

Emerson Alice B.

Ruth Fielding at Briarwood Hall: or, Solving the Campus Mystery



Alice Emerson

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CHAPTER I THE EXODUS

The sun was a regular lie-abed on this Autumn morning, banked about by soft clouds and draperies of mist; but they glowed pink along the horizon – perhaps blushing for Old Sol's delinquency. The mist hung tenderly over the river, too – indeed, it masked the entire Valley of the Lumano – lying thick and dank upon the marshes and the low meadows, but wreathed more lightly about the farmhouses and their outbuildings, and the fodder and haystacks upon the higher ground.

But suddenly the sun flung off the bedclothes and leaped right into the sky. That long, low bank of cloud that had been masking him, melted away and the shreds of mist were burned up in a hurry as his warm rays spread abroad, taking the entire valley in their arms.

Farmhouses, where the kitchen chimney smoke had been rising straightly into the air, immediately put on a new bustle. Doors opened and shut. There was the stamping of horses in the stables as they crunched their corn; cows lowed as the milk-pails rattled; sheep baa-a-ed in their folds, and the swine, fearing that some other of the farm stock would get *their* share of the breakfast, squealed in eager anticipation.

On a knoll by the river side stood the rambling buildings belonging to Jabez Potter, who kept the Red Mill. The great wheel beside the mill end of the main structure had not yet begun to turn, but there was plenty of bustle about the pleasant house.

The sun had scarcely popped up when a very pretty, bright-looking girl ran out upon the porch and gazed earnestly along the road that followed the Lumano toward Osago Lake. She looked out from under a shielding hand, for the sun was in her eyes. Around the corner of the house came a tall, dark-faced man whose long jaws were cleanly shaven and deeply lined. His clothing was full of milldust and it seemed to have been ground into his face for so many years that it was now a part of the grain and texture of his skin. He did not smile at the girl as he said:

"You ain't looking for them yet; air you, Ruth? It's much too early. Help your Aunt Alviry put breakfast on the table. She'll hev it all to do when you're gone."

The tone was stern, but the girl seemed to be used to it, for her face did not cloud over, and the smiles rippled about her mouth as she replied:

"I'm so full of happiness, Uncle Jabez, that you mustn't mind if I'm looking for Helen and Tom ahead of time. It doesn't seem possible that I am actually going with them."

"It seems real enough to me," grumbled Jabez Potter. "I hope you'll get enough out of it to pay us for all the trouble and cost of your going – that I do."

But even this seemingly unkind speech did not ruffle the girl's temper.

"You wait and see, Uncle Jabez – you just wait and see," she said, nodding to him. "I'll prove it the best investment you ever made."

He didn't smile – Jabez Potter was not one of the smiling kind; but his face relaxed and his eyes twinkled a little.

"I sha'n't look for cent. per cent. interest on my money, Niece Ruth," he said, and stumped into the house in his heavy boots.

Ruth Fielding, who had come to the Red Mill only a few months before, having lost all other relatives but her great-uncle, who owned the mill, ran into the kitchen, too, where a little old woman,

with bent back and very bright eyes, was hovering over the stove. The breakfast was ready to be served and this little woman was pottering about, muttering to herself a continual complaining phrase:

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

Aunt Alvira Boggs (who was everybody's Aunt Alvira, but no blood relation to either Ruth or her uncle) was not a morose person, however, despite her rheumatic troubles. She smiled on Ruth and patted her hand as the girl sat down beside her at the table.

"Seems like we'd be lost without our pretty leetle creetur about," said Aunt Alvira. "I don't see what the old house will do without her."

"I'll be home at Thanksgiving – if Uncle will let me," said Ruth, quickly, and glancing at the old man; "and again at Christmas, and at Easter. Why, the intervals will go like *that*," and she snapped her fingers.

"All this junketing up and down the country will cost money, Niece Ruth," admonished Uncle Jabez.

He was, by nature, a very close and careful man with money – a reputed miser, in fact. And that he did hoard up money, and loved it for itself, must be confessed. When he had lost a cash-box he kept in the mill, containing money and other valuables, it had been a great trouble to Uncle Jabez. But through a fortuitous train of circumstances Ruth Fielding had recovered the cash-box for him, with its contents untouched. It was really because he considered himself in her debt for this act, and that he prided himself upon paying his debts, that Jabez Potter had come to agree that Ruth should go away to school.

He had not done the thing in a niggardly way, when once he gave his consent. Ruth's new trunk was at the Cheslow railroad station and in it was an adequate supply of such frocks and necessities as a girl of her age would need in the school to which she was bound. Her ticket was bought, too, and in her purse was a crisp ten-dollar note – both purse and money being a special present from Uncle Jabez.

Ruth had learned that the miller was by no means as grim as he looked, and she likewise knew that now he was kindly disposed toward her and really was doing a great deal for her. She was determined to never be ungrateful to Uncle Jabez for satisfying the greatest longing she had ever had – to go to Briarwood Hall, a boarding school.

Suddenly a young man put his head in at the kitchen door, grinned, and said:

"They're a-comin', Miss Ruthie. I see 'em up the road."

Ruth jumped up at once and ran for her coat and hat.

"There, child!" cried Aunt Alvira, "ye haven't eaten enough breakfast to keep a fly alive. Lucky I've got a good basket of lunch put up for ye. It'll be a long journey – by train, boat, and stage coach. You'll be hungry enough before ye git there – Oh, my back and oh, my bones!" she added, as she hobbled to the dresser for the luncheon box.

Ruth flashed back into the room and cried to the youth on the porch:

"Is the car really in sight, Ben?"

"It's almost here, Miss."

Indeed, they could hear the purring of a motor-car coming up the river road. Ruth flung her arms about Uncle Jabez's neck, although he did not rise from the table where he was methodically putting his breakfast away as though nothing unusual was happening.

"You've been a dear, good uncle to me," she whispered, "and I love you for it. I'll be careful of the money, and I'll get all the learning I can for the money you pay out – now just you see if I don't!"

"I ain't sure that it'll do either of us much good," grumbled Uncle Jabez, and he did not even follow her to the door as she ran out.

