of you all the time.

Von Marlo drew a chair close to the table for me, and placed another near it for himself, and we ate heartily—yes, heartily—to the accompaniment of Hannah's knocks and shrieks and screams to us to let her out of her prison.

By-and-by the meal came to an end, and then it was Von Marlo himself who went to the door. We three, we Grants, were sufficiently cowardly to remain in the parlour. By-and-by Von Marlo reappeared, leading Hannah. Hannah had been reduced to tears. He had her hand on his arm, and was conducting her into the parlour with all the grace with which he would conduct a duchess or any other person of title.

"Here's your supper," he said. "Sit here; you must be very cold. Sit near the fire and eat, eat."

She sat down, but she did not eat.

"Come, come," he said, and he placed an appetising plate of food close to her. She went on sobbing, but her sobs were not quite so frequent.

"It smells good, doesn't it?" said Von Marlo; and now he put a tender piece of rabbit on the end of a fork and held it within an inch of her mouth.

"You will be much better after you have eaten," he said in a coaxing tone.

He had managed to place himself in such a position that when she did stop crying she could only see him; and after a time the smell of the delicious stew, and something about the comfort of her present position close to the fire, caused her to open her eyes, and then she opened her mouth, and in was popped the piece of tender rabbit. She ate it, and then Von Marlo fed her by popping piece after piece into her mouth; and he gave her ginger-beer to drink; and when the supper was quite ended and the platter clean, he stepped back and said, "You must forgive the Grants; it was rather mischievous of them. But it was not Miss Rachel; it was Alex and Charley, and in especial it was Von Marlo's fault. Now you will forgive Von Marlo?"

He dropped on one knee, and put on the most comical face I had ever seen; then he looked up at her, wiping one of his eyes, and winking and blinking with the other. Hannah absolutely laughed.

"Oh, you children, you children!" she exclaimed.

It was a most wonderful victory. We knew now she would not scold, and it had a marvellous effect upon us. I rushed to her and flung my arms round her neck and kissed and hugged her. Alex said, "Good old Hannah!" and Charley crouched down by her side and said, "Rub my hair the wrong way; you know how I like it, Hannah."

Then Von Marlo said, "I'm not going to be out of it," and he planted himself with his broad back firmly against her knees; and thus we all sat, with Hannah in the centre, making a sort of queen in the midst. She had ceased to weep, and was smiling.

"Dear, dear!" she said; "but I never was too hard on real mischievousness; it's naughtiness as angers me. Oh, my sakes! Charley, my lamb, I remember you when you were nothing more than a baby."

"But I was your pet, Hannah," I said. "Tell me that I was your pet."

"But you were nothing of the sort," said Hannah. "I will own that I was always took with looks. Now, Alex has looks."

"And I. I have looks too," said Charley. "I was gazing at my face in the glass this morning, and I saw that I had beautiful, dark, greyey-blue eyes."

"It's very wrong to encourage vanity," said Hannah. "Well, Dumps will always be spared that temptation. But sakes! I must take away the things. What a mess you have made of the place! And whoever in the name of fortune fried up that rabbit? It was the most appetising morsel I ever ate in the whole course of my life."

"I shall have much pleasure in writing out the recipe and giving it to you," said Von Marlo, dropping again on one knee, and now placing his hand across his heart. "Fairest of women, beloved Hannah, queen of my heart, I shall write out that recipe and give it to you."

"Oh my!" said Hannah, "you are worse than the Dutch dolls; but you do make me laugh like anything."

Part 1, Chapter XI.

Mother's Miniature.

The supper was at an end. I was in my room.

Now was the time to look at mother's picture. The hunger in my heart was now to be satisfied. For many long years I had wanted to be the possessor of that portrait, which I knew existed, but which I had never seen. How easily I had got possession of it in the end! It was queer, for we had all been afraid to speak of mother to father. He had said once that he could not stand it, and after that we never mentioned her name. But she was my mother. I had envied girls who had mothers, and yet some girls did not appreciate them. There was Augusta, for instance; how rude and

insufferable she was to her mother! She called her commonplace. Now, I could have been very happy with Mrs Moore. I could have been quite glad to be kissed by her and fondled by her, and to sit with her and encourage her to tell me stories about herself. And I could have helped her with her needlework, and to keep the place tidy; and I should have enjoyed going with her to dine with Uncle Charles—whoever Uncle Charles might be. But there was Augusta, who did not care a bit about her mother, but wanted to be the daughter of my father. Oh yes, she was right; it was a strange, mixed world.

Well, I had the picture of mother, and I was going to look at it to-night. I lit three or four pieces of candle in honour of the great occasion, and then I drew my chair near the ugly little dressing-table, and I took the case and opened it. The picture within had been carefully painted; it was a miniature, and a good one, I am sure, for it looked quite alive. The eyes seemed to speak to me; the gentle mouth looked as though it would open with words of love for me. It was the sort of mouth I should like to kiss. The face was very young. I had imagined that all mothers must be older than that. It was a girlish face.

“It was because no one understood her that she died,” I said to myself. “Hannah said she was killed. Hannah spoke nonsense, of course.”

Tears filled my eyes.

“Darling, I would have loved you,” I murmured. “I’d have made so much of you! You wouldn’t have been a bit angry with Dumps for not resembling you. You’d have let me kiss you and kiss you, and your hungry heart would not have pined and pined. Why didn’t you live just a little longer, darling—just until I grew up, and Alex grew up, and Charley grew up? Why didn’t you, dearest, darling?”

My tears flowed. I gazed at the picture many, many times. Finally I put it under my pillow.

In the middle of the night I woke, and my first thought was of the picture and of the mother whom it represented. I clasped it tightly to my breast and hugged it. Oh yes, the picture of my mother was better than nothing.

The next morning I got up with a sense of relief at knowing that father would be away for at least a couple of days. It was a sadly wrong feeling; but then I held mother’s picture, and father had not understood mother, and mother had died. Killed!—that was what Hannah had said—killed because she had not had enough sunshine.

“It was such a pity you didn’t wait for me! I’d have made things sunshiny for you,” I thought.

I ran downstairs. The boys had had their breakfast and had already gone to school; but there was a little pot of coffee inside the fender, some bread-and-butter on the table, and a jug of cold milk and some sugar. It was one of Hannah’s unpleasant ways that she never would make the milk hot for the children’s coffee. She said cold milk was good enough for them.

But there was something else also on the table. There was a letter—a letter addressed to me. Now, when you hardly ever get letters, you are interested. I had been terribly excited about Miss Donnithorne’s letter; and now here was another, but it was not written by Miss Donnithorne; it was in father’s handwriting. What could father have to say to me? He had never written to me before in the whole course of my life. I took the letter in my hand.

“I wonder if he is coming back to-day,” I thought.

I felt rather sad at this thought, for there was quite a lot of money left and we could have another good supper to-night.

Then I opened the letter and read its contents. They were quite brief. These were the words I read:

“My dear Rachel,—I have just done what I trust will contribute much to your happiness. I have been united in marriage with Grace Donnithorne. I will bring your new mother back on Sunday evening. Try and have the house as nice as possible. My dear child, I know well what a great happiness lies before you in the tender care and affection of this admirable woman.—Your affectionate Father.”

I read the letter twice, but I could not comprehend it. I read it in a misty sort of way, and then I put it on the table and went to the window and gazed out into the street. There was no fog this morning; there was even a little attempt at watery sunshine. I remembered that if I was not quick I should be late for school; and then it did not seem to matter whether I went to school or not. I took up the letter again. What was the matter with my eyes? I rubbed them. Was I going blind? No, no—of course not. I could see perfectly. I read the words, “I have been united in marriage with Grace Donnithorne.”

United in marriage! That meant that father had married Grace Donnithorne, the lady I had stayed with on Saturday and Sunday and Monday and part of Tuesday. She was—oh no, what nonsense!—she was nothing of the sort; I would not even allow my lips to frame the words.

I tore the letter up into little fragments and thrust the fragments into the fire. I kept saying to myself, “Nonsense! it isn’t true! Father was in one of his dreams!”

I deliberately poured out my coffee and drank it; I cut a hunk of bread, buttered it, and ate it. All the time I was saying fiercely to myself, “It isn’t true; it is a practical joke that father is playing on me.”

I was so fiercely, terribly indignant with myself for even allowing the thought of that word, which from ordinary lips would be applied to Miss Donnithorne, to come so near my own lips, that I had no time to remember that father was the very lost man to play a practical joke on any one.

Hannah came into the room. I looked at Hannah. Her face was quite unsmiling, quite everyday. If it was true Hannah would know—certainly Hannah would know; she would be the last person to be kept in ignorance.

“Why, Miss Dumps—sakes alive, child! You’ll be late for school. Hurry up. Whatever are you pondering about? What’s the matter?”

“Nothing. What should be the matter? Hannah, I have got a little money; father left it with me.”

“That’s something queer,” said Hannah. “How much did he give you?”

“Five shillings.”

“My word! Sakes alive! The man must have lost his senses!”

When Hannah said this I rushed up to her, and clasped both her hands, and said, “Oh Hannah, Hannah darling, say that again—say it again!”

“Whatever am I to say over again? I’ve no time to repeat my words.”

“Oh Hannah, do say it once more! Father has lost—”

“What little sense he ever had,” said Hannah. “Don’t keep me, Dumps.”

She had laid a hideous iron tray on the table, and with a noisy clatter she put the cups and saucers on it.

“When people have lost their senses they say and do all sorts of queer things, don’t they?” I asked.

“My word, child, they do!”

“And other people, when they know that they have lost their senses, don’t believe them?”

“Believe ’em? Who’d ever believe what people who have gone crazy say and do?”

I rushed up to Hannah and hugged and kissed her.

“I’ll be in time for school,” I said, “for I’ll run all the way. Get me a little chop for dinner—please do, Hannah; and—and to-night we’ll have supper, and we’ll ask Von Marlo, and you shall come and have supper with us, dear, darling Hannah!”

Hannah grinned.

“You’re wonderful coaxing in your ways just now, Dumps. I can’t make out what sort of maggot you’ve got in your head. But there! you shall have your chop; it’s as cheap as anything else.”

I always brought my hat and jacket down with me when I came to breakfast; now I put them on and went off to school. I really was very ridiculous; but I always was wanting in common-sense. I forced myself to believe that father’s letter was a sort of practical joke, and I was comfortably conning over the fact that we would have another jolly evening to-night, and that he doubtless would have forgotten all about having ever put pen to paper when he returned home, when I saw a number of my schoolfellows waiting for me just round the corner which led into the great school. Amongst them was Augusta Moore. But Augusta Moore, who might have been a sort of refuge from the ordinary girls, was now flanked on the right hand by Rita Swan and on the left by Agnes Swan; and there were several other girls behind this trio. When they saw me they all shouted, “Here she is! Here she is!” and they made for me in a body.

I stood still when I saw them advancing. It wasn’t that they came slowly; they came in a great rush as from a catapult. They drew up when they got within a few inches of me. Then Rita said, “We were making a bet about you.”

“A bet?” I said. “What do you mean?”

“Augusta said you would come; Agnes and I said you wouldn’t.”

“Why should I come?” I said.

“Well,” exclaimed Rita, “I know most girls would take a holiday on the day after their father’s wedding. Most girls would—but you!”

“What do you mean?” I said.

My face was as white as a sheet then, I knew, for I felt very cold, and my eyes were smarting, and that dimness was coming over them again.

“Oh, there, there!” said Augusta Moore.

She wrenched herself away from the Swans, and came up to me and took my hand. I don’t exactly know what followed next; I only knew that there was a great buzzing, and a number of people were talking, and I knew that Augusta went on saying, “There, there, dear!” Finally I found myself walking away from school, led by Augusta—away from school, and towards home. I was making no protest of any sort whatever.

At last we reached our own house, and Augusta looked wistfully at the tall steps which led to the front door; but she

said, “I am not coming in with you, for I know you would rather be alone. It must be a fearful trial for you to have that noble, exalted father of yours united in marriage to such a very commonplace woman as Miss Donnithorne. I feel for you, from the bottom of my heart. Kiss me; I am truly sorry for you.”

Of course, I could not go to school that day. I allowed Augusta to print a little kiss—a tiny, tiny kiss—on my forehead, and then I waited until Hannah opened the door. I felt so stupid that perhaps I should not have rung the bell at all; but Augusta, roused out of herself for the time being, had performed this office for me, and when Hannah opened the door I crept into the house and sank down on a chair.

“Hannah,” I said—“Hannah, it is true, and he hasn’t taken leave of his senses. He was united in marriage yesterday with Grace Donnithorne. Oh Hannah! Oh Hannah!”

Perhaps I expected Hannah to show great surprise; but all she really did was to kneel down beside me, and open her arms wide, and say, “Come, then, honey! Come, then, honey!” and she clasped me in her bony arms and drew my head down to rest on her breast. Then I had relief in a burst of tears. I cried long. I cried as I had not cried since I could remember, for no one in the old house had time for tears; tears were not encouraged in that austere, neglected abode.

After a time Hannah lifted me up, just as though I were a baby, and conveyed me into the parlour. There she laid me on two chairs, and put cushions under my head, and said, “I have got a drop of strong broth downstairs, and you shall have it.”

I enjoyed being coddled and petted by Hannah, and we both, by a sort of tacit consent, agreed not to allude for the present to the terribly painful topic which had at last intruded itself upon us. After I had taken the soup I felt better and was able to sit up. Then Hannah squatted down in front of the fire and looked into it. I observed that her own eyes were red; but all she did was to sway herself backwards and forwards and say, “Dearie me! Oh, my word! Dearie me!”

At last the mournful sort of chant got upon my nerves. I jumped up with alacrity.

“Hannah, the boys will be in soon. We must tell them, and we must get the place in order, and—”

“Miss Dumps!” cried Hannah.

She spoke in a loud, shrill voice. “If you think, Miss Dumps, even for a single minute, that I’m going to put up with it, you’ve mistook me, that’s all.”

“But what are you going to do, Hannah? You won’t leave us, will you?”

“Leave you? Go out of the house into which I came when Master Alex was a baby, bless him! and when you were but a tiny, tiny tot! Leave the house? No, it ain’t me as ’ull do that.”

“Then, Hannah, what will you do?”

I went up to her and took one of her hands. She gave it unwillingly.

“Dumps,” she said. She was still huddled by the fire. I had never seen her so subdued or broken-down before, and it was only when I heard her voice rise in shrill passion that I recognised the old Hannah. “Dumps, is it you who is going to submit tame—you, who had a mother?”

“Oh, I must submit,” I said. I sank down again into a chair. “Where’s the good?” I queried.

“I always know you had no spirit worth speaking of,” said Hannah. “I’m sorry now as I gave you that drop of soup. It was the stock in which I meant to boil the bits of mutton for the boys’ dinner, but I said you should have it, for you were so took aback, poor child! But there! ’tain’t in you, I expect, to feel things very deep; and yet you had a mother.”

“You said yesterday that she had been killed,” I said, and my voice trembled.

“And so she were. If ever a woman were pushed out of life—pushed on to the edge of the world and then right over it—it was the Professor’s wife, Alice Grant. Ah! she was too gentle, too sweet; he wanted a different sort.”

When Hannah said these words, in a flash I seemed to see Grace Donnithorne in a new position—Grace Donnithorne with her laughing eyes, her firm mouth, her composed and dignified manner. It would be very difficult, I felt certain, to push Grace Donnithorne over the edge of the world. I rose.

“Hannah, if you don’t mind, I’ll tell the boys. But please understand that I am very unhappy. I don’t love my mother one bit the less; I am about as unhappy as girl can be. I have been cruelly deceived. I went to see Miss Donnithorne, and she was kind to me, and I thought her kindness meant something.”

“I didn’t,” said Hannah. “I felt all along that she was a snake in the grass.”

“She was kind, even though she meant to marry father; and perhaps another girl would have guessed.”

“Sakes! why should you guess? You ain’t that sort; you’re an innocent child, and don’t know the wicked ways of wicked, knowing, designing females. Why ever should you guess?”

“Well, I didn’t; but, now I look back, I see—”

“Oh, we all see when the light comes,” said Hannah; “there’s nought in that.”

“But, Hannah, she is not bad. She is good, and if she chose to marry father—”

“My word, we’ll have no more of that!” said Hannah. “I’m sorry I gave you that drop of soup. The boys will have to eat the mutton boiled up with water from the pump.”

“Oh Hannah, will you never understand?”

“I don’t understand you, Miss Dumps; but then I never did.”

“Well, I am going to tell the boys, and I’m as unhappy as I can be; but I don’t see the use of fighting. I’ll try to do what’s right. I’ll try to. I don’t love her. I might have loved her if she had just remained my friend.”

“Friend, indeed! What should make her take up with you—a plain girl like you, with no sort of attraction that any living being ever yet discovered? What should make her pet you, and fondle you, and dress you up if she hadn’t had in her mind the getting of a husband? There I now you know. That’s the long and short of it. She used you for her own purposes, and I say she is a low-down sort of hussy, and she won’t get me a-humouring of her!”

“Very well, Hannah. I don’t love her. I would have loved her had she not been father’s wife.”

“There’s no use talking about what you would do had certain things not happened; it’s what you will do now that certain things have happened. That’s what you’ve got to face, Dumps.”

“Am I to sit up in my room all day and never speak to father and—and his wife?”

“Oh, I know you!” said Hannah. “You’ll come down after a day or two and make yourself quite agreeable, and it’ll be ‘mother’ you’ll be calling her before the week’s out I know you—she’ll come round the likes of you pretty fine!”

But this last straw was too much. I left Hannah. I went unsteadily—yes, unsteadily—towards the door. I rushed upstairs, entered my own room, bolted myself in. I took my mother’s miniature in my hands. I opened the case and pressed the miniature to my heart, flung myself on the bed face downwards, and sobbed and sobbed. No broken-hearted child in all the world could have sobbed more for her own mother than I did then.

Part 1, Chapter XII.

Discussing the New Mother.

It was not I, after all, who told the boys Hannah was the person who gave them that piece of information. I did not come downstairs for the watery stew which she had prepared for them. Doubtless she would tell the boys that I had swallowed the spirit of that stew and left them the poor material body. She would make the most of my conduct, for she was very angry with me. But by-and-by there came a knock at my door, and I heard Alex’s voice, and he said, “Oh, do open the door and let me in! Please let me in, Rachel.”

He so seldom called me by that name that I got up, went to the door, and flung it open. Alex’s face was very pale, and his hair was rumpled up over his forehead, but he had not been crying at all. I don’t suppose boys do cry much; but the moment I glanced at him I knew that Hannah had told him.

He took my hand.

“My word,” he said, “how cold you are! And I can scarcely see your eyes. You’ll have a bad inflammation if you give way like this. Where’s the use? Come along downstairs.”

He took my hand, and we raced down together. When we got down I clung to him and said, “Kiss me, Alex.”

“Why, of course I will, Dumps.”

He kissed me twice on my forehead, and I knew by the trembling of his lips that he was feeling things a good bit.

“Hannah has told you?” I said.

“She has. But she isn’t coming upstairs again to-day.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Charley, you can explain to Dumps.”

Charley was standing by the fire. He was a very solidly made boy, not nearly so handsome as Alex, who was tall and slight, with regular features and beautiful eyes. Charley was in some respects like me, only very much better-looking.

“Oh,” said Charley, “she began talking in a way we couldn’t stand about the Professor, so we just took her by the shoulders and brought her to the top of the stairs. She said she was going out, and wouldn’t be back until to-night—or perhaps never.”

“Oh, you haven’t turned her away?” I said; for although Hannah was very troublesome and most disagreeable, and was certainly the last person to conciliate the disturbed state of the household and bring peace out of disorder, I could not bear the idea of her not being there.

“She’ll come back, right enough. I tell you what it is, Dumps,” said Alex; “we’re—we’re a bit stunned. Of course, it’s rather awkward, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know that it is,” said Charley. “He could always do as he liked, couldn’t he? I mean he never thought much about us, did he?”

“Oh, don’t blame him now,” I said.

“I don’t want to—I only want you to understand. Father always did what he liked. Hannah was dreadful; she spoke as she ought not to speak. It is just as well she should go out and let the open air smooth away some of her grievances. I do not see that it matters to her; he is not her father.”

“No, it doesn’t really matter to her; and yet it does matter in another sense,” I said.

Charley turned round.

“When are they coming back?” was his next remark.

“I think on Sunday evening.”

“Well, this is Thursday. We have got to-day and to-morrow and Saturday and Sunday. We have got four whole days. Let us have some fun. How much of your five shillings have you left. Dumps?”

“I don’t care,” I said.

“That’s nonsense.—Alex, push her into that chair.—Now, how much money have you got?”

“I’ve got it all,” I said.

“All of it?”

“Yes, every farthing. I had a few pence over which paid for the Twopenny Tube yesterday; I have not broken into the five shillings at all.”

“We spent one and sixpence each last night, so you owe each of us a bit, because you enjoyed the supper just as much as we did.”

“Oh yes.”

“Let us have something good for tea. You can go out and buy it. You can spend your share on that. And I’ll bring Von Marlo in, and we’ll have a chat, and perhaps we’ll go somewhere to-night. Why shouldn’t we?”

“Oh Charley, where?”

“Well, I was thinking of the pit of one of the theatres.”

This was such a daring, such an unheard-of suggestion that it really took my breath away.

“Do you think we might?”

“Why not? Von Marlo would love it. We four could go. We three big boys could take care of one dumpy girl, I’m sure. There’s a jolly thing on at the Adelphi. I love the Adelphi, for it’s all blood and thunder. Don’t you like it best of all, Alex?”

“Well, you see, I’ve never been to a theatre in the whole course of my life,” said Alex.

“Except once to the pantomime,” I said. “You remember that?”

“Who cares for the pantomime?” said Charley.

“Very well, we’ll go to the Adelphi,” I said. “But I hope it won’t be very frightening.”

“It will scare you out of your seven senses; I know it will. But I tell you what it will do also,” continued Charley—“it will make you forget; and if you remember at all, you have but to squeeze the thought up in your heart that you have got three more whole days, or nearly three whole days, before *she* comes in.”

“All right,” I said; “I’ll get something for tea.”

“And we must be off to school,” said Alex. “The Professor’s away, and when the cat’s away the mice will play.”

“Oh Alex, you oughtn’t to compare father to a cat!”

“Never mind; Hannah isn’t here. If she were here we’d round on her fast enough. Now then, good girl, eat some bread-and-butter, for you weren’t down to that dinner of horrid stew. Hannah said that you’d supped up all the gravy. Jolly mean, I call it. But there! we’ll be back about half-past four. Then we’ll have tea, and hurry off to the theatre afterwards.”

The boys left the house, and I was quite alone. Yes, there was nothing like occupation. I put on my hat and jacket and went out. I bought golden syrup—the darkest sort—we all loved that; and I bought a loaf of crispy new bread, and

half a pound of butter. Then I got a currant-cake and a small—very small—tin of sardines. The meal would be delicious.

I returned home. I entered the parlour and put the kettle on to boil. Then I went down to the neglected kitchen. The fire was out in the little range, the doors of which stood open wide. There was no sign of Hannah anywhere. I went to the kitchen door, and saw that it was locked. There was no key in the lock; she had doubtless taken it with her. This fact relieved me, for I knew that she was coming bock, otherwise she would most certainly have left the key behind.

I selected the best of the cups and saucers, choosing with difficulty, for there were few that were not either deprived of handles or with pieces cracked out of the rims. It was a nondescript set when presently it appeared on the table, and the cloth which I spread on it to lay out our meal was none of the cleanest. But there was the golden syrup, and the crispy loaf, and the butter, which I knew was good; and there was the tin of sardines.

Punctual to the minute, at half-past four, the three boys made their appearance. Von Marlo had been told. He came straight up to me and took my hand. He did not speak; but the next minute he put his hand into his waistcoat pocket and took from it a knife. This knife was a curious one; it seemed to contain every possible tool that any human being could require in his journey from the cradle to the grave. With one of the instruments in it he speedily opened the tin of sardines; then he himself made the tea, and when it was made he drew chairs up to the table and said, “Come and eat.”

We all fell upon the provisions in a ravenous fashion. Oh dear! even when you are in great trouble it is good to be hungry—good to be hungry when you have the means of satisfying your appetite. I felt downright starving with hunger that evening. I drank the hot tea, and ate bread-and-butter and golden syrup, and left the sardines for the boys, who made short work of them.

At last we were all satisfied, and we talked over the matter of the theatre. We must be standing outside not a minute later than seven o’clock. Von Marlo would keep at my right, and Alex at my left, and Charley would be my bodyguard behind. When the rush came we would surely be in the front rank, and we would get good seats. The scenes of the play would be most harrowing; there was a secret murder in it, and a duel, and one or two other extreme horrors. The boys said it was of the sensational order, and Alex wound up with the remark that we could not possibly stand anything else to-night.

Then there fell a silence upon us. We need not go to the Adelphi yet; it was not very far from where we lived. We could get there in a few minutes. There was more than an hour between us and the desirable moment when we were to steal like thieves in the night from our father’s respectable house to go to that place of iniquity, the pit at the Adelphi. For, of course, it was very naughty of us to go. Our father himself would not have thought it right to allow children to partake of these worldly pleasures.

In the silence that ensued the pain at my heart began again. It was then Von Marlo made his remark.

“I think,” he said, “it would be exceedingly interesting if Miss Rachel would tell us exactly what the new mamma is like.”

Nothing could be more intensely aggravating than those words, “the new mamma,” had they fallen from any lips but Von Marlo’s. But the peculiar foreign intonation he gave the words caused us three to burst out laughing.

“You must never say those words again—never as long as you live, Von Marlo,” cried Alex, while Charley sprang upon him and did his very best to knock him off his chair.

“Come, come! no violence,” I said. “Please understand, Mr Von Marlo, that the lady who has married our father is not our new mamma.”

“I am sorry, I am sure,” said Von Marlo. “I won’t call her that any more—never; I am certain of that. But, all the same, if she is coming to live here, what is she like? You have seen her, Miss Rachel; you can describe her.”

“Yes, you may as well tell us about her,” said Charley. “I suppose she is precious ugly. Catch father choosing a woman with good looks! Why, he doesn’t know blue eyes from brown, or a straight nose from a crooked one, or a large mouth from a small one. He never looks at any woman; I can’t imagine how he got hold of her.”

“Hannah said,” remarked Alex, “that she got hold of him.”

“Well, surely that doesn’t matter,” said Von Marlo. “Describe her, Miss Rachel.”

“I will if you wish it,” I answered.

“Yes, do,” said Charley. “You have seen quite a lot of her.”

“I must be honest at all costs,” I said, “and if she had not married father—yes, it is quite true—I’d have liked her. She is what you would—I mean she *was*—I don’t suppose she is now, for when people are dreadfully wicked they change, don’t they? But *before* she was wicked—before she married father—she was a very—very—well, a very jolly sort of woman.”

“Jolly?” said Charley. “I like that! How do you mean jolly?”

“Round and fattish—not too fat—with laughing eyes.”

“We haven’t much of laughing eyes in this house,” said Alex.

“Well, her eyes seem to be always laughing, even when her face is grave; and she makes delicious things to eat—at least she did make them.”

“Let’s hope she has not lost the art,” said Alex. “If we must have her in the family, let us trust that she has at least some merits. Good things to eat? What sort?”

I described the food at Hedgerow House, and described it well. I then went on to speak of the stuffed birds. The boys were wildly excited. I spoke of other things, and gave them a very full and true account of Miss Grace Donnithorne.

“It seems to me she must be a splendid sort of woman,” said Alex.

“Hurrah for Miss Grace Donnithorne!” said Charley. “She must be a most charming lady,” said Von Marlo in his precise way.

Then I sprang to my feet.

“Now listen,” I said. “I have told you about her as she was. When I saw her she had not done this wicked thing.”

“But she was going to do it; she had made up her mind pretty straight,” said Alex.

“Well, she hadn’t done it, and that makes all the difference,” I said stoutly. “She will be changed; I know she will be changed.”

“I hope she won’t have got thin (I’m sick of Hannah’s sort of figure) and cross and churlish and miserly,” said Charley.

