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CONCERNING BELINDA

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Concerning Belinda

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Concerning Belinda

AN APOLOGY

To all principals of New York boarding-schools, the author of these sketches offers humble apologies for having approached those excellent institutions chiefly from their humorous side.

That the city boarding-school has its earnest and serious phases, its charming and sensible pupils, no rational mortal could deny; but each finishing school has, also, its Amelias, and their youthful absurdities offer tempting material to the writer of tales.

CHAPTER I
BELINDA AND THE TWELVE

FOR years New York had been beckoning to Belinda. All during her time at the western co-educational college, where she collected an assortment of somewhat blurred impressions concerning Greek roots, Latin depravity, and modern literature, and assisted liberally in the education of her masculine fellow-students, New York, with its opportunities for work and experience, had lured her on. Fortune she would not need. Daddy had attended to that in his will, but success, and a knowledge of the world outside of Indiana, she must have.

This fixed purpose rendered her immune from the sentimental and matrimonial epidemics that devastate the Junior and Senior ranks in co-educational institutions. She graduated with honours – and with scalps. Many Seniors went away sorrowful because of her, the French professor lapsed into hopeless Gallic gloom, and even the professor of ancient history was forced into painful recognition of the importance of the moderns.

When the fortune which had seemed a premise in life's logic shrunk to proportions barely adequate to support the mother and the younger children, and became for Belinda herself a vague hypothesis, New York still hung mystic and alluring upon the horizon; but a public-school position in the home town offered solid ground upon which to stand, while yearning toward the apparently unattainable star. The public-school career was a success. The English classes attained unheard-of popularity; and, if the number of fights between the big boys swelled amazingly, at least the frays did not, as a rule, occur upon the school grounds, and the casualties were no more dire than those contingent upon football glory. Belinda shone for all. She allowed great and small to adore her. To her pupils she was just but merciful, and stoically impartial. The school superintendent, who had weathered the first throes of widowerhood, and reached the stage where he loved sitting upon a veranda in the twilight and hearing nocturnes played by some feminine personality in the parlour, suffered much emotional stress and strain in the endeavour to decide whether he would rather have nocturnes and a parlour-chained Belinda or a Belinda beside him in the twilight and no nocturnes.

Chopin eventually went to the wall; but, just as the superintendent was developing a taste for major harmonies once more, the unexpected happened.

Miss Lucilla Ryder came to town.

Miss Ryder was one of the Misses Ryder. Apart from the other Miss Ryder was incomplete, but she more nearly approximated completion than did Miss Emmeline Ryder under the same conditions.

Together, the elderly maiden sisters made up a composite entity of considerable force; and for something like thirty years this entity had been the mainspring of a flourishing Select School for Young Ladies, located upon a fashionable side street in the most aristocratic district of New York. To the school of the Misses Ryder youthful daughters of New York's first families might be entrusted, with no fear that their expensive and heaven-allotted bloom would be rubbed off by contact with the offspring of second-rate families. As Miss Lucilla Ryder explained, in an effort to soothe the natural fears of a society leader whose great-grandfather had been a most reputable farmer, the young ladies of the school were divided into groups, and the flowers of New York's aristocracy would find in their especial classes only those young ladies with whom they might reasonably expect to be intimate after their school life ended and their social career began.

Miss Ryder did not mention this interesting fact to the fond parents from Idaho and Texas who contemplated placing their daughters in the school, in order that they might acquire a New York lacquer, and make acquaintances among the social elect. In fact, Miss Ryder always dangled before the eyes of these ambitious parents a group of names suggesting a list of guests for the most exclusive of Newport functions, and dwelt eloquently upon the privilege of breathing the air which furnished

oxygen to members of these exalted families. Nine times out of ten, mere repetition of the sacred names hypnotised the prospective patrons, and they gladly offered up their daughters upon the altar of social advancement.

An explanation of the class-system would have marred the optimistic hopes of these fond parents, and the Misses Ryder were too altruistic to disturb the happiness of fellow mortals. Moreover, it was a comparatively simple thing to separate day-scholars from boarders without appearing to make a point of it.

In the handling of such delicate matters, the Misses Ryder displayed a tact and a *finesse* which would have made them ornaments to any diplomatic corps; and, fortunately, the number of the young ladies who were, of necessity, to be kept in cotton wool was small. The great bulk of the school's attendance was more or less genially democratic.

School keeping in an aristocratic section of New York is an expensive matter. It must be done upon a large and daring scale. The Misses Ryder occupied two brownstone houses. The rents were enormous. The houses were handsomely furnished. Teachers of ability were a necessity, and such teachers were expensive. A capable housekeeper and efficient servants were required to make domestic affairs run smoothly. In consideration of all this, it was imperative that the Misses Ryder should gather in, each year, enough boarders to exhaust the room capacity of the two big houses, and that these boarders should be able and willing to pay high prices. In order to insure this condition of things, one of the two principals always made summer pilgrimages to remote places, where wealthy families possessed of daughters hungering for New York advantages might reasonably be supposed to exist; and it was in the course of one of these promoting tours that Miss Lucilla Ryder came to Lanleyville – drawn there by knowledge of certain large milling interests in the place.

It was – with apologies to Tennyson – "the miller's daughter" who was "dear, so dear," to Miss Lucilla, but an unkind fate had decreed that the miller's daughter should show a pernicious desire for college education, and that the miller himself should be as wax in his daughter's hands. Miss Lucilla did not find pupils in Lanleyville, but she found Belinda. That alone should have repaid her for the trip.

