

Meade L. T.

Three Girls from School



L. Meade

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Chapter One

Letters

Priscilla Weir, Mabel Lushington, and Annie Brooke were all seated huddled up close together on the same low window-sill. The day was a glorious one in the beginning of July. The window behind the girls was open, and the softest of summer breezes came in and touched their young heads, playing with the tumbled locks of hair of different shades, varying from copper-colour to dark, and then to brightest gold.

Priscilla was the owner of the dark hair; Mabel possessed the copper-colour, Annie Brooke the gold. All three girls looked much about the same age, which might have been anything from sixteen to eighteen. Priscilla was perhaps slightly the youngest of the trio. She had dark-grey, thoughtful eyes; her face was pale, her mouth firm and resolved. It was a sad mouth for so young a girl, but was also capable of much sweetness. Mabel Lushington was made on a big scale. She was already well developed, and the copper in her lovely hair was accompanied by a complexion of peachlike bloom, by coral lips, and red-brown eyes. Those lips of hers were, as a rule, full of laughter. People said of Mabel that she was always either laughing or smiling. She was very much liked in the school, for she was at once good-natured and rich.

Annie Brooke was small. She was the sort of girl who would be described as *petite*. Her hair was bright and pretty. She had beautiful hands and feet, and light-blue eyes. But she was by no means so striking-looking as Mabel Lushington, or so thoughtful and intellectual as Priscilla Weir.

The post had just come in, and two of the girls had received letters. Priscilla read hers, turned a little paler than her wont, slipped it into her pocket, and sat very still, Mabel, on the contrary, held her unopened letter in her lap, and eagerly began to question Priscilla.

"Whom have you heard from? What is the matter with you? Why don't you divulge the contents?"

"Yes, do, Priscilla, please," said Annie Brooke, who was the soul of curiosity. "You know, Priscilla, you never could have secrets from your best friends."

"I have got to leave school," said Priscilla; "there is nothing more to be said. My uncle has written; he has made up his mind; he says I am to learn farming."

"Farming!" cried the other two. "You – a girl!"

"Oh, dairy-work," said Priscilla, "and the managing of a farm-house generally. If I don't succeed within six months he will apprentice me, he says, to a dressmaker."

"Oh, poor Priscilla! But you are a lady."

"Uncle Josiah doesn't mind."

"What an old horror he must be!" said Annie Brooke.

"Yes. Don't let us talk about it." Priscilla jumped up, walked across the room, and took a book from its place on the shelf. As she did so she turned and faced her two companions.

The room in which the three found themselves was one of the most beautiful of the many beautiful rooms at Mrs Lyttelton's school. The house was always called the School-House; and the girls, when asked where they were educated, replied with a certain modest pomposity, "At Mrs Lyttelton's school." Those who had been there knew the value of the announcement, for no school in the whole of England produced such girls: so well-bred, so thoroughly educated, so truly taught those things which make for honour, for purity, for a life of good report.

Mrs Lyttelton had a secret known but to a few: how to develop the very best in each girl brought under her influence. She knew how to give liberty with all essential restraints, and how to cultivate ambition without making the said ambition too worldly-minded. She was adored by all the girls, and there were very few who did not shed tears when the time came for them to leave the School-House.

The said School-House was situated in the most lovely part of Middlesex, not very far from Hendon. It was quite in the country, and commanded a splendid view. The house was old, with many gables, quaint old windows, long passages, and innumerable rooms. Each girl over fifteen had a bedroom to herself in Mrs Lyttelton's school, and each girl over fifteen who deserved the privilege was accorded the *entrée* to the older girls' sitting-room. Into this room no teacher was allowed to enter without permission. The room as completely belonged to the girls as though there were no teachers in the school. Here they could give entertainments; here they could conduct debates; here they could lounge and read and chatter and enjoy themselves to their hearts' delight.

The room wanted for no lack of dainty furnishing. There were cosy nooks in more than one corner; there were easy-chairs galore; and from the low, old-fashioned windows could be seen the most perfect view of the outside world.