“I don’t think so,” I answered. “I don’t suppose she’ll be as changed as all that; but, anyhow, I know—”

“I tell you what,” interrupted Von Marlo; “she is coming here, and nothing living will stop her.”

“That’s true enough,” I said gloomily.

“Then can’t you three be sensible?”

“What do you mean now, Von?” said the boys.

“Why can’t you make the best of it? Don’t hunt the poor lady into her grave by being snappish and making the worst of everything. Just give her a fair trial—start her honest, don’t you understand?”

Alex stared; Charley blinked his eyes.

I said slowly, “I don’t mean to be unkind; I mean to be kind. I am not going to say a word to father—I mean not a word of reproach—”

“Much use if you did!” muttered Alex.

“But, all the same,” I said very distinctly, “not for a single instant will I love *her*. She can come and take her place, and I will try to do what she wishes, but I will never love her—never!”

“Hurrah!” said Charley.

“Quite right, Dumps; you show spirit,” cried Alex.

But Von Marlo looked dissatisfied.

“It doesn’t seem right,” he said. “It doesn’t seem quite fair; and the poor lady hasn’t done you any harm.”

Part 1, Chapter XIII.

Putting the House in Order.

The play was as lively as any four children could desire. It was called *The Grand Duke Alexis*; it had a great deal to do with Nihilism and with the Russians generally. There was a very handsome woman in it who had a mission to kill somebody, and a very evil-looking man whose mission it was to get her arrested; and the handsome woman and the wicked man seemed to chase each other on and off the stage, and to mingle up in the plot, and to fasten themselves in some unpleasant manner into my brain. I am sure the boys enjoyed themselves vastly, and there is no doubt that I was interested.

“Your eyes are like the eyes of an owl,” whispered Charley to me; “if they get any rounder they’ll drop out like marbles.”

I was accustomed to this kind of remark, and was too much fascinated with the lovely lady and the man who was trying to arrest her to take any notice of his words. The Grand Duke was certainly the most appallingly wicked person I had ever imagined. Even father’s new wife seemed pale and commonplace and everyday beside him. Even the fact that my own precious mother was superseded by another was of no consequence at all when I recalled to memory that lovely lady’s face, and the face of the man who was trying to have her arrested.

The play came to an end, but when we arrived home Hannah had not yet returned. We let ourselves in, in lordly

fashion, with the latchkey. Von Marlo bade us good-bye, and promised to come in again on the following day. He said he would stand by us. He gave my hand an affectionate squeeze.

“Make the best of things,” he said; “there’s a good girl.”

I began to think Von Marlo a very comfortable sort of friend. I wished that he was a girl instead of a boy. I could have been quite fond of him had he been a girl.

We three sat in the parlour; we would not go to bed until Hannah came in. We began to nod presently, and Alex dropped off to sleep. It was past midnight when we heard Hannah’s steps creeping upstairs towards her bedroom. Charley immediately rushed on tiptoe to the parlour door, opened it a tenth of an inch, and peeped out.

“She is off to bed. She is walking as straight as a die. She has got on her best bonnet. I hope she’ll be in a better temper in the morning. Now then, I’m going to follow her example; I’m dead-beat I shall be asleep in a twinkling.”

He went off; his good-humoured, boyish face flashed back at us full of fun. Father’s marriage, the knowledge that there would soon be a lady in the house, whom some people would call his new mamma, did not affect him very deeply.

I went up to Alex and spoke to him.

“You and I will stand shoulder to shoulder, won’t we?” I said.

“Why, yes, Dumps—of course,” he replied.

“I mean,” I said, “that you will do what I do.”

“What do you exactly mean by that?”

“I’m prepared to be quite kind and lady-like, and not to storm or scold or say ugly things, and I want you to do just the same. You will, won’t you? We’ll understand each other. We’ll be most careful, truly, not to put her in dear mother’s place.”

My voice trembled.

“It’s a long time since mother died,” said Alex.

“But, Alex, you remember her.”

“No, I don’t,” said Alex.

“Nor do I,” I said. “Sometimes I try to. But I have got her miniature; father gave it to me. Wouldn’t you like to see it?”

“A miniature? That’s a picture of her, isn’t it? Have you got one?”

“Yes.”

“I knew father had one, but I didn’t know he would part with it.”

“He never would until now.”

“Once,” said Alex, “years ago, he was very ill in bed for a few days, and I went into his room. He was sitting up in bed, and he had a picture in a frame; he was looking at it, and there were tears in his eyes. When he saw me he fired up—you know his hasty sort of way—and stuffed the picture under his pillow. I believe it was mother’s picture he was looking at. He must have loved her then.”

“But he doesn’t love her now,” I said. “He has given the picture to me because he has put another woman in her place.”

“Well, most of them do,” said Alex.

“What do you mean?”

“Most men marry again. There are two masters at our school, and they’ve married again jolly quick—one of them within a year and a half, and the other even in a shorter time. All the fellows were talking about it. It was mighty unfortunate, I can tell you, for we had to subscribe to give them both wedding presents, otherwise we wouldn’t have noticed. They were widowers, and they had no right to do it. It was beastly hard on the boys; that’s what I think.”

“What do you mean?”

“The wedding presents, I mean.”

“Oh Alex! that is a very trivial part of the matter.”

“I expect they’ll collect something jolly for father.”

“Well, we needn’t subscribe,” I said.

“Of course not; that’s the best of it.”

“I hope they won’t,” I said.

“They’re certain to. They just worship him in the school. You haven’t the least idea how popular he is. They just adore him. He’s such a splendid teacher, and so sympathetic over a difficulty. He is a great man, there’s no doubt of that.”

But I was not in a humour to hear his praises.

“Let’s think of our own dear little mother to-night,” I said.

“All right, Rachel.”

“Come up with me to my room and I’ll show you her portrait.”

“All right, old girl.”

We went up together. I thought if Alex would stand my friend—if he would lean on me as a very superior sort of sister, and allow me to take the place of sister and mother—then I could endure things. Father’s new wife might go her own way, and I would go mine. I just wanted Alex at least to understand me. Charley was a good boy, but he was hopeless. Still, I had a vague sort of hope that Alex would keep on my side.

When we got to my room I lit all the bits of candle, and made quite a strong light; and then I opened the miniature frame, and told Alex to kneel down by me and I would show it to him. He looked at it very earnestly. He himself was strangely like the miniature, but I don’t think the likeness struck him particularly. Nevertheless, he had his sensibilities, and his lips quivered, and his soft, gentle brown eyes looked their very softest and gentlest now as they fixed themselves on my face.

“Poor mother!” he said. He bent his head and kissed the glass which covered the pictured face.

I shut up the case hastily.

“You are in rare luck to have it,” he said.

“Yes,” I answered; “it is a great comfort to me. This is mother; this is the woman I love; no other can ever take her place.”

“Of course not,” said Alex. “And some day when I’m rich you’ll let me have it photographed, won’t you?”

“Indeed I will. We’ll stick to our bargain, won’t we, Alex?”

Alex rose to his feet. He yawned slightly.

“I’m dead-tired, and I must go to school to-morrow. I haven’t looked at one of my lessons, but it doesn’t really matter. When the Professor is away marrying, you know, he can’t expect his children to work as hard as they do when he is at home.”

“Oh Alex, Hannah said something dreadful!”

“As though anybody minded what she said!”

“She said that mother—our little, young, pretty mother—was killed. She said mother would have been in the world now if she hadn’t been killed.”

“That’s all stuff!” said Alex. “Why do you speak in that exaggerated sort of way? If she had been killed there would have been a coroner’s inquest and a trial, and the murderer would have been discovered and—and hanged. Why do you talk such rot?”

“Oh, there are many ways of killing a person, and mother died for want of sunshine.”

“Oh, I see. Well, well! good-night.”

He kissed me again and left the room.

During the next day or two I was very busy. Father had said that the house was to be put in order. Now, what that meant I could not tell, but the house on the whole was about in as much order as such a great, desolate, and unfurnished abode could be. But when the next day at breakfast I found a second letter from father on my plate, and when I opened it and read father’s own directions that the spare room was to be got ready for the reception of himself and his wife on the following Sunday, I knew that Hannah and I must come either to open war or to a dismissal of the latter. I went down to the kitchen and told her at once.

“The spare room, forsooth!” she said. “Well, yes, I thought of that last night. Master said it was to be put in order, but he needn’t have written; I’d have seen to it.”

I was greatly relieved at this change of front. Hannah was looking quite gentle. She was moving about in the kitchen in quite an orderly fashion. The little cooking-stove was black instead of grey; there were no ashes to be seen anywhere, and a bright little fire burned in it. There was a pot on, and there was something boiling in the pot, and the thing that boiled and bubbled gave forth a most appetising smell. When I spoke Hannah turned and opened the oven door, and I saw inside a great cake.

“Why, Hannah!” I said.

“It’s only right to have cake and that sort of thing handy,” she said. “Don’t talk nonsense, Dumps. There’s a deal for you and me to do. Be you going to school to-day?”

“No,” I said.

“Why will you keep away?”

“Because I won’t go.”

“You will get a report; your mistress will be very angry.”

“I don’t care,” I said; “I won’t go. I’ll go afterwards. I won’t go this week.”

“Highty-tighty!” said Hannah. “Well, you’ll catch it!”

“Seems to me I’m always catching it,” I said.

“Seems to me you are,” said Hannah.

“Well, Hannah, what about the spare room?”

“I’ll see to it myself. I’ll have it ready.”

“Can I help you, Hannah?”

“No; but you can come and look on if you like.”

“Don’t you want Mrs Herring? She is so strong. Everything should be turned out; the place should be made very clean.”

“I don’t want none of your herrings nor your sprats neither,” replied Hannah in her most aggressive tone. This was a very old joke of Hannah’s.

I went upstairs now. The spare room was on the same landing as the drawing-room, and, as far as I could tell, had never been of any use at all to any single member of the family. Perhaps in mother’s time it had been of service to some long-forgotten guest. The door was always locked. I supposed Hannah had the key. At nights sometimes, when the wind was blowing high, there was a moaning, through the keyhole of that locked door, and there were times when I flew past it up and up and up to my own attic bedroom. But now I stood outside the door. At the other side of the landing was the drawing-room. It was a very big room with three windows. We sat there sometimes when father had his professors, men very nearly as learned as himself—not quite, of course—to visit him.

I went into the drawing-room. It was very ugly, and not nearly as cosy as the parlour. The spare room I had never seen the inside of that I could remember. Hannah came up now, and took a great bunch of keys from her pocket and opened the door, and we went in.

“Oh, how musty it smells!” I said.

“In course it do,” said Hannah. “When a room’s shut up for going on fourteen years, why shouldn’t it smell musty? But there, child! don’t you go and catch your death of cold. The first thing is to air the room and then to light a fire. Afterwards I’ll rub up the furniture and put up clean hangings. It won’t be exactly a cheerful sort of room, but I suppose the master must be content.”

There were grey-looking curtains hanging at the three tall windows. There were green Venetian blinds, which looked almost white now, so covered were they with dust. There was a sort of rough drugget stuff on the floor, which was quite as grey as the curtains which surrounded the windows. There was a huge four-poster bed, drawn out a little from the wall, and taking one of the best positions in the room. This also was hung with grey moreen, and looked as desolate and as uninviting as a couch could look. There was a huge arm-chair, covered also with the same grey moreen; and there were a few other chairs, hard and dirty. There was a very tall brass fender to the grate, which in itself was large and of generous proportions. There was a chest of drawers, made of mahogany, with brass handles; and a huge wardrobe, almost as big as a small house. I really don’t remember the rest of the furniture of the room, except that there were engravings hanging on the walls, and one in particular portraying Herodias bearing the head of John the Baptist on a charger, hanging exactly over the fireplace. The picture was as ghastly as the room.

“I wouldn’t sleep here for the world,” I said.

“Well, you won’t have the chance,” said Hannah. “Now, you can just go out and make yourself useful somewhere else, while I’m beginning to clean up and get things in order.”

Part 1, Chapter XIV.

The Professor’s Return.

When Sunday morning dawned the place was, according to Hannah’s ideas, in perfect order. She had not got in any one to help her, and I am afraid she must have been nearly dropping with fatigue. She allowed me to dust a little, but would not permit me to do any harder work.

“No, no,” she said—“no, no; you’re the young lady, and I’m a poor drudge. It’s right that the drudge should work, and

not the young lady."

I proceeded to try to remind her that she had not considered my young ladyhood much in the past.

"Things is different now," said Hannah. "I have got to look after you now."

"But why so?" I asked.

"I had a dream in the night," she said. "Your poor mother come to me, and she said, 'Don't leave my children, Hannah.' Oh dear! oh dear! she as was killed—as was killed!"

To my amazement, Hannah burst out crying. When she cried I rushed to her and flung my arms round her neck and cried also.

"Oh, I am so glad you won't leave us!" I said. I felt like a most terrible little martyr, and Hannah's sympathy soothed me inexpressibly.

That evening—it was Saturday—I told Alex and Charley and Von Marlo about Hannah's dream.

"Rot, I call it!" said Charley.

"Oh Charley, you are very unkind!"

"Well, I'm sure," said Charley, "why should she have been so cross and disobliging when we really wanted somebody—when we had no sort of mother? Now that we're going to have that jolly, fat, round woman to look after us and to see to our comforts, Hannah is beginning to find out what her duties are."

"Things will work themselves right," said Von Marlo in his solemn way. "Take my word for it, Rachel, things will shape themselves right."

I didn't think Von Marlo half so comforting as Hannah on this occasion, and I almost said so, for I felt very snappish.

That night I scarcely slept at all. To-morrow would find us with that detestable person in the house—"the new mamma." Of course, she wasn't my mamma, but the world would speak of her in that manner, just as Von Marlo had once done. He would never say those words to my face again.

I went to church on Sunday morning, accompanied by Alex and Charley. As we were coming back Augusta Moore rushed up to me.

"I thought you were very ill," she said. "We all thought so—Miss Franklin, your form mistress, and all."

"I'm not a bit ill," I said. I did not want Augusta's sympathy, or, indeed, to say anything at all to her just then.

"Then why didn't you come to school?"

I was silent. Augusta took my hand. She pulled it through her arm.

"I think I understand," she said. "You were ill in mind; that is the worst sort of illness, isn't it?"

She glanced round at Mrs Moore, who was trotting along behind.

"Go home, mother; I'll follow you."

"You'll lose yourself, Gussie."

"Don't call me Gussie. I'll follow you."

Mrs Moore said something to me; she was quite nice and commonplace, and did not allude to the subject of the "new mamma."

Presently Augusta and I found ourselves alone, for the boys the moment they saw her had taken precious good care to make themselves scarce. We walked on slowly.

"I should like to see your house," said Augusta.

"You can if you wish to," I replied.

I took her in, and the moment she got into the hall she began to sniff.

"What is the matter?" I asked.

"Books!" she said. "Old leather! How I envy that woman!"

"What woman?"

"That commonplace person who has dared to marry your father."

"Oh well, Augusta, we had better not talk of that."

"Not talk of it? Why, it's a weight on my mind always. I only trust she won't make him fall off. Rachel—Rachel Grant—

you have a very solemn responsibility before you."

"What is that?"

"The commonplace woman can do nothing, but you can do a great deal."

"In what way?"

"You, who are his child, must partake in some way of his nature."

"I never had the slightest influence on father," I responded. "I think he often forgets that I exist. I shall certainly have less influence than ever now."

"You have influence, but you won't use it. Oh that I were his daughter!"

Augusta began to sniff again. Charley came into the room at that moment.

"I thought dinner was served," he said.

He looked at Augusta.

"How do you do?" she said. "You are the son of the greatest of men."

"Bosh!" said Charley. He backed towards the door. "I thought," he said, glancing from me to Augusta, and then from Augusta to me again, "that dinner was on the table, and that you were sniffing the good smell."

"Books! Books!" said Augusta.

Charley vanished.

"Take me to his library," said Augusta. "Just let me walk round it once, will you?"

"Oh yes, if you like," I replied.

I took her round. She stepped softly in veneration. She took up a volume; she seated herself on a chair; she opened it; she was lost.

"Augusta," I said.

There was not the most remote movement on her part.

"Augusta!" I said again.

Her lips quivered. She was repeating something softly under her breath.

"Come," I cried, "it is time for you to go home to your dinner, and it is time for us to eat ours. Get up! Awake!"

No stir of any sort. Violent measures were necessary. I snatched the hook from her hand, and in so doing upset the stool on which she was sitting. To have her book taken away and her seat removed from under her was sufficient to wake even Augusta Moore. She rubbed her eyes and said, "Where was I?"

"Where you have no right to be," I said. "You really must go."

"But you will keep him up to the mark; you will take my advice, won't you?"

"I tell you what," I said cheerfully; "if I can possibly manage it, I will introduce you to him, and you shall talk to him. If you feel that he is so near you—so like you in all respects—you will have much more influence over him than I should, and you will be able to keep him up to the mark yourself."

The next minute I had repented of my hastily formed decision, for Augusta's long, thin arms were round my neck, and she was hugging me and kissing me on my cheeks, and then hugging me again with frantic energy.

"Oh, you dear! You love! You beautiful creature! Oh! oh! oh! To think of it! To think of it!"

"Dinner is served," said Charley, just poking his head round the door and then vanishing.

At last I got rid of Augusta. When I arrived in the dining-room Charley asked me if I had had a mad girl in the house who had broken loose from an asylum. I replied with dignity that she was a very clever girl, and then we proceeded to our meal.

The meal itself was quite plain—the usual sort—a piece of boiled beef, carrots floating in gravy round it, and a few boiled potatoes. These were to be followed by one of Hannah's apple-dumplings. Now, apple-dumplings are supposed to be very good things, but I cannot say that Hannah's recipe was worth preserving. The pastry was always very hard, and the apples were never done enough; in short, we were all tired of them.

"I can't imagine why the thing that smells so jolly good doesn't come upstairs," said Charley. "It's too bad—it's worse than bad."

"Oh no," I answered; "don't say that, Charley. Hannah is keeping it for supper. She is going to have a surprise supper; I know it for I saw the cake."

“The cake!” cried Charley. “A cake made by Hannah?”

“Yes; and I can tell you it did smell pretty good. Oh, didn’t it just!” I smacked my lips in anticipation.

“I suppose we’ll have to make this do,” said Alex gloomily, helping himself to another slice of tough beef.

Our conversation filtered away into mere nothings, then into monosyllables; then it tailed off into utter silence. We were all very depressed, and yet we were excited; we wanted we knew not what; we were afraid, we could not tell of what. Each one of us had a sense that things could never be the same again, that we were eating our humble dinner and looking each into the humble face of the other for the last time. Everything from that hour forward would be different. Would the change be for the better? No, it could not be for the better. A change, however, we were certain was coming. We did not speak of it; we sat very still.

At last the boys said they would go for a walk; they did not ask me to accompany them, nor did I offer to go. I ran up to my own room. I took the pretty dark-blue dress which Miss Grace Donnithorne had given me. I took the jacket, the little shoes, the stockings, all the things which she had showered upon me when I was at Hedgerow House, and I put them into the trunk which she had also presented me with—the pretty trunk which I had been so proud of, and which bore my initials, R.G. On the top of all the things I put a card with the words, “Returned with thanks—Rachel Grant,” written upon it. This little trunk I myself conveyed to the bedroom which had been got ready for the Professor and his wife. There was no attempt at making this room pretty, but a huge fire burned in the grate, and that alone had a certain cheerfulness about it. I put the little trunk at the foot of the bed. I did not know what would happen. I felt afraid; nevertheless, I was quite determined to let Miss Grace Donnithorne—Mrs Grant, as she was now—know how things really stood.

At last the time came for me to make myself look as well as I could to meet my father and his wife. I put on the blue evening-dress which I had outgrown, brushed out my long hair, and went down to the parlour. The parlour certainly looked very smart. Its central table alone was worth the greatest admiration. There was a white cloth—very white indeed—in fact, dazzlingly so; and the crockery (I cannot call it by the name of china) seemed to me quite amazing. It did not matter that none of the glass matched, and that there were plates of various sorts, but what was all-important was the fact that the board groaned with goodly fare. There was a huge piece of cold roast beef, a salad made according to an old-fashioned recipe of Hannah’s, a cake (frosted) in the centre of the table, some jellies, some fruit, a pair of roast fowls, and a ham. Oh, when before had the old house close to the college seen such a feast?

Standing at the head of the table, with his arms folded and his eyes fixed upon the goodly fare, was Alex; and standing at the foot of the table, in precisely the same attitude, was Charley. They did not move when I came in, and I did not speak, but went and stood at one of the sides. Hannah bustled into the room.

“They’ll be here in a few minutes, children,” she said; “and don’t forget that I’m here to take your parts. Bless you, poor orphans—bless you!”

Then she disappeared downstairs.

“Oh dear! Oh dear!” I said.

“For goodness’ sake,” said Alex, moving away from the table, “don’t begin to snivel, whatever you do, Dumps. She’s a mighty silly old woman.”

“Oh, what a supper!” said Charley.

He gave a sigh of profound satisfaction. After a minute he said, “Whatever sort of a step-mother she is, I am going to eat! I say, what a supper!”

He had scarcely uttered the words before the sound of a cab stopping outside the front door was distinctly heard.

“Shall we all go into the hall?” asked Alex.

“I’m not going to stir,” I answered.

“Nor I,” said Charley. “I can’t keep my eyes off the supper. I’m awfully afraid it’s a sort of fairy feast, and will vanish if I don’t keep gazing and gazing at it.”

The bell was pulled violently. Hannah came hurrying up the stairs. She bustled into the hall. Charley went on tiptoe to the door of the parlour. He came back again on tiptoe, with his eyes rounder than ever.

“What do you think?” he said. “Hannah has got a white satin favour pinned upon her dress. Would you believe it? What a turncoat she is!”

“She’s not,” I answered. “She had to do it. We must be outwardly civil.”

“Yes, yes; that’s it,” said Alex.

“And for the sake of the supper it’s worth while,” said Charley.

The hall door was opened. My father’s step was heard coming in; this was followed by a lighter, much younger step. Then a cheerful voice said, “Well, here we are.—And you are Hannah, I think? I have often heard of you.”

“The hypocrite!” I muttered; but Alex said, “Hush! Remember our compact.”

“I have often heard of you,” said the cheerful voice. “How do you do?”

Hannah’s reply was so muttered that it could not be heard in the parlour. Then father said, “Where are the children? Dumps! Alex! Charley! Come along at once!”

We all made a rush to the parlour door. We had to rush or we should not have moved at all. We went into the hall. I felt at that supreme moment that if I had not known Miss Grace Donnithorne in the past, and had not really liked her very much, not to say almost loved her, I could have borne my present position better. But having already known her, the present position was almost unbearable. Nevertheless, things that seem unbearable have now and then to be faced in life. My father called in his cheerful tones, “Well, children, well! here we are back. Here’s your new mother. I trust you will all be as dutiful as she deserves. I am sure it is very good of her to come and look after such harum-scarums as you are. Now then, Dumps, you give her a right royal welcome.”

“How do you do?” I said.

I held out my hand. The kindest—oh yes, I must say the words—the kindest eyes in the world looked anxiously into mine; the pleasant mouth relaxed as though it was preparing to smile; then it became grave, but its expression was as sweet as ever.

“How are you, Rachel?” said she who used to be Miss Grace Donnithorne. She bent forward and gave me a light kiss—not the affectionate embrace she had bestowed upon me once or twice when I was at Hedgerow House.

“Take your mother upstairs, Dumps. Take her and show her her bedroom,” said father. “Come along, you two boys; just come and tell me all that has been happening at the college. My goodness, what an age it seems since I went away!”

Father’s tone and the mighty sigh of relief he gave did more to compose my nerves than anything else. Miss Grace Donnithorne had not changed him. I went up the stairs saying to myself, “She is not my father’s wife. She is only Miss Grace Donnithorne, a stoutish lady, middle-aged, quite nice and fat and pleasant; she is not father’s wife.”

All the time these thoughts kept coming and going in my brain; but the lady who followed me did not speak at all. That was quite unlike Miss Donnithorne’s way.

I opened the door of the big room. The fire had almost burnt itself out; the room in consequence was cold. There was no gas of any sort in this huge chamber; two poor, solitary candles had been placed on the high mantelshelf, but had not been lighted.

“Dear me!” said the lady—and there was no mistaking the matter-of-fact voice—“but this room is too cold for your father. Come along. Dumps, you and I must see to this at once. Where can we get coals? Oh, this hod is empty. Get some matches quickly, child, and some hot water. Your father must have hot water, and we must have this fire made up. Dear, dear! Dumps, our hands will be full. He is a very precious man, you know, but a handful—a good bit of a handful—more than one child could possibly manage, and more than one woman can manage, but between us, Dumps—”

She took up the poker, and the fire was soon blazing again. Candles were lit in a trice. Hannah appeared with a great jug of hot water.

“Where would you wish your hot water to be placed, Mrs Grant?” she said. Her tone was very precise. There was a red spot on one of her cheeks; the other was deadly pale. But the white satin favour! What possessed her to wear it? It stood out with an aggravating stare on her dark dress.

The new Mrs Grant turned at once.

“Put it here by the wash-hand stand,” she said; “and bring some more coals, please. This fire is not nearly large enough. The room is chilly.”

She spoke very cheerfully. Hannah left the room at once. Just at that moment there came a knock at the door.

“Father says that supper is ready,” said Charley’s voice.

“Oh, I haven’t spoken to you, Charley,” said Mrs Grant.

She went to the door, took his hand, and wrung it.

“Good boy,” she said. “You will help me all you can.”

I saw him gazing at her very hard; then he went downstairs, almost like a flash. I wondered what he was going to say to Alex.

Meanwhile I stood silent by the fire. Miss Grace Donnithorne, that was, faced me. She had removed her hat and taken off her jacket. She had a little comb in her pocket; with this she smoothed out her hair. She went to the wash-stand and washed her hands. Hannah appeared with the coals.

“Put a good many on, please, Hannah. I want the room to be quite warm,” said the new mistress.

Hannah obeyed. The late Miss Grace Donnithorne looked round the room.

“Much too large,” she said.

“All the rooms are large in this house,” I answered.

“Oh, we’ll choose a cosier one than this—eh, Dumps?” she said.

“Can’t find one in this house,” was my response.

“Well, this will do for to-night.”

She looked at me. The kindness in her eyes seemed kinder than ever. It would have been difficult, had she not been my step-mother, to resist her; but being my step-mother, I stood very cold and still, responding quite civilly when she spoke, but not offering any advances on my part.

She had washed her hands now, and the fire was blazing brightly. She poured some hot water into a basin.

“This is for the Professor,” she said. “He must warm himself. He is very cold, dear man! He is a very precious creature, and—”

I wished she would not talk of him like that. I felt a sense of irritation. Then I looked at her and the irritation vanished.

“The boys are so hungry,” I said.

“And so am I,” she replied, with a laugh; “and your dear father is too. My dear Dumps, he has a ravenous appetite. That is a great relief to me. He hasn’t the faintest idea how much he eats, but it’s that that keeps him going. He eats without knowing that he is eating. But he mustn’t go on doing that. I am certain he bolts his food, and that will mean indigestion by-and-by. And indigestion breaks up life. You and I have a great deal on our hands.”

Then there was a dead pause.

“Dumps dear,” she said, coming nearer.

In another minute perhaps she might have said something, and all that followed need never have been written; just at that moment she laid her hand on my shoulder, but before she could utter the words, whatever they were, that were trembling on her lips, her eyes fell on the little trunk—on the little leather trunk with my initials, R.G., on the lid. She could not mistake it. She gave a start; into her comely cheeks there flamed a vivid red. She bent down without a word and opened the trunk. She looked at the contents, took up the card which I had laid on the top and read it. Then she laid it back again very quietly, without uttering a syllable, and closed the lid of the little trunk. Then she turned to me.

“Shall we go down to supper?” she said. Her voice was quite cheerful. But there was a wall of ice between us.

Part 2, Chapter I.

The New Order of Things.

