

Emerson Alice B.

Ruth Fielding At College: or, The Missing Examination Papers



Alice Emerson

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Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	8
CHAPTER III	13
CHAPTER IV	16
CHAPTER V	20
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	23

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CHAPTER I LOOKING COLLEGEWARD

"Oh, my back! and oh, my bones!"

By no possibility could Aunt Alvira Boggs have risen from her low rocking chair in the Red Mill kitchen without murmuring this complaint.

She was a little, hoop-backed woman, with crippled limbs; but she possessed a countenance that was very much alive, nut-brown and innumably wrinkled though it was.

She had been Mr. Jabez Potter's housekeeper at the Red Mill for more than fifteen years, and if anybody knew the "moods and tenses" of the miserly miller, it must have been Aunt Alvira. She even professed to know the miller's feelings toward his grand-niece, Ruth Fielding, better than Ruth knew them herself.

The little old woman was expecting the return of Ruth now, and she went to the porch to see if she could spy her down the road, and thus be warned in time to set the tea to draw. Ruth and her friends, who had gone for a tramp in the September woods, would come in ravenous for tea and cakes and bread-and-butter sandwiches.

Aunt Alvira looked out upon a very beautiful autumn landscape when she opened the farmhouse door. The valley of the Lumano was attractive at all times – in storm or sunshine. Now it was a riot of color, from the deep crimson of the sumac to the pale amber of certain maple leaves which fell in showers whenever the wanton breeze shook the boughs.

"Here they come!" murmured Aunt Alvira. "Here's my pretty!"

She identified the trio striding up the roadway, distant as they were. Ruth, her cheeks rosy, her hair flying, came on ahead, while the black-haired and black-eyed twins, Helen and Tom Cameron, walked hand-in-hand behind her. This was their final outing together in the vicinity of the Red Mill for many months. Helen and Tom were always very close companions, and although they had already been separated during school terms, Tom had run over from Seven Oaks to see his sister at Briarwood for almost every week-end.

"No more of 'sich doin's now, old man," Helen said to him, smiling rather tremulously. "And even when you get to Harvard next year, you will not be allowed often at Ardmore. They say there is a sign 'No Boys Allowed' stuck up beside every 'Keep Off the Grass' sign on the Ardmore lawns."

"Nonsense!" laughed Tom.

"Oh, I only repeat what I've been told."

"Well, Sis, you won't be entirely alone," Tom said kindly. "Ruth will be with you. You and she will have your usual good times."

"Of course. But *you'll* be awfully lonely, Tommy."

"True enough," agreed Tom.

Then Ruth's gay voice hailed them from the porch upon which she had mounted yards ahead of them.

"Come on, slow-pokes. Aunt Alvira has put on the tea. I smell it!"

Ruth Fielding did not possess her chum's measure of beauty. Helen was a dainty, compelling brunette with flashing eyes – eyes she had already learned to use to the undoing of what Ruth called "the youthful male of the species."

As for Ruth herself, she considered boys no mystery. She was fond of Tom, for he was the first friend she had made in that long-ago time when she arrived, a little girl and a stranger, at the Red Mill. Other boys did not interest Ruth in the least.

Without Helen's beauty, she was, nevertheless, a decidedly attractive girl. Her figure was well rounded, her eyes shone, her hair was just wavy enough to be pretty, and she was very, very much alive. If Ruth Fielding took an interest in anything that thing, Tom declared, "went with a bang!"

She was positive, energetic, and usually finished anything that she began. She had already done some things that few girls of her age could have accomplished.

The trio of friends trooped into Aunt Alvirah's clean and shining kitchen.

"Dear me! dear me!" murmured the little old woman, "I sha'n't have the pleasure of your company for long. I'll miss my pretty," and she smiled fondly at Ruth.

"That's the only drawback about coming home from school," grumbled Tom, looking really forlorn, even with his mouth full of Aunt Alvirah's pound cake.

"What's the drawback?" demanded his twin.

"Going away again. Just think! We sha'n't see each other for so long."

He was staring at Ruth, and Helen, with a roguish twinkle in her eye, passed him her pocket-handkerchief – a wee and useless bit of lace – saying:

"Weep, if you must, Tommy; but get it over with. Ruth and I are not gnashing *our* teeth about going away. Just to think! ARDMORE!"

Nothing but capital letters would fully express the delight she put into the name of the college she and Ruth were to attend.

"Huh!" grunted Tom.

Aunt Alvirah said: "It wouldn't matter, deary, if you was both goin' off to be Queens of Sheby; it's the goin' away that hurts."

Ruth had her arms about the little old woman and her own voice was caressing if not lachrymose.

"Don't take it so to heart, Aunt Alvirah. We shall not forget you. You shall send us a box of goodies once in a while as you always do; and I will write to you and to Uncle Jabez. Keep up your heart, dear."

"Easy said, my pretty," sighed the old woman. "Not so easy follered out. An' Jabe Potter is dreadful tryin' when you ain't here."

"Poor Uncle Jabez," murmured Ruth.

"Poor Aunt Alvirah, you'd better say!" exclaimed Helen, sharply, for she had not the patience with the miserly miller that his niece possessed.

At the moment the back door was pushed open. Helen jumped. She feared that Uncle Jabez had overheard her criticism.

But it was only Ben, the hired man, who thrust his face bashfully around the edge of the door. The young people hailed him gaily, and Ruth offered him a piece of cake.

"Thank'e, Miss Ruth," Ben said. "I can't come in. Jest came to the shed for the oars."

"Is uncle going across the river in the punt?" asked Ruth.

"No, Miss Ruth. There's a boat adrift on the river."

"What kind of boat?" asked Tom, jumping up. "What d'you mean?"

"She's gone adrift, Mr. Tom," said Ben. "Looks like she come from one o' them camps upstream."

"Oh! let's go and see!" cried Helen, likewise eager for something new.

Neither of the Cameron twins ever remained in one position or were interested solely in one thing for long.

The young folk trooped out after Ben through the long, covered passage to the rear door of the Red Mill. The water-wheel was turning and the jar of the stones set every beam and plank in the

structure to trembling. The air was a haze of fine white particles. Uncle Jabez came forward, as dusty and crusty an old miller as one might ever expect to see.