Priscilla Weir now turned to look at this view. She had a passionate love for all beautiful things. There was a dimness before her eyes. From the view she glanced at Mabel Lushington; then she looked at Annie Brooke.

Both girls sympathised with her; and yet, not in the way she wanted. She turned abruptly and left the room.

When the door closed behind her Mabel immediately rose, and as she did so the unopened letter tumbled from her lap. Annie Brooke took it up and handed it to her.

"How upset she is!" said Annie.

"Oh yes," replied Mabel; "but I only wish I were in her shoes. Oh, I know, of course, Annie, it is jolly here, and Mrs Lyttelton is a darling; but I want to get into the big world I shall be eighteen in a month, and it seems absurd to keep any girl at school after that age. Aunt Henrietta is in Paris, too, and is going, I believe, to one of the German spas by-and-by for gout treatment. Aunt Henrietta spends the entire year in a round of gaieties. I'd just give the world to join her."

"And why don't you?" asked Annie. "A great many girls leave school at eighteen."

"She seems determined that I shall stay on for at least another year. It is quite nonsense. She seems to think I am *not* clever enough to leave school."

"Well, you are not specially brilliant, are you, dear Lushie?" asked Annie in that soft little voice of hers, which could nevertheless be intensely aggravating. "Now, for instance, prize day is close at hand – the day after to-morrow, no less – and what prize is the fair Mabel likely to carry off?"

"I don't care twopence for prizes," was Mabel's reply; "and I don't specially want to be clever, if I can be beautiful. You think I am beautiful, don't you, Annie?"

"Oh, my dear, of course there is no denying that," said Annie. She looked up with admiration at her friend, and Mabel at that moment, with an added colour in her cheeks and displaying all the charm of her lovely figure, seemed to justify the remark.

"Why don't you read your letter?" said Annie.

"Oh, it is only from Aunt Henrietta, and she does worry me so by the sort of lecturing tone she has taken up of late. She is a dear, good old thing – not so very old, either – at least she doesn't think so; but when I know how she fritters her time and just lives for pleasure, and pleasure only, it is aggravating to be told that I must be earnest and embrace my opportunities, and endeavour to become really well informed; and that, of course, I must on no account hurry from school, for school-time is the best time; and all that sort of nonsense. You understand, don't you, Annie?"

"Yes," said Annie in a low voice, and with a sigh, "I quite understand. I have had a great deal of that myself. Uncle Horace lectures me awfully. I hate being lectured. Don't you?"

"Loathe and detest it," said Mabel.

“My plan,” said Annie, “is to shut my ears; then the lectures don’t seem to matter much. Do you know how to manage that?”

“I am sure I don’t,” said Mabel. “Being possessed of good hearing, I have to listen to words when they are addressed to me, however annoying they may happen to be.”

“Oh, well,” said Annie, “it is quite easy to cultivate the art of shutting your ears. It is done in this way. The very moment the lecturer begins, you fix your mind, instantly, on that thing that captivates you most – your next new dress, for instance, or your future lover, or something else all-absorbing. It is possible to do this and to keep your mind absolutely abstracted, fixed on your own delicious thoughts, and yet your eyes may be directed to the face of the lecturer. You try it next time, Mabel. The very next time your aunt Henrietta begins to talk to you of the advantages of school, you think of – of – oh, that exalted, that exquisite time when *he* proposes. You won’t hear a word of the rasping talk then; not a word, I do assure you.”

Mabel laughed.

“What a goose you are, Annie!” she said. “But really, I suppose it is a good plan.”

“Once I overdid it,” said Annie. “Uncle Horace was talking on, oh! so gently. He was looking a little sad, too, and I knew I should have to make my subject very absorbing not to take in his words. So I had my hero down on his knees, and his hand was clasping mine, and he was talking, oh! most eloquently. I really forgot that Uncle Horace was by, and I burst out: ‘I can’t marry you quite yet, Clement!’ I thought Uncle Horace would have a fit. He was convinced for the remainder of that day that I had been for a short time touched by lunacy. I explained to him as best I could that I was only reciting something I had learned at school; but of course he didn’t believe me.”

“He never understood you; that is one comfort,” laughed Mabel.