Of course, my step-mother made a great change in the house. I cannot exactly describe how things were gradually altered, and how the desolate old mansion became a habitable and cheerful home. But it certainly was completely metamorphosed. The old régime with regard to fires was the first change. Mrs Grant said that such a big, empty, rambling place must be kept thoroughly warmed in winter. Accordingly, in the dining-room a fire always blazed, and was kept well piled up with solid lumps of shining black coal of the very best Silkstone, which Hannah would never dream of affording in the old days. Then into my bedroom and into the boys’ bedroom were introduced wonderful new gas-stoves, which gave not the slightest smell, but which could be lit at a moment’s notice, and would make the bedrooms thoroughly warm and comfortable.

But I no longer slept in my attic. I had struggled hard against Mrs Grant’s wish to move me into another part of the house, but in the end I yielded, and now I had a pretty room, brightly papered and nicely furnished, on the floor just above the drawing-room.

“Why,” said my step-mother, “we do not need to use those desolate attics at all. This room will do for Alex, this for Charley, and this for Dumps; and this, when we have visitors, for the spare room. Hannah and the other servants can sleep upstairs. For you, children, this ought to be your floor, and it shall be,” continued the little lady, speaking with that spirit which always characterised her.

As to the boys, they were delighted with their new rooms. They were furnished exceedingly simply; indeed, they looked quite bare enough to make most people consider them somewhat hermit-like sort of sleeping apartments; but then those people had never visited the attics where Alex and Charley used to sleep.

“These rooms are quite good enough for boys; you mustn’t pamper boys, whatever happens,” said Mrs Grant. “Girls are different; girls need softer treatment.”

But her most delightful innovation was the introduction into the house of two excellent servants to help Hannah. There had been, I have not the slightest doubt of it, a very terrible scene in the kitchen when Mrs Grant interviewed Hannah. Hannah was not visible at all for the rest of the day, and my step-mother and I went out for our meals.

On the next day Hannah came upstairs and said she wished to speak to Mrs Grant. They had a long conference, and when Hannah came out of her presence, the eyes of that good woman were very red, but she succumbed without a word.

A new range was now put into the kitchen, a boy came every morning to help Hannah with the heaviest part of her work, an excellent housemaid attended to the bedrooms, and a first-rate parlour-maid opened the hall door and served up our meals. In short, we were a new family.

The drawing-room, however, had not yet been touched. I wondered what Mrs Grant would make of the drawing-room. I did not like to question her. I was quite good—outwardly good, I mean—all this time to my step-mother, but we did not come a bit nearer to each other. The little trunk with the letters R.G. on the cover seemed to stand between my heart and her heart. Nevertheless, we chatted together all day long, and planned how we would meet this contingency and the other, and what surprises we would give to father, and how we could manage things.

One day about six weeks after father's second marriage Mrs Grant came to me. She had a pleased and delighted expression on her face.

"Rachel, my dear child," she said, "how old are you?"

"I shall be sixteen on my birthday, and my birthday comes in May. It is a long way off yet."

Then I gave a sigh, and felt a sudden contraction of my heart.

"Well, anyhow, dear, this is Quarter Day, the 21st of December. I have been speaking to your father, and he means to give you a dress allowance."

"A what?" I said.

"A dress allowance, dear. You must, you know, have clothes suitable to your father's daughter. Here is the first quarter's money."

She put two crisp Bank of England notes, worth five pounds each, into my hand. I started; I coloured crimson; I looked at the money.

"But I—I don't know what to do with this," I said.

"Oh yes, you will know very well what to do with it. Now the question is, would you like me to help you to choose some pretty dresses, or would you rather manage the whole affair yourself?"

Again there was that pathetic expression in her eyes which I had seen for a minute or two before. She was looking at me very earnestly. I was about to say, "Oh, will you help me to choose, for I don't know anything about dress?" when I remembered the pretty dark-blue dress with the grey fur. That dress, which I always felt had been given me under false pretences, seemed to rise up now to slay the feeling of kindness which, in spite of everything, I could not help entertaining for my step-mother in my heart. "If you don't greatly mind," I said, "perhaps this first time I had better choose my own dresses."

"As you like, dear, of course; but you mustn't go alone. You might ask one of your schoolfellows to go with you. And, Dumps dear, ask as many of your friends in to tea as you like on Wednesday afternoons and Saturday afternoons; those are your half-holidays, and you can go to visit those whom I like you to know also on those days. I want you to have a very pleasant life, my dear child."

"Thank you," I answered.

"You understand, Rachel, that my wish is to make you happy."

"I am sure of it," I said.

"And you are happy?"

"I am comfortable," I said.

I folded the money up.

"I will thank father when I see him. It is exceedingly kind of him," I said.

"I wouldn't worry him," said Mrs Grant. She looked at me a little anxiously.

"But why not?"

"He has forgotten all about it by now. It is unfair to disturb a man of his nature with these trivial details."

I slipped the notes into my pocket. "Have you no purse, dear?"

"Upstairs," I said.

"Well, be careful of the money. Don't lose it."

"I'll be very careful; thank you so much."

I went out into the hall. Charley was there.

"I say, Dumps!"

“What is it, Charley?”

“Von Marlo and I have been talking about the new mamma.”

“You are not to call her that.”

“But I say she is, you know; and Von and I, we say—”

“I don’t want to hear.”

“But you shall—you must! We say she is *awfully* jolly—just A1, A1—and that—”

But I rushed past. There was a choking lump in my throat; in another minute I should have burst into tears.

I managed to reach my own pretty new bedroom without disgracing myself. I shut and locked the door and stood in the centre of the room. The crisp five-pound notes rustled in my pocket, but I, Dumps—in other words, Rachel Grant—stamped my foot. I was in an absolute passion. I did not know why I felt so thoroughly angry.

What unreasonable creatures girls are! Three months ago I would have given anything for my present surroundings and my present prospects: I, who hardly ever had a penny of my own; I, who was only half-fed and only half-clothed, who was desolate, without a real friend in the world; for my father—my dear old father—lived for ever and ever in Wonderland, and no one could bring him bock from that strange country, where he dwelt with other geniuses of his kind, and I and the boys had to suffer; and Hannah, notwithstanding her protestations, neglected us so shamefully that the wonder was we were not ill. All of a sudden, however, “Open sesame!” and behold a new order of things! The old order had given way to the new. We were clothed; we were fed; we were considered; we were treated with kindness; our wants were attended to, our little trials sympathised with. In short, love in the true sense of the word had come into the house; the genius of Wonderment had taken to himself the genius of Order and Motherly Kindness, and this latter genius had made the whole house home-like and happy.

But I, at least, was not prepared to take into my heart this good fairy whom the good queen of all the fairies had sent to us. I stood in my pretty room which my step-mother had arranged for me, and felt as angry and as bitter as girl could feel.

By-and-by there came a cheerful sound on the stairs. My step-mother knocked at the door.

“Augusta Moore is downstairs and would like to see you, Dumps,” she said. “It is a beautiful, sunshiny morning, and you may as well go out with her.”

I suddenly remembered that I had neglected Augusta a good deal of late; that she had often come to the house and I had hardly spoken to her. I further remembered that, this being the 21st of December, the holidays had begun. Our big school had broken up on the 20th, but the boys’ college would break up to-morrow. Christmas would be with us in no time, and Christmas was to be spent in Hedgerow House.

That was the treat of all treats which was turning the heads of both the boys. I was to go, Alex was to go, Charley was to go, and Von Marlo was to go. He was alone at the school, and Mrs Grant, with her kind and open-hearted hospitality, had invited him.

“It is to be my Christmas present to you all, to have you in my house,” she said. “I am sure you will enjoy yourselves vastly.”

Now surely, with such a prospect in view, any girl would be a perfect goose if she were not happy, and I do not think many girls will sympathise with Rachel Grant at this moment. I was making a martyr of myself because I thought it not right to my mother’s memory to receive this new mamma in her place; and yet, if the truth must be told, although I had often pined for my mother, there were days and months, and perhaps even years, when I had forgotten her very existence. She was out of the world before I had time to remember her face. That was my position with regard to my real mother in the past, but from the hour when I had heard that father was about to bring a new wife to the old house, and after he had given me my mother’s miniature, I worshipped her, I kept her always in my memory, and I felt that the more I withdrew my heart from the “new mamma,” to quote Von Marlo’s hideous phrase, the more I showed my love and tenderness for the real mother. Perhaps there are other girls made like that; if so, I should like to show them once for all how exceedingly silly, how exceedingly unpractical and ungrateful, I was. For this story would be worthless if it were not told truthfully.

I got over my passion after a time. I kept repeating to myself, “Odious fellow, Von Marlo! The new mamma A1 indeed! A1!” I wished he would not talk to Charley and corrupt him with his wrong ideas.

Then I slipped the ten pounds which my step-mother had given me into my purse, and put the purse into my pocket. I dressed myself in the warm clothes which I now had to wear—and which my father, of course, had given me—and I went slowly downstairs.

Augusta was waiting in the drawing-room. She was sitting near the fire; she was talking to my step-mother. As I entered the room I heard my step-mother say, “I think it can be managed, Augusta. It would be a great pleasure for you, and if it is really the case that your mother would like to spend Christmas with your uncle Charles, why— Oh, here you are, Dumps!”

“Yes; what is it?” I asked.

Augusta’s sallow face was lit up with a gleam of red on each of her cheeks. This red tint improved her appearance vastly.

“Oh,” said Augusta, “I don’t for a moment suppose you’ll do it.”

“I don’t see why,” I replied. “I’m not in the habit of making myself unamiable.”

“Well, it’s this,” said Mrs Grant; “Augusta would greatly like to come with us to Hedgerow House for Christmas. It will be a little difficult to squeeze her in, but if you, Dumps, would not mind having her in your room—”

“I’d take a very tiny bit of the bed. I can make myself quite accommodating,” said Augusta.

“She would like it very much indeed,” said Mrs Grant.

“Of course you must come if my step-mother invites you,” I said.

Mrs Grant coloured; then she got up, walked to the table, and took up some plain sewing which she was doing, and began a long seam. She was making some clothes for the poor; she was never idle for a minute of her time.

“You can come, Augusta, as far as I am concerned,” I said.

“Of course you can; you needn’t share the same bed,” said Mrs Grant. “I think I can manage better for you than that, but I cannot give you a room apiece. If you will share the same room, that is all that is required.”

“Oh, it is too wonderful!” said Augusta.

“Come out, Augusta, or I shall be late,” I said.

We found ourselves in the street.

“Oh!” said Augusta. She walked on, not noticing me in the least. After a time she said, “To wake in the morning and to feel that you will breakfast with him, that you will dine with him, and that you will sup with him! To think that occasionally he may even look at you, and perhaps once or twice speak to you; and to know that this will go on for seven days—seven whole days, for I have been asked for a week! Dumps, do you think it is true? Do you think it is only a vision? I often have visions; they’re beautiful, some of them, but none of them equals this. To be in the house with him, and to hang on his words for a week!”

“I don’t think, to tell the truth,” I said, “that any one else will hang on his words; you will have him all to yourself.”

“Oh,” said Augusta, “if you only wouldn’t!”

“Wouldn’t what?”

“Wouldn’t try to deprecate him. It seems wicked—it seems as though God would punish you.”

“Why, what do you mean?” I said.

“You ought to be so happy and so pleased,” said Augusta. “And you have got such a beautiful, commonplace step-mother. I admit that she is commonplace, but I never met so charming a woman. If only my mother were like her!”

“Your mother is excellent,” I said—“quite as nice as my step-mother; and then she is your own. I think it is very wicked of you to run down your mother. If you hadn’t a mother you’d know the difference.”

“But you have.”

“I haven’t. How dare you!”

“Dumps, I can’t help thinking that you—but oh, perhaps you’d rather not share your room with me?”

“How can I help it?” I replied. “Is the room mine? Doesn’t it belong to Mrs Grant—I mean to my step-mother? How can I question any of her wishes? You come to our house, and you snuggle into her good favour; you worm yourself in, and you have got yourself invited, and I suppose—oh dear, I wish I wasn’t so cross!”

“If it were not such a very great thing I would take offence at your words, Rachel,” said Augusta, “and not come with you; but being such a magnificent thing, and so all-important to me, I will not take offence, even though you do compare me to a snuggler (I don’t quite know what the creature is), and even to a worm. I will come with you on the 24th to Hedgerow House, and when you look at my face you will perhaps realise that you are looking at perfect happiness—yes, Perfect Happiness; spell the words with capitals, for I have attained to that great height.”

“This is the Twopenny Tube,” I said. “Perhaps you would like to go back to your mother and make arrangements?”

“But where are you going?”

“I’m going to meet the Swan girls; they said they would be round the corner waiting for me.”

Augusta looked at me rather longingly, but I would not reply to her look.

“Good-bye,” I said. “I’ll try not to do anything to interfere with your bliss.” I left her. When I looked back she was already standing as one in a dream. I doubted if she would catch the next train in the Twopenny Tube, but I concluded that in the course of hours she would return to her commonplace mother.

Part 2, Chapter II.

A Quarterly Allowance.

Rita Swan and Agnes had both been exceedingly interested with regard to my conduct at the time of my father's second marriage. My absence from school had caused their wonder. I was not blamed for that absence, and I often wondered why the form mistress and the head-mistress said nothing whatever to me on the subject.

I went back to school on the Monday after my father's marriage, and the girls had tittered and laughed and made remarks. I had been quite silent and gone stoically through my lessons. Now this marriage was an old story, but still Rita and Agnes were never tired of expatiating on the great change for the better which had taken place in my circumstances. I told them that my step-mother had a great deal of common-sense (I had not the slightest idea of giving her away to strangers); I said that father had now been told what was necessary to the well bringing up of his children, and accordingly things were altered in our home.

The girls were in great spirits on this occasion, and when I met them I suddenly resolved to enjoy myself.

"What do you think has happened to me?" I said.

"What can it be?" said Rita. "Oh, dear me! Rachel, you look very nice."

In the old days they did not pet me much, and they often told me I looked very ugly, and I was not elated by the compliment.

"Never mind my looks," I said. "I am quite a proud girl to-day. I am, in fact, almost grown-up; I have taken the first step upwards."

Now, to be grown-up was Rita's greatest ambition in all the world. She was four months older than I. She would be sixteen early in January, and I should have to wait until the beginning of May for the event. But, of course, she would not be "out" for at least two years.

"You are not really grown-up, and you needn't suppose you will be for ages and ages," said Agnes. "Why, look at Rita; you have made her quite cross."

"You do talk in such an absurd way," said Rita. "But what is it? Out with it!"

"Well, I've begun to get an allowance."

"A what?" said Agnes. "An allowance."

"You don't mean a dress allowance?" said Rita. "Yes, that's just what I do mean; and I've got my first quarter's money in my pocket. What's more, I'm as rich as Croesus; I have more money than I think any one girl could by any possibility spend. Now, what do you think of me?"

Agnes had been walking on Rita's other side. She showed her estimation of my upward step in the world's ladder by running round to my side and placing me in the middle.

"Tell us all about it," she said, and she slipped her hand through my arm.

"There's not much to tell. Father thought that—or at least my step-mother thought that I ought to have money to spend on dress, and I have got ten pounds."

"For a year?" asked Agnes.

"No; for a quarter. I am to have ten pounds every quarter. Think of it!"

Now, Agnes Swan knew quite well that when her allowance was given to her it would not approach anything like that royal sum. She therefore glanced at me and said in a low, pathetic voice, "What remarkably pretty ears you have got, Dumps!"

I made no answer. I continued as though I had not heard her: "And I have the money—two banknotes—in my pocket; and I am going to choose some dresses now, and I thought perhaps you two girls would like to come with me."

"How splendid! Where shall we go?"

"Not to Wallis's," I said firmly.

"Why not to Wallis's? What special hatred have you for that shop?"

"I do not wish to go there," I answered. "I want to dress myself in West End style."

"Then," said Agnes, "nothing can be easier. We'll wait just here and take the first 'bus to Oxford Street. We'll get down there and press our noses against the shop windows. It's Christmas-time, and things are so bright. But if you want dresses now you'll have to get them ready-made, for no shop will make your dresses in time for Christmas."

"I don't really know that I want much dress," I said. "I have got the money to do what I like with."

"Of course you have." Rita looked at me anxiously.

“I must spend some of it on dress, of course, but I’ve got ten pounds. It seems almost as though it could never be spent. Oh, here’s a ’bus! Shall we go on the top?”

Rita waved her umbrella wildly. The driver of the omnibus stopped. We mounted on to the roof, and sat huddled close together discussing my brilliant prospects.

“We’d best keep one on each side of you, for a lot of money like that in a girl’s pocket makes it dangerous for her to walk about at Christmas-time,” said Agnes.

“I don’t mind,” I said. “You can keep one on each side of me. I think,” I continued after a pause, “that it would be only right to spend some of my money on Christmas presents.”

“Of course, dear; it would be only generous. And you ought to get something for your step-mother.”

“Yes, of course I ought; and for the boys, and for father. It will be difficult to think of anything for father. And then there is Hannah. Yes, I will spend some of it on Christmas-boxes.”

We got down from the roof of the omnibus at Oxford Circus, and then we walked slowly down Regent Street and revelled in our view of the shop windows. I was not specially devoted to dress, but the dainty and ravishing garments which I beheld exhibited in the windows were certainly enough to excite the wonder and admiration of us all.

At last we decided to venture into a large shop to ask the price of a pretty costume which took my fancy. I liked it because it was as different from the dark-blue with the grey fur as dress could be. It was a soft, glowing shade of crimson, and was smartly trimmed with velvet of the same colour. We all marched into the shop, and I demanded the price of the little costume in the window.

“It will just fit you, Dumps,” said Rita.

The man who served us said he would inquire, and presently he informed us that the dress was selling off and we could have it for ten guineas. Both Rita and Agnes raised their blows in amazement. I coloured deeply, and said that ten guineas was more than I wanted to pay. He said that he had cheaper costumes in the shop, but I would not listen. We went out of the shop, and we three girls once again found ourselves on the pavement.

“I call it a perfect swindle,” said Rita. “Of course, I know that my cousin Laura Ives gives more than that for a dress, but then she is grown-up. After all, ten pounds doesn’t seem much for a dress allowance. But let us go into another shop.”

But, try as we would, I could get nothing that I could really wear under about five guineas, and as I did not choose to give more than half my allowance for a single dress, I resolved to do without one.

“I’ll tell my step-mother that father must be informed that ten pounds a quarter is not nearly enough to spend on clothes,” I said. “Of course I had no real ideas on the subject before.”

“Of course it isn’t half enough,” said Rita. “You can just spend the money on odds and ends. That’s what I’d do.”

I proceeded to follow her advice, and presently I purchased a quantity of ribbon of different shades and colours, two or three pairs of gloves—boots I decided I could do without, although mine were rather shabby—some neckties of different colours, and a new hat. The hat was quite unsuitable, but Rita said it was remarkably stylish.

By this time I had spent three or four pounds of my allowance.

“Oh, I must have some handkerchiefs and stockings,” I said suddenly. I thought myself most prudent and all that was wise and common-sense when I spoke of stockings. I bought several pairs of most expensive make, and furnished myself with some fine lawn handkerchiefs, and lo and behold! my first five-pound note had vanished. Still, I had the other.

“You ought to think of the Christmas-boxes; you ought to take something home for them all,” said Rita.

The Christmas-boxes proved themselves most fascinating. They were the sort of things that beckoned you into a shop, and then went away, and you could not find them. You followed them from shop to shop, and always exactly the very things you wanted were in another shop farther on and yet quite near. Oh, how difficult it was to get them! That knife, for instance, that Alex would like, or that pen which Charley would condescend to write with, or that pair of soft doeskin gloves for Hannah—Hannah was always complaining of cold hands.

In the end I gave up the knife and the pen and the gloves, and bought fancy articles which I thought would please my family—glass and china for my step-mother; a new sort of inkpot, which eventually proved of no use at all, but was very expensive, for my father; and things for the boys which I will reveal by-and-by.

I had only thirty shillings out of my ten pounds when I returned home that afternoon, having provided presents for every one except myself; and in addition I presented an exceedingly expensive, huge box of chocolates each to Rita and Agnes Swan. They called me their best darling, and said that each moment my appearance was improving, until at last their remarks made me so angry that I said, “If you say that again I will never speak to you or give you sixpence-worth of chocolates as long as I live!”

Upon this threat the two girls were silent, until at last Rita remarked, “Well, whatever happens, she will always pass in a crowd.”

“What does that mean?” I said.

“It means that whatever you put on, you will never be anything but a most ordinary-looking person. Now, does that content you?”

“Better than flattering words which are false,” I said stoutly.

They had conducted me home. I was dead-tired and very hungry. My hands were full of parcels. I rushed impetuously into the house. It was time for lunch; the morning had flown with marvellous swiftness. Nay, more; I was late for lunch. Father was standing alone in the dining-room. Marriage had wrought very little perceptible alteration in him. It is true he always now wore a perfectly clean collar, and his coats were always well brushed, but each one seemed to hang upon him in just its old, loose, aggravating fashion, being worn very high up on the nape of the neck, which gave his back a sort of bowed appearance; and his collars, however neat when he put them on in the morning, managed to get finely rumpled before school-hours were over. This was from a habit he had of clutching his collar fiercely when in the heat of argument. There was no laundress in the whole of London who could have made collars stiff enough to withstand father’s clutch. But even Mrs Grant could not persuade him to put on a clean one to go back to afternoon school, nor could she get him to visit the barber as often as she wished. Therefore, on the whole, father looked much as he had always done. But perhaps he would not have been respected or loved as he was loved and respected if even his outward appearance had been changed. He was in a deep brown study now. He hardly saw me as I rushed into the room. I went up to him and took both his hands, and said, “Thank you—thank you so much!”

I went up to him and took both his hands, and said, ‘Thank you—thank you so much!’

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“What in the world are you thanking me about, Dumps?” he said.

He seemed to wake with a start.

“Where have you been? What is the matter? Don’t litter the place, please; your step-mother doesn’t like it.”

He observed the brown-paper parcels.

“They’re presents,” I said. “Don’t speak about them.”

He raised his hand wearily to his brow.

“I am not likely to,” he said. “Things wrapped up in brown-paper do not interest me.”

“Oh father! they interest most people. But you must—you really must—rouse yourself for a minute or two, for I have to thank you so greatly, darling father.”

“What for?” he muttered.

“The money—the money.”

“I am unaware, child, that I have given you any money.”

What could he mean? I felt a curious damp sensation round my spirits, which were quite high at the moment. Then I remembered that Mrs Grant had told me that I was not to worry father on the subject.

“She said,” I continued, with great eagerness, “that you were not to be worried, but that you had arranged it. I am to have an allowance in future, and she gave me the first quarter’s allowance to-day—ten pounds.”

“Goodness!” said father. “What wilful waste! Ten pounds! Why, it would have bought—it would have bought that new —”

He mentioned a volume which had a long Latin name.

I understood now—or thought I understood—why my step-mother had desired me to be silent on the subject of my allowance. Father shook himself. I was roused even to a show of anger.

“Well, at any rate,” I said, “it might buy you a book, but it can buy other things as well. I was given the money to-day —*your* money—and I must thank you; only please in future make it a little more, for I cannot buy dresses with it; it isn’t enough.”

He stared at me wildly, and just at that moment my step-mother came in.

“Grace,” said my father, turning to her, “this child seems to be in a sad muddle. She has been endeavouring to confuse me, which is exceedingly wrong of her. I trust that in future you will permit yourself, my dear, the extreme privilege of repressing Dumps.”

“Oh, oh!” I said.

“Yes,” continued father, “of repressing her.—You are, Dumps, too exuberant, too unmannerly, too impulsive.—Keep her, my dear, from bringing unsightly objects of that sort into my presence.”

He pointed to my darling brown-paper parcels.

“And above all things, dear Grace, tell her not to thank me for what I have not done. She has been murmuring the most absurd rubbish into my ears, talking about a dress allowance. A dress allowance, indeed! Does she need money to spend on her outward adornment? Tell her to learn that hymn of Watts’s, ‘Why should our garments, made to hide’—She had better learn that. Let her learn once for all that,—

> “Be she dressed fine as she will,
> Flies, worms, and moths exceed her still.

“In short, Grace, suppress the child, and tell her not to utter falsehoods in my presence.”

He went out; his wife followed him into the hall. She came back in a few minutes, and her cheeks were redder than was quite becoming.

“Now, Dumps dear,” she said, “I told you not to speak of your dress allowance to your father.”

“Then he never gave it to me?”

“Well, dear, not exactly. I mean that he did not give it to you in so many words; nevertheless, it is my place to see to these things.”

“But was the ten pounds father’s?” I asked stoutly.

“What is his is mine, and what is mine is his,” she replied.

“Please, step-mother,” I said imploringly, “answer me just for once. Did you give me that money, or did my father?”

“My dear child, will you not understand once and for all that it is my aim and wish to do what I can to make you happy? If you go on trying me, Rachel, as you have been doing lately, you will make me a very unhappy woman.”

She paused; then she said, “Never up to the present moment have I known what real, true unhappiness is. I, Grace Donnithorne, given by nature so cheerful a heart, and, I think, so brave a spirit, and, I believe, the power of looking at things on the bright side—I unhappy!”

She moved away; she stood by the fire. I saw tears starting to her bright, kindly, merry eyes; one rolled down her cheek. I went up to her and took her hand.

“I have not been trying,” I said—“I will confess it—I have not been trying to think kindly of you.”

“I know it, Dumps,” she said gravely, and she looked round at me.

“And I have been advising the boys not to show you any affection.”

“I know it, Dumps,” she said again.

“And—and I returned those clothes that you gave me when I was at Hedgerow House.”

“You did. Why did you do it?”

“If, perhaps,” I said slowly—“I don’t know, but perhaps if you had told me the truth then, that you were not being so awfully kind just because I was a lonely little girl, but because you were going to marry my father, I might have stood it better, and I might have acted differently; but you deceived me. I thought you were a very kind, middle-aged, rather fat lady, and I liked you just awfully; but when you deceived me—”

“Don’t say any more,” she remarked hastily. “It was not my wish—I felt all along that—”

But then, with a great effort, she resumed her usual manner.

“I see I have not won you yet,” she said. “But we must go on being friends outwardly, and *perhaps*—you have been confirmed, have you not?”

“Yes,” I said, somewhat startled.

“Then perhaps when we kneel together at the Great Festival, the feast of all feasts, your heart may be softened, and you may see that in all the world no one means more kindly to you than the one whom you used to know as Grace Donnithorne.”

“Oh, if you wouldn’t be quite so amiable I think I could love you better,” I said, and then I really hated myself.

“It will come, dear,” she said in a patient tone. “And now, just tell me what you bought. If your father isn’t interested in brown-paper parcels, I am.”

“They’re presents,” I said shortly.

“Those delightful things on the sofa are presents? You have spent a little of your money on presents? Rather extravagant of you, but I’m not going to scold.”

“That sounded such a lot of money,” I said, “but it didn’t turn out so much.”

“What do you mean, dear? It is a very substantial sum for a young schoolgirl of your age. I am sorry you did not take me with you to spend it; but you seemed so anxious to go alone, and I thought until Christmas was over—”

“What is going to happen when Christmas is over?” I said.

“I will tell you when the time comes.”

“But please tell me now, step-mother—”

“I wish you wouldn’t call me by that name.”

“Well, I can’t call you Mrs Grant; and you are my step-mother, you know.”

“It doesn’t matter—call me anything you like, dear.”

I wished she was not quite so accommodating; but while I looked at her I saw there was a change in her face: there was a purpose in it, a firmness, a sort of upper-hand look as though she did not mean that I, Dumps, should have my own way about everything. She asked me what I had bought for myself, and I said nothing particular, except a few ribbons and things like that.

“They ought to be bought last of all,” she said, “but of course you don’t quite understand this time.”

“Oh!” I said.

“You want a quiet, plain dress; let me recommend you to get it the first thing to-morrow morning. Peter Robinson has some very nice dresses for young girls; and Evans, just a little farther down Oxford Street, has perhaps even smarter costumes. You ought to get a very nice dress for about four guineas. It would be wrong to spend more. A warm coat and a nice short skirt would be the thing. Shall we go to-morrow morning to Evans’s?”