The meeting was accidental, being brought about through the aforesaid miller's daughter, who had been, for a High-School period, one of Belinda's adoring slaves.

The Misses Ryder needed a teacher of English; Belinda dreamed of New York. To make a long story short, Belinda was engaged to teach to the Ryder pupils such sections and fragments of the English branches as might be introduced into their heads without resort to surgery. The salary offered was meagre, but the work would be in New York; so the contract was made, and Belinda was inclined to look upon Miss Lucilla as angel of light. Miss Lucilla's opinion of the arrangement was summed up briefly in her next letter to Miss Emmeline.

"I have secured a teacher of English," she wrote. "The young person is much too pretty and girlish, but she is willing to accept a very small salary and is unmistakably a gentlewoman. Her attractions will give her an influence which we may be able to utilize for the benefit of the school."

Two months later Belinda sat upon her trunk in a New York hall bedroom and considered.

The room was the smallest in the Misses Ryder's Select School for Young Ladies, and before the introduction of the trunk it had been necessary to evict the one chair which had been a part of the room's furnishing. The bed was turned up against the wall, where it masqueraded, behind denim curtains, as a bookcase. When the bed came down there was no standing room outside of it, and, as Belinda discovered later, getting into that bed without casualties was a feat calling for fine strategy. A chiffonier retired as coyly as possible into the embrace of a recessed doorway; a washstand of Lilliputian dimensions occupied an infinitesimal fraction of a corner.

The newly arrived instructor of youth studied her domain ruefully from her vantage point on the trunk; and it might have been observed, had there been any one on hand to observe it, that the study was interrupted by occasional attacks of violent winking, also that much winking seemed to

impart a certain odd moisture to the singularly long lashes which shielded a pair of rather remarkable gray eyes.

As she winked, the young woman of the gray eyes kicked her heels against the side of the trunk in a fashion that was distinctly undignified, but appeared to be comforting. There was a note of defiance in the heel tattoo, an echo of defiance in the heroic attempt at stubbornness to be noted in a deliciously rounded chin, and a mouth which a beneficent Providence never mapped out upon stubborn lines, but the eyelashes gleamed moistly.

If, as has been claimed by worthy persons who have made physiognomy their study, the eyes reflect one's native spirit, and the mouth proclaims one's acquired character, Belinda's spiritual and emotional heritage was in tears, but her mental habit challenged fate to hurl hall bedrooms *ad libitum* at her curly head. She had wanted to come to New York. Well, she was in New York. The immortal Touchstone loomed up before her with his disgruntled protest: "Now am I in Arden. When I was at home I was in a better place." Belinda quoted the comment softly. Then suddenly she stopped winking and smiled. The chin and mouth incontinently abandoned their stubborn rôle, and showed what they could do in the line of curves and witchery. Dimples dashed boldly into the open.

Belinda looked up at the large steel engraving of the Pyramids, which filled most of the room's available wall space, and the smile expanded into a laugh. When Belinda laughs, even a city hall bedroom is a cheerful place.

"*J'y suis; j'y reste*," the young woman announced cheerfully to the largest Pyramid. It looked stolidly benignant. The sentiment was one it could readily understand.

There came a tap upon the closed door.

"Come in," called Belinda. The door opened, and a tall young woman dispassionately surveyed the scene.

"It's a mathematical impossibility," she said gravely, "and that's expert testimony, for I'm Miss Barnes, the teacher of Mathematics. Don't apologize. I had this room myself the first year, and I got so used to it that when I moved to one that is six inches larger each way, I positively rattled around in it. Miss Ryder sent me to ask you to go to her sitting-room. I'll come and call as soon as you've unpacked and settled."

She went away, and Belinda, after dabbing a powderpuff recklessly over her eyelids and nose, hurried to the private sitting-room, which was the Principal's sanctum.

Miss Lucilla, slim, erect, well gowned, superior, sat at a handsome desk between the front windows. Miss Emmeline, a delightful wash drawing of her strongly etched sister, was talking with two twittering girls at the opposite end of the room. Miss Emmeline was always detailed to the sympathetic task. Her slightly vague gentleness was less disconcerting to sentimental or homesick pupils than Miss Lucilla's somewhat glacial dignity.

Belinda hesitated upon the threshold. Miss Emmeline bestowed upon her a detached and impersonal smile. Miss Lucilla summoned her with an autocratic move of a slender hand, a gesture so imperious that it was with difficulty the new teacher refrained from an abject salaam.

"Miss Carewe," said the smooth, cool voice, "some of the young ladies want to go to the theatre to-night. School does not begin until to-morrow; there are no duties to occupy their time and attention, and we are, of course, liable to an epidemic of homesickness and hysteria. Under the circumstances the theatre idea is a good one. It will distract their minds. I have selected a suitable play, and you will chaperon. The teachers who have been here before will be needed to assist me with certain preliminary arrangements to-night. Moreover, you seem to be cheerful, and at present the young ladies need to be inoculated with cheerfulness. Be very careful, however, to be dignified first and cheerful afterward. Remember, however young you may look or feel, you are a teacher with responsibility upon your shoulders. You must make the pupils understand that you cannot be overrun, even though you are young. Unless you take a very wise stand from the first your position will be difficult and you will be of no value to us. Be reasonable but uncompromising."