He was a tall, crabbed looking man, the dust of the mill seemingly so ground into the lines of his face that it was grey all over and one wondered if it could ever be washed clean again. He only nodded to his niece and her friends, seizing the oars Ben had brought with the observation:

"Go 'tend to Gil Martin, Ben. He's waitin' for his flour. Where ye been all this time? That boat'll drift by."

Ben knew better than to reply as he hastened to the shipping door where Mr. Martin waited with his wagon for the sacks of flour. The miller went to the platform on the riverside, Ruth and her friends following him.

"I see it!" cried Tom. "Can't be anybody in it for it's sailing broadside."

Uncle Jabez put the oars in the punt and began to untie the painter.

"All the more reason we should get it," he said drily. "Salvage, ye know."

"You mustn't go alone, Uncle Jabez," Ruth said mildly.

"Huh! why not?" snarled the old miller.

"Something might happen. If Ben can't go, I will take an oar."

He knew she was quite capable of handling the punt, even in the rapids, so he merely growled his acquiescence. At that moment Ruth discovered something.

"Why! the boat isn't empty!" she cried.

"You're right, Ruth! I see something in it," said Tom.

Uncle Jabez straightened up, holding the painter doubtfully.

"Aw, well," he grunted. "If there's somebody in it – "

He saw no reason for going after the drifting boat if it were manned. He could not claim the boat or claim salvage for it under such circumstances.

But the strange boat was drifting toward the rapids of the Lumano that began just below the mill. In the present state of the river this "white water," as lumbermen call it, was dangerous.

"Why, how foolish!" Helen cried. "Whoever is in that boat is lying in the bottom of it."

"And drifting right toward the middle of the river!" added her twin.

"Hurry up, Uncle Jabez!" urged Ruth. "We must go out there."

"What fur, I'd like to know?" demanded the miller sharply. "We ain't hired ter go out an' wake up every reckless fule that goes driftin' by."

"Of course not. But maybe he's not asleep," Ruth said quickly. "Maybe he's hurt. Maybe he has fainted. Why, a dozen things might have happened!"

"An' a dozen things might *not* have happened," said old Jabez Potter, coolly retying the painter.

"Uncle! we mustn't do that!" cried his niece. "We must go out in the punt and make sure all is right with that boat."

"Who says so?" demanded the miller.

"Of course we must. I'll go with you. Come, do! There is somebody in danger."

Ruth Fielding, as she spoke, leaped into the punt. Tom would have been glad to go with her, but she had motioned him back before he could speak. She was ashamed to have the miller so display the mean side of his nature before her friends.

Grumblingly he climbed into the heavy boat after her. Tom cast off and Ruth pushed the boat's nose upstream, then settled herself to one of the oars while Uncle Jabez took the other.

"Huh! they ain't anything in it for us," grumbled Mr. Potter as the punt slanted toward mid-stream.

CHAPTER II

MAGGIE

Ruth Fielding knew very well the treacherous current of the Lumano. She saw that the drifting boat with its single occupant was very near to the point where the fierce pull of the mid-stream current would seize it.

So she rowed her best and having the stroke oar, Uncle Jabez was obliged to pull *his* best to keep up with her.

"Huh!" he snorted, "it ain't so pertic'lar, is it, Niece Ruth? That feller –"

She made no reply, but in a few minutes they were near enough to the drifting boat for Ruth to glance over her shoulder and see into it. At once she uttered a little cry of pity.

"What now?" gruffly demanded Uncle Jabez.

"Oh, Uncle! It's a girl!" Ruth gasped.

"A gal! *Another gal?*" exclaimed the old miller. "I swanny! The Red Mill is allus littered up with gals when you're to hum."

This was a favorite complaint of his; but he pulled more vigorously, nevertheless, and the punt was quickly beside the drifting boat.

A girl in very commonplace garments – although she was not at all a commonplace looking girl – lay in the bottom of the boat. Her eyes were closed and she was very pale.

"She's fainted," Ruth whispered.

"Who in 'tarnation let a gal like that go out in a boat alone, and without airy oar?" demanded Uncle Jabez, crossly. "Here! hold steady. I'll take that painter and 'tach it to the boat. We'll tow her in. But lemme tell ye," added Uncle Jabez, decidedly, "somebody's got ter pay me fur my time, or else they don't git the boat back. She seems to be all right."

"Why, she isn't conscious!" cried Ruth.

"Huh!" grunted Uncle Jabez, "I mean the boat, not the gal."

Ruth always suspected that Uncle Jabez Potter made a pretense of being really worse than he was. When a little girl she had been almost afraid of her cross-grained relative – the only relative she had in the world.

But there were times when the ugly crust of the old man's character was rubbed off and his niece believed she saw the true gold beneath. She was frequently afraid that others would hear and not understand him. Now that she was financially independent of Uncle Jabez Ruth was not so sensitive for herself.

They towed the boat back to the mill landing. Tom and Ben carried the strange girl, still unconscious into the Red Mill farmhouse, and bustling little Aunt Alvirah had her put at once to bed.

"Shall I hustle right over to Cheslow for the doctor?" Tom asked.

"Who's goin' to pay him?" growled Uncle Jabez, who heard this.

"Don't let that worry you, Mr. Potter," said the youth, his black eyes flashing. "If I hire a doctor I always pay him."

"It's a good thing to have that repertation," Uncle Jabez said drily. "One should pay the debts he contracts."

But Aunt Alvirah scoffed at the need of a doctor.

"The gal's only fainted. Scare't it's likely, findin' herself adrift in that boat. You needn't trouble yourself about it, Jabez."

Thus reassured the miller went back to examine the boat. Although it was somewhat marred, it was not damaged, and Uncle Jabez was satisfied that if nobody claimed the boat he would be amply repaid for his trouble.

Naturally, the two girls fluttered about the stranger a good deal when Aunt Alvira had brought her out of her faint. Ruth was particularly attracted by "Maggie" as the stranger announced her name to be.

"I was working at one of those summer-folks' camps up the river. Mr. Bender's, it was," she explained to Ruth, later. "But all the folks went last night, and this morning I was going across the river with my bag – oh, did you find my bag, Miss?"

"Surely," Ruth laughed. "It is here, beside your bed."

"Oh, thank you," said the girl. "Mr. Bender paid me last night. One of the men was to take me across the river, and I sat down and waited, and nobody came, and by and by I fell into a nap and when I woke up I was out in the river, all alone. My! I was frightened."