“No, thank you,” I replied.

“But, my dear child, you want a dress. Well, perhaps you will get one of the girls to go with you.”

“I would rather,” I replied. I gathered up all my parcels in my arms and prepared to leave the room.

“Just as you like, dear; but remember we go on the 24th to Hedgerow House.”

“On the 24th; yes, step-mother, thank you.”

I went upstairs.

Part 2, Chapter III.

Christmas in the Country.

After all, Christmas Eve was jolly. You may cherish a feud against the most innocent and good-natured person in the

world with all your might and main; but unless you are specially wicked you cannot bring it into prominence when every one else around you is in the best of good spirits.

It was altogether a very merry party which started off by train from Liverpool Street *en route* for Hedgerow House. We seemed to have left cares of every sort behind us. The boys were absolutely unruly in their mirth. As to father, he elected to go in a smoking carriage. This was a very keen disappointment to Augusta. I saw her start from her seat as though she would accompany him; but not being invited—indeed, the Professor did not even see her—she sank back again and solaced herself by eating chocolates and reading a German book the whole way down.

“Don’t you ever want to watch the scenery?” said Von Marlo in his slow Dutch fashion.

“Yes, when it is worth looking at,” she responded. She glanced at him. “You are a foreigner?”

“Yes, a Dutchman.”

“I don’t approve of Dutchmen.”

She lapsed back into her German. Von Marlo thought it well to change his seat. He came nearer to me.

Oh, I forgot to say that Hannah was also of the party. Now, she had not wished to come; she had objected very strongly; but my step-mother, there was no doubt, was beginning to win Hannah over. Hannah came to my room that very morning when I was dressing to go, and said, “Miss Dumps, I do hope you won’t take it amiss, but—”

“Why, what is it, Hannah?” I asked.

“Well, I’m going too.”

“I’m very glad,” I said.

“’Tain’t that I like her a bit better than I did,” said Hannah—“not a bit. She’s a step-mother, and what’s a step-mother but a sort of person who is in league against the children of the first wife? I’ve sworn to be a friend to the first wife’s children. Didn’t the poor lady come to visit me in a dream the very night I heard of your pa’s marriage, and didn’t I promise that I’d never leave you? And didn’t she come again last night in another dream and tell me to go down to Hedgerow House—not for my own enjoyment, but to be close to you, Miss Dumps, and the two dear boys? So I’m going. Those new servants can look after this place. ’Tain’t what it was.”

“Indeed it isn’t, Hannah. I am very glad you are going with us. And to be honest, Hannah, isn’t it now, frankly, very much nicer than it was?”

“Not to my way of thinking,” said Hannah. “The house now is at that work what I ’ates.”

“The house?” I said. “What is the poor house doing?”

“Pushing out old memories; that’s what this ’ere house is busy over. Every room that gets decked up new is pushing out the old memories—the memories of the time when that poor, dear shadow walked from room to room trying to get a glimpse of sunshine. She’ll soon be gone, poor dear! That’s what I call the behaviour of the house, so don’t ask me if I like it better, for I don’t, and that’s flat.”

Had I been at all wise I should have talked sensibly to Hannah; but in my heart of hearts, although knowing that she spoke the most absolute nonsense, I could not help partly agreeing with her.

The very last thing I did before leaving was to take mother’s miniature and stuff it into the bottom of the little old horse-hair trunk which had been unearthed from a distant garret for me. Nothing would induce me to take my step-mother’s new trunk on this special journey. I was not too well dressed, either, for I could not possibly buy the smart, warm costume which my step-mother had set her heart on, and up to the present I had given her no reason for this. But then I had endless ribbons—sky-blue, pink, mauve, even green; and I had quantities of chiffon bows and chiffon ties, and good gloves and good stockings, and lovely handkerchiefs. I felt that I would pass muster, and turned a deaf ear when Mrs Grant came somewhat anxiously to my room to know if I did not want a corner of her trunk for some of my prettiest dresses. I told her that the horse-hair trunk held all I required, and she went away.

Well, at last we got off, and we were in the train. Good-bye, dull care! This was Christmas-time—the time of presents, of fun and hilarity. I had taken good care to bring all my Christmas-boxes with me.

When we arrived at Chelmsford Station there was a great wagonette waiting for us, drawn by a pair of brown horses. My step-mother immediately took the reins. We all scrambled in; father was huddled in one corner occupied with his Greek Testament. When he had nothing else to do he always read his Greek Testament.

Augusta pushed herself into the seat exactly opposite to him; she bent forward and stared fixedly into his face; but he never once looked at her. I am certain he did not see her. Occasionally she said “Oh!” in quite an audible tone. I felt that Augusta would be quite enough to keep any one from perfect bliss if she went on in such an idiotic fashion.

“What is she doing?” whispered Charley to me.

“Oh, let her alone,” I said; “she is worshipping him.”

“Worshipping him?” he cried.

“Yes; don’t you know?”

“I’ll prick her with a pin,” he said.

“Oh, you mustn’t—you really mustn’t! Do let her alone, poor thing! You see, she sees a kind of glory round father which we don’t.”

“My word, I should think not!” said Charley. “Poor, dear old Professor! Of course, he’s a jolly old dad and all that sort of thing, but—” Charley gave a low whistle.

Augusta’s voice was now heard.

“You were reading that passage aloud; I heard it,” she said. “Would you greatly mind raising your voice a little?”

The Professor lowered his book.

“Eh?” he said.

Then he dropped his glasses. They were *pince-nez*, and as he dropped them one of the glasses fell out. The wagonette had to be stopped, and we had all to search for the missing glass; and so Augusta’s question was never answered, for when the glass was found it was slipped into its case, and father readjusted his *pince-nez* on his nose, and went on reading as though nothing had happened.

Augusta looked round at me.

“It would have been such a valuable help,” she said, “and so very little extra exertion to him.”

“Oh, don’t talk to him while he’s reading,” I said. “I’ll get you a chance if you’re good; but do just make an effort to keep your feelings to yourself.”

We had now reached the house, and we all tumbled out of the wagonette. I do think there is no other way of describing the manner in which we left that vehicle. Mrs Grant immediately assumed the manners of hostess. She gave directions to the groom who had brought the carriage, flung him the reins, and then spoke to a man who was waiting. This man disposed of what luggage had been brought in the carriage; the rest was to follow in a cart. Then we entered the house.

Its smallness, its bewitching appearance, the little drawing-room with the stuffed birds and stuffed animals, the dear little dining-room, the pretty bedrooms upstairs, were invaded as though by a horde of ants. Nancy was curtsying and bobbing at the hall door. She welcomed me as though I were a very dear friend, and personally took me up herself to the identical room where I had slept before. It was just as sweet and fresh and fragrant, and the brightest of fires burned in the grate; but there was an extra bed in one corner, which in itself was disconcerting.

Then Augusta appeared and flung down an ugly leather valise, which she had brought her clothes in, on the snowy white counterpane, and said, with a sigh, “Oh, wonderful—wonderful! Marvellous beyond words to express! I am here! I am here!”

“Augusta,” I said stoutly, “if you go on in that fashion you’ll be a raving lunatic before Christmas Day is over. Now pull yourself together and be sensible. You’ll never get father to talk to you if you keep on staring at him and interrupting him. We are going to have a jolly time, and to forget heroics and ‘high strikes’ and all the rest. Oh, there’s the luncheon-bell, and I’m ever so hungry!”

That was a very happy evening notwithstanding the fact that the Miss Grace Donnithorne of less than a couple of months ago was now Mrs Grant and our step-mother. In her own house, surrounded by her own things, she was more difficult than ever to resist. Indeed, I think no one tried to do so, for she was the very soul of tact, and managed to make us all feel that we were her guests, and as guests ought to be particularly nice. Alex said to me, “She is quite charming! She is good! She is a dear! I’m beginning to love her. I don’t care what you say to the contrary.”

“I like her for herself,” I said.

“Then for goodness’ sake prove it, Dumps, and don’t wear that horridly starched, proper face. It’s enough to drive any one cracked even to look at you. You were always plain, but now that you are both plain and affected, you will be too offensive to live with before long.”

“Thank you,” I answered. “I never did come to my family for compliments, and I certainly am not getting them.”

“You won’t get them from me, or from Charley, or from Von Marlo while you behave like that. Why, I declare I’d rather be that poor, demented Augusta Moore than go on as you are doing.”

“But what am I doing?” I asked. “What do you mean? I’m doing nothing.”

“Nothing, Dumps? Be truthful with yourself. Try and get over that horrid feeling, and let us be really happy this Christmas.”

“But there was our mother—”

“She wasn’t with us last Christmas, was she?”

“She was in spirit.”

“Well, if she was with us in spirit last Christmas—when we were so jolly miserable, and I had that bad influenza, and Charley sprained his foot, and we had hardly any Christmas dinner and no Christmas-boxes at all except the things

we managed to make with the old carpenter's tools, and when father forgot to come home till the evening, and you began to cry and said that he had been run over by an omnibus—if mother was with us in spirit when we were all really wretched, don't you think she will be twenty times more in spirit with us now when we are all jolly and good and good-humoured? If our mother is an angel in heaven—and I suppose you believe she is—she must be blessing that sweet woman Grace Donnithorne, as you used to call her, every moment of the time. Oh, there! I needn't say any more. I'll let Von Marlo have a talk with you."

"But he sha'n't—I won't be talked to," I said.

I rushed away up to my own room. In spite of myself, my feelings were arrested by Alex's words. For a moment I knelt down and said to God, "Please let me feel kindly towards my step-mother; please let me have a really nice Christmas Day."

After that it was wonderful how my spirits were soothed and how much happier I felt. Christmas Eve ended in fun and games and all sorts of preparations for the merriest Christmas which was to follow, and we all went to bed in high good-humour.

Part 2, Chapter IV.

Christmas Day.

My presents were much appreciated, although it is true that father looked somewhat dubiously at his inkpot. He asked me how it was opened. I described the exact method by which he was to press the spring, and he remarked then that it would take time.

"But," I said, "you see there is a kind of sponge with a leather cover to it, which presses down into the bottle and prevents every scrap of air from getting in, so that the ink keeps much longer."

"Yes; but the period it takes from one's existence!" remarked father. Then he glanced at me. "Never mind," he said; "you meant well. I am always willing to admit it when any one means well."

Now, I had actually spent a pound of my money on this inkstand of father's—one-tenth of my quarter's allowance—and all the praise I got was that I meant well.

Von Marlo came up to me and said, "It is a most wonderful and cleverly constructed inkstand. I tell you what—whenever I come over to your house I'll see that it's dusted and kept in order. I'll look after it myself. I think it's quite lovely."

I had given Von Marlo a nice little tablet for notes, which he professed to be delighted with; and I had given my step-mother a new sort of diary with a lock and key. There was no one whom I had forgotten. Even Augusta was in raptures with the very driest book on mathematics that I could pick up. She said that for once she believed I was a thoroughly sensible girl.

Then there were the gifts from the others to me. My step-mother gave me a lovely little narrow gold chain with a locket attached to it; and father, for the first time since I could remember, gave me a present simply as a present. It consisted of a row of very curious, sweet-scented beads, which were mounted now in gold, and could be worn either as a necklace or as a bracelet.

"But you have had these for ages," I said.

"Yes; but my wife thought that they could be set very prettily for you," he said.

I was delighted, and thanked him heartily. I had often coveted those blue beads, for they were a wonderful greenish blue, and in some lights looked quite opalescent.

The boys, too, gave me things very suitable and very useful. No one had forgotten me. Even Augusta gave me a pin-cushion stuck full of pins that I scratched myself with the first thing. That was very likely, for she had put them in so badly that several stuck out underneath, and I had inflicted a wound before I was aware of this fact.

But the presents, after all, were nothing compared to the festive air which pervaded the place.

We went to church, and we knelt before God's altar, and joined in the great and glorious Festival of Divine Love.

After church we were all to go to the Aldyces' for dinner. This invitation had been vouchsafed to us on the occasion of my father's marriage, and Mrs Grant said that it was quite impossible not to accept it.

"You will like Hermione," I said to Augusta. I thought she would. I thought Hermione's precise ways would rather please Augusta. The carriage, however, did not meet us at the church, for it was arranged that we were to go home first and have lunch at Hedgerow House, and then were to walk in a body the two miles which separated us from The Grange, Squire Aldyce's beautiful old residence.

We went there in high spirits. Everything was joyful that day. Here more and more presents awaited us. Really it was marvellous. Alex managed to whisper to me, "Have you no eye for contrasts?"

"Contrasts?" I asked, turning round and giving him a flashing glance.

“Between this Christmas and last,” he said.

I felt annoyed. I had been trying so very hard to keep in the best of humours—to be good, if I, poor naughty Dumps, could really and truly be good—and now the spirit of naughtiness was once more awakened. Oh, of course, this was a glorious time, and I ought to be delighted; but the ache had returned to my heart, the longing to be in my own little room looking at my mother’s miniature, the wish for the old desolation when she, as I said to myself, had been honoured and her memory respected.

I stood in a brown study for a minute or two, and as I stood thus Hermione came up to me and asked me if I would not like to go away with her to her room. I was very glad of the reprieve. She took my hand and we ran upstairs. When we found ourselves in her pretty room she made me sit down in the cosiest chair she could find, poked the fire, and squatted herself on the hearth-rug. She wore a lovely dress of very pale Liberty green silk, and looked, with her aristocratic small face and beautiful hair, like a picture.

“Well, Dumps,” she said, “and so you have solved the mystery?”

“You knew it at that time?” I said.

“Knew it? Of course I did! It was the greatest amazement to me when Miss Donnithorne said, ‘You are not to tell her; her father doesn’t wish it to be known.’”

“Then she did not want to have it kept a secret?”

“She?” said Hermione. “Poor darling! it was her greatest desire to tell you—in fact, she had quite made up her mind to do so—but she received a most urgent letter from your father saying that he would infinitely prefer none of you to know until after the ceremony. You mustn’t blame her.”

“I think it was exceedingly wrong to deceive me,” I said.

“It was not her fault; you must not blame her.”

I was silent. On the whole, my step-mother’s conduct could not seem quite so black if she herself had been forced to act as she did. Nevertheless, I felt uncomfortable.

Hermione glanced at me.

“You look very much better,” she said.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Not that you are dressed so wonderfully well—of course, I shouldn’t dream of making any comments with regard to your dress; but then you were quite exquisitely attired the last time you came here. Mother said she had never seen anything so *chic* in all her life as that little dark-blue costume with the grey fur; and it suited you so well.”

I was wearing one of my summer dresses which my step-mother had altered for me shortly after she came to us. It was made of pale-blue crepon, which had been rather ugly, but she had put on a beautiful lace tucker, and had arranged the skirt so that my growing length of limb was not so discernible.

“It isn’t your dress,” continued Hermione—“never mind about it—nobody cares what any one else wears on Christmas Day—but it is your face.”

“And what about that?” I said.

“You are so much better-looking.”

I felt myself flushing.

“I wish you wouldn’t laugh at me, Hermione. It isn’t kind. I can’t help being plain.”

“No,” said Hermione, putting her head a little on one side. “Nothing will ever give you remarkably good eyes, or much of a nose, or anything special of a mouth; but you have got a complexion now, and your cheeks have filled out.”

“Oh, I was always fat,” I said.

“Well, but they look different,” she said; “I can’t tell why.”

I knew, but I would not enlighten her. I knew that it was the excellent food that I now had, and the warm rooms to live in, and the good influence of a comfortable home. I was not going to betray myself, however.

“You must be having a jolly time,” said Hermione. “Oh! if anything were to give me a step-mother, I should pine and long for a sort of Grace Donnithorne.”

“She is a dear,” I said.

Hermione looked at me very gravely.

“Dumps,” she said, “you don’t like her in your heart.”

“Hermione, how dare you say it?”

“You know you don’t. The moment I saw you I was certain of it.”

“I wish you wouldn’t read people like that,” I said.

“I saw it, and I was sorry; for the fact is, you have only known Grace for a little—a very little—time.”

“For two months,” I said.

“And I have known her ever since I have known anybody at all.”

“Then, of course, it is natural that you should be fond of her.”

“Not at all. There are other people I have known, so to speak, from my birth. There is old Mr Chatterton, and there is Mrs Frazer. Now, I detest fussy Mrs Frazer, and I run away a mile from Mr Chatterton. It isn’t the time I have known Grace, but because she is what she is.”

“Well, I suppose,” I said, “you are going to give me a lecture about her?”

“No, I am not; but I am simply going to say this—that you are in rare luck to have got the most amiable woman in the whole of Essex to be your step-mother. And then, Dumps dear, she is so jolly rich! She can give you all sorts of comforts. And what is more, she is awfully fond of you; she said so.”

“Fond of me? She couldn’t be!”

“She is, poor darling! She said so in such a loving and sad way just now. I know why she is sad; it is because you won’t return her love.”

“Never mind,” I said, jumping to my feet. I went over to the window and looked out.

“Hermione,” I said, “let us talk of something else.”

“Of course. For instance, how will you like your new school?”

“What new school?”

I sprang towards her; I took her by her shoulders; I turned her round.

“Oh! have I let the cat out of the bag?” said Hermione. “Didn’t you know you were going?”

“There!” I said; “and yet you tell me to like her. Has she been planning this?”

“It is awfully wrong of me to speak of it; but I thought, of course, you knew.”

“But I don’t want to go.”

“Oh, won’t you, though? Now look here, Dumps. You mustn’t make a fuss; you must be patient; you must—you really must—for I am going with you. It’s to a jolly, jolly school in Paris. We’ll have a nice time—I know we shall.”

“Paris?” I said.

Now, what London girl doesn’t own to a secret hankering for Paris—Paris the gay, the fascinating, the beautiful? Nevertheless, after my first shock of pleasure I was very wary. I said after a pause, “Perhaps you had better not say any more.”

“No, I won’t, as you didn’t know. It’s very odd; you’ll be told probably to-morrow.”

“I suppose so,” I said.

There came a knock at the door. Hermione said, “Come in;” and Augusta intruded her face.

“It seems a great pity you should be here,” she said. “I thought I’d tell you.”

“Come in, Miss Moore; make yourself at home,” said Hermione.

“Thank you so much,” said Augusta, “but I couldn’t come in.”

“And why not?” asked Hermione.

“Because he is talking—he is lecturing downstairs. We are all listening.—I thought it would be such a frightful deprivation for you, Dumps, not to hear him. I rushed upstairs; he was blowing his nose—I think he has a cold. I must go back at once. Do come down, if you don’t want to miss it. It’s about the time of Herodotus; it’s most fascinating—fascinating!” She banged the door after her and rushed away.

“Is that poor girl mad?” said Hermione slowly.

“I think so,” I answered. “She has conceived a violent worshipping attachment to father. She thinks he is the soul of genius.”

“Well, he is, you know. You, as his daughter, can really hold a most distinguished position; and now that you have got such a step-mother as Miss Donnithorne, and you yourself are to be sent to—oh, I forgot, that subject is taboo. Well, never mind; when you come out you will have quite a good time, Dumps, I can tell you. Your step-mother means to do the right thing both by you and the boys. You will have a splendid time, so just do cheer up and be thankful for the blessings which Providence has showered upon your head.”

Part 2, Chapter V.

A Quiet Talk.

Christmas Day came to an end, and the very next morning, when I was alone with my step-mother, I asked her what Hermione meant by her words.

“Oh, she has told you?” said Mrs Grant.

She was sitting by the fire in the little drawing-room; the stuffed birds and the stuffed animals surrounded us, but the room was never close, and it had the faint, delicious smell of cedar-wood which had fascinated me so much on the occasion of my first visit.

“Sit down, Dumps,” she said, holding out her hand to take one of mine.

“But please tell me,” I said.

“Well, yes, it has been arranged. Your father would like it, and so would I. You go on the 21st of January. It is a very nice school, just beyond the Champs Élysées. You will be well taught, and I think the change will do you good.”

“You suggested it, didn’t you?” I said.

“Yes, naturally.”

“Why naturally? I am his child.”

“My dear, you know his character; he is so absorbed in those marvellous things which occupy his great brain that he hasn’t time—”

“Oh, I know,” I said bitterly; “he never had any time, this wonderful father of ours, to attend to us, his children.”

“Dear, he has given you into my care, and, believe me, I love you.”

“I believe you do,” I said in a gentle voice.

“Some day, Rachel, I am sure you will love me.”

I was silent.

“Tell me about the school,” I said.

“I know all about it, for it belongs to a very special friend of mine, and I am certain you will be looked after and all your best interests promoted.”

“And Hermione Aldyce goes too?”

“Yes; she is a very nice girl, and a special friend of mine.”

“I know.”

“You will, I am sure, Dumps, do your utmost to attend to your studies. You will soon be sixteen; my intention is that you should remain at the French school for two years, and then come back in time to enjoy some of the pleasures of life—some of the pleasures, dear, as well as the responsibilities, for we never can dissever one from the other.”

I was silent. Why did I like her and yet dislike her? I had thought the day before when Hermione spoke of school that I should wildly rebel, but as I sat there looking at her placid face it did not occur to me to rebel. I said after a minute, “Step-mother, until I love you better, may I call you by that name?”

“I have given you leave,” she said in a low tone.

“I have something to confess,” I said.

“What is that?” she asked.

“I did not buy any thing useful out of the ten pounds you gave me.”

“Your father’s dress allowance?”

“You know it was yours.”

“Your father’s,” she repeated.

“I will tell you how I spent it,” I said; and then I described to her all about the ribbons and the chiffons and the gloves and the stockings and the handkerchiefs.

“The stockings were needful,” she said, “and so were the gloves and handkerchiefs. So much ribbon was scarcely essential, but it can be passed over. The hat you bought was vulgar, so I trust you will not wear it again.”

“What?” I said. “That lovely green hat with the bird-of-Paradise in it?”

“It is very unsuitable to a girl of your age.”

“I got it in one of the smartest shops in Regent Street.”

“Anything that is unsuitable is vulgar, Dumps. I hope you will soon understand that for yourself.”

“Oh, I have a great deal to learn,” I said, with sudden humility.

“You have, my dear; and when you take that fact really to heart you will begin to learn in grave reality, and you will be all that your father and I long to make you.”

“But I’m not the least like father; he could never appreciate me, for I am so different from him. If, for instance, I were like Augusta—”

“I wonder, Dumps, if it would greatly distress you if Augusta also went to the French school?”

“What?” I said. “Augusta! But surely she cannot afford it?”

“I think it could be arranged. I take an interest in her, poor child! There is no doubt she is wonderfully clever; but just at present she is very one-sided in all her views. Her intellect is somewhat warped by her having all her aspirations and desires forced into one channel.”

“Then, step-mother, you are going to support her?”

“Certainly not. It is true I may make it possible for those who could not otherwise afford it. I have spoken to her mother on the subject, and perhaps her mother can be helped by some of her relations; it would certainly be the making of Augusta.”

“You are wonderfully kind,” I said.

“What am I put into the world for except to help others?”

“Is it true,” I asked suddenly, and I laid my hand on her lap, “that you are very rich?”

“Who told you that?” she said, the colour coming into her face. She looked at me in a distressed way.

“Only I want to know.”

“All I can tell you in reply to your question is this: that whatever money God has given me is to be spent not on myself but for Him—for Him and for those whom I am privileged to help. I do not want to talk of riches, for it is impossible for a child like you, with your narrow experience, to understand that money is a great gift; it is a talent little understood by many; nevertheless, one of the most precious of all. Few who have money quite know how to spend it worthily.”

Alex, Charley, and Von Marlo bounded into the room.

“We can skate, if you don’t mind,” said Charley, “on the round pond a mile from here. We didn’t bring our skates with us, but there are jolly nice ones in Chelmsford. Do you mind?” he asked.

“Certainly not, dear,” said Mrs Grant; “and what is more, if there is good skating I am going myself. What do you say, Dumps? Do you know how to skate?”

“No,” I answered. “How could I? I never learnt.”

“Few girls can skate,” said Charley.

“This girl shall learn,” said Mrs Grant. “Come, come, children; we’ll go off as fast as ever we can, to get the best skates to be obtained.”

Part 2, Chapter VI.

Learning to Skate.

A minute later she was flying away herself . . . with Charley on one side and Alex on the other.

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Certainly my step-mother was a patient teacher, and certainly also there were few more awkward girls than I, Rachel Grant, on that afternoon. The stumbles I made, the way I sprawled my legs, the many falls I had, notwithstanding my step-mother's care! Both Alex and Charley laughed immoderately. It was Von Marlo, however, who in the end came to the rescue.

"Mrs Grant," he said, "you are dead-tired. I have been able to skate ever since I was able to walk. May I take Miss Dumps right round the pond? Will you trust her to me?"

"Oh yes, do let him!" I said.

My step-mother agreed, and a minute later she was flying away herself as though on wings, with Charley on one side of her and Alex on the other. Notwithstanding that she was a stout person, she looked very graceful on the ice. She could cut figures, and she set herself to teach the boys how to manage these exquisite and bird-like movements.

Meanwhile Von Marlo and I skated away after a time with a certain amount of success. He was taller and stronger than my step-mother, and he taught me a Dutch way of managing the business; and after a time I was able to go forward with the help of his strong hand, and so the afternoon did not turn out so very disastrous after all.

As we were going home Von Marlo asked if he might walk with me. Mrs Grant was standing near; she said "Certainly," and we started off together.

"Not that way," he said; "I don't want to go straight back. We have nearly two hours before dinner, and I want you to take me a very long way round."

"But I don't know Chelmsford specially well," I replied.

"Oh, I've been poking about a bit by myself," he answered. "We'll just walk up this road to the left, then plunge into the woods; they look so perfect with the snow on the ground."

I took his hand, and we walked along bravely. I was warmed with the skating; my cheeks were cold; my heart was beating heartily; I felt a curious exhilaration which snowy air and even most badly executed skating gives to every one.

When we entered the woods Von Marlo slackened his steps and looked full at me.

"You are as happy as the day is long," he said.

I made no reply.

“If you are not you ought to be so,” was his next remark.

I turned then and stood quite still and faced him.

“You make too much fuss,” I said. “If you and Alex and Charley would leave the subject alone I might get on better with her. But you never will leave the subject alone. When I speak to her you all three look at me.”

“I didn’t know that the others looked; I couldn’t help it, you know,” said Von Marlo.

“But why should you do it? After all, you know much less than the others do.”

“That doesn’t matter.” Von Marlo held out his hand and took mine. “I want to say something to you, Dumps. You are quite the nicest and pluckiest girl I have ever come across. I know lots of girls at The Hague, and they are pretty in their way; but I never saw anybody quite so pretty as you are.”

“Oh Von!” I said, and I burst out laughing. “I do wish you wouldn’t talk rubbish like that. Why, you know that I am very—very—downright ugly.”

“I know nothing of the sort,” he replied. “To me, a face like yours, so round, and eyes so grey, and—well, I think you are beautiful.”

I saw at last that he was speaking the truth. Perhaps I was the Dutch style. I knew I should never certainly be the English style. After a moment his words were soothing. It was well if even a Dutchman could think me nice.

“And you are so brave,” he continued. “Looks don’t matter very much, of course. They do a little, but you are so plucky, and you have always been so good at home, although now you are just having a rare chance of turning yourself into—”

“Well?” I said, for he stopped.

“Into a vixen.”

“Oh dear!” I cried.

“Yes; you know you are not what you used to be, and it is because of the best woman in the world. So I do want you to try—”

“Stop!” I said. “I won’t do what you want, so now let us change the subject.”

The colour came into his face.

“Perhaps,” he said, “the best thing I can do is to tell you about my own step-mother.”

“Have you one?” I asked.

I looked at him with very keen interest. “Yes. I do not remember anybody else. I don’t remember my own mother.”

“Oh, well, that is different.”

“I do not think it is so different, for in some ways it is harder for me than for you.”

“Isn’t she nice. Von?” I asked.

“She means to be,” he said; “but she is severe. She doesn’t love me as English school because I am not wanted at home.”

“Poor Von!” I said. “And have you ever been rude to her?”