“No, my dear, he didn’t. But to this day I do believe he is looking out everywhere for my imaginary Clement. He is convinced that I shall run away with him some day.”

Mabel was silent for a minute. Then she said, “You are too comical, Annie. It is well to have your powers of imagination; but the worst of it is that in my case I get the lectures by letter. Oh, it’s enough to sicken one!”

“Well, read your letter – do,” said Annie.

Mabel sank into the nearest chair, and languidly tearing open the thin envelope of her aunt’s letter, unfolded the sheets and began to read. Annie’s first impulse was to rise and leave the room. She had her own interests to see after, and Mabel would be lost to external things for a bit. But a sudden exclamation from her companion caused her to change her mind. Mabel uttered something between a groan and a laugh, and then, tossing her aunt’s voluminous sheets across to Annie, said:

“Read that letter, and just tell me if Aunt Henrietta isn’t quite enough to drive anybody mad.”

“May I read it all?” asked Annie, who adored confidences, and whose principal power in the school lay in the fact that she was more or less in everybody’s secret.

“Yes, yes; read it aloud. I declare I have hardly taken it in, I am so bewildered at Aunt Henrietta’s point of view.”

Annie accordingly picked up the sheets, put them in order, and proceeded to read the following words:

”Grand Hotel, Paris, *July 10.*

”My dear Mabel, – Your last extraordinary letter and your unladylike, and frantic desire to leave such a desirable place as Mrs Lyttelton’s school have affected me a great deal. You speak with great intemperance, my dear, and annoy me much. You seem to forget that my one sole object in treating you as I do is for your good. But really, after your last letter, I do not think school can be doing you much good, and provided you will subject yourself to a test which I am about to set you, I will yield to your request. I may as well tell you first of all that I strongly disapprove of girls coming out too young. It is quite true that many girls do enter upon life and go

into society at eighteen years of age; but, to begin, my dear Mabel, you are hardly that age yet; and, to go oh, I personally consider eighteen too young. At nineteen you are steadier, older, more formed. During that last precious twelve months between eighteen and nineteen you are capable of learning more than you have done in all your life previously. During those months you are becoming fitted for your future position – ”

“Doesn’t she lecture?” said Mabel. “Didn’t I tell you so? Do go on quickly, please, Annie. Skip that part; I want you to come to the test.”

“I don’t mean to skip a single word,” said Annie.

“Well, be quick,” groaned Mabel. Annie proceeded, her level voice, which neither rose nor fell, but kept on in a sort of even monotone, reaching Mabel’s ears, who was far too interested to allow her thoughts to wander: “‘My dear’ (continued Aunt Henrietta), ‘on receiving your last letter I wrote to Mrs Lyttelton; I could not reply to your letter until I had first heard from your excellent governess. I was pleased to find that on the whole she gave me an admirable report of you. She says that she considers you a promising pupil, not especially brilliant, but plodding and conscientious.’”

“I plodding and conscientious!” said Mabel. “Oh, the horrid epithets!”

“Keep quiet, Mabel,” said Annie. “These are the sort of remarks that are likely to impress your aunt Henrietta.”

“Are they?” said Mabel. “Then in that case I suppose I must endure them.”

“Well,” said Annie, “let me proceed. ‘Mrs Lyttelton is pleased with you, my dear. She says your music is up to the average, your drawing not bad’ – ”

“Not bad, indeed!” burst from Mabel. “I have a *genius* for black and white.”

“Mrs Lyttelton evidently does not see it, Mabel. But stop talking, and let me go on.

”“Your English education, dear Mabel, is, however, your weak point. Mrs Lyttelton considers that you have no love for the good things of literature or history. This she much deplores. She mentions in her letter that she thinks more of the literature prize than any other prize the school offers, and wishes most heartily that you should obtain it. Now, my dear Mabel I make you a proposal. Win the first prize for literature on the coming prize day, and I will take you from school. You shall join me in Paris, and, in short, may consider yourself an emancipated young lady. If, on the other hand, you do not win the prize, you must patiently submit to another year of education, at the end of which time you shall again hear from me. Now, no more grumbles, my dear. Win the prize, and you are free; lose it, and you remain for another year at school.”