"Then you have no reason for going back to the camp?" asked Ruth, thoughtfully.

"No – Miss. I'm through up there for the season. I'll look for another situation – I – I mean job," she added stammeringly.

"We will telephone up the river and tell them you are all right," Ruth said.

"Oh, thank you – Miss."

Ruth asked her several other questions, and although Maggie was reserved, her answers were satisfactory.

"But what's goin' to become of the gal?" Uncle Jabez asked that evening after supper, when he and his niece were in the farmhouse kitchen alone.

Aunt Alvira had carried tea and toast in to the patient and was sitting by her.

The girl of the Red Mill thought Maggie did not seem like the usual "hired help" whom she had seen. She seemed much more refined than one might expect a girl to be of the class to which she claimed to belong.

Ruth looked across the table at her cross-grained old relative and made no direct reply to his question. She was very sure that, after all, he would be kind to the strange girl if Maggie actually needed to be helped. But Ruth had an idea that Maggie was quite capable of helping herself.

"Uncle Jabez," the girl of the Red Mill said to the old man, softly, "do you know something?"

"Huh?" grunted Uncle Jabez. "I know a hull lot more than you young sprigs gimme credit for knowin'."

"Oh! I didn't mean it that way," and Ruth laughed cheerily at him. "I mean that I have discovered something, and I wondered if you had discovered the same thing?"

"Out with it, Niece Ruth," he ordered, eyeing her curiously. "I'll tell ye if it's anything I already know."

"Well, Aunt Alvira is growing old."

"Ye don't say!" snapped the miller. "And who ain't, I'd like to know?"

"Her rheumatism is much worse, and it will soon be winter."

"Say! what air ye tryin' to do?" he demanded. "Tellin' me these here puffictly obvious things! Of course she's gittin' older; and of course her rheumatiz is bound to grow wuss. Doctors ain't never yet found nothin' to cure rheumatiz. And winter us'ally follers fall – even in this here tarnation climate."

"Well, but the combination is going to be very bad for Aunt Alvira," Ruth said gently, determined to pursue her idea to the finish, no matter how cross he appeared to be.

"Wal, is it *my* fault?" asked Uncle Jabez.

"It's nobody's fault," Ruth told him, shaking her head, and very serious. "But it's Aunt Alvira's misfortune."

"Huh!"

"And we must do something about it."

"Huh! Must we? What, I'd like to have ye tell me?" said the old miller, eyeing Ruth much as one strange dog might another that he suspected was after his best marrow bone.

"We must get somebody to help her do the work while I am at college," Ruth said firmly.

The dull red flooded into Uncle Jabez's cheeks, and for once gave him a little color. His narrow eyes sparkled, too.

"There's one thing I've allus said, Niece Ruth," he declared hotly. "Ye air a great one for spending other folks' money."

It was Ruth's turn to flush now, and although she might not possess what Aunt Alvira called "the Potter economical streak," she did own to a spark of the Potter temper. Ruth Fielding was not namby-pamby, although she was far from quarrelsome.

"Uncle Jabez," she returned rather tartly, "have I been spending much of *your* money lately?"

"No," he growled. "But ye ain't l'arn't how to take proper keer of yer own – trapsin' 'round the country the way you do."

She laughed then. "I'm getting knowledge. Some of it comes high, I have found; but it will all help me *live*."

"Huh! I've lived without that brand of l'arnin'," grunted Uncle Jabez.

Ruth looked at him amusedly. She was tempted to tell him that he had not lived, only existed. But she was not impudent, and merely went on to say:

"Aunt Alvira is getting too old to do all the work here – "

"I send Ben in to help her some when she's alone," said the miller.

"And by so doing put extra work on poor Ben," Ruth told him, decidedly. "No, Aunt Alvira must have another woman around, or a girl."

"Where ye goin' to find the gal?" snapped the miller. "Work gals don't like to stay in the country."

"She's found, I believe," Ruth told him.

"Huh?"

"This Maggie we just got out of the river. She has no job, she says, and she wants one. I believe she'll stay."

"Who's goin' to pay her wages?" demanded Uncle Jabez, getting back to "first principles" again.

"I'll pay the girl's wages, Uncle Jabez," Ruth said seriously. "But you must feed her. And she must be fed well, too. I can see that part of her trouble is malnutrition."

"Huh? Has she got some ketchin' disease?" Uncle Jabez demanded.

"It isn't contagious," Ruth replied drily. "But unless she is well fed she cannot be cured of it."

"Wal, there's plenty of milk and eggs," the miller said.

"But you must not hide the key of the meat-house, Uncle," and now Ruth laughed outright at him. "Four people at table means a depletion of your smoked meat and a dipping occasionally into the corned-beef barrel."

"Wal – "

"Now, if I pay the girl's wages, you must supply the food," his niece said, firmly, "Otherwise, Aunt Alvira will go without help, and then she will break down, and *then* – "

"Huh!" grunted the miller. "I couldn't let her go back to the poorfarm, I s'pose?"

He actually made it a question; but Ruth could not see his face, for he had turned aside.

"No. She could not return to the poorhouse – after fifteen years!" exclaimed the girl. "Do you know what *I* should do?" and she asked the question warmly.

"Somethin' fullish, I allow."

"I should take her to Ardmere with me, and find a tiny cottage for her, and maybe she would keep house for Helen and me."

"That'd be jest like ye, Niece Ruth," he responded coolly. "You think you have all the money in the world. That's because ye didn't aim what ye got – it was give to ye."

The statement was in large part true, and for the moment Ruth's lips were closed. Tears stood in her eyes, too. She realized that she could not be independent of the old miller had not chance and

kind-hearted and grateful Mrs. Rachel Parsons given her the bulk of the amount now deposited in her name in the bank.

Ruth Fielding's circumstances had been very different when she had first come to Cheslow and the Red Mill. Then she was a little, homeless, orphan girl who was "taken in out of charity" by Uncle Jabez. And very keenly and bitterly had she been made to feel during those first few months her dependence upon the crabbed old miller.

The introductory volume of this series, "Ruth Fielding of the Red Mill, or, Jacob Parloe's Secret," details in full the little girl's trials and triumphs under these unfortunate conditions – how she makes friends, smooths over difficulties, and in a measure wins old Uncle Jabez's approval. The miller was a very honest man and always paid his debts. Because of something Ruth did for him he felt it to be his duty to pay her first year's tuition at boarding school, where she went with her new friend, Helen Cameron. In "Ruth Fielding at Briarwood Hall," the Red Mill girl really begins her school career, and begins, too, to satisfy that inbred longing for independence which was so strong a part of her character.