Belinda had been listening attentively. Already she began to hear the whirring of wheels within wheels in this work of hers, began to understand that in city private-school life "face" must be preserved as religiously as in Chinese ceremonial circles; but she recognised in Miss Lucilla a woman who understood her problem, and she found this middle-aged spinster, with the keen eyes, the Roman nose, the firm lips, and the grande-dame manner, interesting.

"How many girls will go?" she asked meekly.

"Twelve."

Belinda gasped. Twelve strange, homesick girls! She wondered if they would all be as big as the two with Miss Emmeline.

"The theatre is the Garrick. You will start at five minutes of eight."

Miss Lucilla turned to her desk. The interview was finished. No one ever lingered after Miss Lucilla had said her say.

Belinda went back to her room. On the way she met Miss Barnes.

"Where is the Garrick Theatre?" she inquired.

The teacher of mathematics stopped and looked at her.

"Thirty-fifth Street, between Fifth and Sixth Avenues. Walk over and take the stage or the Sixth Avenue car. Make the girls walk in twos and the couples close together. Walk behind them. Watch them. They'll stand it. Don't let them laugh or talk loud or giggle like idiots. I suppose you may as well get broken in first as last."

The voice and manner were brusque, but the eyes had a kindly gleam, and Belinda was devoutly thankful for the information so curtly given.

"Do they ever cry in the street cars?" she asked with an air of grim foreboding.

Miss Barnes's eyes relented still further.

"No, but they flirt in the street cars."

"Not really." Belinda's tone expressed incredulous disgust.

"Really. By the time you've chaperoned miscellaneous specimens of the up-to-date young person for a few months, Miss Carewe, you'll not be surprised at any breach of good taste. The girls carry on handkerchief flirtations with strangers from the windows."

"Girls from respectable families?"

"Girls from excellent families. Of course, there are numbers of well-bred girls who behave correctly; and there's nothing actually bad about the ones who behave badly. They are merely lacking in good taste and overcharged with animal spirits or sentimentality. I'm always surprised that they don't get into all sorts of disgraceful scrapes, but they seldom do. We have to be eternally vigilant, though."

"But handkerchief flirtation is so unspeakably common," said Belinda emphatically – then, with a twinkle, "and such a desecration of a really fine art."

Miss Barnes shook her head.

"The Misses Ryder haven't any sense of humour," she warned; "you'd better let your conversation be yea, yea, and nay, nay" – but she smiled.

At five minutes to eight the Youngest Teacher stood in the lower hall, surrounded by schoolgirls of assorted sizes and shapes, and prayerfully hoping that she didn't look as foolish as she felt.

One of the older teachers, commissioned by Miss Ryder, had come down to see the expedition fairly started. She was a plump, sleek woman with an automatic smile and a pneumatic manner.

"You will all give your car fares to Miss Carewe, young ladies," she purred. "You have your rubbers? That's right. The pavements are damp. Miss Bowers and Miss Somerville, you may lead. Fall in closely, in couples, and be very careful not under any circumstances to become separated from the chaperon. She will report any annoyance you may cause her. I hope you will have a delightful evening."

The door closed upon her unnatural amiability. Six couples swung into the street, with Belinda at their heels. Out of the grim, inclosing walls, with the cool, moist air in their faces, the lights reflected gayly in the glistening pavements, the cabs and carriages dashing by, the mystery and fascination of a great city clinging around them, and a matinée idol beckoning them, the girls began to find life more cheerful. Even fat, babyish little Kittie Dayton, whose face was swollen and blotted almost beyond human semblance by six hours of intermittent weeping, stopped blowing her nose long enough to squeal delightedly:

"Oh-e-e! The man kissed the lady in that cab."

It was with difficulty that Belinda stopped a stampede in the direction of the hansom. This was seeing New York. The melancholy atmosphere of the school was forgotten.

They giggled in the car. It worried Belinda. Later she learned to bow to the inevitable. The young man who gave Amelia Bowers his seat was sociably inclined; but, on the whole, Amelia behaved very well, though she admitted, later, that she thought he had "most romantic eyes, and a perfectly elegant waistcoat."

Belinda squirmed on the car. Arrived at the theatre she squirmed still more. The lobby was well filled. It was almost time for the curtain. She hated leading her line down the middle aisle to the fourth row; she hated the smiles and comment that followed them; she loathed being made conspicuous – and her sentiments were not modified, as she followed the last of the girls through the door, by hearing the manager say jocularly to the doorkeeper:

"My eye! and who's chaperoning the pretty chaperon?"

There was a balk, a tangle, when the fourth row was reached. The acquaintances between most of the girls dated from the morning of that day, but already each of the group had strong convictions in regard to the girls beside whom she chose to sit, and hours of discussion and debate could not have solved the problem to the satisfaction of all concerned.

Belinda firmly hustled the protestants into the seats without regard to prejudices, and sat down in the end chair exhausted and rebellious. She detested the Young Person, individually and collectively. She resented being bear leader. She thought longingly of the Lanleyville High School and the home friends, and the fact that New York seethed round the theatre in which she sat afforded her no consolation. She was profoundly indifferent to the popular actor before whom her charges became as dumb, adoring worshippers. In a little while she would have to lead her flock of geese home, and she wished she dared lose them and run away. She felt a sudden sympathy for Kittie Dayton, whose pudgy, swollen face, though now radiant, looked like an unfinished biscuit. Belinda, too, was homesick – deeply, darkly, dismally homesick. Even her sense of humour was swamped. June and the end of her contract loomed but vaguely beyond a foggy waste of months.