“Oh no,” he answered; “I couldn’t be that—my father wouldn’t allow it.”

He was silent for a bit, and so was I silent. “What is she like, Von?” I asked.

“She is what you English would call plain. She is very stout, with a good figure, a high colour, and black eyes, only they’re rather small. She is an excellent housewife, and makes good dinners, and sees to the house and the linen and the servants. My father thinks a great deal of her.”

“And you have brothers and sisters—half brothers and sisters?” I said.

“Oh yes; a great many. My step-mother loves them best, of course, but that cannot be wondered at.”

“No,” I answered, “And, Von Marlo,” I continued, “what do you call her?”

“Mamma,” he replied.

“How can you?”

“I couldn’t say anything else. I have known her since I was a tiny boy.”

“With you it is different—it is truly,” I repeated. “I am never going to call my step-mother mamma or mother, nor anything which would give her the place of my own mother.”

“I do not believe a name matters,” said Von Marlo; “but you ought to be good to her, for she is wonderfully good to you.”

We finished our walk. I liked him and yet I did not like him. I felt annoyed with the boys. I saw during dinner that they were watching me when I spoke to my step-mother. Alex would raise his head and glance in her direction, and once when I forgot to reply to her Charley gave me a kick under the table. As to Von Marlo, he seemed to have done his part when he had that walk with me, for he did not take much notice of me, although I was certain he was listening.

Now, this was the sort of thing to fret a girl. How could I be good when I was certain that I was surrounded by spies? I thought my father’s abstracted manner quite refreshing beside the intent and watchful ways of the three boys. And as to Augusta, I almost learned to love her. She saw nothing wrong in my step-mother for the very reason that she did not see her at all. Whenever she raised her eyes, those deep-set dark eyes of hers would fly to the Professor. When he spoke she bent eagerly forward. Once he began one of his endless dissertations; the boys were talking about something else. Augusta said “Hush!” in a most peremptory manner, and my father stopped.

“Thank you,” he said, and he gave her a gracious bow. I really thought for a moment I was at school, and that one of the prefects was calling the class to order. “Thank you, Miss—”

“Augusta Moore is my name.”

She uttered it quickly, and with a sort of sob in her voice.

“Oh, go on, please—go on! It is of the utmost importance.”

“Indeed!” he replied, colouring. “I should not have thought you understood.”

“Oh, I do, sir—I do! I love the great Herodotus—the father of all history, is he not?”

“Yes, child.”

Really I believe, for the first time in his whole life, my father was aware of Augusta’s society; he now addressed his remarks to her, evidently thinking the rest of us of no importance. He put questions to her which she answered; he drew her out; she had an immense amount of miscellaneous knowledge with regard to the old classics. Her hour had come; her cheeks blazed; her eyes were bright; she was lifted off her feet, metaphorically, by my father’s appreciation of her talents.

“A remarkable girl,” he said afterwards when I was alone in the room. “A friend of yours, Dumps?”

“One of my schoolfellows,” I said.

Then I took hold of his hands.

“Father!”

“Well, Dumps?”

“I want to speak to you.”

“Yes, my dear.”

“It was very good of you to do what you did for me, and now you are going to send me to a school in Paris.”

“Indeed I am not,” said my father.

“You are,” I replied; “it is all arranged. My step-mother said so.”

“Grace, bless her! She has a great many schemes on hand. But I think you will have discovered for yourself, Dumps, that I cannot possibly do such a thing. Indeed, I don’t particularly care for the French mode of education. If you must go abroad, go to Germany. In Germany we find the greatest thinkers of the last three centuries. Put yourself under them, my dear, and it is possible you may come back an intelligent woman.”

I did not say much more. By-and-by I went up to my room. Augusta had not come upstairs. I had a few moments to myself. I locked the door and flung myself on my bed. Oh, what a silly, silly Dumps I was! for I cried as though my heart would break. It was not father who was sending me to the school in Paris; it was my new mother—my step-mother. Was I beholden to her for everything? Of course, she had bought me the clothes, and she had provided all the new and delightful things in the house. Could I take her gifts and stand aloof from her? It seemed impossible.

“I cannot love her,” I said to myself. “She is nice, but she ever and ever stands between me and my own mother. I cannot—cannot love her.”

“Then if you don’t love her,” said a voice—an inward voice—“you ought not to take her gifts. The two things are incompatible. Either love her with all your heart, and take without grudging what she bestows upon you, or refuse her gifts.”

I was making up my mind. I sat up on my elbow and thought out the whole problem. Yes, I must—I would refuse. I would find father some day when he was alone, and tell him that I, Rachel, intended to live on the little money he could spare me; that I would still go to the old school, and wear shabby dresses. Anything else would be a slight on my own mother, I thought.

Part 2, Chapter VII.

A New Régime.

Little did I know, however, of the changes that were ahead. Hitherto my step-mother had been all that was sweetly kind and lovingly indulgent; no doubt she was still kind, and in her heart of hearts still indulgent; but when we returned home after our pleasant few days at Hedgerow House her manner altered. She took the reins of government with a new sort of decision; she ordered changes in the household management without consulting me about them; she got in even more servants, and added to the luxuries of the house. She invited friends to call, and went herself to pay visits. She ordered a neat brougham, which came for her every day, and in which she asked me to accompany her to visit friends and relatives of her own. I refused in my own blunt fashion.

“I am sorry, step-mother,” I said; “I am particularly busy this afternoon, and I am going to tea with the Swans.”

“Is that an old engagement, Rachel?” she inquired.

“Yes,” I said; but I blushed a little as I spoke, for in truth that morning I had all but refused Rita Swan’s urgent entreaty to go and have tea with them. Now I seized upon the whole idea as an excuse.

Mrs Grant stood silent for a minute. How handsome and bright and energetic she looked! She was becomingly dressed, and the carriage with its nice horse and well-appointed coachman was waiting at the door. She said after a minute’s pause, “Very well, Dumps, you needn’t come to-day; but please understand that I shall want you to go out with me to-morrow morning, and again in the afternoon. Don’t make any engagement for to-morrow.”

Before I had time to reply she had swept down the hall, the door was flung open for her by the neat parlour-maid, she stepped into her carriage, and was borne away.

Was this indeed the same desolate house where I had lived ever since my mother died?

I had a somewhat dull tea with the Swans; I was thinking all the time of my step-mother. They twitted me one moment on my melancholy, and the next they began to praise me. I was not a particularly shrewd girl, but somehow after a time I began to suspect that the news of my step-mother’s wealth had got to their ears. If that was so, it would account for their complete change of front. Doubtless my step-mother was right when she decided to take me from a school where I might have companions of the Swan sort. The next day I came downstairs determined, if possible, to have my own way and not to go out with Mrs Grant. She was at breakfast when I entered.

“You are a little late, Rachel,” she said. “The hour for breakfast is half-past eight.”

“But—but—” I began.

“You needn’t excuse yourself, dear. Sit down. To-morrow morning I shall expect you to be in time.” She spoke very sweetly, poured out a cup of delicious coffee for me, and asked whether I would prefer ham or eggs to eat with it. I looked out at the street. The worst January weather was on us; there was a drizzling sleet falling from the sky.

“We sha’n’t have a very pleasant day for our shopping,” said Mrs Grant.

“Are we going shopping?” I asked.

“Yes; I am going to take you shopping to-day. You will want your school outfit.”

I felt myself turning first red and then pale.

“Oh, but, please—” I began.

She stopped helping herself to marmalade and looked at me. She and I were alone; the Professor and the boys were all at the college.

“But?” she said. “What is it, dear?”

“I don’t want to go.”

“I am sorry, but we have very little time to lose. I have ordered the carriage to be here at ten o’clock.”

“But—” I said, faltering somewhat in my speech, for her manner was beginning to tell on me. I was struggling and struggling against it, but struggling as the swimmer does who knows that time and tide are against him.

“Yes?” she said.

“I want to go for a walk. I hate driving.”

“To walk on such a day, Rachel? I should think you would be glad to have the comfort of our carriage.”

She was always careful never to call anything hers; she always said “ours.”

I flushed angrily.

“I hate driving,” I repeated.

“I am sorry, dear. Well, we will get the things you hate over as quickly as possible. You must get your school outfit, you see, as you are going to Paris on the 21st. Now run upstairs and get your hat and jacket on.”

Was there ever a girl so bullied before? I went unwillingly upstairs. On the second floor, where I now slept, I saw Hannah coming downstairs. I ran up to her and took one of her hands.

“What have you been doing?” I asked.

“Doing?” said Hannah. “Doing? What’s the matter with you, Dumps?”

“She’s going to send me away, Hannah.”

“Don’t talk to me,” replied Hannah.

“Hannah, I must I’m just stifling.”

“I can’t talk to you now—not now. She’s everywhere, and she has her spies about—all them new servants; they’re hand in glove with her—eating her food and taking her wages.”

“But, Hannah, we eat her food and take her wages.”

“Well, I must confess I thought there was a time when I could put up with it, but if you go I go too. There!”

I clutched her hand. There came a rustling sound of a silk dress up the stairs. No, it was not a silk dress; it was a woollen one of good material, but Mrs Grant had all her dresses lined with silk.

“I hate going,” I had just time to whisper.

“I’ll come to your bedroom to-night, and we’ll talk this thing out,” said Hannah.

But how small I felt myself, condescending to talk even to poor old Hannah about my step-mother!

“Come, dear,” cried the pleasant voice, “are you ready? The carriage is at the door.”

I rushed into my bedroom, got into my hat and jacket, and was downstairs in a trice. Mrs Grant came up to me.

“Not tidily put on, Rachel,” she said. She dragged my tie into a straight position, and straightened my hat; then she said approvingly, “Ah! gloves are nice, and so are the boots. Always remember, Rachel, that a lady is known by her good gloves and good boots. Now then, come.”

She stepped into the carriage first, and I followed. She gave orders. We stopped at a large shop, where we bought a quantity of things—or rather she bought them—underclothing of every sort and description, more stockings than I thought I could ever use in the whole course of my life, a lot more handkerchiefs, embroidered petticoats, dark petticoats; then gloves—walking gloves and evening gloves and afternoon gloves; and by-and-by we went into the region where pretty things were to be found. Such a sweetly becoming costume was got for me—dark-blue again, but now trimmed richly with velvet which was embroidered in a strange and mystical sort of pattern. In my heart of hearts I adored it, but all the time I stood gloomy and silent and without a smile on my face.

“Come,” said Mrs Grant when the purchases were nearly finished, “you must, my dear child, put on a slightly more agreeable face, for we are going to the millinery department, and I cannot choose a hat which will suit you while you look like that.”

I tried to smile, but instead I burst into a sort of hysterical laughter.

“I wish you wouldn’t,” I said.

She took my hand and squeezed it.

“You wish I wouldn’t? But I wish I could do a thousand times more for you. Come, darling, come.” The word “darling,” after all the calm insistence of having her own way all the morning, broke on my heart with a feverish desire to respond to it, but I would not. No, I would not be conquered.

Oh, how particular my step-mother was about that hat! As if it mattered after all. It was the quietest and most expensive hat I had ever seen. As to the feathers, she took them to the light, examined them and pulled them about, and saw that they were exactly the right shade, until I scarcely knew how to contain myself. I could not help murmuring under my breath, “I shall become a sort of Augusta if this goes on. I shall loathe clothes if this continues.”

Finally a dark-blue hat was chosen to suit the dark-blue costume, and then a grey hat with a long grey feather was also bought for best occasions; and afterwards I was supplied with a perfectly fascinating set of chinchilla furs, chinchilla for my neck and a darling little muff to match.

“You shall wear this hat with these chinchillas,” said my step-mother; “and I will get you a very good brown fur for everyday wear—fox. You must wear your chinchillas when you want to be extra smart.”

At last all the list of things that Mrs Grant considered necessary for a young lady’s entrance into the fashionable Parisian school were obtained.

“We have done a good morning’s work,” she said, and she desired the coachman to take us home.

“At least I shall have the afternoon to myself,” I thought.

Now, if the truth must be known, hateful as the morning had been, there had also been a sort of feeling of enjoyment. The things that had been bought were good, and I was to be no longer a shabby girl. When I remembered the dark-brown skirt of uncertain make and by no means uncertain length, with the brick-red blouse which had been my proud possession such a very short time ago, I could not help smiling to myself at the vastness of the contrast. But, alas and alack! why was I so perverse that I thought I would welcome that skirt and hideous blouse if only I might be back again in the old days? But would I? Could I have this afternoon to myself, I should have a certain satisfaction in going to see the Swans, and inviting them back to tea, which I was always permitted to do, and giving them an account of my ravishing chinchilla, my beautiful fox, my dark-blue costume, and my new hats. What would they not feel? I fairly believed that they would begin to see beauty in my small and insignificant eyes, in my *retroussé* nose, in my somewhat wide mouth.

“Oh, riches, riches!” I muttered under my breath.

“As you did not get the dress I expected you to get before Christmas, Rachel,” said my step-mother during lunch-time, “I have ordered the dark-blue costume and the grey hat and the grey furs to be sent home immediately, for I am going to visit some special friends of mine this afternoon, and I want you to accompany me.”

“Oh, but twice in the carriage!” I said.

“I am sorry. To-morrow we will do a lot of walking. I have heaps to do, and I love a tramp on my feet, as you know. I won’t have the carriage at all to-morrow; we’ll walk until we are fit to drop. But go and amuse yourself, dear, for the carriage will not be round again until four o’clock.”

I went away to my room. The little gas-stove was alight and the room was warm and comfortable. I went and stood by the window and looked round the apartment. It had been made so elegant, so sweet, so fresh for me. Then I glanced at the bed; it was covered with parcels—great big boxes, small boxes, parcels made up in brown-paper. What girl can resist an unopened parcel? Not even Rachel Grant. I began to take out my wonderful possessions, to look at them, to examine them. In themselves they were fascinating, but the sting lay in the fact that they had been given me by her. They all seemed to be witnesses against the miniature—the dear miniature which was fading and fading out of every one’s memory.

“The only person in this house,” I said to myself, “who has a grain of sense is poor old Hannah.”

Just as the thought floated through my brain the door was opened and Hannah came in.

“I had a few minutes to spare, and I thought I’d just steal in and have a talk with you now. She’s downstairs talking to a visitor—drat her! say I. Now then, Miss Dumps, what is it? You tell me, and as quick as you can.”

Hannah was the cook of the establishment, and I must say an excellent cook she made.

“Why, Hannah,” I said, “I can’t imagine how you manage to leave the kitchen just now.”

“Oh, I can manage,” said Hannah. “I get as much help as I want.”

“And you are such a good cook, Hannah; you take to the new life as kindly as I do.”

“Much chance I have of not taking to it. It’s do your work or go; that’s the rule of rules in this house. If you are kept to cook, cook you must; if you don’t cook, out you go, and some one else comes in who can cook. That’s the way. Now, Miss Rachel, you’ve got to be made into a fashionable young lady, magnificently dressed, and educated in one of the ’orrid French schools.”

Hannah threw a world of contempt into the adjective she bestowed upon the Parisian school.

“In one of them ’orrid French schools,” she said; “and if you don’t submit, why, out you goes too.”

“Why, Hannah, how could I go out? I often wish I could.”

“Poor child!” said Hannah. “Well, now—oh, my word! what are all those?”

She had not noticed the parcels before. She now sprang on them and began to examine them. In spite of herself she was impressed by the goodly array of garments.

“My word!” she said, “no one can accuse her of being stingy.”

“And no one can accuse her,” I said with feeling, “of being mean in any sense of the word. She does her best for us all.”

“Well, she has her object,” said Hannah. “A-pushing of *her* out—a-pushing of her out. She’s a’most gone, poor thing! Killed she were, but still her spirit seems to linger; now she’s a’most gone.”

“Hannah, when you talk like that I sometimes hate you,” I said.

Hannah looked at me in astonishment.

“How queer you are, Dumps!” she said. “I don’t know that I didn’t like you twice as well in the old times, though you have plumped out like anything. You were a very plain little creature, I will say that. But there! handsome is that handsome does.”

“And did I behave so handsomely, Hannah? You were always finding fault with me then.”

“Drat you!” said Hannah, “you were a bit of a caution—you and them boys. Oh dear me! don’t I remember the darkness in the old times? And now it’s just a blaze of light—gas every where, big fires, big j’ints, poultry, game, fish. My word! and the sweets are enough to make your mouth water. And I has to superintend, and it’s ‘Mrs Joyce’ here and ‘Mrs Joyce’ there. My word! My word!”

“Do they call you Mrs Joyce?”

“Of course they do. I wouldn’t allow anything else. But there, child, I must be off. It’s a’most time for us to sit down to our dinner; nothing less, I can assure you, than veal and ham pie, and apple-dumplings afterwards.”

“But, Hannah, you never were good at apple-dumplings, you know.”

“I am now. I have everything to make them with—that’s what I have; and I had nothing afore. Oh, my word!”

“Yes, Hannah, you used to feed us very badly. Do you remember that leg of mutton?”

Hannah laughed.

“I do,” she said. “’Ot Sunday, cold Monday, cold again Tuesday, turned upside down Wednesday, hashed Thursday, bone made into soup Friday—couldn’t do more with it if I tried.”

“You certainly couldn’t.”

“Well, child, well, all I can say is this—if you go, and she puts more on me, out I go too. And if ever you want a home, I’ll give it to you. I have a bit of money put by—more than you think on. You shall have my address before you go to that school in Paris.”

I kissed the poor old thing. Hannah was neatly dressed herself now, and looked a new sort of person altogether. She no longer wore cotton-wool in her ears; she did not need to, she said, for she was never expected to answer any bell of any sort.

“I’ve enough in the kitchen to keep me agoin’,” was her remark.

Hannah disappeared. It was soon time to dress. I put on my beautiful blue dress, which fitted me perfectly—that is, as well as it was necessary to fit a girl of my age. The short, smart little coat had not a wrinkle in it anywhere. Over the dress I tried first the fox. It was Russian fox, and, I thought, terribly expensive; but what was that to the lovely chinchilla? The chinchilla must go on.

I forgot my step-mother in my excitement. The blue hat? Yes, the blue hat was perfect; but the grey hat, which exactly toned with the chinchilla, was still better. I found that my cheeks were flushed, and the softness of the grey hat seemed exactly to suit the tone of my complexion. I made my hair look as thick and important as I could. I put on the hat; I fastened the chinchilla fur round my neck. How delicious it was! Just as though a number of soft kittens were pressing against my cheeks. I had grey gloves on my hands, and the little muff was seized, and—oh yes, I kissed it. I was a new Dumps altogether. I looked in the long glass in my bedroom, and saw an almost slender Dumps in an elegant costume. Never mind the plain face; the whole appearance was good, and very lady-like. And *she* had done it all. Where was the girl whose dress was outgrown, whose hats had often not the semblance of respectability about them? The girl who was always in despair about the possibility of mending her old stockings any longer, whose gloves had mostly holes in the fingers? Where was this girl, with her hungry eyes, her shivering body? She had vanished; she belonged to the attic upstairs, the bare attic which contained—oh, just memories of the past.

Again I kissed the little muff; then I ran down into the hall. My step-mother was very anxious to see the effect of the costume; she took me into the parlour and made me turn round and round.

“It is nice!” I said.

My tone of approbation seemed to give her immense satisfaction. She kissed me, then said, “There’s the carriage—we are just in time.”

We entered, and off we went. Mrs Grant looked her very best. I cannot remember what she wore; when a person is always well dressed you take it as a matter of course and do not notice. I kept on feeling the delicious softness of the pussy-cat fur round my neck, and if my step-mother had not been present I should have kissed the little muff again.

We stopped at a house; the footman got down and came to the door. I had not noticed before that there were two men on the box.

“Why, step-mother,” I said, “we are grand!”

She gave a smile as though she had not heard me; then, bending forward, she told the man to inquire if Lady Anne Churton was within. He ran up the steps, pulled the bell, and a powdered footman in livery opened the door. A minute later we found ourselves in the hall.

We went upstairs; Mrs Grant, of course, going first, I following. It was a smart-looking house, but it seemed dull and heavy to me; the air was so hot, too. I was certain that I should have to part with my beloved pussy-cat fur when once I entered whatever room we were being conveyed to.

A door was flung open by the man who had preceded us upstairs; our names were called out, and a lady, who must have been between fifty and sixty years of age, came to meet us.

“Now this is good, Grace,” she said. “How sweet of you to come! You are not a bit formal. Oh, this is your—”

“My daughter,” said Mrs Grant.—“Rachel, this is my very great friend, Lady Anne Churton.”

A hand jewelled with many valuable rings was held out to me. I was asked to come near the fire. I followed my step-mother and Lady Anne across the room. It was a very large room, and absolutely crowded with furniture. Wherever you turned you saw a little table; and where a table was not, there was a little chair; and every chair was different from its neighbour, and each table was also of a different shape from the one next it. The tables were laden with what my step-mother called *bric-à-brac* and curios of all sorts and descriptions. The nearest table to me was covered with old-fashioned articles of silver.

Lady Anne and my step-mother began to talk earnestly together in low tones. I got up and went nearer to the silver table to examine it. But, alack and alas! notwithstanding my beautiful dark-blue costume, my chinchilla furs, and all the rest, I was awkward. I was carried off my feet into this new region of soft things and little tables and *bric-à-brac* and every kind of luxury. I stumbled and knocked over a still smaller table which contained but one priceless treasure, a piece of glass of most wondrous make. I had meant to examine that glass when I had done looking at the silver, for it had the power of taking on every imaginable ray of colour. But it existed no longer; it lay in fragments on the ground.

My step-mother came at once to the rescue. Lady Anne said in the calmest voice, “Fray don’t trouble. Miss Grant; it was a mere accident. Come a little nearer to me, won’t you?”

Then she rang the bell. When the footman appeared he was told to remove the broken glass. Everything was done quietly; there was not the faintest trace of displeasure on Lady Anne’s face; but any girl who reads this can well imagine my feelings. Talk of being hot! I thought I should never need furs again as long as I lived. The soft pussy-cats, dear pets, no longer comforted me. I removed the chinchilla, and sat with blazing cheeks gazing straight before me. But Lady Anne was nothing if she was not kind.

“So you are going to school next week?” she said. “And to Paris? You will enjoy that.”

“Oh yes,” I murmured. I really had not a vestige of character left; I could only mutter—I, who felt myself to be a person of great energy and determination and force of speech.

“It was very kind of Mrs Grant to arrange it all for you.”

“Very kind,” I said, loathing Mrs Grant as I uttered the words.

Lady Anne stared at me. Her eyebrows went up the very least bit in the world.

“Ah! here comes tea,” she said.

A footman appeared with a tray. A little table opened of its own accord in some extraordinary way. It had looked like a harmless bundle of sticks leaning against one of the walls. The tray, one of rarest china, was placed upon it. Lady Anne poured thimblefuls of weak tea into cups of matchless china. I was trembling all over. I was actually so nervous that I was sure I should break one of those cups if I touched it. But I did take it, nevertheless; I took this terrible thimbleful in its beautiful little saucer in my gloved hand, and sat down and received a plate of the same type to rest on my lap with an infinitesimal morsel of wafery bread-and-butter. The tea was scalding hot, and it brought tears to my eyes. I felt so bewildered and upset that it was with difficulty I could keep myself from making an ignominious bolt from the room. But worse was to follow.

Lady Anne and my step-mother continued to talk as placidly together as though nothing whatever had happened, as though I had not disgraced myself for ever and ever, when the door was flung open and a perfect swarm of gaily dressed ladies appeared. I think there were five of them. They made the silent room alive all at once, each talking a little higher and more rapidly than the other. One rushed up to Lady Anne and called her an old dear, and kissed her and patted her cheek; another tapped her with her lorgnette and said, “You naughty old thing, why weren’t you at the bazaar yesterday? Oh, we had such fun!”

Then they all sat down, spreading out their garments and seeming to preen themselves like lovely tropical birds. I pushed my chair a little farther from the fire, which had caught my cheeks and made them burn in a most terrible manner. When would my step-mother go? But no, she had no intention of stirring. She knew these people; they were quite interested on seeing her.

“Oh, how do you get on? How nice to see you again! But what an extraordinary thing you have done, Grace! And you have step-children, too. Horrors, no doubt!”

The words reached my ears. I could scarcely bear myself. Mrs Grant said something, and there was an apologetic, almost frightened look on the lady’s face.

The next minute a girl, doubtless about my own age, but who had all the *savoir-faire* which I did not possess, came swiftly forward and dropped into a low chair near me.

“I must introduce myself, Miss Grant,” she said. “I know you are Miss Grant. I am Lilian St. Leger. I am so glad you are here; all the others are so terribly old, you know. Where shall we go to have a nice little talk all to ourselves? Into the back drawing-room? Oh, but have you had enough tea?”

“Quite,” I replied.

Now, if there was an absolutely radiant-looking creature on this earth, it was Lilian St. Leger. I won’t attempt to describe her, for I have no words. I don’t suppose if I were to take her features separately I should be able for a single moment to pronounce them perfect; but it was her sweetness and tact, and the way she seemed to envelop me with her bright presence, which was as cold water to a thirsty person.

“I have had quite enough tea,” I said.

“And I hate tea in drawing-rooms; it is always so weak, and you can only snatch a mouthful of food at a time,” said Lilian. “Come along, then.”

She held out her tiny hand and clasped mine. I felt vulgar and rough and commonplace beside her; but she steered me right past the numerous tables until we got into a room which was comparatively cool, and we sank down together on a sofa.

“This is better. Oh, you do look hot! Have you been sitting by the fire?”

“Yes, Miss St. Leger, I have; but I’ve also done such an awful thing.”

“I am sure awful things have been done to you. You heard, of course, what mother said. She didn’t mean it; she couldn’t have meant it if she had seen you.”

“If she had seen me she would have meant it in very truth,” I replied, “if she had witnessed me a few minutes ago.”

“Oh! what happened? Tell me everything. It would be lovely if you broke the proprieties of that drawing-room.”

Lilian was wearing a black velvet hat, which had a great plume of feathers that drooped a little over her face. Her hair was golden, and very thick and very shining. It was not, like mine, hanging down her back, but fastened in a thick knot very low on her neck.

“What did you do?” she said, and she clasped my hand and gave it a squeeze.

“I knocked over a small table; there was a solitary glass ornament in the middle.”

“What! Not the Salviati?”

“It was glass, not Salviati,” I said.

She laughed.

“Salviati is the maker of some of the most perfect opalescent glass in the world, and this was one of his oldest and most perfect creations. But you saved it?”

“I didn’t, Miss St. Leger. It is in pieces. It was taken away in something that a footman brought in; it doesn’t exist any longer. I have smashed it.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t know what happened; nothing, I think. There was a kind of icy breath all over the room, and I thought my heart would stop. But Lady Anne’s voice was as cool as—oh! cool as snow, if snow could speak. Afterwards I got burning hot; the ice went and the fire came, and—and I have done it!”

Lilian looked perplexed. She turned round and gazed at me; then she burst into a peal of merriest laughter.

“Oh, you funny girl!” she said. “Just to think of you—the horror, as mother called you—calmly breaking dear Lady Anne’s sacred Salviati, and Oh, you don’t *half* know the heinousness of your crime!”

“You are rubbing it in pretty hard,” I said.

She laughed again immoderately; she could not stop laughing.

“Oh! I could kiss you,” she said; “I could hug you. I hate that room and those tables and curios; it is wicked—it is wrong for any one to make her room exactly like a curiosity shop, and that is what Lady Anne does. But then it’s her hobby. Well, you have knocked over one of her idols, and she’ll never forgive you.”

“If she never expects me to come to see her again I shall certainly survive,” I said. “But please don’t laugh at me any more.”

“Oh, I admire you so much,” said Lilian; “you have such courage!”

“But you don’t think I did it on purpose, do you?”

“Of course not You just did it because you are accustomed to space, and there is no space allowed in Lady Anne’s drawing-room. Oh! I shall tell Dick to-night, and Guy.”

“Who are they, please?”