In succeeding volumes of the "Ruth Fielding Series," we follow Ruth's adventures in Snow Camp, a winter lodge in the Adirondack wilderness; at Lighthouse Point, the summer home of a girl friend on the Atlantic coast; at Silver Ranch, in Montana; at Cliff Island; at Sunrise Farm; with the Gypsies, which was a very important adventure, indeed, for Ruth Fielding. In this eighth story Ruth was able to recover for Mrs. Rachel Parsons, an aunt of one of her school friends, a very valuable pearl necklace, and as a reward of five thousand dollars had been offered for the recovery of the necklace, the entire sum came to Ruth. This money made Ruth financially independent of Uncle Jabez.

The ninth volume of the series, entitled, "Ruth Fielding in Moving Pictures; or, Helping the Dormitory Fund," shows Ruth and her chums engaged in film production. Ruth discovered that she could write a good scenario – a very good scenario, indeed. Mr. Hammond, president of the Alectrion Film Corporation, encouraged her to write others. When the West Dormitory of Briarwood Hall was burned and it was discovered that there had been no insurance on the building, the girls determined to do all in their power to rebuild the structure.

Ruth was inspired to write a scenario, a five-reel drama of schoolgirl life, and Mr. Hammond produced it, Ruth's share of the profits going toward the building fund. "The Heart of a Schoolgirl" was not only locally famous, but was shown all over the country and was even now, after six months, paying the final construction bills of the West Dormitory, at Briarwood.

In this ninth volume of the series, Ruth and Helen and many of their chums graduated from Briarwood Hall. Immediately after the graduation the girl of the Red Mill and Helen Cameron were taken south by Nettie Parsons and her Aunt Rachel to visit the Merredith plantation in South Carolina. Their adventures were fully related in the story immediately preceding the present narrative, the tenth of the "Ruth Fielding Series," entitled, "Ruth Fielding Down in Dixie; or, Great Times in the Land of Cotton."

Home again, after that delightful journey, Ruth had spent most of the remaining weeks of her vacation quietly at the Red Mill. She was engaged upon another scenario for Mr. Hammond, in which the beautiful old mill on the Lumano would figure largely. She also had had many preparations to make for her freshman year at Ardmore.

Ruth and Helen were quite "young ladies" now, so Tom scoffingly said. And going to college was quite another thing from looking forward to a term at a preparatory school. Nevertheless, Ruth had found plenty of time to help Aunt Alvira during the past few weeks.

She had noted how much feebler the old woman was becoming. Therefore, she was determined to win Uncle Jabez to her plan of securing help in the Red Mill kitchen. The coming of the girl, Maggie, though a strange coincidence, Ruth looked upon as providential. She urged Uncle Jabez to agree to her proposal, and the very next morning she sounded Maggie upon the subject. The strange girl was sitting up, but Aunt Alvira would not hear to her doing anything as yet. Ruth found Maggie

in the sitting-room, engaged in looking at the Ardmore Year Book which Ruth had left upon the sitting-room table.

"Pretty landscapes about the college, aren't they?" Ruth suggested.

"Oh yes – Miss. Very pretty," agreed Maggie.

"That is where I am going to college," Ruth explained. "I enter as a freshman next week."

"Is that so – Miss?" hesitated Maggie. Her heretofore colorless face flushed warmly. "I've heard of that – that place," she added.

"Indeed, have you?"

Maggie was looking at the photograph of Lake Remona, with a part of Bliss Island at one side. She continued to stare at the picture while Ruth put before her the suggestion of work at the Red Mill.

"Oh, of course, Miss Fielding, I'd be glad of the work. And you're very liberal. But you don't know anything about me."

"No. And I shouldn't know much more about you if you brought a dozen recommendations," laughed Ruth.

"I suppose not – Miss." It seemed hard for the girl to get out that "Miss," and Ruth, who was keenly observant, wondered if she really had been accustomed to using it.

They talked it over and finally reached an agreement. Aunt Alvira was sweetly grateful to Ruth, knowing full well that there must have been a "battle royal" between the miller and his niece before the former had agreed to the new arrangement.

Ruth was quite sure that Maggie was a nice girl, even if she was queer. At least, she gave deference to the quaint little old housekeeper, and seemed to like Aunt Alvira very much. And who would not love the woman, who was everybody's aunt but nobody's relative?

Once or twice Ruth found Maggie poring over the Year Book of Ardmore College, rather an odd interest for a girl of her class. But Maggie was rather an odd girl anyway, and Ruth forgot the matter in her final preparations for departure.

CHAPTER III

EXPECTATIONS

"I expect she'll be a haughty, stuck-up thing," declared Edith Phelps, with vigor.

"Just like *that*," drawled May MacGreggor. "We should worry about the famous authoress of canned drama! A budding lady hack writer, I fancy."

"Oh, dear me, no!" cried Edith. "Didn't you see 'The Heart of a Schoolgirl' she wrote? Why, it was a good photo-play, I assure you."

"And put out by the Aletrion Film Corporation," joined in another of the group of girls standing upon the wide porch of Dare Hall, one of the four large dormitories of Ardmore College.

The college buildings were set most artistically upon the slope of College Hill, each building facing sparkling Lake Remona. Save the boathouse and the bathing pavilions, Dare and Dorrance Halls at the east side of the grounds, and Hoskin and Hemmingway Halls at the west side, were the structures nearest to the lake.

Farther to the east an open grove intervened between the dormitories and the meadows along the Remona River where bog hay was cut, and which were sometimes flooded in the freshet season.

To the west the lake extended as far as the girls on the porch could see, a part of its sparkling surface being hidden by the green and hilly bulk of Bliss Island. The shaded green lawns of the campus between Dare and Hoskin Halls were crossed by winding paths.

A fleshy girl who was near the group but not of it, had been viewing this lovely landscape with pleasure. Now she frankly listened to the chatter of the "inquisitors."

"Well," Edith Phelps insisted, "this Ruth Fielding was so petted at that backwoods' school where she has been that I suppose there will be no living in the same house with her."