“There!” said Mabel; “isn’t it like her? Did you ever in all your life hear of anything more aggravating? She dangles liberty before my eyes, and shows me at the same time that I can as little hope to obtain it as to – well, to fly. *I* obtain the literature prize! Oh Annie, Annie, isn’t it enough to make one mad!”

“I don’t see,” said Annie very gravely, “why you have not a chance of the prize. You have written your essay, haven’t you?”

“Oh yes; I have written something.”

“Of course,” said Annie in a low, thoughtful tone, “you were not likely to be keenly interested until you received this letter, but now matters are very different. You haven’t sent in your essay, have you?”

“No; all the essay? go in after breakfast to-morrow.”

“Well,” said Annie, “you have got to-night.”

“It is hopeless – quite hopeless,” said Mabel; and she began to pace up and down the room.

“I don’t consider it so for a minute,” said Annie.

“If it were not for Priscilla there would be a chance. The only one of us who is really clever at composition is Priscilla.”

“She is the one you have to fear. I believe that with a great deal of pains, and perhaps just a little help from me, you could manage to do something quite excellent.”

“I can’t, I can’t!” said Mabel. “There is no good trying.”

Annie’s eyes were very bright, and there had come vivid spots of colour into her cheeks.

“You have got to-night,” she said suddenly, “and you must not lose the chance.”

“Oh! it is useless,” said Mabel.

“Leave it to me,” remarked Annie. “I will come to your room after you go to bed to-night; I will tap twice on the wall, and you will know it is I. I am so sorry for you, Mabel; it is really too bad of your aunt Henrietta.”

“It is just like her,” said the angry Mabel. “She knew I could not possibly win the prize, and so she set me this test. Now, when I have to write to her meekly and say, ‘Dear, kind Auntie, – Your Mabel came out worst of all the girls who tried for the literature prize,’ she will write again and say, ‘Who was right, Mabel, you or I?’ Oh, I would give all the world to prove her wrong!”

“I quite understand,” said Annie; “I’d feel precisely the same if it were Uncle Horace; but then, with all his faults, Uncle Horace would not set me an impossible task. How queer, how queer is the world; you pine to leave school, and Priscilla Weir would give her eyes to stay! Yet poor Priscilla, who is almost a genius, has to go, and you, who are not a bit of a genius, and will never appreciate the learning that is given at the school, will have to stay.”

“Yes; things are most horribly contrary,” said Mabel.

“Unless I can set them right,” thought Annie to herself.

There was an expression on her face which Mabel could not fathom when she suddenly ran up to her, kissed her, and said, “Leave it to me.”

Chapter Two

The Temptation

Priscilla, when she left the girls' special sitting-room, went out into the grounds. She saw a group of her young companions standing on the lawn. She was, on the whole, a favourite in the school, particularly with the younger girls, for she was gentle and good-natured, often helping them with their studies and sympathising with their small sorrows. But now she avoided her companions, and going to a shrubbery at one side of the grounds, paced up and down a shady walk.

Priscilla was very ambitious, and the letter she had received was the end of everything. She was an only child. Her father was in India, her mother dead. She was left under the care of an uncle, her mother's brother, a rough, fairly good-natured, but utterly unsympathetic person. Priscilla's father was a clerk, with only a very small salary, in one of the Government Houses at Madras. He could do little more than support himself, and Priscilla was therefore left to the care of Uncle Josiah. It was he who paid for her schooling, who received her during the holidays, who gave her what clothes she possessed – in short, who supplied what he considered her every want.

Occasionally she heard from her father; but by this time he had married again, had one or two little children, and found it more than ever impossible to do anything for Priscilla. When he wrote he urged her to make the most of her education, for when she was really properly educated she could support herself as a governess, or a coach, or a mistress at one of the high schools.

Priscilla was full of ambition, and the letter which she had just received seemed at that moment like her death-blow.

"What am I to do?" she thought. "When I am with Uncle Josiah, he and Aunt Susan will make me nothing whatever but a household drudge. Does not his letter – his horrid letter – say so?"