But Aunt Alvira hobbled after her, and pressed her close before she would let the girl run down the walk.

"Blessin's on ye, ye pretty creetur," she crooned over Ruth. "I'll think of ye ev'ry moment ye air away. This is your home, Ruthie; ye ain't got nary 'nother – don't fergit that. And yer old A'nt Alviry'll be waitin' for ye here, an' jest longin' for the time when ye come home."

Ruth kissed her again and again. Two excited young voices called to her from the automobile.

"Come on! Come on, Ruth. Do come away!"

She kissed Aunt Alvira once more, waved her hand to bashful Ben, who was Uncle Jabez's man-of-all-work, and ran down to the waiting car. In the seat beside the chauffeur was a bright-looking, black-haired boy in a military uniform of blue, who seized her lunch basket and handbag and put them both in a safe place. In the tonneau was a plainly dressed lady and a brilliantly pretty girl perhaps a year older than Ruth. This young lady received the girl from the Red Mill rapturously when she sprang into the tonneau, and hugged her tightly as the car started on. She was Ruth's dearest friend, Helen Cameron. It was her brother Tom in front, and the lady was Mrs. Murchiston, who had been the governess of the Cameron twins since their babyhood, and was now to remain in the great house – "Outlook" – Mr. Macy Cameron's home, as housekeeper, while his son and daughter were away at school.

For Tom was bound for Seven Oaks Military Academy, and that was only ten miles, or so, this side of Lumberton, near which was situated Briarwood Hall, the boarding school which was the girls' destination. Tom had attended Cheslow High School for a year; but Ruth and Helen were about equally advanced in their studies and expected to be both roommates and classmates at the Hall.

Ruth stood up in the car as it rolled up the hill toward Cheslow and looked back at the Red Mill. She fluttered her handkerchief as long as she could see the little figure of Aunt Alvira on the porch. Uncle Jabez came out and strode down the path to the mill. Then the car shot around a curve in the road and the scene was blotted out.

How much was to happen to her before she saw the Red Mill again!

CHAPTER II

THE MAN WHO PLAYED THE HARP

In the first volume of this series, entitled, "Ruth Fielding of the Red Mill; Or, Jasper Parloe's Secret," is related how Ruth and Helen and Tom came to be such close friends. The Camerons had been with Ruth when the lost cash-box belonging to Uncle Jabez Potter was found, and out of which incident Ruth's presence in the Camerons' automobile on this beautiful September morning, and the fact that she was accompanying Helen to school, arose.

Mr. Macy Cameron, a wealthy dry-goods merchant, and a widower, had selected the best school for his daughter to attend of which he could learn. Briarwood Hall, of which the preceptress was Mrs. Grace Tellingham, was a large school (there being more than two hundred scholars in attendance for the coming term), but it remained "select" in the truest sense of the word. It was not an institution particularly for the daughters of wealthy people, nor a school to which disheartened parents could send either unruly girls, or dunces.

Without Mrs. Murchiston's recommendation Helen Cameron could not have gained entrance to Briarwood; without the attested examination papers of Miss Cramp, teacher of the district school, who had prepared Ruth for entering Cheslow High School before it was supposed that she could go to Briarwood, the girl from the Red Mill would not have been starting on this journey.

"My goodness me!" exclaimed Helen, when Ruth had sat down and Cheslow was coming into view before them. "I'm just as excited as I can be. Aren't you afraid of meeting Mrs. Tellingham? She's got an A. B. after her name. And her husband is a doctor of almost everything you can think!"

Mrs. Murchiston smiled, but said with some sternness; "I really hope, Helen, that Briarwood will quell your too exuberant spirits to a degree. But you need not be afraid of Dr. Tellingham. He is the mildest old gentleman one ever saw. He is doubtless engaged upon a history of the Mound Builders of Peoria County, Illinois; or upon a pamphlet suggested by the finding of a fossilized man in the caves of Arizona."

"Is he a great writer, Mrs. Murchiston?" asked Ruth, wonderingly.

"He has written a great many histories – if that constitutes being a great writer," replied the governess, with a quiet smile. "But if it was not for Mrs. Tellingham I fear that Briarwood Hall could not exist. However, the doctor is a perfectly harmless person."

From this Ruth drew the conclusion (for she was a thoughtful girl – thoughtful beyond her years, as well as imaginative) that Mrs. Grace Tellingham was a rather strong-minded lady and that the doctor would prove to be both mild and "hen-pecked."

The car sped along the beautifully shaded road leading into Cheslow; but there was still ample time for the travelers to catch the train. On the right hand, as they advanced, appeared a gloomy-looking house with huge pillars upholding the portico roof, which was set some distance back from the road. On two posts, one either side of the arched gateway, were set green lanterns. A tall, stoop-shouldered old gentleman, with a sweeping mustache and hair that touched his coat collar, and a pair of keen, dark eyes, came striding down the walk to the street as the motor-car drew near.

"Doctor Davison!" cried Helen and Ruth together.

The chauffeur slowed down and stopped as the doctor waved his hand.

"I must bid you girls good-bye here," he said, coming to the automobile to shake hands. "I have a call and cannot be at the station. And I expect all of you to do your best in your studies. But look out for your health, too. Take plenty of gym work, girls. Tom, you rascal! I want to hear of you standing just as well in athletics as you do in your books. Ah! if Mercy was going with you, I'd think the party quite complete."

"What do you hear from her, Doctor?" questioned Ruth, eagerly.

"My little Goody Two-sticks is hopping around pretty lively. She will come home in a few days. Too bad she cannot see you before you go. But then – perhaps you'll see her, after all."

"What do you mean?" demanded Helen, looking sharply at the physician. "You're hiding something. I can see it! You've got something up your sleeve, Doctor!"

"Quite so – my wrist!" declared the physician, and now, having shaken hands all around, he hurried away, looking vastly mysterious.

"Now, what do you suppose he meant by that?" demanded Helen. "I'm suspicious of him. He's always bringing unexpected things about. And poor Mercy Curtis –"

"If she could only go to Briarwood with us," sighed Ruth.

"She would make you and Helen hustle in your work, all right," declared Tom, looking over the back of his seat. "She's the smartest little thing that I ever saw."