Edith was one of the older sophomores – quite old, indeed, to the eyes of the plump girl who was listening. But the latter smiled quietly, nevertheless, as she listened to the sophomore's speech.

"We shall have to take her down a peg or two, of course. It's bad enough to have the place littered up with a lot of freshies – "

"Just as we littered it up last year at this time, Edie," suggested May, with a chuckle.

"Well," Edith said, laughing, "if I don't put this Ruth Fielding, the authoress, in her place in a hurry, it won't be because I sha'n't try."

"Have a care, dearie," admonished one quiet girl who had not spoken before. "Remember the warning we had at commencement."

"About what?" demanded two or three.

"About that Rolff girl, you know," said the thoughtful girl.

"Oh! I know what you mean," Edith said. "But that was a warning to the sororities."

"To everybody," put in May.

"At any rate," Dora Parton said, "Dr. Milroth forbade anything in the line of hazing."

"Pooh!" said Edith. "Who mentioned hazing? That's old-fashioned. We're too ladylike at Ardmore, I should hope, to *haze*— my!"

"My heye, blokey!" drawled May.

"You are positively coarse, Miss MacGreggor," Dora said, severely.

"And Edie is so awfully emphatic," laughed the Scotch girl. "But she will have to take it out in threatenings, I fear. We can't haze this Fielding chit, and that's all there is to it."

"Positively," said the quiet girl, "that was a terrible thing they did to Margaret Rolff. She was a nervous girl, anyway. Do you remember her, May?"

"Of course. And I remember being jealous because she was chosen by the Kappa Alpha as a candidate. Glad *I* wasn't one if they put all their new members through the same rigmarole."

"That is irreverent!" gasped Edith. "The Kappa Alpha!"

"I see Dr. Milroth took them down all right, all right!" remarked another of the group. "And now none of the sororities can solicit members among either the sophs or the freshies."

"And it's a shame!" cried Edith. "The sorority girls have such fun."

"Half murdering innocents – yes," drawled May. "That Margaret Rolff was just about scared out of her wits, they say. They found her wandering about Bliss Island – "

"Sh! We're not to talk of it," advised Edith, with a glance at the fat girl in the background who, although taking no part in the discussion, was very much amused, especially every time Ruth Fielding's name was brought up.

"Well, I don't know why we shouldn't speak of it," said Dora Parton, who was likewise a sophomore. "The whole college knew it at the time. When Margaret Rolff left they discovered that the beautiful silver vase was gone, too, from the library – "

"Oh, hush!" exclaimed May MacGreggor, sharply.

"Won't hush – so now!" said the other girl, smartly, making a face at the Scotch lassie. "Didn't Miss Cullam go wailing all over the college about it?"

"That's so," Edith agreed. "You'd have thought it was her vase that had been stolen."

"I don't believe the vase was stolen at all," May said. "It was mixed up in that initiation and lost. I know that the Kappa Alpha girls are raising a fund to pay for it."

"Pay for it!" scoffed some one. "Why, they couldn't do that in a thousand years. That was an Egyptian curio – very old and very valuable. Pay for it, indeed! Those Kappa Alphas, as well as the other sororities, are paying for their fun in another way."

"But, anyway," said the quiet girl, "it was a terrible experience for Miss Rolff."

"Unless she 'put it on' and got away with the loot herself," said Edith.

"Oh, scissors! *now* who's coarse?" demanded May MacGreggor.

But the conversation came back to the expected Ruth Fielding. These girls had all arrived at Ardmore several days in advance of the opening of the semester. Indeed, it is always advisable for freshmen, especially, to be on hand at least two days before the opening, for there is much preparation for newcomers.

The fleshy girl who had thus far taken no part in the conversation recorded, save to be amused by it, had already been on the ground long enough to know her way about. But she was not yet acquainted with any of her classmates or with the sophomores.

If she knew Ruth Fielding, she said nothing about it when Edith Phelps began to discuss the girl of the Red Mill again.

"Miss Cullam spoke to me about this Fielding. It seems she has an acquaintance who teaches at that backwoods' school the child went to – "

"Briarwood a backwoods' school!" said May. "Not much!"

"Well, it's somewhere up in New York State among the yaps," declared Edith. "And Cullam's friend wrote her that Fielding is a wonder. Dear me! how I *do* abominate wonders."

"Perhaps we are maligning the girl," said Dora. "Perhaps Ruth Fielding is quite modest."

"What? After writing a moving picture drama? Is there anything modest about the motion picture business in *any* of its branches?"

"Oh, dear me, Edie!" cried one of her listeners, "you're dreadful."

"I presume this canned drama authoress," pursued Edith, "will have ink-stains on her fingers and her hair will be eternally flying about her careworn features. Well! and what are *you* laughing at?" she suddenly and tartly demanded of the plump girl in the background.

"At you," chuckled the stranger.

"Am I so funny to look at?"

"No. But you are the funniest-talking girl I ever listened to. Let me laugh, won't you?"

Before this observation could be more particularly inquired into, some one shouted:

"Oh, look who's here! And in style, bless us!"

"And see the freight! Excess baggage, for a fact," May MacGreggor said, under her breath. "Who *can* she be?"

"The Queen of Sheba in all her glory had nothing on this lady," cried Edith with conviction.

It was not often that any of the Ardmore girls, and especially a freshman, arrived during the opening week of the term in a private equipage. This car that came chugging down the hill to the entrance of Dare Hall was a very fine touring automobile. The girl in the tonneau, barricaded with a huge trunk and several bags, besides a huge leather hat-box perched beside the chauffeur, was very gaily appareled as well.

"Goodness! look at the labels on that trunk," whispered Dora Parton. "Why, that girl must have been all over Europe."

"The trunk has, at any rate," chuckled May.

"Hist!" now came from the excited Edith Phelps. "See the initials, 'R. F.' What did I tell you? It is that Fielding girl!"

"Oh, my aunt!" groaned the plump girl in the background, and she actually had to stuff her handkerchief in her mouth to keep from laughing outright again.

The car had halted and the chauffeur got down promptly, for he had to remove some of the "excess baggage" before the girl in the tonneau could alight.

"I guess she must think she belongs here," whispered Dora.

"More likely she thinks she owns the whole place," snapped Edith, who had evidently made up her mind not to like the new girl whose baggage was marked "R. F."

The girl got out and shook out her draperies. A close inspection would have revealed the fact that, although dressed in the very height of fashion (whatever *that* may mean), the materials of which the stranger's costume were made were rather cheap.