She took it out of her pocket and read the contents:

"You have had sufficient money spent on your schooling. You will be eighteen your next birthday, and surely by then you can earn your living. I don't want you to take a post as teacher, for by all accounts teachers are badly paid. You can stay with us for six months and learn dairy-work under your aunt, and how to manage a household. There will be plenty for a hearty lass to do in looking after the little ones and attending to the linen, and helping your aunt, whenever you have an odd minute, at making the children's clothes. If you don't turn out a success – and your aunt Susan will tell you that pretty smart – I will apprentice you to Miss Johnson in the village, where you can learn dressmaking – a fifty times better thing, in my opinion, than teaching. We will expect you this day fortnight, and I will come to the station in the spring-cart to meet you. – Your affectionate uncle, Josiah Henderson."

Priscilla crushed up the letter, flung it from her, and stamped on it. She was employed in this way when a voice behind caused her to turn her head, and she saw Annie Brooke running to meet her.

"Oh Priscie, whatever is the matter? What *are* you killing? You are stamping your foot with all your might. What poor creature has been silly enough to offend you?"

"It is this poor creature," said Priscilla. She lifted the mangled letter and held it between her finger and thumb. "It is this horror," she said. "I am nearly mad. If you had a future like mine hanging over you, you would be off your head too."

"Oh, poor Priscie!" said Annie. "I do sympathise – I do really. Your uncle must be a dreadful man. Why, of course you must not leave school; you are cleverer than all the rest of us put together. Mrs Lyttelton thinks no end of you. She is prouder of you than of any other pupil she possesses. Of course you must not go."

"It is very kind of you to be so sympathetic, Annie, replied Priscilla; person who pays for my schooling is Uncle Josiah. He has paid for it ever since father went back to India, and he doesn't mean to pay any more. He says so in this letter. He says I am to go back to help Aunt Susan; and if

I fail in pleasing her I am to be apprenticed to a country dressmaker. He considers either occupation preferable to that of a teacher. So here I am, Annie, and no one can alter the state of things.”

“But you would give anything in the world to stay, notwithstanding your uncle’s letter?”

“Anything,” cried Priscilla. “I said just now what is true, that I would give ten years of my life; I would be twenty-eight instead of just eighteen, and you know what that means – all one’s youth gone.”

“You must be desperately in earnest,” said Annie, “if you mean that, for of course to be twenty-eight means to be quite an old maid. I do pity you, poor Priscilla!”

Priscilla did not reply. She walked on a little faster. She wanted Annie to leave her, but instead of doing this, Annie Brooke slipped her hand through Priscilla’s arm.

“Have you written your prize essay yet?” she said.

Priscilla brought herself back to the subject of the essay with an effort.

“Oh yes,” she replied; “I finished it last night.”

“I suppose it is very good?” said Annie.

“I thought it was at the time,” answered Priscilla; “but where is the use of worrying about it? Uncle Josiah wouldn’t think a scrap more about me if I wrote the finest prize essay in the world. On the contrary, he would be more disgusted than pleased. If I had received this letter a week ago I should not have bothered about the essay. I don’t even know now that I shall compete.”

“I wonder,” said Annie.

“What is the matter with you, Annie?”

“I have a thought in my head, Priscie – such a funny thought. You know Mabel Lushington?”

“Why, of course.”

“She is just as angry as you are. You remember you both got letters at the same time. You read yours and told us about it. Then you left the room. Afterwards she read hers. What do you think her letter was about?”

“I am afraid I neither know nor care,” replied Priscilla.

“That is very selfish of you, for you ought to care. Well, I will tell you. She has got to stay at school, whether she likes it or not.”

“Lucky, lucky girl!” said Priscilla.

“But that is just the point, you old silly. She doesn’t consider herself at all lucky. She hates and detests school, and wants to go; she would give all the world to go.”

“And can’t she?”

“No; at least there is scarcely a chance. Her aunt has subjected her to a ridiculous test. She says that if by any chance Mabel wins the first prize in the literature competition she may leave school and join her in Paris. If she does not win it, she has to stay here for another year. Mabel is nearly mad, for of course she has not a chance of the prize.”