"That's what Dr. Davison says," Ruth observed. "If the surgeons have enabled her to walk again, and dispense with the wheel chair, why couldn't she come to Briarwood?"

"I don't think Sam Curtis is any too well fixed," said Tom, shaking his head. "And Mercy's long illness has been a great expense to them. Hello! here we are at the station, with plenty of time to spare."

Mrs. Murchiston was not going with them; the trio of young folk were to travel alone, so Tom took the tickets, got the trunk checks, and otherwise played escort to the two girls. There were several friends at the station to bid the Camerons good-bye; but there was nobody but the stationmaster to say a word to Ruth Fielding. It was his lame daughter whom they had been discussing with Dr. Davison – an unfortunate girl who had taken a strong liking for Ruth, and for whom the girl from the Red Mill, with her cheerful spirit and pleasant face, had done a world of good.

The train was made up and they got aboard. Just below Cheslow was the Y where this train branched off the main line, and took its way by a single-track, winding branch, through the hills to the shore of Lake Osago. But the young folks did not have to trouble about their baggage after leaving Cheslow, for that was checked through – Tom's grip and box to Seven Oaks, and the girls' over another road, after crossing Lake Osago, to Lumberton, on Triton Lake.

Lake Osago was a beautiful body of water, some thirty miles long, and wide in proportion; island-dotted and bordered by a rolling country. There were several large towns upon its shores, and, in one place, a great summer camp of an educational society. Steamboats plied the lake, and up and down the rivers which either emptied into the Osago, or flowed out of it, as far as the dams.

The trio of school-bound young folk left the train very demurely and walked down the long wharf to the puffy little steamboat that was to take them the length of the lake to Portageton. Tom had been adjured by his father to take good care of his sister and Ruth, and he felt the burden of this responsibility. Helen declared, in a whisper to Ruth, that she had never known her twin brother to be so overpoweringly polite and thoughtful.

Nevertheless, the fact that they were for the very first time traveling alone (at least, the Camerons had never traveled alone before) did not spoil their enjoyment of the journey. The trip down the lake on the little side-wheel steamer was very interesting to all three. First the Camerons and Ruth Fielding went about to see if they could find any other girl or boy who appeared to be bound to school like themselves. But Tom said he was alone in that intention among the few boys aboard; and there were no girls upon the *Lanawaxa*, as the little steamboat was named, save Ruth and Helen.

Tom did not neglect the comfort of the girls, but he really could not keep away from the engine-room of the *Lanawaxa*. Tom was mightily interested in all things mechanical, and in engines especially. So the girls were left to themselves for a while upon the upper deck of the steamboat. They were very comfortable under the awning, and had books, and their luncheon, and a box of candy that Tom had bought and given to Ruth, and altogether they enjoyed the trip quite as much as anybody.

The breeze was quite fresh and there were not many passengers on the forward deck where the girls were seated. But one lady sitting near attracted their attention almost at first. She was such

a little, doll-like lady; so very plainly and neatly dressed, yet with a style about her that carried the plain frock she wore, and the little hat, as though they were both of the richest materials. She was dark, had brilliant eyes, and her figure was youthful. Yet, when she chanced to raise her veil, Ruth noted that her face was marred by innumerable fine wrinkles – just like cracks in the face of a wax doll that had been exposed to frost.

"Isn't she a cunning little thing?" whispered Helen, seeing how much Ruth was attracted by the little lady.

"She's not a dwarf. There's nothing wrong with her," said Ruth. "She's just a lady in miniature; isn't she? Why, Helen, she's no taller than you are."

"She's dainty," repeated her chum. "But she looks odd."

Below, on the other deck, the music of a little orchestra had been tinkling pleasantly. Now a man with the harp, another with a violin, and a third with a huge guitar, came up the companionway and grouped themselves to play upon the upper deck. The three musicians were all foreigners – French or Italian. The man who played the harp was a huge, fleshy man, with a red waistcoat and long, black mustache. The waistcoat and mustache were the two most noticeable things about him. He sat on a little campstool while he played.

The musicians struck into some rollicking ditty that pleased the ear. The two girls enjoyed the music, and Helen searched her purse for a coin to give whichever of the musicians came around for the collection at the end of the concert. There was but one person on the forward deck who did not seem to care for the music. The little lady, whose back was to the orchestra, did not even look around.

All the time he was playing the huge man who thrummed the harp seemed to have his eyes fixed upon the little lady. This both Ruth and Helen noted. He was so big and she was so fairy-like, that the girls could not help becoming interested in the fact that the harpist was so deeply "smitten."

"Isn't he funny?" whispered Helen to Ruth. "He's so big and she's so little. And he pays more attention to her than he does to playing the tune."

Just then the orchestra of three pieces finished its third tune. That was all it ever jingled forth before making a collection. The man who played the guitar slipped the broad strap over his shoulders and stood up as though to pass his cap. But instantly the huge harpist arose and muttered something to him in a guttural tone. The other sat down and the big man seized the cap and began to move about the deck to make such collection as the audience was disposed to give for the music.

Although he had stared so at the unconscious lady's back, the big man did not go in her direction at first, as the two girls quite expected him to do. He went around to the other side of the deck after taking Helen's toll, and so manoeuvred as to come to the end of the lady's bench and suddenly face her.

"See him watch her, Ruth?" whispered Helen again. "I believe he knows her."

There was such a sly smile on the fat man's face that he seemed to be having a joke all to himself; yet his eyebrows were drawn down over his nose in a scowl. It was not a pleasant expression that he carried on his countenance to the little lady, before whom he appeared with a suddenness that would have startled almost anybody. He wheeled around the end of the settee on which she sat and hissed some word or phrase in her ear, leaning over to do so.

The little woman sprang up with a smothered shriek. The girls heard her chatter something, in which the word "*merci*" was plain. She shrank from the big man; but he was only bowing very low before her, with the cap held out for a contribution, and his grinning face aside.

"She is French," whispered Helen, excitedly, in Ruth's ear. "And he spoke in the same language. How frightened she is!"