"Isn't he just too perfectly sweet, Miss Carewe?" gurgled Amelia Bowers in her ear.

Belinda was non-committal.

"Did you ever meet him on the street?"

Belinda had never had that rapture.

"Well, one might, you know," said Amelia hopefully. "Alice Ransom plumped right into Faversham, one day, when she was in New York, and he took off his hat to her and said, 'Beg pardon.' She said she felt perfectly faint. His voice sounded just like it does on the stage, and he had the most fascinating eyes and the sweetest bulldog. Alice said it seemed like Fate, running right into him that way, the first time she went out alone. She walked down Fifth Avenue at that same time every day for a week, but she never met him again."

The star and his leading lady fell into each other's arms for the final curtain and later were brought out to bow their amiable acknowledgements, with results disastrous to the seams of Amelia's white gloves.

The crowd rustled to its feet, preened itself, and took lagging flight toward the street. Belinda marshalled her flock and joined the exodus. She would be glad to reach the hall bedroom and shut

its door upon a world that was too much with her. She coveted the stolid, tranquil society of the Pyramids. They would watch her cry with the same impenetrable indifference with which they would watch her laugh, but presumably the Garrick Theatre crowd would be impressed if she should burst into floods of tears.

Drearily she followed the six couples of chattering girls who dropped adjectives and exclamations as they went, and who were quite unable to keep in line, according to the prescribed formula, in the midst of the jostling, hurrying crowd; but Belinda was little concerned by that. As a matter of fact, her thoughts were self-centred. This was her first view of a New York crowd, but she received no impression save that men and women alike looked tired and dissatisfied, though surely they were not all elected to spend the next nine months in a boarding-school.

The middle aisle emptied her into the lobby; and as she stood there, vaguely conscious that something was incumbent upon her, her wandering glance fell upon a young man across the lobby. Belinda gasped, flushed. The young man's eyes met hers from where he was wedged against the wall. His face, too, lighted into incredulous joy. It was a good-looking face, a gay, boyish face, but browned to a hue that contrasted oddly with the city-bleached skins around him. Perhaps that was why he had attracted attention, and why several heads turned to discover the cause of the sudden illumination. When the owners of the heads saw Belinda they understood and smiled benignantly. All the world loves a lover.

Belinda was utterly unconscious of the glances, unconscious of anything save that the gods were good.

Here was Jack – Jack, of all men, dropped into the midst of her gloom. Hilarious memories and cheerful anticipations swarmed into her mind. Jack stood for home, old days, old larks, old irresponsibility. New York disappeared from the map. The Select School for Young Ladies ceased to exist. The young ladies themselves were blotted out.

Beaming, dimpling, Belinda squeezed a way across the outgoing current. Grinning, radiant, Jack Wendell forced an opening for his square shoulders.

They met in the whirlpool, and he cleverly hauled her into a high and dry corner.

"Belinda!"

"Jack!"

Everyone near them smiled sympathetically. Belinda's enthusiasm is often misleading, and on this occasion she was unreservedly enthusiastic.

"Is the Massachusetts in?"

"Docked yesterday."

"And you are going to stay?"

"Several weeks – and you?"

"All winter."

Belinda's delight approached effervescence. Jack's face was a luminous harvest moon. Both were oblivious to the fact that he was still holding her hand.

They talked breathlessly in laughter-punctuated gusts. They went back to the beginning of things and rapidly worked down past the Deluge which separated them, and the subsequent wanderings. They brought their life histories almost up to date, and then, suddenly, Miss Lucilla Ryder entered Belinda's tale.

"Miss Lucilla Ryder!"

As she spoke the name she underwent a sudden transformation. Her smiles and dimples vanished, her face lengthened miraculously, her eyes stared fixedly at some awesome vision.

Lieutenant Wendell cast an alarmed look over his shoulder. The glance encountered a blank wall and returned to Belinda's face.

"For Heaven's sake, what is it?" he asked.

"The girls!" said Belinda in a whisper.

Once more the Lieutenant looked over his shoulder.

"Where?" he inquired, eyeing her anxiously.

"I – don't – know," faltered Belinda.

"Good Heavens, Belinda," protested the Lieutenant. "Wake up. What's the matter? Are you ill?"

Her look and manner distressed him. This was some sort of an attack, and he didn't understand. He didn't know what ought to be done.

Belinda had clutched his coat sleeve. He patted her hand encouragingly.

"There, there, never mind," he murmured soothingly.

Never mind, indeed! Belinda waxed tremblingly wroth.

"I'm in a cold sweat. They've gone home alone. Oh, Jack, what shall I do? I don't dare to meet Miss Ryder. She'll send me away to-morrow. It's awful!"

Still holding him by the coat sleeve, she was pulling him toward the door. The lobby was almost empty. The few stragglers were eyeing the tableau curiously.

Masculine common-sense asserted itself. The Lieutenant drew Belinda's hand through his arm and stopped her under the glare of the electric light.

"Don't be an idiot," he said brusquely. "Who is Miss Ryder? Who are the girls?"

The bullying stirred the young woman to intelligence.

"She's principal of the school. I'm teaching there. I brought twelve pupils to the theatre."

Amazement, comprehension, sympathy chased each other across the man's face and were swallowed by wild mirth, but Belinda's eyes filled with tears, and his mirth evaporated.