"This is Dare Hall, isn't it?" she asked the group of girls above her on the porch. "I suppose there is a porter to help – er – the man with my baggage?"

"It is a rule of the college," said Edith, promptly, "that each girl shall carry her own baggage to her room. No male person is allowed within the dormitory building."

There was a chorused, if whispered, "Oh!" from the other girls, and the newcomer looked at Edith, suspiciously.

"I guess you are spoofing me, aren't you?" she inquired.

"Help! help!" murmured May MacGreggor. "That's the very latest English slang."

"She's brought it direct from 'dear ol' Lunnon'," gasped one of the other sophomores.

"Dear me!" said Edith, addressing her friends, "wouldn't it be nice to have a 'close up' taken of that heap of luggage? It really needs a camera man and a director to make this arrival a success."

The girl who had just come looked very much puzzled. The chauffeur seemed eager to be gone.

"If I can't help take in the boxes, Miss, I might as well be going," he said to the new arrival.

"Very well," she rejoined, stiffly, and opening her purse gave him a bill. He lifted his cap, entered the car, touched the starter and in a moment the car whisked away.

"I declare!" said May MacGreggor, "she looks just like a castaway on the shore of a desert island, with all the salvage she has been able to recover from the wreck."

And perhaps the mysterious R. F. felt a good deal that way.

CHAPTER IV

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Greenburg was the station on the N. Y. F. & B. Railroad nearest to Ardmore College. It was a small city of some thirty or forty thousand inhabitants. The people, not alone in the city but in the surrounding country, were a rather wealthy class. Ardmore was a mile from the outskirts of the town.

Ruth Fielding and Helen Cameron, her chum, had arrived with other girls bound for the college on the noon train. Of course, the chums knew none of their fellow pupils by name, but it was easily seen which of those alighting from the train were bound for Ardmore.

There were two large auto-stages in waiting, and Ruth and Helen followed the crowd of girls briskly getting aboard the buses. As they saw other girls do, the two chums from Cheslow gave their trunk checks to a man on the platform, but they clung to their hand-baggage.

"Such a nice looking lot of girls," murmured Helen in Ruth's ear. "It's fine! I'm sure we shall have a delightful time at college, Ruthie."

"And some hard work," observed Ruth, laughing, "if we expect to keep up with them. There are no dunces in this crowd, my dear."

"Goodness, no!" agreed her friend. "They all look as sharp as needles."

There were girls of all the classes at the station, as was easily seen. Ruth and Helen chanced to get into a seat with two of the seniors, who seemed most awfully sophisticated to the recent graduates of Briarwood Hall.

"You are just entering, are you not – you and your friend?" asked the nearest senior of Ruth.

"Yes," admitted the girl of the Red Mill, feeling and looking very shy.

The young women smiled quietly, saying:

"I am Miss Dexter, and am beginning my senior year. I am glad to be the first to welcome you to Ardmore."

"Thank you so much!" Ruth said, recovering her self-possession. Then she told Miss Dexter her own name and introduced Helen.

"You girls have drawn your room numbers, I presume?"

"They were drawn for us," Ruth said. "We are to be in Dare Hall and hope to have adjoining rooms."

"That is nice," said Miss Dexter. "It is so much pleasanter when two friends enter together. I am at Hoskin Hall myself. I shall be glad to have you two freshmen look me up when you are once settled."

"Thank you," Ruth said again, and Helen found her voice to ask:

"Are all the seniors in Hoskin Hall, and all the freshmen at Dare Hall?"

"Oh, no. There are members of each class in all four of the dormitories," Miss Dexter explained.

"I suppose there will be much for us to learn," sighed Ruth. "It is different from a boarding school."

"Do you both come from a boarding school?" asked their new acquaintance.

"We are graduates of Briarwood Hall," Helen said, with pride.

"Oh, indeed?" Miss Dexter looked sharply at Ruth again. "Did you say your name was Ruth Fielding?"

"Yes, Miss Dexter."

"Why, you must be the girl who wrote a picture play to help build a dormitory for your school!" exclaimed the senior. "Really, how nice."

"There, Ruth!" said Helen, teasingly, "see what it is to be famous."

"I – I hope my reputation will not be held against me," Ruth said, laughing. "Let me tell you, Miss Dexter, we all at Briarwood helped to swell that dormitory fund."

"I fancy so," said the senior. "But all of your schoolmates could not have written a scenario which would have been approved by the Alectrion Film Corporation."

"I should say not!" cried Helen, warmly. "And it was a great picture, too."

"It was clever, indeed," agreed Miss Dexter. "I saw it on the screen."

Miss Dexter introduced the girl at the other end of the seat – another senior, Miss Purvis. The two entering freshmen felt flattered – how could they help it? They had expected, as freshmen, to be quite haughtily ignored by the seniors and juniors.

But there were other matters to interest Ruth and Helen as the auto-bus rolled out of the city. The way was very pleasant; there were beautiful homes in the suburbs of Greenburg. And after they were passed, there were lovely fields and groves on either hand. The chums thought they had seldom seen more attractive country, although they had traveled more than most girls of their age.

The road over which the auto-bus rolled was wide and well oiled – a splendid automobile track. But only one private equipage passed them on the ride to Ardmore. That car came along, going the same way as themselves, just as they reached the first of the row of faculty dwellings.

There was but one passenger in the car – a girl; and she was packed around with baggage in a most surprising way.

"Oh!" gasped Helen, in Ruth's ear, "I guess there goes one of the real fancy girls – the kind that sets the pace at college."

Ruth noticed that Miss Dexter and Miss Purvis craned their necks to see the car and the girl, and she ventured to ask who she was.

"I can't tell you," Miss Dexter said briskly. "I never saw her before."

"Oh! Perhaps, then, she isn't going to the college."

"Yes; she must be. This road goes nowhere else. But she is a freshman, of course."

"An eccentric, I fancy," drawled Miss Purvis. "You must know that each freshman class is bound to have numbered with it some most surprising individuals. *Raræ aves*, as it were."

Miss Dexter laughed. "But the corners are soon rubbed off and their peculiarities fade into the background. When I was a freshman, there entered a woman over fifty, with perfectly white hair. She was a *dear*; but, of course, she was an anomaly at college."

"My!" exclaimed Helen. "What did she want to go to college for?"