Indeed, the little lady fumbled in her handbag for something which she dropped into the insistent cap of the harpist. Then, almost running along the deck, she whisked into the cabin. She had pulled the veil over her face again, but as she passed the girls they felt quite sure that she was sobbing.

The big harpist, with the same unpleasant leer upon his face, rolled down the deck in her wake, carelessly humming a fragment of the tune he had just been playing. He had collected all the

contributions in his big hand – a pitiful little collection of nickels and dimes – and he tossed them into the air and caught them expertly as he joined the other players. Then all three went aft to repeat their concert.

An hour later the *Lanawaxa* docked at Portageton. When our young friends went ashore and walked up the freight-littered wharf, Ruth suddenly pulled Helen's sleeve.

"Look there! There – behind the bales of rags going to the paper-mill. Do you see them?" whispered Ruth.

"I declare!" returned her chum. "Isn't that mysterious? It's the little foreign lady and the big man who played the harp – and how earnestly they are talking."

"You see, she knew him after all," said Ruth. "But what a wicked-looking man he is! And she *was* frightened when he spoke to her."

"He looks villainous enough to be a brigand," returned her chum, laughing. "Yet, whoever heard of a *fat* brigand? That would take the romance all out of the profession; wouldn't it?"

"And fat villains are not so common; are they?" returned Ruth, echoing the laugh.

CHAPTER III

APPROACHING THE PROMISED LAND

Tom had tried to remove the smut of the steamboat engine-room from his face with his handkerchief; but as his sister told him, his martial appearance in the uniform of the Seven Oaks cadets was rather spoiled by "a smootchy face." There wasn't time then, however, to make any toilet before the train left. They were off on the short run to Seven Oaks in a very few minutes after leaving the *Lanawaxa*.

Tom was very much excited now. He craned his head out of the car window to catch the first glimpse of the red brick barracks and dome of the gymnasium, which were the two most prominent buildings belonging to the Academy. Finally the hill on which the school buildings stood flashed into view. They occupied the summit of the knoll, while the seven great oaks, standing in a sort of druidical circle, dotted the smooth, sloping lawn that descended to the railroad cut.

"Oh, how ugly!" cried Helen, who had never seen the place before. "I do hope that Briarwood Hall will be prettier than *that*, or I shall want to run back home the very first week."

Her brother smiled in a most superior way.

"That's just like a girl," he said. "Wanting a school to look pretty! Pshaw! I want to see a jolly crowd of fellows, that's what I want. I hope I'll get in with a good crowd. I know Gil Wentworth, who came here last year, and he says he'll put me in with a nice bunch. That's what I'm looking forward to."

The train was slowing down. There was a handsome brick station and a long platform. This was crowded with boys, all in military garb like Tom's own. They looked so very trim and handsome that Helen and Ruth were quite excited. There were boys ranging from little fellows of ten, in knickerbockers, to big chaps whose mustaches were sprouting on their upper lips.

"Oh, dear me!" gasped Ruth. "See what a crowd we have got to go through. All those boys!"

"That's all right," Tom said, gruffly. "I'll see you to the stage. There it stands yonder – and a jolly old scarecrow of a carriage it is, too!"

He was evidently feeling somewhat flurried himself. He was going to meet more than half the great school informally right there at the station. They had gathered to meet and greet "freshmen."

But the car in which our friends rode stopped well along the platform and very near the spot where the old, brown, battered, and dust-covered stage coach, drawn by two great, bony horses, stood in the fall sunshine. Most of the Academy boys were at the other end of the platform.

Gil Wentworth, Tom's friend, had given young Cameron several pointers as to his attitude on arrival at the Seven Oaks station. He had been advised to wear the school uniform (he had passed the entrance examinations two months before) so as to be less noticeable in the crowd.

Very soon a slow and dirge-like chant arose from the cadets gathered on the station platform. From the rear cars of the train had stepped several boys in citizen's garb, some with parents or guardians and some alone, and all burdened with more or less baggage and a doubtful air that proclaimed them immediately "new boys." The hymn of greeting rose in mournful cadence:

"Freshie! Freshie! How-de-do!
We're all waiting here for you.
Hold your head up!
Square each shoulder!
Thrust your chest out!
Do look bolder!

Mamma's precious – papa's man —

Keep the tears back if you can.
Sob! Sob! Sob!
It's an awful job —
Freshie's leaving home and mo-o-ther!"

The mournful wailing of that last word cannot be expressed by mere type. There were other verses, too, and as the new boys filed off into the path leading up to the Academy with their bags and other encumbrances, the uniformed boys, *en masse*, got into step behind them and tramped up the hill, singing this dreadful dirge. The unfortunate new arrivals had to listen to the chant all the way up the hill. If they ran to get away from the crowd, it only made them look the more ridiculous; the only sensible way was to endure it with a grin.

Tom grinned widely himself, for he had certainly been overlooked. Or, he thought so until he had placed the two girls safely in the big omnibus, had kissed Helen good-bye, and shaken hands with Ruth. But the girls, looking out of the open door of the coach, saw him descend from the step into the midst of a group of solemn-faced boys who had only held back out of politeness to the girls whom Tom escorted.

Helen and Ruth, stifling their amusement, heard and saw poor Tom put through a much more severe examination than the other boys, for the very reason that he had come dressed in his uniform. He was forced to endure a searching inquiry regarding his upbringing and private affairs, right within the delighted hearing of the wickedly giggling girls. And then a tall fellow started to put him through the manual of arms.

Poor Tom was all at sea in that, and the youth, with gravity, declared that he was insulting the uniform by his ignorance and caused him to remove his coat and turn it inside out; and so Helen and Ruth saw him marched away with his stern escort, in a most ridiculous red flannel garment (the lining of the coat) which made him conspicuous from every barrack window and, indeed, from every part of the academy hill.

"Oh, dear me!" sighed Helen, wiping her eyes and almost sobbing after her laughter. "And Tommy thought he would escape any form of hazing! He wasn't so cute as he thought he was."

But Ruth suddenly became serious. "Suppose we are greeted in any such way at Briarwood?" she exclaimed. "I believe some girls are horrid. They have hazing in some girls' schools, I've read. Of course, it won't hurt us, Helen —"

"It'll be just fun, I think!" cried the enthusiastic Helen and then she stopped with an explosive "Oh!"