“Not a chance,” said Priscilla.

“But you don’t care about winning it, and you are the one who is sure to do so.”

“I don’t greatly care,” said Priscilla. “Of course, I would rather win than not win; that is about all.”

“Suppose – suppose,” said Annie – “I am not saying it could be done, and I am not saying it is right – I am not pretending to any conscience in the matter; but —*suppose*– you and Mabel changed essays; and – suppose *you* had your dearest wish, and Mabel *her* dearest wish – you stayed at school for another year and Mabel went to Paris to join her aunt. Now – just suppose.”

Chapter Three

To Catch at a Straw

Priscilla's eyes, large, dark, grey, and full of feeling, opened to their widest extent as she turned them now and fixed them on her companion.

"What do you mean?" she said. "Do you know that you are a horrible girl to propose anything of this sort. How dare you? I don't want to speak to you again."

"Very well, Priscilla," replied Annie, by no means offended, and speaking in a gentle, meek little voice. "I *have* heard of worse things being done before, and I only meant to help you both. You are both my greatest friends. One of you wants to stay at school; the other wants to leave school. It can be done by such a very simple matter as changing your essays."

"It is horrible – quite too horrible even to think about," was Priscilla's response.

"But you said you didn't care about the prize."

"No; but I do care about honour. I am bad, but I am not as bad as all that."

"Well," said Annie, a little frightened at Priscilla's manner and the look on her face, "the whole thing can do me no good; I don't profit by it. I have got to stay at school, *nolens volens*; and I think I should prefer Mabel as my greatest friend for the next twelve months to you. You won't say anything about it, Priscie, for that would indeed be to ruin me, and I only meant to make you both happy."

"Oh, of course I won't tell," said Priscilla. "I shall be leaving school in a fortnight, and then you won't ever see me again. I can promise you to keep quiet with regard to this proposal of yours for that time."

"Very well," said Annie; "then that is all right. I will tell poor Mabel."

"You don't mean that you have suggested the thing to her?"

"Not exactly, but I have hinted at it – I mean at something – and she is very much interested. I'll have to tell her that my little scheme is up a tree. Poor old Mabel! She is such a dear, too. We shall be glad to keep her at school."

"Really, Annie, you are too extraordinary. Have you written a paper for the literature prize yourself?"

"I? Oh yes. But I have no imagination; not a bit. The subject is 'Idealism' – such an odious, impossible subject; but it has appealed to you."

"It did appeal to me very strongly; I loved to write about it."

"I can fancy you at it; you are just full of imagination."

"It is my dearest possession," said Priscilla. A *new* look came into her eyes. She turned her fine face and looked at her companion. "And when I leave school," she added, "I shall take it with me. Even when I am working in the dairy and mending the children's socks I shall still rejoice in it. I am glad you reminded me of it – very glad."

"Well, I wish you joy of your future life. I would have helped you, but you won't be helped."

"You don't suppose," said Priscilla suddenly, "that I don't just long to catch at any straw? You don't suppose that I am not tempted? But even – even if I were to consider your base proposal for a single minute, what good on earth would it do me? The reason I am leaving school is because Uncle Josiah will not pay for my schooling. He certainly won't pay for it any more because I have not won the literature prize."

"But if I can positively promise you – and I am almost sure it can be done – that your schooling will be paid in another way, what then?"

"Annie, you cannot make me that promise. Say nothing more about it."

"Oh, well, if you won't talk of it, it can't be helped. I am going to Mabel now."

“Annie, I suppose you mean kindly, and I suppose I ought to feel that you do; but you don’t understand. It is a case of *noblesse oblige* with me. If I did stoop to what you suggest I should never, never have a happy hour again.”

“Very well,” said Annie. “I am glad I have not such a troublesome conscience.”

As she spoke she skipped away from her companion and joined the other girls on the lawn. Two little girls of about eleven and twelve years of age ran up to her. Their names were Flora and Violet Frere.

“What are you looking so solemn about, Annie?” asked Violet.

“Oh, I am worried. Poor old Priscie has got to leave school. Isn’t it an awful shame?”