"Never mind. Buck up, little girl. We'll fix it some way. We'll get a cab. We'll kill a horse. We'll get there before they can. Maybe they won't tell."

"Oh, yes, they will. If they were only boys – but girls will." Still Belinda revived slightly under the suggestion.

"Come on. We must hustle."

He hurried her to the door. Alert, energetic, self-confident, he had taken command of affairs. Belinda's spirits soared. After all, she reflected, there's something about a man. He has his moments.

It was raining. The crowd had scattered, the carriages had gone. As Lieutenant Wendell raised an umbrella and looked sharply around for a cab Belinda's eyes caught sight of a row of dripping umbrellas ranged along the curb. Below the umbrellas were carefully lifted petticoats. She counted the umbrellas. There were twelve.

"Jack, look!"

He looked. Belinda darted forward.

The umbrellas were lifted and disclosed twelve girlish faces. On each face was a wide-spreading, comprehending, maddening grin, but not a girl spoke.

Belinda's cheeks were crimson, but she pulled herself together heroically.

"Good night, Mr. Wendell. Come, girls."

They dropped into line, still grinning.

Jack stepped to Belinda's side for a moment.

"Cheer up. They look like a good sort – but if there is any trouble let me know," he said softly.

The teacher and her charges made their way silently toward the car. No one mentioned the lieutenant, and Belinda volunteered no explanation or excuse. She would keep at least a shred of dignity.

Arrived at the school Belinda saw the girls deposited in their respective rooms, then she pulled down her folding bed, crept into it, and cried into her pillow. If the girls should tell – and they would – and even if they didn't, how could she ever have any authority over them?

"Be very careful not under any circumstances to become separated from the chaperon." Miss Spogg's soft voice purred it into her ear.

"Remember, however young you may look or feel, you are a teacher with responsibility upon your shoulders. Unless you take a very wise stand from the first you will be of no value to us." Miss Lucilla's voice now smote the ears of memory.

If the girls should tell —

"I've changed my mind about girls," Belinda announced to Lieutenant Wendell, on her free evening, a week later. "They are much nicer than boys, and quite as generous."

CHAPTER II
THE MUSICAL ROMANCE OF AMELIA

A SUBTLE thrill was disturbing the atmosphere of high-bred serenity which the Misses Ryder, with a strenuousness far afield from serenity, fostered in their Select School for Young Ladies. As a matter of fact, this aristocratic calm existed only in the intent and the imaginations of the lady principals, and in the convictions of parents credulous concerning school prospectuses. With fifty girls of assorted sizes and temperaments collected under one roof agitation of one sort or another is fairly well assured.

Miss Ryder's teachers were by no means blind to the excitement pervading the school, but its cause was wrapped in mystery. Amelia Bowers seemed to be occupying the centre of the stage and claiming the calcium light as her due, while Amelia's own particular clique gathered in knots in all the corners, and went about brimming over with some portentous secret which they imparted to the other girls with a generosity approaching lavishness.

It was after running into a crowd of arch conspirators in the music-room alcove and producing a solemn hush that Miss Barnes sought the Youngest Teacher and labored with her.

"Belinda," she began in her usual brusque fashion, "what's the matter with the girls?"

"Youth," replied the Youngest Teacher laconically.

She was trimming a hat, and when Belinda trims a hat it is hard to divert her serious attention to less vital issues.

"Have you noticed that something is going on, and that Amelia Bowers is at the bottom of it?"

Belinda looked up from her millinery for one fleeting instant of scorn. "Have I noticed it? Am I stone blind?"

Miss Barnes ignored the sarcasm.

"But what are they doing? The light-headed set is crazy over something, and I suppose there's a man in it. They wouldn't be so excited unless there were. Now, who is he? What is he? Where is he?"

"Search me," replied the Youngest Teacher with a flippancy lamentable in an instructor of youth.

"I suppose Amelia is making a fool of herself in some way. Sentimentality oozes out of that girl's pores."

"And yet I'm fond of Amelia," protested Belinda.

Amelia was one of the twelve who had witnessed the Youngest Teacher's first disastrous experiment in chaperoning and had remained loyally mute.

Miss Barnes shook her head.

"My dear, I can stand sharp angles, but I detest a human feather pillow. Push Amelia in at one spot and she bulges out at another. It's impossible to make a clean-cut and permanent impression upon that girl."

The teacher of mathematics always stated her opinions with a frankness not conducive to popularity.

Belinda laughed.

"It ought to be easy for you to find out what the girls are giggling and whispering about," continued Miss Barnes. "They are so foolish over you."

"I hate a sneak."

"But, Belinda – "

"Yes, I know – the good of the school and all that. I've every intention of earning my salary and being loyal to Miss Ryder. I'll keep my eyes open and try to find out why the girls are whispering and hugging each other; but if you think I'm going to get one of the silly things into my room, and

because she's fond of me hypnotise her into a confidence, and then use it to bring punishment down on her and her chums – I'm not!"

"But what do you suppose is the trouble?" asked the Elder Teacher.

"I don't believe there is any trouble. Probably Amelia's engaged again. If she is it's the sixth time."

"That wouldn't stir up the other girls."