There was being helped into the coach by the roughly dressed and bewhiskered driver, the little, doll-like, foreign woman whom they thought had been left behind at Portageon.

"There ye air, Ma'mzell!" this old fellow said. "An' here's yer bag — an' yer umbrella — an' yer parcel. All there, be ye? Wal, wal, wal! So I got two more gals fer Briarwood; hev I?"

He was a jovial, rough old fellow, with a wind-blown face and beard and hair enough to make his head look to be as big as a bushel basket. He was dressed in a long, faded "duster" over his other nondescript garments, and his battered hat was after the shape of those worn by Grand Army men. He limped, too, and was slow in his movements and deliberate in his speech.

"I s'pose ye *be* goin' ter Briarwood, gals?" he added, curiously.

"Yes," replied Ruth.

"Where's yer baggage?" he asked.

"We only have our bags. Our trunks have gone by the way of Lumberton," explained Ruth.

"Ah! Well! All right!" grunted the driver, and started to shut the door. Then he glanced from Ruth and Helen to the little foreign lady. "I leave ye in good hands," he said, with a hoarse chuckle. "This here lady is one o' yer teachers, Ma'mzell Picolet." He pronounced the little lady's name quite as outlandishly as he did "mademoiselle." It sounded like "Pickle-yet" on his tongue.

"That will do, M'sieur Dolliver," said the little lady, rather tartly. "I may venture to introduce myself – is it not?"

She did not raise her veil. She spoke English with scarcely any accent. Occasionally she arranged her phrases in an oddly foreign way; but her pronunciation could not be criticised. Old Dolliver, the stage driver, grinned broadly as he closed the door.

"Ye allus make me feel like a Frenchman myself, when ye say 'moosher,' Ma'mzell," he chuckled.

"You are going to Briarwood Hall, then, my young ladies?" said Miss Picolet.

"Yes, Ma'am," said Ruth, shyly.

"I shall be your teacher in the French language – perhaps in deportment and the graces of life," the little lady said, pleasantly. "You will both enter into advanced classes, I hope?"

Helen, after all, was more shy than Ruth with strangers. When she became acquainted she gained confidence rapidly. But now Ruth answered again for both:

"I was ready to enter the Cheslow High School; Helen is as far advanced as I am in all studies, Miss Picolet."

"Good!" returned the teacher. "We shall get on famously with such bright girls," and she nodded several times.

But she was not really companionable. She never raised her veil. And she only talked with the girls by fits and starts. There were long spaces of time when she sat huddled in the corner of her seat, with her face turned from them, and never said a word.

But the nearer the rumbling old stagecoach approached the promised land of Briarwood Hall the more excited Ruth and Helen became. They gazed out of the open windows of the coach doors and thought the country through which they traveled ever so pretty. Occasionally old Dolliver would lean out from his seat, twist himself around in a most impossible attitude so as to see into the coach, and bawl out to the two girls some announcement of the historical or other interest of the localities they passed.

Suddenly, as they surmounted a long ridge and came out upon the more open summit, they espied a bridle path making down the slope, through an open grove and across uncultivated fields beyond – a vast blueberry pasture. Up this path a girl was coming. She swung her hat by its strings in her hand and commenced to run up the hill when she spied the coach.

She was a thin, wiry, long-limbed girl. She swung her hat excitedly and although the girls in the coach could not hear her, they knew that she shouted to Old Dolliver. He pulled up, braking the lumbering wheels grumblingly. The newcomer's sharp, freckled face grew plainer to the interested gaze of Ruth and Helen as she came out of the shadow of the trees into the sunlight of the dusty highway.

"Got any Infants, Dolliver?" the girl asked, breathlessly.

"Two on 'em, Miss Cox," replied the stage driver.

"Then I'm in time. Of course, nobody's met 'em?"

"Hist! Ma'mzell's in there," whispered Dolliver, hoarsely.

"Oh! She!" exclaimed Miss Cox, with plain scorn of the French teacher. "That's all right, Dolliver. I'll get in. Ten cents, mind you, from here to Briarwood. That's enough."

"All right, Miss Cox. Ye allus was a sharp one," chuckled Dolliver, as the sharp-faced girl jerked open the nearest door of the coach and stared in, blinking, out of the sunlight.

CHAPTER IV

THE RIVALRY OF THE UPEDES AND THE FUSSY CURLS

The passengers in the Seven Oaks and Lumberton stage sat facing one another on the two broad seats. Mademoiselle Picolet had established herself in one corner of the forward seat, riding with her back to the driver. Ruth and Helen were side by side upon the other seat, and this newcomer slid quickly in beside them and smiled a very broad and friendly smile at the two chums.

"When you've been a little while at Briarwood Hall," she said, in her quick, pert way, "you'll learn that that's the only way to do with Old Dolliver. Make your bargain before you get into the Ark – that's what we call this stage – or he surely will overcharge you. Oh! how-do, Miss Picolet!"

She spoke to the French teacher so carelessly – indeed, in so scornful a tone – that Ruth was startled. Miss Picolet bowed gravely and said something in return in her own language which made Miss Cox flush, and her eyes sparkle. It was doubtless of an admonishing nature, but Ruth and Helen did not understand it.

"Of course, you are the two girls whom we ex – that is, who were expected to-day?" the girl asked the chums, quickly.

"We are going to Briarwood Hall," said Ruth, timidly.

"Well, I'm glad I happened to be out walking and overtook the stage," their new acquaintance said, with apparent frankness and cordiality. "I'm Mary Cox. I'm a Junior. The school is divided into Primary, Junior and Senior. Of course, there are many younger girls than either of you at Briarwood, but all newcomers are called Infants. Probably, however, you two will soon be in the Junior grade, if you do not at once enter it."

"I am afraid we shall both feel very green and new," Ruth said. "You see, neither Helen nor I have ever been to a school like this before. My friend is Helen Cameron and my name is Ruth Fielding."

"Ah! you're going to room together. You have a nice room assigned to you, too. It's on my corridor – one of the small rooms. Most of us are in quartettes; but yours is a duet room. That's nice, too, when you are already friends."