"The poor thing had always wanted to go to college. When she was young there were few women's colleges. And she had a big family to help, and finally a bedridden sister to care for. So she remained faithful to her home duties, but each year kept up with the graduating class of a local preparatory school. She was really a very well educated and bright woman; only peculiar."

"And what happened when she came to Ardmore?" asked Ruth, interested, "is she still here?"

"Oh, no. She remained only a short time. She found, she said, that her mind was not nimble enough, at her age, to keep up with the classes. Which was very probably true, you know. Unless one is constantly engaged in hard mental labor, one's mind must get into ruts by the time one is fifty. But she was very lovely, and quite popular – while she lasted."

Helen was more interested just then in the row of cottages occupied by the members of the faculty, and here strung along the left side of the highway. They were pretty houses, set in pretty grounds.

"Oh, look, Helen!" cried Ruth, suddenly.

"The lake!" responded Helen.

The dancing blue waters of Lake Remona were visible for a minute between two of the houses. Ruth, too, caught a glimpse of the small island which raised its hilly head in the middle of the lake.

"Is that Bliss Island?" she inquired of Miss Dexter.

"Yes. You can see it from here. That doesn't belong to the college."

"No?" said Ruth, in surprise: "But, of course, the girls can go there?"

"It is 'No Man's Land,' I believe. Belongs to none of the estates surrounding the lake. We go there – yes," Miss Dexter told her. "The Stone Face is there."

"What is that, please?" asked Ruth, interested. "What is the Stone Face?"

"A landmark, Miss Fielding. That Stone Face was quite an important spot last May – wasn't it, Purvis?" the senior asked the other girl.

"Oh, goodness me, yes!" said Miss Purvis. "Don't mention it. Think what it has done to our Kappa Alpha."

"What do you suppose ever became of that girl?" murmured Miss Dexter, thoughtfully.

"I can't imagine. It was a sorry time, take it all in all. Let's not talk of it, Merry. Our sorority has a setback from which it will never recover."

All this was literally Greek to Ruth, of course. Nor did she listen with any attention. There were other things for her and Helen to be interested in, for the main building of the college had come into view.

They had been gradually climbing the easy slope of College Hill from the east. The main edifice of Ardmore did not stand upon the summit of the eminence. Behind and above the big, winged building the hill rose to a wooded, rounding summit, sheltering the whole estate from the north winds.

Just upon the edge of the forest at the top was an octagon-shaped observatory. Ruth had read about it in the Year Book. From the balcony of this observatory one could see, on a clear day, to the extreme west end of Lake Remona – quite twenty-five miles away.

The newcomers, however, were more interested at present in the big building which faced the lake, half-way down the southern slope of College Hill, and which contained the hall and classrooms, as well as the principal offices. The beautiful campus was in front of this building.

"All off for Dare and Dorrance," shouted the stage driver, stopping his vehicle.

The driveway here split, one branch descending the hill, while the main thread wound on past the front of the main building. Ruth and Helen scrambled down with their bags.

"Good-bye," said Miss Dexter smiling on them. "Perhaps I shall see you when you come over to the registrar's office. We seniors have to do the honors for you freshies."

Miss Purvis, too, bade them a pleasant good-bye. The chums set off down the driveway. On their left was the great, sandstone, glass-roofed bulk of the gymnasium, and they caught a glimpse of the fenced athletic field behind it.

Ahead were the two big dormitories upon this side of the campus – Dare and Dorrance Halls. The driveway curved around to the front of these buildings, and now the private touring car the girls had before noticed, came shooting around from the lake side of the dormitories, passing Ruth and Helen, empty save for the chauffeur.

"Goodness!" exclaimed Helen. "I wonder if that dressy girl with all the goods and chattels is bunked in *our* dormitory?"

"'Our' dormitory, no less!" laughed Ruth. "Do you feel as much at home already as *that*?"

"Goodness! No. I'm only trying to make myself believe it. Ruth, what an *e-nor*-mous place this is! I feel just as small as – as a little mouse in an elephant's stall."

Ruth laughed, but before she could reply they rounded the corner of the building nearest to the campus and saw the group of girls upon its broad porch, the stranger at the foot of the steps, and the heap of baggage piled where the chauffeur had left it.

"Hello!" May MacGreggor said, aloud, "here are a couple more kittens. Look at the pretty girl with the brown eyes and hair. And the smart-looking, black-eyed one. Now! *here* are freshies after my own heart."

Edith Phelps refused to be called off from the girl and the baggage, however. She said coolly:

"I really don't know what you will do with all that truck, Miss Fielding. The rooms at Dare are rather small. You could not possibly get all those bags and the trunk – and certainly not that hat-box – into one of these rooms."

"My name isn't Fielding," said the strange girl, paling now, but whether from anger or as a forerunner to tears it would have been hard to tell. Her face was not one to be easily read.

"Your name isn't *Fielding*?" gasped Edie Phelps, while the latter's friends burst into laughter. "'R. F.!' What does that stand for, pray?"

At this moment the fleshy girl who had been all this time in the background on the porch, flung herself forward, burst through the group, and ran down the steps. She had spied Ruth and Helen approaching.

"Ruthie! Helen! *Ruth Fielding*! Isn't this delightful?"

The fleshy girl tried to hug both the chums from Cheslow at once. Edie Phelps and the rest of the girls on the porch gazed and listened in amazement. Edie turned upon the girl with the heap of baggage, accusingly.

"You're a good one! What do you mean by coming here and fooling us all in this way? What's your name?"

"Rebecca Frayne – if you think you have a right to ask," said the new girl, sharply.

"And you're not the canned drama authoress?"

"I don't know what you mean, I'm sure," said Rebecca Frayne. "But I *would* like to know what I'm to do with this baggage."

Ruth had come to the foot of the steps now with Helen and the fleshy girl, whom the chums had hailed gladly as "Jennie Stone." The girl of the Red Mill heard the speech of the stranger and noted her woesgone accent. She turned with a smile to Rebecca Frayne.

"Oh! I know about that," she said. "Just leave your trunk and bags here and put your card and the number of your room on them. The men will be along very soon to carry them up for you. I read that in the Year Book."

"Thank you," said Rebecca Frayne.

The group of sophomores and freshmen on the porch opened a way for the Briarwood trio to enter the house, and said never a word. Jennie Stone was, as she confessed, grinning broadly.