"Wouldn't it? My dear, you may know cube roots, but you don't know schoolgirls. An absolutely fresh engagement is enough to make a flock of girls twitter for weeks. If there are smuggled love letters it's convulsing, and if there's parental disapproval and 'persecution' the thing assumes dramatic quality. Probably all the third-floor girls gather in Amelia's room after lights are out, and she tells them what he said, and what she said, and what papa would probably say, and they plan elopements and schemes for foiling stern teachers and parents. Amelia won't elope, though. She won't have time before her next engagement."

A bell rang sharply below stairs. Miss Barnes sprang to her feet.

"There's the evening study bell. I must go. I'm in charge to-night. But they do elope sometimes. This school business isn't all farce. Do watch Amelia, Belinda."

Belinda had finished the hat and was trying it on before the glass with evident and natural satisfaction.

"My respect for Amelia would soar if she should attempt an elopement, but even the sea-serpent couldn't elope with a jellyfish. Amelia's young man may be a charmer, but he couldn't budge Amelia beyond hysterics."

In the history of the school there had been an experiment with silent study in the individual rooms; but an impartial distribution of fudge over the bedroom carpets, gas fixtures and furniture, an epidemic of indigestion, and a falling off in class standing had effected a return to less confiding and more effectual methods of insuring quiet study.

As Miss Barnes entered the study-room, after her talk with Belinda, a group of agitated backs surrounding Amelia Bowers dispersed guiltily, and the girls took their seats with the italicized demureness of cats who have been at the cream. Amelia herself radiated modest self-esteem. She was IT; she was up to her eyebrows in romance! What better thing had life to offer her?

The teacher in charge looked at her sharply.

"Miss Bowers, if you will transfer your attention from the wall paper to your French verbs you will stand a better chance of giving a respectable recitation to-morrow."

Amelia's dreamy blue eyes wandered from the intricate design on the wall to the pages of her book, but they were still melting with sentiment, and her pink and white face still held its pensive, rapt expression.

"*J'aime, tu aimes, il aime*," she read. "*Il aime!*" – she was off in another trance.

Miss Barnes would have builded better had she recommended algebraic equations instead of French verbs.

Following the study hour came an hour of recreation before the retiring bell rang. Usually the girls inclined to music and dancing in the parlours, but now the tide set heavily upstairs toward Amelia's room, which was at the back, and was the most coveted room in the house because the most discreetly removed from teachers' surveillance.

When Miss Barnes passed the door later she heard the twang of a guitar and Amelia's reedy voice raised in song. The teacher smiled. Harmless enough, certainly. Probably she had been over-earnest and suspicious.

Meanwhile, behind the closed door the girls of Amelia's set were showing a strange and abnormal interest in her music – an interest hardly justified by the quality of the performance. The lights in the room were turned down as low as possible. Amelia and her roommate, Laura May Lee,

were crouched on the floor close by the open window, beyond which the lights of the houses around the square twinkled in the clear dark of the October night.

Huddled close to the two owners of the room on the floor were six other girls, all big-eyed, expectant, athrill with interest and excitement.

Amelia touched her guitar with a white, if somewhat pudgy, hand, and sang a few lines of a popular love song. Then suddenly she stopped and leaned forward, her elbows on the windowsill, her lips apart, her plump figure actually intense. The other girls edged closer to the window and listened with bated breath. A moment's hush – then, out of the night, came an echo of Amelia's guitar, and a tenor voice took up the song where she had left it.

A sigh of satisfaction went up from the group by the window, and Amelia laid one fat hand upon what she fondly believed to be the location of her heart. The stage business was appropriate, but the star's knowledge of anatomy was limited, and the gesture indicated acute indigestion.

The other girls, however, were properly impressed.

"It's him," murmured the fair one rapturously, as reckless of grammar as of anatomical precision. "Oh, girls, isn't it just too sweet; what a lot of feeling he puts into it!"

"The way he sings 'My Love, My Own,' is simply elegant," gasped Laura May. "I shouldn't wonder a bit if he's a foreigner. They're so much more romantic over there. An Italian's just as likely as not to fall in love this way and go perfectly crazy over it."

"Maybe he's a prince," Kittie Dayton suggested. "The folks on this block go round with princes and counts and earls and things all the time. Like as not he's visiting somebody, and – "

"If he were an Italian prince he wouldn't sing such good English," put in Serena Adams. Serena hailed from Massachusetts and hadn't the fervid exotic imagination characteristic of the daughters of the South.

"Well, earls are English."

"Earls don't sing."

"Why don't they?"

Serena tried in vain to imagine the English earl of her fiction reading warbling love songs out of a back window to an unknown charmer, but gave it up.

"I think he's a poet," Amelia whispered, "or maybe a musician – one of the high-strung, quivering kind, don't you know." They all knew.

"They're so sensitive – and responsive."

Amelia spoke as though a host of lute-souled artists had worshipped at her shrine and had broken into melody at her touch.

"Like as not he's only a nice American fellow. My cousin Sam at Yale sings like an angel. All he has to do is sing love songs to a girl and she's positively mushy."

Amelia looked reflectively at the last speaker.

"Well, I wouldn't mind so much," she said. "If he lives on this block his folks must be rich."

"Some day, some day,"

yearned the tenor voice.

"Some day I shall meet you."

"My, won't it be exciting when he does," gurgled Kittie.

"Does he do this every night?" Serena asked. This was her first entrance into the romantic circle.

"Five nights now," Laura May explained. "Amelia was just sitting in the window Wednesday night playing and singing, and somebody answered her. Then they played and sang back and forth. We

were awfully afraid the servants in the kitchen would hear it and report, but they didn't. It's been going on every night since. We're most afraid to go outside the house for fear he'll walk right up and speak."