She seemed to have informed herself regarding these particular newcomers, even if she *had* met them quite by accident.

Helen, who evidently quite admired Mary Cox, now ventured to say that she presumed most of the girls were already gathered for the Autumn term.

"There are a good many on hand. Some have been here a week and more. But classes won't begin until Saturday, and then the work will only be planned for the real opening of the term on Monday. But we're all supposed to arrive in time to attend service Sunday morning. Mrs. Tellingham is very strict about that. Those who arrive after that have a demerit to work off at the start."

Mary Cox explained the system under which Briarwood was carried on, too, with much good nature; but all the time she never addressed the French teacher, nor did she pay the least attention to her. The cool way in which she conducted the conversation, commenting upon the school system, the teachers, and all other matters discussed, without the least reference to Miss Picolet, made Ruth, at least, feel unhappy. It was so plain that Mary Cox ignored and slighted the little foreign lady by intention.

"I tell you what we will do," said Mary Cox, finally. "We'll slip out of the stage at the end of Cedar Walk. It's farther to the dormitories that way, but I fancy there'll be few of the girls there. The stage, you see, goes much nearer to Briarwood; but I fancy you girls would just as lief escape the warm greeting we usually give to the arriving Infants," and she laughed.

Ruth and Helen, with a vivid remembrance of what they had seen at Seven Oaks, coincided with this suggestion. It seemed very kind of a Junior to put herself out for them, and the chums told her so.

"Don't bother," said Mary Cox. "Lots of the girls – especially girls of our age, coming to Briarwood for the first time – get in with the wrong crowd. You don't want to do that, you know."

Now, the chums could not help being a little flattered by this statement. Mary Cox was older than Ruth and Helen, and the latter were at an age when a year seemed to be a long time indeed. Besides, Miss Cox was an assured Junior, and knew all about what was still a closed book to Ruth Fielding and Helen Cameron.

"I should suppose in a school like Briarwood," Ruth said, hesitatingly, "that all the girls are pretty nice."

"Oh! they are, to a degree. Oh, yes!" cried Mary Cox. "Briarwood is very select and Mrs. Tellingham is very careful. You must know *that*, Miss Cameron," she added, point-blank to Helen, "or your father would not have sent *you* here."

Helen flushed at this boldly implied compliment. Ruth thought to herself again that Mary Cox must have taken pains to learn all about them before they arrived, and she wondered why the Junior had done so.

"You see, a duo-room costs some money at Briarwood," explained Miss Cox. "Most of us are glad, when we get to be Juniors, to get into a quarto – a quartette, you understand. The primary girls are in big dormitories, anyway. Of course, we all know who your father is, Miss Cameron, and there will be plenty of the girls fishing for your friendship. And there's a good deal of rivalry – at the beginning of each year, especially."

"Rivalry over what?" queried Ruth.

"Why, the clubs," said Mary Cox.

Helen became wonderfully interested at once. Everything pertaining to the life before her at Briarwood was bound to interest Helen. And the suggestion of society in the way of clubs and associations appealed to her.

"What clubs are there?" she demanded of the Junior.

"Why, there are several associations in the school. The Basket Ball Association is popular; but that's athletic, not social. Anybody can belong to that who wishes to play. And we have a good school team which often plays teams from other schools. It's made up mostly of Seniors, however."

"But the other clubs?" urged Helen.

"Why, the principal clubs of Briarwood are the Upedes and the Fussy Curls," said their new friend.

"What ridiculous names!" cried Helen. "I suppose they mean something, though?"

"That's just our way of speaking of them. The Upedes are the Up and Doing Club. The Fussy Curls are the F. C.'s."

"The F. C.'s?" questioned Ruth. "What do the letters really stand for?"

"Forward Club, I believe. I don't know much about the Fussy Curls," Mary said, with the same tone and air that she used in addressing the little French teacher.

"You're a Upede!" cried Helen, quickly.

"Yes," said Mary Cox, nodding, and seemed to have finished with that subject. But Helen was interested; she had begun to like this Cox girl, and kept to the subject.

"What are the Upedes and the F. C.'s rivals about?"

"Both clubs are anxious to get members," Mary Cox said. "Both are putting out considerable effort to gain new members – especially among these who enter Briarwood at the beginning of the year."

"What are the objects of the rival clubs?" put in Ruth, quietly.

"I couldn't tell you much about the Fussy Curls," said Mary, carelessly. "Not being one of them I couldn't be expected to take much interest in their objects. But *our* name tells our object at once. 'Up and Doing'! No slow-coaches about the Upedes. We're all alive and wide awake."

"I hope we will get in with a lively set of girls," said Helen, with a sigh.

"It will be your own fault if you don't," said Mary Cox.

Oddly enough, she did not show any desire to urge the newcomers to join the Upedes. Helen was quite piqued by this. But before the discussion could be carried farther, Mary put her head out of the window and called to the driver.

"Stop at the Cedar Walk, Dolliver. We want to get out there. Here's your ten cents."

Meanwhile the little foreign lady had scarcely moved. She had turned her face toward the open window all the time, and being veiled, the girls could not see whether she was asleep, or awake. She made no move to get out at this point, nor did she seem to notice the girls when Mary flung open the door on the other side of the coach, and Ruth and Helen picked up their bags to follow her.

The chums saw that the stage had halted where a shady, winding path seemed to lead up a slight rise through a plantation of cedars. But the spot was not lonely. Several girls were waiting here for the coach, and they greeted Mary Cox when she jumped down, vociferously.

"Well, Mary Cox! I guess we know what you've been up to," exclaimed one who seemed older than the other girls in waiting.

"Did you rope any Infants, Mary?" cried somebody else.

"'The Fox' never took all that long walk for nothing," declared another.

But Mary Cox paid her respects to the first speaker only, by saying:

"If you want to get ahead of the Upedes, Madge Steele, you Fussy Curls had better set your alarm clocks a little earlier."

Ruth and Helen were climbing out of the old coach now, and the girl named Madge Steele looked them over sharply.

"Pledged, are they?" she said to Mary Cox, in a low tone.