CHAPTER V

GETTING SETTLED

"What does this mean, Heavy Jennie?" demanded Helen, pinching the very comfortable arm of their fleshy friend.

"What does that mean? Ouch, Helen! You know you're pinching something when you pinch *me*."

"That's why I like to. No fun in trying to make an impression on bones, you know."

"But it doesn't hurt bones so much," grumbled Jennie. "Remember what the fruit-stand man printed on his sign: 'If you musta pincha da fruit, pincha da cocoanut.' You can't so easy bruise bony folk, Helen."

"You are dodging the issue, Heavy," declared Helen. "What does this mean?"

"What does what mean?" demanded the fleshy girl, grinning widely again.

"How came you here, of course?" Ruth put in, smiling upon their gay and usually thoughtless friend. "You said you did not think you could come to Ardmore."

"And you had conditions to make up if you did come," declared Helen.

"I made 'em up," said Jennie, laughing.

"And you're here ahead of us! Oh, Heavy, what sport!" cried Helen, undertaking to pinch the plump girl again.

"Now, that's enough of that," said Jennie Stone. "I have feelings, as well as other folk, Helen Cameron, despite my name. Have a heart!"

"We are so glad to see you, Heavy," said Ruth. "You mustn't mind Helen's exuberance."

"And you never said a word about coming here when you wrote to us down South," Helen said, eyeing the fleshy girl curiously.

"I didn't know what to do," confessed Jennie Stone. "I talked it over with Aunt Kate. She agreed with me that, if I had finished school, I'd put on about five pounds a month, and that's all I *would* do."

"Goodness!" gasped Ruth and Helen, together.

"Yes," said Heavy, nodding with emphasis. "That's what I did the first month. Nothing to do, you see, but eat and sleep. If I'd had to go to work –"

"But couldn't you find something to do?" demanded the energetic Ruth.

"At Lighthouse Point? You know just how lazy a spot that is. And in winter in the city it would be worse. So I determined to come here."

"To keep from getting fatter!" cried Helen. "A new reason for coming to college."

"Well," said Jennie, seriously, "I missed the gym work and I missed being uncomfortable."

"Uncomfortable?" gasped Ruth and Helen.

"Yes. You know, my father's a big man, and so are my older brothers big. Everything in our house is big and well stuffed and comfortable – chairs and beds and all. I never was comfortable in my bed at Briarwood."

"Horrible!" cried Helen, while Ruth laughed heartily.

"And *here*!" went on Heavy, lugubriously. "Wait till you see. Do you know, all they give us here is *cots* to sleep on? *Cots*, mind! Goodness! when I try to turn over I roll right out on the floor. You ought to see my sides already, how black-and-blue they are. I've been here two nights."

"Why did you come so early?"

"So as to try to get used to the food and the beds," groaned Heavy. "But I never will. One teacher already has advised me about my diet. She says vegetables are best for me. I ate a peck of string beans this noon for lunch – strings and all – and I expect you can pick basting threads out of me almost anywhere!"

"The teacher didn't advise you to eat *all* the vegetables there were, did she?" asked Ruth, as they climbed the stairs.

"She did not signify the amount. I just ate till I couldn't get down another one. I sha'n't want to see another string bean for some time."

Ruth and Helen easily found the rooms that had been drawn for them the June previous. Of course, they were not the best rooms in the hall, for the seniors had first choice, and then the juniors and sophomores had their innings before the freshmen had a chance.

But there was a door between Ruth's and Helen's rooms, as they had hoped, and Jennie's room was just across the corridor.

"We Sweetbriars will stick together, all right," said the fleshy girl. "For defence and offence, if necessary."

"You evidently expect to have a strenuous time here, Heavy," laughed Ruth.

"No telling," returned Jennie Stone, wagging her head. "I fancy there are some 'cut-ups' among the sophs who will try to make our sweet young lives miserable. That Edie Phelps, for instance." She told them how the sophomores had met the new girl, Rebecca Frayne, and why.

"Oh, dear!" said Ruth. "But that was all on *my* account. We shall have to be particularly nice to Miss Frayne. I hope she's on our corridor."

"Do you suppose they will haze you, Ruth, just because you wrote that scenario?" asked Helen, somewhat troubled.

"There's no hazing at Ardmere," laughed Ruth. "They can't bother me. 'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me!'" she singsonged.

"Just the same," Jennie said, morosely, "that Edie Phelps has a sharp tongue."

"We, too, have tongues," proclaimed Helen, who had no intention of being put upon.

"Now, girls, we want to take just what is handed us good-naturedly," Ruth advised. "We are freshmen. Next year we will be sophomores, and can take it out on the new girls then," and she laughed. "You know, we've all been through it at Briarwood."

"Goodness, yes!" agreed Helen. "It can't be as bad at college as it was during our first term at Briarwood Hall."

"This Edie Phelps can't be as mean as The Fox 'useter was,' I suppose," added Jennie Stone. "Besides, I fancy the sophs need us freshmen – our good will and help, I mean. The two lower classes here have to line up against the juniors and seniors."

"Oh, dear, me," sighed Ruth. "I hoped we had come here to study, not to fight."

"Pooh!" said the fleshy girl, "where do you go in this world that you don't have to fight for your rights? You never get something for nothing."

However, the possibility of trouble disturbed their minds but slightly. For the rest of the day the trio were very busy. At least, Ruth and Helen were busy arranging their rooms and unpacking, and Jennie Stone was busy watching them.

They went to the registrar's office that day, as this was required. Otherwise, they were in their rooms, after their baggage was delivered, occupied until almost dinner time. Heavy had been on the ground long enough, as she said, to know most of the ropes. They were supposed to dress rather formally for dinner, although not more than two-thirds of the girls had arrived.

There were in Dare Hall alone as many pupils as had attended Briarwood altogether. This was, indeed, a much larger school life on which they were entering.

So many of the girls they saw were older than themselves – and the trio of girls had been among the oldest girls at Briarwood during their last semester.

"Why, we're only *kids*," sighed Helen. "There's a girl on this corridor – at the other end, thank goodness! – who looks old enough to be a teacher."

"Miss Comstock," said Heavy. "I know. She's a senior. There are no teachers rooming at Dare. Only the housekeeper downstairs. But you'll find a senior at the head of each table – and Miss Comstock looks awfully stern."

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