"He wouldn't know you."

Amelia turned from the window to look scornfully at the sordid-souled Serena.

"Not know me! Why, he'd feel that I was The One, the moment he saw me. It's like that when you love this way."

She pillowed her chin on her arms again and stared sentimentally into the back yard.

"Only this, only this, this, that once you loved me.
Only this, I love you now, I love you now – I lo-o-ve you-u-u now."

The song ended upon a high, quavering note just as the retiring bell clanged in the hall.

The visiting girls waited a few moments, then reluctantly scrambled to their feet and started for their rooms. But Amelia still knelt by the window.

"I'm positive he has raven black hair and an olive complexion," she said to Laura May as finally she drew the shade and began to get ready for bed.

The next morning the Youngest Teacher took the girls for their after-breakfast walk. Trailing up and down the streets at the tail of the "crocodile" was one of the features of the boarding-school work which she particularly disliked; but, as a rule, the proceeding was commonplace enough.

For a few mornings past Belinda had noticed something unusual about the morning expedition. She was used to chattering and giggling. She had learned that the passing of a good-looking young man touched off both the giggles and the chatter. She had even forced herself to watch the young man and see that no note found its way from his hand to that of one of the girls; but this new spirit was something she couldn't figure out.

In the first place the girls developed a mad passion for walking around the block. Formerly they had begged her to ramble to Fifth Avenue and to the Park. One saw more pedestrians on the avenue than elsewhere at that hour of the morning; and, if one walked to the Park, one might perchance be late for chapel and have to stay out in the hall until it was over. But now Fifth Avenue held no charms; the Park did not beckon. Round and round the home block the crocodile dragged its length, with Amelia and Laura May at its head and Belinda bringing up the rear. Men were leaving their homes on their way to business, and every time a young man made his appearance upon the steps of one of the houses on the circuit something like an electric shock ran along the school line and the crocodile quivered from head to tail.

The problem was too much for the Youngest Teacher. She led her charges home in time for chapel, and meditated deeply during the morning session.

Late on that same afternoon Belinda was conferring with Miss Lucilla Ryder when the maid brought a card to the principal.

"'Mr. Satterly' – I don't know the gentleman. What did he look like, Katy?"

"Turribly prosperous, ma'am."

"Ah! possibly some one with a daughter. Miss Carewe, will you go down with me? I am greatly pressed for time. Perhaps this is something you could attend to."

Belinda followed the stately figure in softly flowing black. Miss Ryder always looked the part. No parent could fail to see her superiority and be impressed.

The little old gentleman who rose to greet them in the reception-room was not, however, awed by Miss Lucilla's gracious elegance.

He was a corpulent, red-faced little man with a bristling moustache and a nervous manner; his voice when he spoke was incisive and crisp.

"Miss Ryder, I presume."

Miss Ryder bowed.

"This is Miss Carewe, one of our teachers," she said, waving both Belinda and the visitor toward seats.

Mr. Satterly declined the seat.

"I've come to ask you if you know how your pupils are scandalizing the neighborhood," he said abruptly.

Belinda jumped perceptibly. Miss Ryder's lips straightened slightly, very slightly, but she showed no other sign of emotion.

"I am not aware of any misconduct on the part of the young ladies." Her manner was the perfection of courteous dignity. Belinda mentally applauded.

"It's scandalous, madam, scandalous," sputtered the old gentleman, growing more excited with every second.

"So you observed before, I believe. Will you kindly tell me the nature of the offence?"

"Clandestine love-making with the Astorbilt's coachman – for five nights, flirting out of windows, singing mawkish songs back and forth to each other till it's enough to make a man sick. My daughters hanging out of our back window to hear! Nice example for them! Nice performance for a school where girls are supposed to be taken care of!"

A faint flush had crept into Miss Ryder's cheeks. A great awakening light had dawned in Belinda's brain.

"Amelia," she murmured.

Miss Ryder nodded comprehension.

"She's so romantic, and she supposed it was Prince Charming."

Again the principal nodded. She was not slow of comprehension.

"One of our young ladies is excessively romantic," she explained to the irate Mr. Satterly. "I think I understand the situation, and I shall deal with it at once. I am grieved that the neighbors have been annoyed."

The old gentleman relented slightly. "Well, of course, I thought you ought to know," he said.

"You were quite right. I am deeply indebted to you, and shall be still more so if you will not mention the unfortunate incident to outsiders. Good-morning."

The door closed behind him.

Principal and teacher faced each other. Miss Ryder's superb calm had vanished. Her eyes were blazing.

"Dis-gust-ing!" she said.

Belinda wrestled heroically to suppress a fit of untimely mirth. She knew Amelia and her set so well. She could picture each detail of the musical flirtation, each ridiculous touch of sentimentality.

"I shall expel her."

Miss Ryder's tone was firm.

Belinda laid a soft hand impulsively upon the arm of the August One. "She isn't bad – just foolish – "

"She's made the school ridiculous."

"The school can stand it. She's made herself more ridiculous, and it will be hard for her to stand that."

"How would you punish her?"

"Tell the story to the whole school to-morrow. Rub in the fact that the serenader is a coarse, common, illiterate groom. Mention that the stablemen and other servants all around the block are chuckling over the thing. Rob the episode of every atom of romance. Make it utterly vulgar, and sordid, and ugly, and absurd."