“My brothers. Won’t they roar? Well, my dear, she’ll never say a word to you or your step-mother; she’ll never say a

word to anybody; but I shouldn't be a bit surprised if the doctor was summoned to-night. She has had a sort of shock; but she won't show it, for it's considered underbred for any one to show anything."

"Oh, what an appalling life to lead!"

"I lead it—at least I generally do; it is only now and then that I can give myself away. You dear, refreshing young soul, how you have cheered me up! I was so loathing the thought of this afternoon of visits. But now, do tell me something more! Are you *always* doing *outré* things? If I could only convey you to our house and send you sprawling round, it would be such fun!"

"I know you are laughing at me," I said.

"Well, yes, I am and I am not. But there! tell me about yourself."

"I have nothing to tell; I am just a plain girl."

"However plain, you are delicious—delicious! How old are you?"

"I shall be sixteen in May."

"Well, I was seventeen a month ago, so I have put up my hair. How do you like it?"

"It is lovely," I said.

"My maid thinks it is. I don't much bother about it. I have one great desire in life. I long for the unattainable."

"I should think anything could be attained by you."

"Not a bit of it. The thing that I want I can't attain to."

"What do you want?"

"To be very, very plain, to have a free time, to do exactly what I like—to knock over tables, to skim about the country at my own sweet will unchaperoned and unstared at; never to be expected to make a great match; never to have any one say, 'If Lilian doesn't do something wonderful we shall be disappointed.'"

"Oh, well, you never will get those things," I said. After a time I continued—for she kept on looking at me—"Would you change with me if you could?"

"I shouldn't like to give up mamma—dear mamma *is* a darling; she really is, although she is always putting her foot into it. She put her foot into it now; but, you see, it was rather good after all, for I saw you and I noticed that you had heard what mamma said. Now, mother never does *outré* things with her body, but with her lips she is always giving herself away. I couldn't leave her even to change with you."

"Well, I'm plain enough."

"Thank Providence for that. You are plain; I quite admit it. But I will tell you something else. Your step-mother is the most delightful woman—"

"Oh, you have been very nice, Miss St. Leger—"

"They call me Lady Lilian," she interrupted.

"Oh, but that is rather too terrible."

"Why should the fact of being an earl's daughter make me a scrap better than you, who are the daughter of a very great professor? But, anyhow, you may call me Lilian; you may drop the Lady. Now go on."

"I wish you wouldn't begin to praise *her*."

"Oh, then, you don't like her? You are one of those naughty little girls who won't take to her dear step-mother. Dear, dear!"

"She is as good as gold," I said.

"I see what it is," said Lady Lilian; "you and I must have a long talk. We must be friends. Have we not talked together over the lost Salviati? Have we not both sighed over the *mal-à-propos* remarks of my dear mamma? We ought to be friends. Don't I wish to have your looks? And doubtless you wish to have mine? Why shouldn't we be friends?"

"Let us," I said. I was bewitched, charmed. I had forgotten my shyness and felt quite at home with her. In fact, as Lady Lilian went on talking I felt rather superior to her. It was the first time in all my life I had regarded my plainness as a distinct and most valuable acquisition.

"That's all right. I'll introduce you to mamma. Come along now this very minute; she is rising to go."

"But I sha'n't see much of you, for I am going to school on the 21st."

"To school! Heavens! Why?"

“My step-mother wishes it.”

“Poor little thing! I see. And where?”

I mentioned the school. Her eyes brightened.

“Oh, you are going there?” she said. “Then I don’t think I do pity you. I was there for a year; it’s an awfully nice place, and there are some of my own friends there. I’ll write and tell them about you. Oh! come along; there is mamma at the door.”

She took my hand. The Countess of Derwent was just saying adieu to another intimate acquaintance who had entered the room as soon as Lilian and I had betaken ourselves into the back drawing-room. She turned when she saw her daughter.

“Come, Lilian. I am going. Say good-bye to Lady Anne.”

“First,” said Lilian in her calmest voice, “let me introduce you to the Horror.”

She drew me forward. The poor Countess’s face became crimson.

“The what?” she said.

“Oh, you called her that yourself when you were congratulating dear Grace on having a husband and ready-made children. Well, this is the girl, and she is a perfect darling, a deliverer for me out of my worst fit of the dumps.”

“Oh, but they call me Dumps,” I could not help saying.

“Better and better,” said Lady Lilian.—“Now, mother, here she is; judge for yourself.”

“I must really apologise, Miss Grant,” said the Countess. “I must apologise most humbly. I had no idea you were in the room.”

“There’s nothing to apologise for,” I answered. “I am awfully obliged to you, for Lady Lilian wouldn’t have spoken to me but for your saying that. And you had a right to say it, for I expect I am a horror.”

“I am sure you are nothing of the sort—Lilian, my dear Lilian.”

Lady Lilian tripped back.

“Ask this child to tea to-morrow.—Come, won’t you, Miss—Grant? Now good-bye, my dear; you are a very nice, forgiving sort of girl. Good-bye.—Come, Lilian—come!”

Part 2, Chapter VIII.

Going to School.

All the preparations for school had been made, and it was the day before I was to leave. My trunks—I had several now—were packed. Augusta was coming too, and so was Hermione. Hermione had come to spend the last evening with us in the old house behind the great college. She was very much interested and highly pleased.

The last fortnight of my time at home had gone on wings. Lady Lilian St. Leger had lifted me into a new world. She was a daring, bright, true-hearted girl. She did not mind treating me with a sort of playful lightness which was very refreshing after the stifling time I had spent in that awful drawing-room; but she also had said good-bye.

“We shall meet in the holidays,” she said. “I shall see you sometimes. I am to come out as soon as ever I am presented, and I’ll be presented at the first Drawing-room. After that it will be nothing but rush and tumult; I’ll be wishing myself dead all the time, for there will be no hope of anything. I am going to make up my mind to accept the first man who proposes for me.”

“Oh, but you won’t do that!” I said, for I had very primitive and very sacred ideas on such topics.

“Oh, just to get rid of the thing! I only trust he’ll be young and poor and ugly. If he is young and poor and ugly, and I fall madly in love with him, there’ll be such a rumpus, and that would be a rare bit of fun. But dear, darling mamma will have to give way, because I can always make her do what I like.”

“But your father?” I said.

“Oh, I’ll manage him too.”

Thus she talked and chattered; but she was not out yet. She was very good-natured, and told me a great deal about the school.

“I do envy your going there,” she said. “I wish I was fifteen. And you are so jolly honest-looking and so downright plain. I do think you are unfairly equipped for this life, Dumps.”

She would never call me anything else now; I was Dumps to her—her darling, plain, practical, jolly Dumps. That was how she spoke of me. She had written to the girls whom she knew at the school, and had told me to be sure to

introduce myself as her very dearest friend, as her newest and dearest.

“They will embrace you; they will take you into their bosoms for my sake,” she said.

I am afraid I was very much enamoured of Lady Lilian; she was the type of girl who would excite the admiration of any one. Even Hermione, who knew her quite well, and whom I had liked in many ways until I met Lady Lilian, seemed commonplace and spiritless beside her.

But Hermione, Augusta, and I were to go to school together. Of course we would be friends. A lady, a special chaperon, was to take us across the Channel; we would start on the following morning, and should arrive in Paris in the evening. I was excited now it came to the point Hannah met me on the last evening as I was going upstairs. She was standing just beside a corner of my own landing. She sprang out on me.

“Hannah,” I said, “you did give me a start.”

She laid her hand on my arm.

“Let me come into your room with you,” she said.

I asked her to do so. She came up and spoke to me emphatically.

“You are going. When you go she will go too.”

“She?”

“Your own mother. She won’t stay another minute. The house will belong to the new queen; but Hannah won’t put up with it. I gave her notice this morning.”

“Hannah, you didn’t.”

“I did, my dear—I did. I said, ‘You are turning the child out, and the old woman goes too.’”

“Then you won’t stay for the sake of the boys?”

“No, I won’t; they can manage for themselves, even Master Charley and even beautiful Master Alex. I will say, anyhow, she wasn’t a bit unkind. She was very nice; I will say that for her. She’s a very nice woman, and under other circumstances I’d be inclined to like her. But there! she’s the new queen, and my heart is with the old one.”

Poor Hannah burst into tears; I had never seen her so overcome before.

“You will come back belonging to the house as it will be in the future. You are too young not to grow up in the new house; but I’m too old, child. I’ll never forget the old ways.”

“Hannah, fudge!” said a voice behind; and turning round, I was amazed, and I must say rather disgusted, to see my brother Charley.

“Look here,” he said, “this is all stuff and nonsense. We are as jolly as we can be, and our step-mother is as good as gold, and why should we make mischief? As to the old times—now I’ll tell you what it is, Hannah, they were detestable.”

Charley made his bow, winking at me and vanishing.

“Just like him,” said Hannah.

“There’s a good deal of truth in what he says, Hannah.”

“Well, I like the old ways best,” said Hannah.

Poor old thing, I could not but pet her and comfort her. She gave me her address. She was going to live with a cousin, and if ever I wanted a home, and was disposed to quarrel with my step-mother, she would take me in—that she would. As I had no intention of quarrelling with my step-mother—for it is quite impossible for any one to have a completely one-sided quarrel—I told Hannah that all I could hope to do in the future was to visit her a good deal. In the end I told her that I would write her long letters from Paris, which quieted her a good bit. She kissed me, and when she went away I did feel, somehow, that the old life was really gone.

The old life! It quite went the next morning when I found myself on board the steamer which was to convey me from Dover to Calais. I stood with Hermione on one side and Augusta on the other, looking at the fast-receding waves as the gallant boat plied its way through them. Our chaperon, a dull, quiet-looking woman, who only spoke broken English, took little or no notice of us. Augusta’s eyes were fixed on the distant horizon. Occasionally I heard her murmuring lines of verse to herself. Once she glanced at me, and I saw that her eyes were full of tears.

“What is it?” I said.

She immediately repeated with great emphasis:

> “*And where are they*? And where art thou,
> My country?”

“Oh,” I cried, “don’t say any more! We are not in the humour for poetry.”

“Of course we’re not,” said Hermione, glancing at her.

“I was quoting,” said Augusta. “I was thinking, not about what Lord Byron thought when he spoke of ancient Greece, but of all that I was leaving behind in London.”

“And what are you leaving behind that is so specially valuable, Augusta?” I asked.

“Your father’s lectures,” she replied. She turned once more and looked at the horizon.

“Don’t worry her,” said Hermione in a low tone to me.

“I wonder if she’ll ever get over it,” I said.

Hermione and I began to pace slowly up and down the deck.

“I cannot imagine why my step-mother was so anxious that she should come with us,” I said.

“Because she felt that it was absolutely essential that Augusta should see another side of life. Dear, dear, I do feel excited! I wonder how we shall like the life. Don’t frown, Dumps; you surely needn’t worry about Augusta. She has made a kind of king of your father. She believes him to be all that is heroic and noble and majestic in life. It is really a most innocent admiration; let her keep it.”

“Yes, of course, if she likes,” I said.

The air was cold. I wrapped the warm fur cloak which my step-mother had insisted upon giving me for the voyage tightly round me, and sat down on one of the deck-seats. By-and-by Augusta tottered forward.

“It is strange how difficult it is to use your sea-legs,” she said.

She sprawled on to the seat by my side. Suddenly the vessel gave a lurch, and she found herself lying on the deck. A sailor rushed forward, picked her up, and advised the young lady to sit down; the wind was a little fresher and the vessel would sway a trifle. He brought a tarpaulin and wrapped it round us three. Augusta was on one side of me. Presently she pressed my hand.

“You are the *next* best,” she said, gazing at me with pathetic eyes.

“Next what?” I said.

“You are his daughter.”

“I will try and be friendly with you, Augusta; but I do bar one thing,” was my immediate comment.

“And what is that?”

“Nonsense. You must try and talk sense.”

She smiled very gently, and taking my hand within her own, stroked it.

“He also,” she said after a pause, “is very determined. In fact, I cannot with truth say that he has ever in his life given me what I could call a civil word. Now, you are like him; you are exceedingly blunt. The blunter you are, the more you resemble him.”

“Oh, good gracious! then I suppose I shall have to be civil.”

“I beseech of you, don’t; keep as like him as you can.”

“If you mean for a single moment that Dumps is like her father in appearance, you are much mistaken,” said Hermione, bending across me to speak to Augusta.

“She is like him neither in body nor in mind.”

“But she has a trifle of his moral force,” replied Augusta, with great majesty; and then, finding that neither Hermione nor I was at all in sympathy with her, she satisfied herself with remaining silent and leaning against my shoulder. Perhaps she thought I was imparting to her some of my moral force. I really felt a savage desire to push her away.

At last we landed, and found ourselves in a first-class compartment in the Paris train, and a few minutes afterwards we were on our journey. We arrived there in the evening. Then we found ourselves in an omnibus which was sent to meet us from the school, and were on our way to that home of all the virtues just beyond the Champs Élysées. My heart was beating high. I was full of suppressed anxiety. Hermione once or twice touched my hand. She was also very excited; she was wondering what sort of life lay before her. Augusta, on the other hand, was utterly irresponsive. She did not make one remark with regard to gay, beautiful, brilliant Paris, which looked, as it always does at this hour, full of marvellous witchery, so brilliantly lighted up were the broad streets, so altogether exhilarating was the tone of the bracing air.

Augusta sat huddled up in one corner of the omnibus, while Hermione and I got as close to the door as we could, and gazed out of the window, which was wide-open, exclaiming at each turn as we drove along. The Champs Élysées flashed into view; we drove on, and presently turned into a very broad street, and pulled up with a jerk before a house which seemed to have a balcony to each window, and which was brilliantly lit from attic to cellar.

Our companion, the lady who had brought us, now said something in excellent French, and we got out of the omnibus and followed her up a paved path and through an open doorway into a wide hall. Here a servant appeared, who was told to take us to our rooms. We followed her up some stairs, which were white marble and were uncarpeted. We passed a wide landing where there were some marble figures in the corners, and large palm-trees standing beside them; then again past folding-doors, and through a landing with more marble figures and more palms, until at last we entered through two doors, which were flung open wide, into a pretty little sitting-room. Why do I say little? The room was lofty, and was so simply furnished that it looked much larger than it was. The floor was covered with oak parquetry, and was polished to the most slippery degree. There were a couple of rugs here and there, but no carpet. In the centre of the room was a table covered with a white cloth, and containing knives, forks, glasses, and a bunch of flowers rather carelessly arranged in a vase in the middle. There were heavy chairs in the Louis-Quinze style, with a great deal of gilt about them, and a huge mirror, also with gilt, let into the wall at one side; and exactly opposite the wall was a door, which led into three small bedrooms, all communicating each with the other.

“These are your apartments, young ladies,” said the governess who had taken us upstairs. “This is your sitting-room, where to-night you will have your supper. You will not see your companions—or I think not—until the morning. You will be glad to retire to rest, doubtless, as you must have had a long journey. Your supper will come up in a moment or two. If you give your trunks to Justine she will unpack them and put your things away. Ah! here is the bell; if you will ring it when you want anything, Justine, who is the maid whose special duty it is to wait on you, will attend the summons.”

The governess turned to go away.

“But, please,” called out Hermione as she was closing the door, “what are we to call you?”

“Mademoiselle Wrex.”

We thanked her, and she vanished. Augusta stood in the middle of the room and clasped her hands.

“Well, now, I call this jolly!” I said.

“Delightful! And how quaint!” said Hermione. “I never thought we should have a sitting-room.”

“But there isn’t a book,” remarked Augusta.

“Oh, we don’t want books to-night, Augusta. Now, do lean on my moral strength and forget everything unpleasant,” I said.

“Oh! do look out of the window; here’s a balcony,” cried Hermione. “Let us go out on it when we have had supper.”

She pushed back the curtains, opened the window, and the next minute she was standing on the little balcony looking down into the crowded street.

“Oh! and that house opposite; we can see right into its rooms. What fun! What fun! I do call this life!” cried the girl.

“We had better go and unlock our trunks; remember we are at school,” I said.

“How unlike you, Dumps, to think of anything sensible!” was Hermione’s remark.

We went into our rooms.

“I am going to ring the bell for Justine,” said Hermione.

She did so, and a very pretty girl dressed in French style appeared. She could not speak English, but our home-made French was sufficient for the occasion. We managed to convey to her what we wanted, and she supplied us with hot water, took our keys, and immediately began to unpack our trunks and to put away our belongings.

“You shall have the room next to the sitting-room,” I said to Hermione.

“Very well,” she answered.

“I will take the next,” I said; “and, Augusta, will you have that one?”

“It’s all the same to me,” said Augusta.

In less than half-an-hour we felt ourselves more or less established in our new quarters.

“Now,” said Justine, becoming much animated, “you will want, you *pauvre petites*, some of the so nécessaire refreshment.”

She rang the bell with energy, and a man appeared bearing chocolate, cakes of different descriptions, and sandwiches. We sat down and made a merry meal. Even Augusta was pleased. She forgot the absence of books; she even forgot how far she was from the Professor. As to her poor mother, I do not think she even gave her a serious thought Hermione and I laughed and chatted. Finally we went and stood on the balcony, and Augusta retired to her own room.

“Now this is a new era; what will it do for us both?” said Hermione.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Aren’t you happy, Dumps?”

“Yes, I am a little; but I don’t suppose I am expected to take things very seriously.”

“It is a great change for me,” said Hermione, “from the regularity of the life at home.”

“I suppose it is,” I said; but then I added, “You cannot expect me to feel about it in that way.”

“Why so?”

“It seems to me,” I continued, “that I have been for the last few months taken off my feet and whirled into all sorts of new conditions. We were so poor, so straitened; we seemed to have none of what you would call the good things of life. Then all of a sudden Fortune’s wheel turned and we were—I suppose—rich. But still—”

“Don’t say you prefer the old life.”

“No—not really. I know she is so good; but you must admit that it is a great change for me.”

“I know it is; but you ought to be thankful.”

“That is it; I don’t think I am. And what is more,” I continued, “I don’t think this is the right school for Augusta. There is just a possibility that I may be shaped and moulded and twisted into a sort of fine lady; but nothing will ever make Augusta commonplace, nor will anything make you commonplace. Oh dear! there is some one knocking at the door.”

The knock was repeated. We said, “Come in!” and a girl with a very curly head of dark hair, bright eyes to match, and a radiant face, first peeped at us, then entered, shut the door with a noisy vehemence, and came towards as with both her hands extended.

Half-way across the room she deliberately shut her eyes.

“Now, I wonder which of you I shall feel first. One is Dumps and the other Hermione. I am expected to adore Dumps because she is so jolly and plain and sensible and—and awkward; and I am expected to worship Hermione because she is exactly the reverse. Now—ah! I know—this is Hermione!”

She clasped her arms round my somewhat stout waist.

“Wrong—wrong!” I cried.

She opened her eyes and uttered a merry laugh.

“I have been introduced to you,” she said, “by special letter from my friend Lilian St. Leger. And you *are* Dumps?”

“Of course,” I said.

“Good! You do look jolly. I am Rosalind Mayhew. I am a great friend of Lilian’s. Of course, I am younger than she is—I am a year younger—and I am going to be at school for another year, so I’ll see you through, Dumps; Lilian has asked me to.”

“Sit down and tell us about every thing,” I said. “You know we are such strangers.”

“Washed up on this inhospitable shore, we scarcely know what we are to do with ourselves, or what savages we are to meet,” said Hermione very merrily.

“Then I’ll just tell you everything I can. You know, Mademoiselle Wrex would be wild if she knew that I had come up to see you this evening. She said I was not to do so, but to leave you in peace. Well, I could not help myself. I slipped out to come here, and I told Elfreda and Riki and Fhemie and Hortense that I could not resist it any longer.”

“What queer names!” I said.

“Oh, Riki—she’s a German comtesse; and Elfreda is a baroness; but we always call them just Riki and Elfreda. They are very jolly girls. Then as to Fhemie, she is more English than I am; and Hortense is French of the French. There are all sorts of girls at our school. The Dutch girls are some of the nicest. I will introduce you to them. Then there are Swedes, and several Americans. The Americans are very racy.”

“How many girls are there altogether at the school?” I asked.

“Well, between twenty and thirty. You see, the Baroness Gablestein is exceedingly particular.”

“Who is she?”

“My dear Dumps! You don’t mean to say that you have come to this school without knowing the name of our head-mistress?”

“A baroness? Gablestein?” I exclaimed.

“Yes; she really represents a sort of all-round nationality. To begin with, she is an Englishwoman herself by birth—that is, on one side. Her mother was English, but her father was French. Then she married a German baron, whose mother was a Dutchwoman, and whose grandmother was Italian. Her husband died, and she found, poor baroness! that she had not quite enough to live on, and so, as she was exceedingly well educated and had many aristocratic

connections, she thought she would start a school. Her name in full is Baroness von Gablestein. She is most charming. She talks excellent English, but she also talks French and German and Italian like a native. She has a fair idea of the Dutch tongue, and is exceedingly kind to her Dutch connections; but I think her most valued pupils hail from the island home. But there! I don't think I ought to stay any longer to-night. I don't want Comtesse Riki to become curious and to poke her aristocratic little nose in here. She is a very jolly girl, and as nice as ever she can be; still, she is not English, you know. Oh, you'll find all sides of character here. I can't tell you how funny it is, particularly with regard to the French and German girls; they are so interested about their *dot* and their future husbands and all the rest. I tell you it *is* life in this place! We do have good times; it isn't a bit like a regular school. You see all sorts and conditions—good, bad, and indifferent; but I suppose the good preponderate. Now kiss me, Dumps. You will be quite a fresh variety. I believe you are blunt and honest—but, oh, don't break the Salviati glass!"

"How very wrong of Lilian to have told you that story!" I said.

"My dear good creature, do you think that Lilian St. Leger could keep anything to herself? She is about the maddest young woman I ever came across; but we do miss her at school. Her name will be 'Open sesame' to you to every heart in the place. She is just the nicest and most bewitching of creatures. I only wish she was back."

"She is coming out in about a month," I said.

"Poor thing, how she always did hate the idea!"

"She won't when the time comes," said Hermione.

"Once she is plunged into that fun she will enjoy it as well as another."

"I never should," I said.

Rosalind glanced at me and laughed.

"Oh, perhaps you'll change too," she said. "Well, you look awfully nice. Your breakfast will be brought to your rooms to-morrow morning sharp at seven o'clock. We have *déjeuner* at twelve, afternoon tea at four, dinner at seven. The rest of the day is divided up into all sorts of strange and odd patterns, totally different from English life. But, of course, the meals are all-important."

"Why," I said, "I did not think you were so greedy."

"Nor are we; but you see, dear, during meals we each speak the language of our native country, and I can tell you there is a babel sometimes when the Baroness is not at the head of her table. All the rest of the time the English girls *must* talk French, German, or Italian; and the French ones must talk English, German, or Italian; and the German girls must talk French, English, or Italian; and so on, and so on."

"Oh, you confuse me," I said. "How can any one girl talk three languages at once?"

"Day about, or week about—I forget which," said Rosalind. "Now, good-night, good-night."

She vanished.

"I declare I am dead-tired," I said, and I sank down on the sofa.

"What a good thing Augusta wasn't here!" said Hermione.

"Yes; she wouldn't have understood a bit," I said.

I went to Augusta's room that night before I lay down to rest. She was sound asleep in the dress she had travelled in. She had not even taken the trouble to put a wrap over her. She looked tired, and was murmuring Latin verses in her sleep.

"It is not the right place for her; she will never, never get on with these baronesses and comtesses, and all this medley of foreign life," I could not help saying to myself.

I covered her up, but did not attempt to awake her; and then I went to my own room, got into bed, and went to sleep with a whirl of emotion and wonder filling my brain.

Part 2, Chapter IX.

First Impressions.

It seemed to me that I had hardly closed my eyes in sleep before I was awakened again by seeing Justine standing by my bedside with a tray of very appetising food in her hand.

"Here are your rolls and coffee, mademoiselle," she said.

As she spoke she laid the little tray on a small table by the side of my bed, evidently put there for the purpose; and taking a dressing-jacket from the wardrobe, she made me put it on, and admonished me to eat my breakfast quickly, as I must rise and attend prayers in the space of three-quarters of an hour.

Here was hurry indeed. I munched my delicious rolls, and sipped my coffee, and thought of the new life which was

before me, and then I got up with energy and washed and dressed. When I had completed my toilet I went into the sitting-room, for although our rooms opened one into the other, there were other doors on to an adjoining landing. Here I found Hermione waiting for me.

“Where’s Augusta?” I said.

“I don’t know—surely she is dressed.”

“I’ll go to her room and find out,” I said.

I went and knocked at the door. A heavy voice said “Come in,” and I entered. Augusta was now lying well wrapped up in the bedclothes. She had not touched either her coffee or her rolls.

“Aren’t you getting up?” I said. “The bell will ring in a moment for prayers. We are expected to go down.”

“I have a headache,” said Augusta.

“Are you really ill, Augusta? I am sorry.”

“I am not ill, but I have a headache. I had bad dreams last night.”

“And you never got into bed at all.”

“I fell asleep, and my dreams were troublesome. I can’t get up yet. No, I won’t have any breakfast. I wish I hadn’t come; I don’t like this place.”

I knelt down by the bed and took her hand.

“You know that your mother and your uncle wouldn’t have made such an effort to send you here if they didn’t think it would be for your good,” I said. “Do try and like it.”

There was a new tone in my voice. I really felt sorry for her. She raised her head and fixed her dark eyes on my face.

“Do you think your father would like it?”

“I am sure he would, Augusta,” I said; and an idea flashed through my brain. I would write that very day to my step-mother and beg her to get my father to send Augusta a message. The slightest word from him would control her life; she would work hard at her French, her German, hard at manners, refinement—at everything—if only he would give her the clue. Surely my step-mother would manage it.

I flashed a bright glance at her now.

“I know that my father would like it. I’ll tell the Baroness you are not well and cannot come down this morning.”

“The Baroness? What did you say?” said Augusta.

“Our head-mistress; her name is Baroness von Gablestein.”

Augusta closed her eyes and shivered.

“To this we have sunk,” I heard her mutter, and then she turned her face to the wall.

A great bell, musical and dear, sounded all over the house.

“That is our summons,” I said. “Mademoiselle Wrex will meet us on the next landing, and I will come to you as soon as I can.”

I left the room.

“What’s the matter?” said Hermione.

“She says she has a headache, but I think she is mostly sulking,” I replied. “I am going to write to my step-mother; I think I know how to manage her.”

“Dumps, how bright you look—and how happy!” Yes, I was happy; I was feeling in my heart of hearts that I really meant to do my very best.

On the next landing we met Mademoiselle Wrex. See looked approvingly at us. I told her about Augusta, and she said she would see to the young lady, but in the meantime we must follow her downstairs. We went down and down. How airy and fresh, and I must say how cold also, the house felt! I had always imagined that French houses were warm. When we arrived on the ground *étage* we turned to our left and entered a very large room. Like all the other rooms in the house, it was bare of carpet. On a sort of dais at the top of the room there stood the Baroness von Gablestein. She was one of the handsomest and most distinguished-looking women I had ever seen. She was not young; she must have been between forty and fifty years of age. Her hair was dark by nature, but was now very much mixed with grey. She had dark and very thick eyebrows, and a broad and massive forehead. She wore her hair on a high cushion rolled back from her face. The rest of her features were regular and very clearly cut. Her lips were sweet but firm, and her eyes dark and very penetrating. But it was not her mere features, it was the clear, energetic, and yet joyous expression of her face which so captivated me that I, Dumps, stood perfectly still when I saw her, and did not move for the space of two or three seconds. I felt some one poke me in the back, and a voice in broken English said,

“But stare not so. Go right forward.”

I turned, and saw a girl much shorter than myself, and much more podgy, who glanced at me, smiled, and pointed to a bench where I was to sit.

The Baroness read a few verses of Scripture in the French tongue, and then we all knelt down and a collect for the day was read, also in French, and then we were desired to join our different classes in the schoolroom. I stood still, and so did Hermione. The Baroness seemed to observe us for the first time, and raised her brows.

Mademoiselle Wrex came up and said something to her.

“Ah, yes,” I heard her say in very sweet, clear English. “The dear children! But certainly I will speak with them.”