"Well! I've been riding in the Ark with them for the last three miles. Do you suppose I have been asleep?" returned Miss Cox, with a malicious smile.

Ruth and Helen did not distinctly hear this interchange of words between their new friend and Madge Steele; but Ruth saw that the latter was a very well dressed and quiet looking girl – that she was really very pretty and ladylike. Ruth liked her appearance much more than she did that of Mary Cox. But the latter started at once into the cedar plantation, up a serpentine walk, and Helen and Ruth, perforce, went with her. The other girls stood aside – some of them whispering together and smiling at the newcomers. The chums could not help but feel strange and nervous, and Mary Cox's friendship seemed of value to them just then.

Ruth, however, looked back at the tall girl whose appearance had so impressed her. The coach had not started on at once. Old Dolliver did everything slowly. But Ruth Fielding saw a hand beckoning at the coach window. It was the hand of Miss Picolet, the French teacher, and it beckoned Madge Steele.

The latter young lady ran to the coach as it lurched forward on its way. Miss Picolet's face appeared at the window for an instant, and she seemed to say something of importance to Madge Steele. Ruth saw the pretty girl pull open the stage-coach door again, and hop inside. Then the Ark lumbered out of view, and Ruth turned to follow her chum and Mary Cox up the winding Cedar Walk.

CHAPTER V

"THE DUET"

Helen, by this time, having recovered her usual self-possession, was talking "nineteen to the dozen" to their new friend. Ruth was not in the least suspicious; but Mary Cox's countenance was altogether too sharp, her gray eyes were too sly, her manner to the French teacher had been too unkind, for Ruth to become greatly enamored of the Junior. It did really seem very kind of her, however, to put herself out in this way for two "Infants."

"How many teachers are there?" Helen was asking. "And are they all as little as that Miss Picolet?"

"Oh, *she*!" ejaculated Mary Cox, with scorn. "Nobody pays any attention to her. She's not liked, I can tell you."

"Why, she seemed nice enough to us – only not very friendly," said Helen, slowly, for Helen was naturally a kind-hearted girl.

"She's a poverty-stricken little foreigner. She scarcely ever wears a decent dress. I don't really see why Mrs. Tellingham has her at the school at all. She has no friends, or relatives, or anybody that knows her –"

"Oh, yes she has," said Helen, laughing.

"What do you mean?" inquired Mary Cox, suspiciously.

"We saw somebody on the boat coming over to Portageton that knew Miss Picolet."

"Oh, Helen!" ejaculated Ruth, warningly.

But it was too late, Mary Cox wanted to know what Helen meant, and the story of the fat man who had played the harp in the boat orchestra, and who had frightened the French teacher, and had afterward talked so earnestly with her on the dock, all came out in explanation. The Junior listened with a quiet but unpleasant smile upon her face.

"That's just what we've always thought about Miss Picolet," she said. "Her people must be dreadfully common. Friends with a ruffian who plays a harp on a steamboat for his living! Well!"

"Perhaps he is no relative or friend of hers," suggested Ruth, timidly. "Indeed, she seemed to be afraid of him."

"He's mixed up in her private affairs, at least," said Mary, significantly. "I never could bear Miss Picolet!"

Ruth was very sorry that Helen had happened upon this unfortunate subject. But her chum failed to see the significance of it, and the girl from the Red Mill had no opportunity of warning Helen. Mary Cox, too, was most friendly, and it seemed ungrateful to be anything but frank and pleasant with her. Not many big girls (so thought both Ruth and Helen) would have put themselves out to walk up to Briarwood Hall with two Infants and their baggage.

Through breaks in the cedar grove the girls began to catch glimpses of the brown old buildings of Briarwood Hall. Ivy masked the entire end of one of the buildings, and even ran up the chimneys. It had been cut away from the windows, and they showed brilliantly now with the descending sun shining redly upon them.

"It's a beautiful old place, Helen," sighed Ruth.

"I believe you!" agreed her chum, enthusiastically.

"It was originally a great manor house. That was the first building where the tower is," said Mary Cox, as they came out at last upon the more open lawn that gave approach to this side of the collection of buildings, which had been more recently built than the main house. They were built around a rectangular piece of turf called the campus. This, however, the newcomers discovered later,

for they came up in the rear of the particular dormitory building in which Mary declared their room was situated.

"You can go to the office afterwards," she explained, kindly. "You'll want to wash and fix up a little after traveling so far. It always makes one so dirty."

"This is a whole lot better than the way poor Tom was received at his school; isn't it?" whispered Helen, tucking her arm in Ruth's as they came to the steps of the building.

Ruth nodded. But there were so many new things to see that Ruth had few words to spare. There were plenty of girls in sight now. It seemed to the girl from the Red Mill as though there were hundreds of them. Short girls, tall girls, thin girls, plump girls – and the very plumpest girl of her age that Ruth had ever seen, stood right at the top of the steps. She had a pretty, pink, doll-like face which was perpetually a-smile. Whereas some of the girls – especially the older ones – stared rather haughtily at the two Infants, this fat girl welcomed them with a broadening smile.

"Hello, Heavy," said Mary Cox, laughing. "It must be close to supper bell, for you're all ready, I see."

"No," said the stout girl. "There's an hour yet. Are these the two?" she added, nodding at Ruth and Helen.

"I always get what I go after," Ruth heard Mary say, as they whisked in at the door.

In the hall a quiet, pleasant-faced woman in cap and apron met them.

"This is Helen Cameron and Ruth Fielding, Miss Scrimp," said Mary. "Miss Scrimp is matron of our dormitory, girls. I am going up, Miss Scrimp, and I'll show them to their duet."

"Very well, Miss Cox," said the woman, producing two keys, one of which she handed to each of the chums. "Be ready for the bell, girls. You can see Mrs. Tellingham after supper."

Ruth stopped to thank her, but Mary swept Helen on with her up the broad stairway. The room the chums were to occupy (Mr. Cameron had made this arrangement for them) was up this first flight only, but was at the other end of the building, overlooking the campus. It seemed a long walk down the corridor. Some of the doors stood open, and more girls looked out at them curiously as they pursued their way.