Miss Ryder looked at the Youngest Teacher with something akin to admiration.

"I believe you are right, Miss Carewe. It will be punishment enough. I'll mention no names."

"Oh, no. Everyone will know."

There was a short but dramatic special session the next morning. The principal slew and spared not; and all the guilty squirmed uncomfortably, while the arch offender hid her face in her hands and sobbed miserably over shattered romance and open humiliation.

Even her boon companions tittered and grinned derisively at her as she fled to her room when the conference ended.

But the Youngest Teacher followed, and her eyes were very kind.

CHAPTER III
THE ELOPEMENT OF EVANGELINE MARIE

EVA MAE rose, like a harvest moon, above the Ryder school horizon late in November. Large bodies being proverbially slow of motion, she had occupied the first two months of the school year in acquiring enough momentum to carry her from Laurelton, Mississippi, to New York and install her in the Misses Ryder's most desirable room – providentially left vacant by a defection in the school ranks.

The price of the room was high, but money meant nothing to Eva May. Creature comfort meant much. The new pupil clamoured for a private bath, but finally resigned herself to the least Spartan variety of school simplicity, bought a large supply of novels, made an arrangement by which, for a consideration, the second-floor maid agreed to smuggle fresh chocolates into the house three times a week, unpacked six wrappers, and settled down to the arduous process of being "finished" by a winter in New York.

Miss Lucilla Ryder, conscientious to a fault in educational matters, made an effort to plant Eva May's feet upon the higher paths of learning, and enrolled the girl in various classes; but the passive resistance of one hundred and ninety pounds of inert flesh and a flabby mind were too much for the worthy principal.

"We must do what we can with her," Miss Lucilla said helplessly to the Youngest Teacher. "She may acquire something by association; and, at least, she seems harmless."

Belinda agreed with due solemnity.

"Yes, unless she falls upon someone, she'll do no active damage."

"But her laziness and lack of ambition set such bad standards for the other girls," sighed Miss Lucilla.

Belinda shook her head in protest.

"Not at all. She's valuable as an awful example."

So Eva May, whose baptismal name was Evangeline Marie, and whose father, John Jenkins, a worthy brewer, had wandered from Ohio to the South, married a French creole, and accidentally made a colossal fortune out of a patent spigot, rocked her ponderous way through school routine, wept over the trials of book heroines, munched sweets, filled the greater part of the front bench in certain classes where she never, by any chance, recited, furnished considerable amusement to her schoolmates, and grew steadily fatter.

"If she stays until June we'll never be able to get her out through the door," prophesied Miss Barnes, the teacher of mathematics one morning, as she and Belinda stood at the door of the music-room during Eva May's practice hour, and looked at the avalanche of avoirdupois overflowing a small piano-stool. "Something really must be done."

Chance provided something. The ram in the thicket took the form of an epidemic started by Amelia Bowers, whose fond parents conceived the idea that their child was not having exercise enough in city confines and wrote that they wanted her to have a horse and ride in the Park. Being a southern girl she was used to riding, but they thought it would be well for her to have a few lessons at a good riding-school, and, of course, a riding-master or reliable groom must accompany her in the Park.

The Misses Ryder groaned. A teacher must chaperon the fair Amelia to riding-school, and sit there doing absent chaperoning until her charge should be restored to her by the riding-master. The teachers were already too busy. Still, as Mr. Bowers was an influential patron, the arrangement must be made.

No sooner was the matter noised abroad than the whole school was bitten by the riding mania. Those who could ride wanted to ride. Those who couldn't wanted to learn. Frantic appeals went forth

by letters to parents throughout the United States, but riding in New York is an expensive pastime, and only five fathers responded with the desired blessings and adequate checks.

Miss Ryder wrote to the head of a popular riding-school and asked that someone be sent to talk the arrangements over with her.

The next evening, during recreation hour, the girls fortunate enough to be in the drawing-room saw a radiant vision ushered in by the maid and left to await the coming of the principal.

He was slim, he was dapper, he was exquisite, he was French. His small black moustache curved briskly upward from red lips curved like a bow; his nose was faultlessly straight; his black eyes were sparkling; his brows were well marked, his dark hair was brushed to a high, patent-leather polish.

He wore riding clothes of the most elaborate type, despite the hour of his visit, and as he sat nonchalantly upon the red-damask sofa he tapped his shining boots with a knowing crop, curled his moustache airily, and allowed his glance to rove boldly over the display of youthful femininity. A number of the older girls rose and left the room, but a majority lingered fearfully, rapt in admiration and wonder.

Eva May palpitated upon a commodious window-seat. Here was a realization of her brightest dreams. So Comte Robert Montpelier Ravillon de Brissac must have looked as he sprang lightly from his curveting steed and met the Lady Angélique in the Park of Flambéron. In her agitation she tucked a caramel in each cheek and forgot that they were there.

"Young ladies, you may be excused."

Miss Emmeline Ryder had arrived.

The girls departed, and a buzz of excited conversation floated back from the hall; but Evangeline Marie went silently to her room, sore smitten.

If Miss Lucilla Ryder had been selected by the Fates to meet Monsieur Albert de Puys, the chances are that some riding-school other than Manlay's would have been patronized by the Ryder school, for Miss Lucilla was a shrewd judge of men and things; but, as luck would have it, Miss Lucilla was suffering from neuralgia, and Miss Emmeline, gentle, vague, confiding, was sent down to conduct the interview.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.