She went down two or three steps and came to meet us.

“You are Rachel Grant,” she said. “Welcome to our school.—And you are Hermione Aldyce. Welcome to our school.”

She had a sort of regal manner; she bent and kissed me on the centre of my forehead, and she did the same to Hermione.

“I trust you will enjoy your life here. I trust you will in all respects be worthy of the reputation of our school; and I trust, also, that we shall do our utmost to make you happy and wise.”

She paused for a minute.

“My dear children,” she said then, “this is a very busy hour for me, and I will see you later; in the meantime I leave you in the care of Mademoiselle Wrex, who will take you to those teachers who will superintend your studies.”

I felt my cheeks growing very red. Hermione was cool and composed. We followed Mademoiselle Wrex through several rooms into the schoolroom, and there we were examined by a German lady, who put us in a very low form as regarded that language. We were next questioned by a French mademoiselle, who did likewise; but an English lady, with a matter-of-fact and very quiet face, rescued us from the ignominious position in which we found ourselves with regard to German and French by discovering that our attainments in our mother-tongue were by no means contemptible.

In the end we found, so to speak, our level, and our school life began right merrily.

Late that evening I found time to write a few words to my step-mother.

> “I will tell you all about the school later on,” I began. “At present I feel topsy-turvy and whirly-whirly; I don’t know where I am, nor what has happened to me. I dare say I shall like it very much, but I will keep my long letter for Sunday; we have all the time we want for ourselves on Sunday; no one interferes, and we are allowed to talk in our own tongue—that is, if we wish to do so. What I am specially writing to you about now is Augusta. She is taking the change in her circumstances very badly, I must say, my dear step-mother; she is not reconciled. She would not get up this morning, nor would she undress last night. She pleads a headache, and will not eat. But, at the same time, Mademoiselle Wrex, who has the charge of our department, cannot find anything special the matter with her. I think it is a case of homesickness, but not the ordinary sort, for she is certainly not pining for her mother. It really is a case of grieving because she cannot attend my father’s lectures. She does think a great deal of him, and seems to have set her whole life by his example. Now, if you could get him to send her the tiniest little note, just the merest line, to say he hopes she will do well and like her French and German—oh, anything will do—she will do her duty and will be as happy as the day is long. You are so clever, I know you can manage it. I haven’t time for another word.—Your affectionate step-daughter, Rachel Grant.”

Part 2, Chapter X.

The Professor’s Letter.

I cannot give all the particulars with regard to my life at the school, which was called Villa Bella Vista, although I cannot tell why; perhaps because from the upper windows you could catch a glimpse of the Champs Élysées. Be that as it may, it was in some ways a Bella Vista for me, a very great change from my old life in the dark house near the ancient college, from poverty to luxury, from dullness to sunshine, from the commonplace school to one which was the best that it was possible for a school to be. The Baroness von Gablestein was a woman of great integrity of mind and great uprightness of bearing, and her strong personality she managed more or less to impress on all the girls. Of course, there were black sheep in this fold, as there must be black sheep in every fold; but Hermione and I soon found our niche, and made friends with some of the nicest girls. We liked our lessons; we took kindly to French and German; Italian would follow presently. French and German were now the order of the day. In short, we were contented.

We had not been a fortnight at the school Bella Vista before we began to feel that we had always lived there. Were we not part and parcel of the house? Were not its interests ours, the girls who lived there our friends, and the life we lived the only one worth living? We did not acknowledge to ourselves that we felt like this, but nevertheless we did.

As to Augusta—well, for the first few days she was as grumpy and unsociable as girl could be. Then there came a change over her, and I knew quite well what had caused it. The post was delivered in the evening, and there was a letter addressed to Augusta. She took it up languidly. She seemed to feel no interest whatever in anything. I watched

her without daring to appear to do so. We were in our own little sitting-room at that time, and Rosalind Mayhew was having supper with us. This treat was always allowed on Saturday evenings. The girls could ask one another to have supper, only giving directions downstairs with regard to the transference of the food to the different rooms. Rosalind was our guest on this occasion.

Augusta laid her letter by her plate; she put one hand on the table, and presently took up the letter and glanced at it again. I did not dare to say, “Won’t you read it?” for had I done so that would have provoked her into putting it into her pocket, and not glancing at it perhaps until the following morning, or goodness knows when. So, glancing at Hermione, I proposed that those who had finished supper should go and stand on the balcony for a little. We all went except Augusta, who remained behind. I kept one ear listening while I chatted with my companions. It seemed to me that I certainly *did* hear the rustle of paper—the sort of rustle that somewhat stiff paper would make when it is taken out of its envelope. Then there was utter stillness, and afterwards a wild rush and a door slammed. I looked into the sitting-room. It was empty.

“She has read it, has she not?” said Hermione.

“Oh, hush, hush!” I whispered. “Don’t say a word.”

“Are you talking about that queer, half-mad girl?” said Rosalind.

“Oh, I’m sure she will be all right in the future,” I said.

Rosalind changed the conversation to something else.

“By the way, Dumps, Comtesse Riki has taken a most violent fancy to you.”

“What! to me?” I asked.

“Yes; and the Baroness Elfreda to Hermione.”

Now, Comtesse Riki was a very delicately made, exquisitely pretty girl, of the fairest German type. Elfreda, on the contrary, was short and exceedingly fat, with a perfectly square face, high cheek-bones, and a quantity of hay-coloured hair which she wore in two very tight plaits strained back from her face.

Hermione shrugged her shoulders.

“They’re both awfully nice; don’t you think so?” said Rosalind.

“I have scarcely given them a thought,” I answered.

My mind was still dwelling on the letter which Augusta had received. Presently Rosalind left us, and Hermione and I wondered what the result would be.

“Go to her door and knock, and see if she will come out and tell us; won’t you, Dumps?” said Hermione.

I did go and knock.

“Yes, dear?” said Augusta’s voice. It was quite bright and absolutely changed.

“Aren’t you coming out to stand on the balcony a little, and to chat? Do come, please.”

“Not to-night, dear; I am very busy.”

Still that new, wonderful, exceedingly cheerful voice.

“The spell has worked,” I said to Hermione when I returned to her.

We neither of us saw Augusta again until the next morning, and then there was a marvellous change in her. She did not tell us what had caused it. To begin with, she was neatly dressed; to follow, she ate an excellent breakfast; and again, wonder of wonders! she applied herself with extreme and passionate diligence to her French and German lessons. She looked up when her mistress spoke; she no longer indulged in silence broken only by rhapsodies of passionate snatches of verse from her favourite authors. She was altogether a changed Augusta. I did not say a word to her on the subject, and I cautioned Hermione not to breathe what I had done.

“If she thinks father has written to her on his own account the spell will work, and she will be saved,” I said.

It was not until a fortnight later that Augusta said to me in a very gentle tone, “I see daylight. How very naughty I was when I first came! How badly I did behave! But now a guiding hand has been stretched out, and I know what I am expected to do.”

I jumped up and kissed her.

“I am glad,” I said.

“You cannot be as glad as I am,” she answered; and she took both my hands in one of hers and looked into my face, while tears rose to her bright, rather sunken eyes. “To think that *he* should take the trouble to write!”

I ran away. I did not want to be unkind, and truly did not mean to; but Augusta’s manner, notwithstanding the reform in her character, was almost past bearing.

“Poor, dear old father!” I said afterwards to Hermione, “he can little realise what a fearful responsibility he has in life—the whole of Augusta’s future—and just because he is a clever lecturer. I really cannot understand it.”

“Nor I,” said Hermione. “I myself think his speeches are rather dull; but I suppose I have a different order of mind.”

I remember quite well that on that occasion we girls were permitted to go for a delightful walk into the Bois de Boulogne. We went, of course, with some of the governesses; but when we got there we were allowed a certain amount of freedom—for instance, we could choose our own companions and walk with whom we pleased. We were just leaving the house on this occasion when Comtesse Riki came up to me and asked if I would walk with her. I acceded at once, although I had hoped for a long walk with Hermione, as I had received a budget of home news on that day, and I wanted to talk it over with her; last, but not least, there had come a voluminous letter from Lilian St. Leger. It was a little provoking, but Riki’s very pretty blue eyes, her pathetic mouth, and sweet smile conquered. At the same instant Baroness Elfreda flew up to Hermione and tucked her podgy hand inside the girl’s arm.

“I couldn’t walk with you, Dumps,” she said, “for a dumpy girl couldn’t walk with another dumpy girl—so I want to be your friend, a sweet, slight, graceful English girl.”

Hermione consented with what patience she could, and we started off on our walk. While we were in the town we had, of course, to walk two by two; but presently, in a special and rather retired part of the gardens, the governesses were less particular, and each couple was allowed to keep a little away from the other.

“Now, that’s a comfort,” said Riki. “I have so much I want to ask you.”

“What about?” I said.

“About your so delightful English ways. You have much of the freedom, have you not?”

“I don’t know,” I replied.

“Oh, but you must! Think now; no girl here, nor in my country, nor in any other, I think, on the Continent, would be allowed to go about unattended—not at least before her marriage.”

“But,” I answered, “we don’t think about getting married at all in England—I mean girls of my age.”

“If you don’t think it impertinent, would you tell me what your age may be?”

I said I should be sixteen in May.

“But surely you will think of your marriage within about a year or two, will you not?”

I laughed.

“What are you talking about?” I said. “Really, Comtesse, I cannot understand you.”

“Fray don’t call me that; call me Riki. I like you so very much; you are different from others.”

“Every one tells me that,” I answered, a little bitterness in my tone.

“You have the goodness within—you perhaps have not the beauty without; but what does that matter when goodness within is more valuable? It is but to look at you to know that you have got that.”

“If you were really to see into my heart, Riki, you would perceive that I am an exceedingly selfish and very ungrateful girl.”

“Oh dear!” said the Comtesse Riki, “what is it to be what you call ungrateful?”

“Not to be thankful for the blessings that are given you,” I made answer.

She glanced at me in a puzzled way.

“Some day, perhaps,” I said, “you will visit our England and see for yourself what the life is like.”

“I should like it,” she replied—“that is, after my nuptials.”

“But you are only a child yourself.”

“Not a child—I am sixteen; I shall be seventeen in a year; then I shall leave school and go home, and—and—”

“Begin your fun,” I said.

“Oh no,” she answered—“not exactly. I may go to a few of the dances and take a *tour* (dance) with the young men—I should, of course, have many partners; but what is that? Then I shall become affianced, and my betrothal will be a very great event; and afterwards there will be my trousseau, and the preparing for my home, and then my marriage with the husband whom my parents have chosen for me.”

“And you look forward to that?” I said.

“Of course; what else does any girl look forward to?”

I could not speak at all for a minute; then I said, “I am truly thankful I am not a German.”

She smiled.

“If we,” she said slowly, “have one thing to be more—what you call grateful for—than another, it is that we don’t belong to your so strange country of England. Your coldness, and your long time of remaining without your *dot* and your betrothal and your so nécessaire husband, is too terrible for any girl in the Fatherland even to contemplate the pain.”

“Oh!” I said, feeling quite angry, “we pity *you*. You see, Comtesse, you and I can never agree.”

She smiled and shook her little head.

“But what would you do,” she said a few minutes afterwards, “if these things were not arranged? You might reach, say, twenty, or even twenty-one or twenty-two, and—”

“Well, suppose I did reach twenty-one or twenty-two; surely those years are not so awful?”

“But to be unbetrothed at twenty-one or twenty-two,” she continued. “Why, do you not know that at twenty-five a girl—why, she is lost.”

“Lost?” I cried.

“Well, what we call put aside—of no account. She doesn’t go to dances. She stays at home with the old parents. The young sister supersedes her; she goes out all shining and beautiful, and the adored one comes her way, and she is betrothed, and gets presents and the *dot* and the beautiful wedding, and the home where the house linen is so marvellous and the furniture so good. Then for the rest of her days she is a good housewife, and looks after the comforts of the lord of the house.”

“The lord of the house?” I gasped.

“Her husband. Surely it is her one and only desire to think of his comforts. What is she but second to him? Oh! the chosen wife is happy, and fulfils her mission. But the unfortunate maiden who reaches the age of twenty-five, why, there is nothing for her—nothing!”

The Comtesses pretty checks were flushed with vivid rose; her blue eyes darkened with horror.

“Poor maiden of twenty-five!” I said. “Why, in England you are only supposed to be properly grown-up about then.”

“But surely,” said the Comtesse, glancing at me and shrugging her shoulders—“you surely do not mean to say that at that advanced age marriages take place?”

“Much more than before a girl is twenty-five. But really,” I added, “I don’t want to talk about marriages and *dots*; I am only a schoolgirl.”

The Comtesse laughed.

“Why will you so speak? What else has a girl of my great nation to think of and talk of? And the mademoiselles here—what have they to think of and to talk of? Oh! it is all the same; we live for it—our *dot*, and our future husbands, and the home where he is lord and we his humble servant.”

“It doesn’t sound at all interesting,” I said; and after that my conversation with Comtesse Riki languished a little.

A few days afterwards this same girl came to me when I was preparing a letter for home. I was writing in our sitting-room when she entered. She glanced quickly round her.

“It is you who have the sympathy,” she said.

“I hope so,” I answered. “What is the matter, Riki?” Her eyes were full of tears; she hastily put up her handkerchief and wiped them away.

“There is no doubt,” she said, “that you English are allowed liberties unheard-of for a German girl like me. I would beg of you to do me a great favour. I have been thinking of what you said the other day about this so great liberty of the English maidens, and the great extension of years which to them is permitted.”

“Yes, yes?” I said, and as I spoke I glanced at the gilt clock on the chiffonier.

“You are in so great a hurry, are you not?” asked Riki.

“I want to finish my letter.”

“And you will perhaps post it; is it not so?”

“Yes; I am going out with Hermione and Mademoiselle Wrex.”

“You are going, perhaps, to shops to buy things?”

“Yes. Do you want me to bring you in some chocolates?”

“Oh! that would be vare nice; but if you would, with your own letter, put this into the post also?”

As she spoke she gave me a letter addressed in the somewhat thin and pointed hand which most German girls use, and which I so cordially detested.

“It is to Heinrich,” she said. “I wouldn’t ask you; but your heart is warm, and—he suffers.”

“But why should I post it? Will you not take it downstairs and put it with the other letters in the letter-box?”

The delicate colour flew to her cheeks; her eyes were brighter than usual.

“Heinrich would not then receive it,” she answered. “You will post it—it is nécessaire for him that he gets it soon; he is in need of comfort. You will, will you not?”

I really hardly thought about the matter. I did not know why, but it did not occur to me that Riki was asking me to do anything underhand or outside the rules. She laid the letter on the table and flew away. I had just finished my own; I put it into an envelope and addressed it, and taking Riki’s letter also, I put on my outdoor things and went downstairs to meet Hermione and Mademoiselle Wrex.

It was now a very bitter day in March. We had been at school for two months. The time had flown. I was a healthy and very happy girl.

Mademoiselle Wrex said, “We must walk quickly to keep ourselves warm in this so bitter north-east wind.”

We all walked quickly, with our hands in our muffs, and as we were passing a pillar-box I dropped the letters in.

“Now that is off my mind,” I thought, with a sigh of relief.

“How did you manage to write two letters?” asked Hermione. “You were in such a fearful fuss getting through your one!”

I made no answer. Something the next moment distracted our attention, and we absolutely forgot the circumstance.

It was not until about a week afterwards that I observed a change in Comtesse Riki. She was very pale, and coughed now and then. She no longer took interest in her work, and often sat for a long time pensive and melancholy, her eyes fixed on my face. One bitterly cold day I found her alone in the *salon*, where we seldom sat; for although there was what was called central heating all over the house, it was not often put on to any great extent in the *salon*. Riki had flung herself into a chair which was the reverse of comfortable. She started up when she saw me.

“Oh, you will sympathise with me in my trouble!”

“What is the matter?” I asked.

“If we might go for a little walk together.”

“But why so?” I asked. “You are not fit to go out to-day, it is so cold.”

“But the cold will revive me. Feel my hand; my pulse beats so fast.”

I took her hand; her little pulse was bounding in her slender wrist.

“I am sure you ought not to go out; indeed, you can’t.” She looked up at me imploringly. Suddenly she burst out crying.

“Oh Riki,” I said, “what is the matter?”

“If you don’t help me I shall be the most miserable girl in all the world,” she said. “And it is all your fault, too.”

“My fault?” I cried. “Why, Riki, you must be mad. Whatever have I done?”

“Well, you have told me about your so wonderful English customs, and I have been taking them to my heart; and there is Heinrich—”

“Who is Heinrich—your brother?”

She stared at me, but made no reply.

“He was the person you wrote to, was he not?”

“Oh, hush, hush! Raise not your voice to that point; some one may come in and hear.”

“And why should not people hear? I must say English girls have secrets, but not that sort,” I said, with great indignation.

“You are so bitter and so proud,” she said; “but you know not the heart-hunger.”

“Oh yes, I do!” I answered. I was thinking of my mother and her miniature, and the fading image of that loved memory in the old home. I also thought of the new step-mother. Yes, yes, I knew what heart-hunger was. My tone changed to one of pity.

“I have felt it,” I said.

“Oh, then, you have had your beloved one?”

“Indeed, yes.”

“Did I not say that of all the school it was natural I should select you to be to me a companion?”

“Can I help you?” I said.

“You can. Will you, as I am not allowed to go out, take this and put it into a letter-box?”

“But I cannot make out why there should be any trouble.”

“It is so easy, and Heinrich—the poor, the sad, the inconsolable—wants to get it at once.”

Again I was a remarkably silly girl; but I took Riki’s letter and posted it for her. She devoured me with kisses, and immediately recovered her spirits.

The next day she was better and able to go out, and when she returned home she presented me with a magnificent box of French bonbons. Now, I was exceedingly partial to those sweets. Riki often came into our little sitting-room, and all the girls began to remark on our friendship.

“It is so unlike the Comtesse Riki to take up passionately with any one girl!” said Rosalind when this sort of thing had been going on for a few weeks and we were all talking of the Easter holidays.

The great point of whether I was to go home or not had not yet been decided. Hermione knew she must remain at the school; Augusta would probably do likewise.

Rosalind went on commenting on my friendship with Riki. After a pause she said, “Of course, she has been at the school for some time; she leaves in the summer.”

“Oh!” I answered; “she told me that she would be here for another year.”

“I think it has been changed. She is not contented; the Baroness will not keep a pupil in the school who shows discontent.”

“But surely she is quite a nice girl?”

Rosalind was silent for a minute; then she said, “Perhaps I ought just to warn you, Dumps. I wouldn’t trouble myself to do so—for I make a point of never interfering between one girl and another—but as you are Lilian St. Leger’s friend, and have been specially introduced to me through her, it is but fair to say that you ought to regard the German girl from a different standpoint from the English one.”

“Certainly the German girl is different,” I said; and I laughingly repeated some of Riki’s conversation with me in the Bois de Boulogne.

“Think of any girl talking of *dots*, and being betrothed, and getting married at her age!” I said.

“Oh, that isn’t a bit strange,” replied Rosalind; “they all do it. These German girls get married very young, and the marriages are arranged for them by their parents; they never have anything to say to them themselves.”

“Well, it is horrible,” I said, “and I told her so.”

“Did you?” said Rosalind very slowly. “Well, perhaps that accounts.” She looked very grave. After a minute she bent towards me and said in a low tone—too low even for Hermione to hear—“Whatever you do, don’t post letters for her.”

I started and felt myself turning very white.

“You won’t, will you?” said Rosalind, giving my arm a little squeeze.

I made no reply.

“It will be madness if you do. You cannot possibly tell what it means, Dumps.”

“Why, is there anything very dreadful in it?”

“Dreadful? Why, the Baroness has all the letters put into a box in the hall—I mean all the foreigners’ letters—and she herself keeps the key. She opens the box to take out the letters both for the post and when they have arrived, and distributes them amongst the girls.”

“And she doesn’t do that for the English girls?”

“No—not for a few. With the consent of their parents, they are allowed to have a free correspondence.” I sat very still and quiet. One or two things were being made plain to me. After a pause I said, “I can tell you nothing, Rosalind, but I thank you very much.”

On the next day I myself was seized with the first severe cold I had had that winter; it was very bad and kept me in bed. I had been in bed all day, not feeling exactly ill, but glad of the warmth and comfort of my snug little room.

Towards evening Augusta came in and asked me if I would like any friends to visit me.

“Oh, I don’t know,” I answered. “Of course, Hermione or you; but the others—I think not.”

“There’s that stupid girl, that pale-faced Comtesse—Riki, I think you call her—she is very anxious to come and have a chat with you.”

Now, to tell the truth, I had been feeling uncomfortable enough ever since Rosalind had spoken to me about the rule with regard to the foreign girls’ letters. The Baroness von Gablestein had every right to make what rules she liked in her own school, but I could not help thinking that it was hardly wise that such a marked distinction should be made between girls of one nationality and another. I now understood that all foreign girls’ letters were pot into the post-box in the hall, and the Baroness looked them over before they were posted. But the affair was not mine, and I should have forgotten all about it but for the very uncomfortable feeling that I myself, unwittingly, had twice broken this most solemn rule of the house, and had twice posted a letter for Riki von Kronenfel.

Now, it seemed to me that this might be a good opportunity for me to expostulate with her on the whole position, and to tell her that she had done very wrong to allow me innocently to break the rule of the house, and to assure her that under no circumstances should I be guilty of such an indiscretion again.

Augusta meanwhile seated herself comfortably by my bedside.

“Horrible,” she said—“horrible! but for the prospect of pleasing him—”

I did not pretend to misunderstand her.

“But you are really getting on splendidly, Augusta,” I said.

“Ah, yes! I should be a brute indeed did I do otherwise. And perhaps when I am sufficiently acquainted with the German tongue I may find out some of its beauties—or, rather, the beauties of its literature, for the language itself is all guttural and horrible—worse than French.”

“But surely French is very dainty?” I said.

“Dainty!” said Augusta, with scorn. “What one wants is a language of thought—a language that will show sentiment, that will reveal the depth of nature; and how, I ask you, can you find it in that frippery the French tongue?”

“I do not know,” I answered somewhat wearily.

“I like Molière and the writings of some of the other great French poets very much indeed.”

“Well,” said Augusta, “I have got to study a great quantity of German for to-morrow morning. I must go into my room and tackle it. The Professor said I was not to write to him, but I keep his treasured letter near my heart; but if you are writing home you might say that Augusta is not ungrateful. Do you ever have the great privilege of writing direct to your father?”

“I could, of course, write to father any day,” I said; “but as a matter of fact I don’t.”

“But why not?”

“It would worry the poor man.”

“But you might write just once to give him my message.”

“I will, Augusta, if you will leave me now.”

“But why do you want to get rid of me? How like you are to him! You have just that same bluntness and the same determination. You interest me at times profoundly.”

“Well,” I said, “if I interest you to the extent of getting you to start your German it would be better.”

“All right; but what am I to say to that silly Comtesse?”

“Tell her that I will see her by-and-by.”

“You had much better not. She is not worth a grain of salt. A little piece of conceit!”

Augusta left the room. She had not been gone many minutes before there came a tap at the door, and the Comtesse, dressed in the palest blue and looking remarkably pretty, entered.

“Ah!” she said, “you have caught cold from me, you poor English girl, and I am so disconsolate.”

She sank down at the foot of the bed and fixed her bright eyes on my face.

“You are much better,” I said.

“Ah, yes, that is so. I am what is called more spirited, and it is because of you; but for you I should be indeed disconsolate. I might have chosen the stupid, the so weary life of the good German housewife, instead of—”

“What do you mean?” I said.

“I cannot say more. There are secrets which can be guessed but which must not be spoken.”

“Riki,” I said, “I do wish you would give me a right good lesson in talking German.”

“Oh, but I couldn’t—to give you a lesson. But why should I thus discompose myself?”

“It would be a good and worthy object for one girl to help another.”

“I want not to think of objects good and worthy. Why should I? That isn’t my aim; that is not what is called my *métier* in life.”

I sighed.

“You have made me so happy that I should be happy to do what I could to please *you*, and to bring that one very slow smile to your so grave face, and to let your eyes open wide and look into my face so that I should see the lurking goodness within, but it is too troublesome.”

“Riki, there is something I must say to you.”

“Why that tone of suffering? I hope it isn’t of the so disagreeable nature.”

“I can’t help it if it is. Do you know that you have done something very wrong?”

She clasped her hands and looked at me with sad pathos.

“Why speak of that?” she said. “Is it to be expected that I should always do what we call right?”

“Not always; but it is expected of *every* one to be straight and upright and above anything mean. A girl of honour always expects to be that.”

“Would you mind very much if you were to repeat once more your so difficult remark?”

I did repeat it.

“But straight,” said Riki—“straight? That means a line. I make it difficult in my drawing. My line is always what you call wobbly.”

I could not help laughing.

“There, now, you are much more of the agreeable. What would you say to me?”

I felt that I must indeed speak very plainly to this girl.

“Listen,” I said. “You know the rules with regard to letter-writing.”

She understood me well enough now. The colour left her cheeks and fluttered back again like a waving flag; her lips were slightly parted; she looked at me with wide-open eyes.

“You know the rules,” I said. “No girl—no German girl, or Italian girl, or French girl, or Dutch girl, or any girl in the school—without the consent of her parents, or the special leave of the Baroness, is allowed to post letters except through the post-box in the hall.”

“Oh, that is very nice,” she said—“very nice.”

She waited expectantly.

“You know what I mean.”

“But I don’t post letters except in the way that is what is called legitimate.”

“Riki, where is the good of prevaricating?”

“I know not what you call pre-vare-cating. I never heard the word.”

“Listen to me,” I said. “You had no right to ask me to post the letters for you.”

“What would poor, poor Heinrich do if you had not?” she said. “What do we not owe you, you kind English girl, with the so kind, good face? You have our great gratitude.”

“I don’t want your gratitude,” I said. “You did wrong to ask me. I would not do wrong for all the world—I mean wrong like this—quite wrong; and it was wrong of you to tempt me. I did not know; I was unaware of the rule; but even so, I was silly, and you will quite understand that I will not do it any more.”

She took my hand and stroked it very gently. After a silence of two or three minutes, during which I hoped to get a full explanation from her, she raised her eyes and said very gently:

“What about the great prizes on the great day of the break-up, and the beautiful Easter lilies that we are each presented with before the Easter services? Think you not that will be a very beautiful occasion for us all?”

“I don’t know,” I answered. “I may not be here for Easter.”

She looked at me with a startled expression. After a minute's pause she began again in a very inconsequent way to rattle off some news with regard to the school. It was not until her visit was very nearly over that she said:

"Once is good, twice is better, but the third is best. If your friend, the kind and gracious Hermione, goes out, will she not drop this letter into the post-box?"

"She will not," I replied.

"And why? It is only to poor Heinrich. May he not receive this letter, this note of so true feeling from one he regards? May it not be put into the box?"

"There is no reason why Heinrich, whoever he is, should not hear from you twice every day as far as I am concerned," I said; "but I will not post it, nor will Hermione."

"I know; but you cannot tell the mind of your friend."

"I know she will not do it, Riki."

Riki considered for a minute; then she put the note again into her pocket.

"Very well," she said. "I little guessed that you would have a heart so hard, instead of soft and overflowing with the love for the German Fatherland."

Part 2, Chapter XI.

Consequences.

The next day I did not see Comtesse Riki at all. My cold was rather worse; but the day after I was able to sit up in my room, and she came to me with two or three other girls in the evening. She was shy, however, and had none of her old warm manner. Baroness Elfreda made herself more agreeable on that occasion, and a plump little German girl of the name of Fräulein Schott took my fancy by her blunt, good-humoured, pleasant manner. There were also some Dutch girls and a French girl, who all crowded into our sitting-room to congratulate me, to chatter to one another, to flock to the window and gaze longingly at the balcony.

"You are what is called of the lucky," said Elfreda presently.

"But why?" I asked. "I don't think I am specially lucky; I have been two whole days in my room with this horrid cold."