Mary was talking in a low voice to Helen now, and Ruth could not hear what she said. But when they stopped at the end of the corridor, and Helen fitted her key into the lock of the door, she said:

"We'd be delighted, Miss Cox. Oh, yes! Ruth and I will both come."

Mary went away whistling and they heard her laughing and talking with other girls who had come out into the corridor before the chums were well in their own room. And what a delightful place it seemed to the two girls, when they entered! Not so small, either. There were two single beds, two dressing tables, running water in a bowl, two closets and two chairs – all this at one end of the room. At the other end was a good-sized table to work at, chairs, a couch, and two sets of shelves for their books. There were two broad windows with wide seats under them, too.

"Isn't it just scrumptious?" cried Helen, hugging Ruth in her delight. "And just think – it's our very own! Oh, Ruthie! won't we just have good times here?"

Ruth was quite as delighted, if she was not so volubly enthusiastic as Helen. It was a much nicer room, of course, than the girl from the Red Mill had ever had before. Her tiny little chamber at the Red Mill was nothing like this.

The girls removed such marks of travel as they could and freshened their dress as well as possible. Their trunks would not arrive at the school until morning, they knew; but they had brought their toilet articles in their bags. These made some display – on Helen's dresser, at least. But when their little possessions came they could make the room look more "homey."

Barely had they arranged their hair when a gentle rap sounded at the door.

"Perhaps that's Miss Cox again," said Helen. "Isn't she nice, Ruth?"

Her friend had no time to reply before opening the door to the visitor. It was not Miss Cox, but Ruth immediately recognized the tall girl whom Mary Cox had addressed as Madge Steele. She came in with a frank smile and her hand held out.

"I didn't know you were going to come to my corridor," she said, frankly. "Which of you is Miss Fielding, and which is Miss Cameron?"

It made the chums feel really grown up to be called "Miss," and they liked this pretty girl at once. Ruth explained their identity as she shook hands. Helen was quite as warmly greeted.

"You will like Briarwood," said Madge Steele. "I know you will. I understand you will enter the Junior classes. I have just entered the Senior grade this year. There are lots of nice girls on this corridor. I'll be glad to introduce you after supper."

"We have not been to the office yet," said Ruth. "I believe that is customary?"

"Oh, you must see the Preceptress. She's just as nice as she can be, is Mrs. Tellingham. You'll see her right after supper?"

"I presume so," Ruth said.

"Then, I tell you what," said Madge. "I'll wait for you and take you to the Forward Club afterwards. We have an open meeting this evening. Mrs. Tellingham will be there – she is a member, you know – so are the other teachers. We try to make all the new girls feel at home."

She nodded to them both brightly and went out. Ruth turned to her chum with a smile.

"Isn't that nice of her, Helen?" she said. "We are getting on famously – Why, Helen! what's the matter?" she cried.

Helen's countenance was clouded indeed. She shook her head obstinately.

"We can't go with her, Ruth," she declared.

"Can't go with her?"

"No."

"Why not, pray?" asked Ruth, much puzzled.

"We can't go to that Forward Club," said Helen, more emphatically.

"Why, my dear!" exclaimed Ruth. "Of course we must. We haven't got to join it. Maybe they wouldn't ask us to join it, anyway. You see, it's patronized by the teachers and the Preceptress herself. We'll be sure to meet the very nicest girls."

"That doesn't follow," said Helen, somewhat stubbornly. "Anyway, we can't go, Ruth."

"But I don't understand, dear," said the puzzled Ruth.

"Why, don't you see?" exclaimed Helen, with some exasperation. "I told Miss Cox we'd go with her."

"Go where?"

"To *her* club. *They* hold a meeting this evening, too. You know, she said there was rivalry between the two big school clubs. Hers is the Upedes."

"Oh! the Up and Doings," laughed Ruth. "I remember."

"She said she would wait for us after we get through with Mrs. Tellingham and introduce us to *her* friends."

"Well!" gasped Ruth, with a sigh. "We most certainly cannot go to both. What shall we do?"

CHAPTER VI

THE ENTERING WEDGE

Since Ruth Fielding had first met Helen Cameron – and that was on the very day the former had come to the Red Mill – the two girls had never had a cross word or really differed much on any subject. Ruth was the more yielding of the two, perhaps, and it might be that that was why Helen seemed so to expect her to yield now.

"Of course, Ruthie, we can't disappoint Miss Cox," she said, with finality. "And after she was so kind to us, too."

"Are you sure she did all that out of simple kindness, Helen?" asked the girl from the Red Mill, slowly.

"Why! what do you mean?"

"Aunt Alviry says one should never look a gift-horse in the mouth," laughed Ruth.

"What *do* you mean?" demanded her chum.

"Why, Helen, doesn't it seem to you that Mary Cox came out deliberately to meet us, and for the purpose of making us feel under obligation to her?"

"For pity's sake, what for?"

"So that we would feel just as *you* do – that we ought if possible to attend the meeting of her society?"

"I declare, Ruth Fielding! How suspicious you have become all of a sudden."

Ruth still laughed. But she said, too: "That is the way it has struck me, Helen. And I wondered if you did not see her attention in the same light, also."

"Why, she hasn't asked us to join the Upedes," said Helen.

"I know. And neither has Miss Steele – "

"You seem to have taken a great fancy to that Madge Steele," interrupted Helen, sharply.

"I think she is nice looking – and she was very polite," said Ruth, quietly.

"Well, I don't care," cried Helen. "Miss Cox has shown us much more kindness. And I promised for us, Ruth. I said we'd attend her club this evening."

"Well," said her chum, slowly. "It *does* look as though we would have to go with Miss Cox, then. We'll tell Miss Steele – "

"I believe your head has been turned by that Madge Steele because she's a Senior," declared Helen, laughing, yet not at all pleased with her friend. "And the F. C.'s are probably a fussy crowd. All the teachers belonging to the club too. I'd rather belong to the Upedes – a real girls' club without any of the teachers to boss it."

Ruth laughed again; but there was no sting in what she said: "I guess you have made up your mind already that the Up and Doing Club is the one Helen Cameron wants to join."

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