"I make no thought for the cold," said Elfreda. "I do consider that you are of the lucky type because your room looks upon this so gay street."

On further questioning, I found that both she and the Comtesse had rooms at the back of the house. After a time Hermione came in and chased my visitors away. When they were gone she sat down near me. She looked very grave.

"Did you," she said, "notice anything special about Riki?"

"No," I answered; "except, perhaps, that she was more silent than usual."

"I do not like what is going on," said Hermione after a pause. "I did not want to worry you when you were ill, but Riki came to me on that evening and asked me if I was going out; and then she begged me to post a letter for her."

"Oh yes," I said. I trembled slightly. "And you—what did you do?"

"Do?" said Hermione—"do? I asked her to read the rules in her bedroom."

"The rules in her bedroom?" I said.

"My dear Dumps, wherever are your eyes? There are rules written in four languages in every bedroom in the house. Have you never read those in your room?"

"I have glanced at them."

"Well, in the German and French and Italian sections the very strictest rule of all is that no letters of any sort whatsoever are to be posted by girls of those nationalities except in the post-box in the hall, and any girl helping another to get letters in any other fashion into the post will be most severely punished."

"I did not notice it."

"Well, notice it the next time you go into your bedroom. But don't look so white; it doesn't matter to us, surely!"

"Of course not," I said in a faint voice. After a pause I said, "But why are you anxious about her now?"

"She is underhand; she is not quite open. Now, Elfreda is a dull girl; I never could get anything amusing out of her; but she is quite different from Riki. Riki is supposed to be pretty, and will probably be much admired when she leaves school; but it is her want of openness that I cannot stand."

"The whole system is wrong," I said with some vigour. "I cannot imagine how any German girl grows up really nice."

“But heaps of them do, and you won’t be long at the school before you find that there are as nice German girls as English. You must not take Riki von Kronenfel as a specimen.”

I said nothing more, and after a time Hermione continued, “Now let us turn to something else. I had a letter from my father to-day; I am not to go home for Easter.”

“Oh dear! Easter will be here in a fortnight now,” I said. “I do not suppose for a single moment that I shall have a chance of getting back.”

“But have you heard definitely?”

“No.”

At this moment there was a tap at our door, and Justine entered with some letters. Of course, we both fell upon them as girls will all over the world, and the next minute we were eagerly sorting our different letters from a pile which Justine, with her most gracious French manner, had laid on the table—two for Hermione, one for me, and one for Augusta.

“From my step-mother,” I said, and I sank into a chair and opened it.

Far away from home Mrs Grant seemed like a very beneficent and kind presence; her letters were charming, as they told me every single thing I wanted to know; nothing was forgotten, nothing left out. I opened the letter now. To my surprise, I saw that it was quite short.

> “My dear Dumps,—I cannot write as much as I would to-day, for I am sorry to say your father is not quite himself.”

I started. There seemed to come a little prick at my heart—not a very big prick, just a momentary sense of uneasiness.

> “He has a severe chill—not an ordinary cold—and he is in bed.”

The Professor in bed! I laid down my letter and looked up at Hermione with startled eyes.

“What is it?” she said.

“Father is in bed,” I replied.

“Good gracious, how you made me jump! And why shouldn’t he be in bed?”

“You don’t understand. Why, I never remember his staying in bed. He is never ill, except with those fearful headaches.”

“He hadn’t a good, careful woman like Grace Donnithorne to look after him in the past,” replied Hermione in an indifferent tone. “For goodness’ sake don’t be anxious!”

Just at this moment the door opened and Augusta entered.

“A letter for you,” said Hermione.

She glanced at me as she spoke, and her eyes evidently implored me to keep my news to myself. But Augusta had seen my face.

“Is anything wrong?”

“Nothing—nothing,” said Hermione, with impatience. “For goodness’ sake don’t worry her, Augusta; she has not quite got over her cold. Fancy any girl being nervous because her father is in bed for a day or two!”

“The Professor ill?” said Augusta.

“Oh no,” I answered.

Her tone was like a tonic to me. If she was anxious, surely I needn’t be.

“That is,” I continued, glancing down at my step-mother’s letter, “he is not very well, that’s all.”

“I knew he was too good,” said Augusta.

She took up her letter and walked out of the room, slamming the door after her.

“It really is provoking,” I said, “when your friend feels more about your father than you do yourself.”

I went on reading my step-mother’s letter. She said that if all went well she would like me to return home for one week at Easter.

“By that time we can move your father down to Hedgerow House,” she said. “The fresh country air will do him good. He has been working for years far beyond his strength, and this is the result. I should like to have you with the boys and myself to spend our first Easter together, dear; so, although few of your companions will be leaving Bella Vista at that season, I hope to have you. I will write about it later on, and give you particulars with regard to your journey.”

I do not exactly know why this letter made me feel depressed. To have my father a little ill was not the sort of thing that would put an ordinary girl into a state of keen anxiety; but anxious I was, and depressed. Perhaps this was caused by my own state of weakness, for my cold had left me far less strong than I had been.

The next day, however, something occurred which put all thoughts of home and home life out of my head. Soon after breakfast Mademoiselle Wrex came upstairs and asked me to follow her to the Baroness's private sitting-room.

"But why am I to go there?" I said.

Mademoiselle Wrex looked at me kindly. She came up to me and took my hand.

"I trust," she said after a pause, "that when questioned you will tell the simple truth. A very painful thing has occurred. Fortunately the Baroness is able to nip it in the bud. It seems that you are suspected."

I guessed what was coming, and I felt a cold chill at my heart. How silly I had been! How worse than silly—how wrong!

"I will follow you in a minute, mademoiselle," I said.

"Put a warm shawl round you, dear, though the house is not cold; for since so many girls have been suffering from this sort of slight form of influenza, all the passages have been heated much more than they were."

Mademoiselle left the room. I flew immediately to the table of rules which was pinned against my wall. There was no doubt whatever that the rule in question was there. I had broken it; there was no excuse for me. I wrapped a white shawl round my shoulders and ran downstairs. As I passed through the wide hall I peeped into the schoolroom, which opened directly into it. I saw Baroness Elfreda glancing out at me with an intense and frightened expression on her face. Immediately several other girls looked out also, and then a whisper ran round the room. I felt it more than heard it, and my misery and distress grew worse. I had never before been mixed up with a dreadful thing of this sort. But Mademoiselle Wrex was standing by the Baroness's sitting-room door. She said, "Vite! vite, mon enfant!" and we found ourselves the next minute at the other side of a thick pair of velvet curtains.

The Baroness was standing by a bright fire made of logs of wood. This was the only room in the house which had the privilege of a fire. The fire gave it all of a sudden a sort of English look. A smarting pain came at the back of my eyes.

"I trust you are better, my child," said the Baroness.

She came up to me quite kindly, took my hand, and led me to a seat which exactly faced the very bright light which came through two tall windows. She then rang the bell.

"Request Comtesse Riki von Kronenfel to attend here immediately," was her remark to the servant.

The servant withdrew; there was a dead pause in the room. The Baroness was turning over some papers, and did not take the slightest notice of me.

As soon as Riki entered she glanced nervously round her. When she saw me she turned first red, then very white; then, being evidently quite satisfied that I had betrayed her, she went to the extreme end of the room and sat there with her hands folded.

"You sent for me, my Baroness?" she said in the prettiest tone imaginable, and looking up with pleading blue eyes at the face of her mistress.

The Baroness returned her glance with one full, dark, swift, and indignant.

"Riki," she said, "I have had the good fortune to intercept a letter addressed to you."

"But how? I understand not," said the girl.

"It was addressed to you, and got, doubtless by mistake, into the post-box this morning."

As the Baroness spoke she laid the letter on the table. Riki came forward as though to pounce on it. "Permit me," said the Baroness. She took it up and held it firmly in her own hand.

"But it is open," said Riki.

"I opened it," said the Baroness.

Riki then stood very still; it seemed to me I could almost hear her heart beat.

"I have read the letter," said the Baroness; "and now I will read it aloud. I will read it in English, so that both you and this young girl, Rachel Grant, may hear." The Baroness then began:

> "My own One, Angel of Love and Light,—I have received your two most precious letters quite safely. I pine to get still more news from you. I don't think it possible that I can exist until the summer without seeing you, and I propose, during the Easter recess, to get my father to allow me to visit Paris. There, I make no doubt, we can arrange a meeting, if the some kind English girl,"—("Horrors!" I said to myself)—"will again help us by putting your communications to me into the post-box *outside* the house where that dragon of propriety, the Baroness von Gablestein, resides.—Your most faithful and devoted lover,—
> "Heinrich."

This letter, read aloud in the smooth tones of the Baroness, without a scrap of emotion, just as though she were repeating one of her pupils' daily lessons, fell truly like a bomb-shell into the little room.

"I must have other witnesses to this transaction," she said.

Again she rang the bell. Riki darted blue fire of indignation towards me. I did not speak; I believe I looked a greater culprit than she did at this moment.

"Request Mademoiselle Wrex and Fräulein Schumacher to come here immediately," said the Baroness, her tone now one of great imperiousness. The servant withdrew, and the French and German governesses made their appearance. The Baroness handed the letter in question to each in turn.

"Do not speak," she said; "I only want you to witness exactly what will immediately take place.—Comtesse, will you have the goodness to tell me the name of the individual who calls himself Heinrich?"

Silence on the part of the Comtesse.

"If there is such reluctance to your making a full confession of your disgraceful conduct, I shall be forced to send a telegram to your father, the Count Kronenfel, and request him to attend here in order that he may take his daughter away in disgrace from my establishment."

This threat had a due effect on Riki, and she now, in a very nervous voice, confessed that the name of the youth who called himself Heinrich was Holgarten. Further investigation proved that Holgarten was a boy at a large school near Riki's native place, that he and she had met two or three times, and that the idea of a correspondence had started between them. She did not wish, she said, to enter into a forced marriage. Here she burst into tears.

"It is not the English way," she said.

"And pray, Comtesse, what have you to do with the English way? You are a German girl."

"I—I love Heinrich," she said.

She threw herself down on the sofa, regardless of proprieties, and burst into sobs.

"You will have the goodness in a minute or two to leave the room. Your punishment, which will be a severe one, will be meted out to you when I have considered all the circumstances. I now wish to ask you the name of the English girl who posted your letters."

There was no answer from Riki; again she glanced at me. Again she lowered her eyes and twisted her hands in distress.

"A full confession, Comtesse; in no other way will you escape the just anger of your noble father."

Before she could speak I sprang to my feet.

"You need not ask her," I said. "I did very wrong. I posted the letters."

"That will do," said the Baroness. A relieved look passed over her features. "Riki, stop crying. Your conduct has been beyond words, but I will not say any more to blame you just now.—Fräulein Schumacher, conduct the Comtesse to her room, and see that she does not leave it; stay with her there, for I cannot trust her alone."

The German governess immediately conveyed the weeping girl from the room, and I found myself the one culprit who was now to be dealt with.

"I must ask you," said the Baroness in her very bitterest tone, "why you, an English girl, brought up without the terribly circumscribed pale of the German girl, dared to help her to convey letters from this house."

"I did it without thinking," I said.

"The rule on the subject of letters was in your bedroom."

"I know."

"You had read the rules?"

"That is true; but they did not make any impression on me; I did not remember any of them."

"You must tell me exactly what occurred; also on what dates you posted the letters."

Gradually, piece by piece, the Baroness got the information from me. My conduct seemed to grow blacker and blacker in my own eyes. The Baroness evidently thought very badly of me. After a time she said:

"I shall be forced to make a distinction between you and the other girls. It must be known amongst the English girls—and we have six or seven in this establishment—that their letters will still be unread, that their correspondence will still be unmolested, with the exception of the correspondence and letters of one girl—Rachel Grant. In future you must post every letter in the box in the hall, and each letter you receive must be first of all opened and read by me before it is handed to you. That is your just punishment. I could do much more severe things, but I will to a certain extent overlook your inexperience."

I left the room feeling as though the very floor would open to receive me. I went upstairs with my cheeks on fire. How was I to live? How was I to endure this?

Presently Mademoiselle Wrex followed me.

“Oh mademoiselle, I cannot bear this!” I exclaimed. “I must go away.”

“Go away?” she said.

“Yes; how can I bear to stay at the school when I am disgraced?”

“But your punishment is not very great,” said the French teacher.

“But to let the others know, and to have my freedom as an English girl taken away from me!”

“It will be restored again, I am sure, if you bear your punishment with meekness,” said Mademoiselle; “but if you rebel and make a fuss the Baroness will keep up her indignation.”

“And will she tell my people at home?”

“I do not think she will do that if you bear your punishment with all due patience. You did wrong.”

“I did wrong, but not such a dreadful sin as you give me credit for. I did wrong in ignorance. There is a great, great difference between doing a thing you know is wrong and doing a thing that is wrong without knowing it.”

A slight smile played round the lips of Mademoiselle. She was, as a rule, kindly; but she could not quite understand my nice distinction.

“The effect is the same,” she said. “Do you not know that for a young lady in this school to have a correspondence with a schoolboy, as the Comtesse Riki has done, is quite scandalous? It would ruin the school. The Comtesse must be made an example of.”

“Oh, what are they going to do with her, poor thing?”

“She will not be dismissed; that would be too disgraceful; but she is for a whole week to be confined to her own room, and no girl in the school will be allowed to speak to her. At the end of that time she will be restored to a certain amount of liberty; but her actions will be most carefully watched.”

“And Heinrich?” I said.

“Heinrich?” said Mademoiselle, with a start. “You are not interested in him, I hope?”

“Oh no, no!”

“He will receive one short letter from the Baroness, and his master at the school will receive another. I do not think anybody in the future need trouble themselves about Heinrich.”

Nothing could exceed the contempt which she threw into the word. After a time she left me.

The scene of the morning had certainly not made my cold better; but when Hermione came up I confided my troubles to her. She said she thought that I was lucky to have got off as cheaply as I had.

“Rosalind has been telling me of another girl, an English girl, who helped some Russians to get their communications into the post, and she was dismissed—sent back to England within twenty-four hours. The only reason you are not treated as harshly is because the Baroness really believes that you did what you did unwittingly.”

“I did,” I said. “Oh, I hate this school! I was never meant to be a French or German girl. I have lived such a free life, I shall die in this cage.”

“No, you won’t, you silly girl. As to your thinking that we English girls will think any the less of you, you may be certain we won’t.”

But, after all, the punishment which was so severe, which I so dreaded, which seemed to shake my nature to its very depths and to turn me at once from a happy, interested, contented girl into a mass of sulkiness and misery, was, for the time at least, to be averted—averted in a very fearful way—for that evening there came a telegram from my step-mother:

“Your father very ill; one of the teachers must bring you back immediately.”

Mademoiselle Wrex was the lady who had the task of conveying me home. There was a great fuss and bustle and distress in the school when the telegram reached me. I scarcely knew what to do with myself. Augusta was speechless with misery. She begged and implored me to take her with me.

“But I can’t,” I said. “And why should I? He is not your father.”

“No,” said the poor thing—“no.”

I really pitied her. She sank back on the sofa in our little sitting-room with a face like death.

“If you see him, can you just tell him how he has helped me?”

“I will,” I said. I pitied her now. What had seemed silly and unreasonable when the Professor was in health assumed quite a different aspect when the dear Professor was dangerously ill.

My feelings were torn between the misery of the morning and my relief at not being publicly disgraced before the other girls, and the terror and fear of returning to my home to find my father very ill.

Hermione was a host in herself. She superintended my packing; it was she who saw that I had plenty of sandwiches to eat on the journey, she who brought my fur cloak for me to wear on the steamer. Even the Baroness was very kind. She came into the hall and saw that I was warmly wrapped up.

“We will hope for the best, Rachel,” she said.

I raised my eyes to her face and wondered if I should ever see her again—if this little flash of school life was all I was to be permitted to enjoy. But had I enjoyed it? I did not know. I could scarcely tell what my own sensations were.

A minute later I was in the cab. Hermione’s face was no longer visible from the doorway; Augusta, who was standing on the balcony of our sitting-room and waving frantically, was lost to view: the school, with its brightness, its life, its strange spirit of intrigue, its curious un-English customs, seemed to vanish for ever. I flung myself back in the cab and cried as though my heart would break.

Part 2, Chapter XII.

The Professor’s Illness.

There are two ways of taking a journey. I had come to the school with expectations bright and rosy. I had been there for a little over two months, and I was returning home close on the Easter holidays with very different feelings. As I was whirled through the darkness by the night-express which was to convey me to Calais I could not help thinking of all that had occurred. I was a totally different girl from what I had been when I started on that journey. I had seen a great deal of fresh life; I had lived in a new atmosphere; I had made new friends; I had found that the world was a larger place than even big London; that there were all sorts of different experiences; and even so, that I myself was only on the threshold of life. Could I ever regret the narrow time when my principal friends were the Swan girls, when a scolding from old Hannah was the worst thing that could occur to me, after what I had lately lived through?

But then the occurrence of that very morning came over me with a flash of intolerable shame. I was thinking more of my school than of my father; but, of course, all the time he was in the background.

We arrived at Calais, and the passage across the Channel was without incident of any sort, and we found ourselves at Victoria Station at an early hour on the following morning. It was a dreary, cold, and foggy day, and I shivered as I stood in my fur cloak on the platform while Mademoiselle ran wildly about, collecting the luggage, and trying to find a porter to convey it to the Customs. Mademoiselle evidently did not appreciate England, and I felt that the air was more bitingly cold than in Paris. We got into a cab and were driven as fast as possible through the West End towards that dreary part of the town where the old house stood.

Yes, the old house was there; I had almost expected to see that it too had slipped away into the past with all the rest, that the shadowy house as well as the shadowy times had vanished into illimitable space. But it stood firm, and there on the steps was Charley. He had opened the door as soon as ever he heard the sound of wheels drawing up on the pavement, and now he rushed down to greet me. His face was red as though he had been crying a great deal. He said:

“I thought you’d be coming about now. There’s coffee in the dining-room. Come along at once.”

“But how is the good gentleman?” said Mademoiselle.

Charley started and turned crimson at the sound of her voice. I introduced him as my brother, and Mademoiselle as Mademoiselle Wrex, a French teacher at our school. Charley mumbled something. I think he longed for Von Marlo’s presence, for Von Marlo never lost his head on any occasion whatever.

The next instant I did see his rather uncouth figure and kindly, plain face advancing through the hall to meet me.

“Now, I said you’d come; I knew you’d come without delaying one minute. How do you do. Miss Rachel?”

Mademoiselle looked at him and uttered a little cry.

“Why, Max!” she cried. “Max!”

Then she held out both her hands, and they were both engrossed with one another; they were doubtless old friends. Charley dragged me into the dining-room.

“How is father?” I said.

“Oh, he is rather bad; but there are plenty of doctors, and we hope to pull him through.”

“And my step-mother?”

“Rachel, she is a brick! She is about the best and dearest woman in all the world. I never knew her like. She has been

up with him all the week, and never thinks of herself at all."

"But, oh, here comes Alex—dear Alex!"

Alex came up to me. In this moment of universal anxiety he was delighted to see me again; he kissed me several times.

"Why, you have grown," he said, "and you look so—"

"She looks awfully nice," said Von Marlo.

He had come in dragging Mademoiselle with him.

"Mademoiselle Wrex is my mother's cousin," he said. "I am delighted to see her."

Mademoiselle was also all enthusiasm.

"Why, the dear, dear boy," she said, "it is indeed a pleasure to see him in this so desolate country. It is a joy of the inconceivable."

Her broken English made both Charley and Alex laugh; but then Alex pulled the bell, and our neat parlour-maid brought in our breakfast. I sat down to eat. I felt still as though in a dream. Was I in Paris, or in the old house, or in altogether new surroundings? I rubbed my eyes.

"You're dead-tired," said Von Marlo.

"I am bewildered," I said.

"But I must catch the next train back," said Mademoiselle.

This roused the boys from any present thought of me. They were all bustle and activity, seeing to Mademoiselle's wants. She had very little time to spare. She would take the ten o'clock express from Victoria, and be back in Paris in less than twenty-four hours after she had left it.

As I bade her good-bye it seemed to me that I was slipping more and more from the old landmarks.

"Give my love to Hermione and Augusta," I said.

"And to, perhaps, poor Riki?" said Mademoiselle.

"Yes, if she will have it," I answered.

"Things will go well with you now, and when you return there will be rejoicing," said Mademoiselle.

But I did not think, somehow, that I should ever return; and Mademoiselle got into the cab and was whirled away.

It was not until I saw my step-mother that I fully realised what the real threshold of the place where I was standing really meant; for in that house, with its comforts, its proprieties, its almost luxuries—that house so well furnished, with such good servants, with every comfort that life could give—there was, we knew, a visitor hourly and momentarily expected: that grim and solemn visitor who goes by the name of Death. Kindly Death he is to some, terrible to others; a gentle and beloved friend to those who are worn-out with misery—a rest for the weary. But there are times when Death is not longed for, and this was one of those times. We children felt as we sat huddled together in the parlour, now such a comfortable room, that we had never wanted the Professor as we did then. He was a man in the prime of life, and great were his attainments.

"It is wonderful what he is thought of," Alex kept repeating, and he kept on telling me and telling me all about father and what people said of him.

But, indeed, I was learning that myself for the first time that day, for the carriages that drew softly up over the straw in the street to look at the bulletin on the door might have told me what the great world thought of him; and the boys who came up each moment to glance at the solemn message might have told me what his scholars thought of him; and many poor people whom he had helped were seen crossing the street to glance at the writing. I stood fascinated behind the window-curtain, where I could see without being seen, and it seemed to me that all these people were repeating in a marvellous fashion the true meaning of my father's life. To me he had hardly ever been a true father in any sense; but these people had regarded him as a great light, as a teacher, as one whom they must ever respect.

"He will be a loss to the world," said Alex—"a great, great loss to the world!"

"There will be his life in all the papers," said Charley; and then the two poor boys put their arms round each other and burst into sobs. I sobbed with them, and wished for old Hannah. And hardly had the wish come to me before she entered the room very quietly and stood beside us; and when she saw us all crying she said, "Oh, you poor dears—you poor dears!" and she sobbed and cried herself. Really it was quite dreadful. I hardly knew how to bear my pain.

But when Mrs Grant came down just in the dusk of the evening, and entered the room very quietly and sat down near us, I went up to her.

"May I see father?" I asked.

She looked at me, and then said:

“Dumps, if he gets worse, if the doctor on his next visit says there is no hope, then you shall see him. The doctor is coming here at eight o’clock with Dr Robinson, the very greatest authority in London. If he gives no hope you must all see him to say good-bye; but not otherwise, for any excitement is bad for him now.”

“I don’t think I should excite father,” I said.

Perhaps there was reproach in my tones, but I did not mean it.

Then my step-mother went away.

“She will feel it awfully; she is just devoted to him,” said Alex.

Part 2, Chapter XIII.

Waiting to be Called.

We sat on and on in the dusk. After a time Hannah went away. We scarcely noticed her when she got up. She stooped and kissed us, and said, “Poor children!” and it seemed to me as she left the room as though she were our old nurse back again, caring for us as she used to do when we were motherless and too young to see after ourselves. But she went, and she had scarcely disappeared through the door before we forgot her, we were so absorbed waiting for the message which might come to us any moment from upstairs.

Hannah had not been gone ten minutes before we heard a carriage with a pair of horses dash up to the door. It stopped. We heard the muffled thud of the wheels on the thick straw outside, and we heard the door of the carriage being opened, and two men got out. They were not kept waiting an instant at the door. Muriel, our parlour-maid, must have been expecting them. We heard them enter, and they went upstairs quite softly, making little sound on the thick carpets.

Then there was silence. Alex clasped my hand and squeezed it very hard; and as to Charley, he rumpled up his hair and finally buried his head in my lap and began to sob afresh. I was glad to be with them both; I felt very close to them. All else was forgotten except the two boys who belonged to me, who were my very, very own, and the father who might be dying upstairs.

‘No; I’ll stick to Alex,’ Charley responded.

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By-and-by the doctors went away; the carriage disappeared, and there was silence again in the house, only the muffled sound of carts and carriages going over the street outside; but nobody came near us.

“It looks bad,” said Alex.

He raised his face. The room was quite dark. Muriel had not come in to turn on the gas or to build up the fire. We were glad she had not done so. We thought it kind of her. A piece of coal fell into a great chasm of red now, and broke into a flame, and I saw Alex's face; it was ghastly white.

"It is quite awful, isn't it?" he said.

"She certainly said she would come down if there was no hope," I said.

"But oughtn't she to let us know, Dumps?"

"She would certainly come if she could," I answered.

After a time my cramped limbs compelled me to rise. I stood up, and the two boys looked at me reflectively.

"Where are you going, Rachel? Where are you going?"

"I can't stand it any longer," I said. "I am his daughter, and you are his sons, and I think we ought to be there. I do—I do."

"No," said Alex firmly; "I am not going against *her*. She has managed him all along. It would be frightfully unkind to do anything to risk giving him a start or anything of that sort. She said she'd bring us to him if it were necessary. I am not going to stir."

"Will you come, Charley?" I said.

"No; I'll stick to Alex," he responded.

He went closer to his brother as he spoke, and flung his arm round him with all the abandon of one who was altogether carried out of himself.

I did not speak. I felt alone again, outside my brothers and their love; but just because I was so alone I thought more than ever of my father. I had rushed away from Paris to be in time; I would see him again. I left the room and crept softly upstairs. All day long I had been wearing my travelling-boots; it did not seem worth while to take them off; nobody had given me a thought. For the first time since my step-mother came I had been neglected in our now comfortable home.

When I reached the landing where the great, desolate room which had been made so comfortable by my step-mother was situated, I took off my shoes and stood very quiet. I saw that the door of my father's room was slightly ajar. Inside there was the flickering light of a fire—not a very big fire; there was a screen round the bed. I felt more and more a keen and passionate desire to enter the room. I could bear it no longer. I crept inside the door and round by the screen. Then I saw that the room had been changed since I had noticed it last. The great four-poster was removed, and a man was lying on a little iron bedstead drawn out almost into the middle of the room. There was a woman seated close to him. She sat very still; she did not seem to move. The man also, who was lying on his back, was motionless. A wild terror seized me. Was he dead? Oh! I feared death at that moment, but still that impulse, uncontrollable, growing stronger each moment, compelled me forward, and still more forward, and at last I came very near the woman. She roused herself when she saw me. There was no reproach of any sort on her face. It was very white, but her eyes had never looked sweeter.

Just for an instant I wondered if she would rise and take me by the hand and lead me from the room; but, instead of that, she held out her hand to me and drew me close, and motioned to me to kneel by the bed. I did kneel. I heard the quick breathing, and noticed the cadaverous, worn face, the dark lashes lying on the cheeks, the hair tossed back from the lofty and magnificent brow. Something seemed to clutch at my heart; then my step-mother's voice sounded in my ears:

"You and I will watch by him together."

After that I felt that nothing really mattered; and I knew also that the barrier between my step-mother's heart and mine had vanished. I looked at her; my eyes were full; I took her hand and, stooping, kissed it several times. Then she too dropped on her knees, and we remained motionless together.

All night long we knelt by the Professor's side, and all night long he slept. It was about five in the morning when he opened his eyes. Dr Robinson was standing by the other side of the bed; he was holding his hand and feeling his pulse.

"Come," said the doctor in a cheerful tone, "you have had a famous sleep. You are better; and now you must take this;" and he put a strong restorative between my father's white lips.

"Take me away—*mother*!" I said.

I could not contain myself. She led me as far as the door. I do not think she said a word; but she herself returned to the room. I rushed up to my own room, and there I flung myself on my bed and cried as though my very heart would break.

Oh, shadow, shadow of my own mother, were you really angry with me then? Or did you, in the light of God's Presence, understand too well what love really meant ever to be angry any more? For everything that was not love, that was not gratitude towards the new mother who had come into my life, had vanished for ever and ever while I knelt that night by my father's bedside.

By-and-by, in the course of that day, I kissed her and told her something of what I felt. She understood, as I think she always did understand even my thoughts before they were uttered.

And so I turned over a new page in life, and my father was spared to us after all.

The End.

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