Violet gave a sort of howl. “I can’t live without Priscie. I don’t believe it for a single minute. Where is she?”

“She is walking up and down in the shrubbery. I tell you what it is, Vi. You have great influence with her. You and Flora both go to her now, and put your arms about her, and pet her a lot, and tell her that she simply must not go – that she must stay with you whatever happens.”

“Come, Flora,” said Violet – “Thank you, Annie, for telling us. We’ll certainly go and *make* dear Priscie stay.”

“Yes,” said Flora. “I wouldn’t stay at school myself if Priscie were to leave. I should be a very naughty girl; I would run away.”

“And so would I,” said Violet. Annie stood still for a minute or two after the little girls had left her; then she went into the house. She felt troubled. Annie was by no means the best of girls. She had naturally a turn for crooked and underhand ways. She was ambitious and discontented with her own lot. When she left school she would go to stay with her uncle, the Rev. Maurice Butler. She would live in a musty old rectory in a very dull part of England, and see hardly any people, and try to devote her time to mothers’ meetings and school feasts, and all the thousand and one things which occupy a young girl’s time when she happens to be the niece or daughter of the rector. Now, Annie had no taste for these occupations. She hated the holidays, which she had invariably to spend at Burfield Rectory. She had no appreciation for Uncle Maurice, although he was the best and kindest of men. She wanted to get into the world. She pined to enjoy herself. She was neither very pretty nor very clever. She was, as far as appearance went, an everyday sort of girl. It is true, she had lovely golden hair, but that was about all. At school she was the sort of girl who, apparently good-natured, makes many friends. Her object was to make friends. Her one desire in life was to secure the goodwill of her school companions, so that by-and-by they might invite her to their houses and give her the sort of good time she had always pined for. She knew in a vague sort of way that if she could get one of these girls more or less into her power, she might dictate her own terms. And now her chance had come. No prickings of conscience held her back; it did not even occur to her that she was acting badly. If she thought at all, it was but to pronounce Priscilla’s ideas of honour obsolete and impossible. She had little doubt that she could get Priscilla to yield to the plan which was forming itself in her own brain; and she was also pretty sure that Mabel would be even a more easy victim. Many of her school friends were fond of asking small services of Annie; for she was invariably good-natured, and had a sunny, pleasant temper. She was rather amusing, too, and to all appearance never thought of herself.

Now she ran up to the elder girls’ sitting-room, threw the door open wide, and entered. A tall, pale girl, with an aristocratic face was seated by an open desk busily writing. She looked annoyed when Annie entered.

“Am I in your way, Constance?” asked Annie.

“No, Annie. Of course you have a right to sit here, but I do hope you will keep quiet. I am busy writing my prize essay – not that I have a chance of the prize, but of course I want to do my very best. The subject interests me.”

Annie said nothing. She flung herself into a chair, and taking up a story-book, tried to read. But her thoughts were too busy with the scheme which was forming itself in her brain. She threw down the book, and drawing her chair to the opposite window, looked out.

Constance Hadley seemed to feel her presence, for after a time she sank back in her chair with a sigh.

“Finished, Constance?” cried Annie.

“No; I can’t manage the end. I want to do something really good, but the something won’t come.”

“I wonder you bother,” said Annie; “that is, of course, unless you are sure of the prize.”

“I sure of the prize!” laughed Constance. “Why, there are at least four girls in the school who will do better work than I. You, for instance, Annie; you have an audacious, smart little way of writing which very often takes.”

“But I can do nothing with such a subject as ‘Idealism,’” replied Annie, “except to laugh at it and thank my stars that I have not got it.”

Constance looked at her gravely.

“I wonder who *will* get the prize,” she said.

Annie did not reply. Constance rose, stretched herself slightly, and putting her papers together, laid them in orderly fashion in her desk.

“I shall get up early to-morrow,” she said, “and come down here and finish my paper. There is no time so good as before breakfast for brain-work.”

“Well, thank goodness, my attempt is quite finished,” said Annie.

“I suppose,” remarked Constance, “that Priscilla will get the prize. She is the cleverest of us all.”

“Oh, I’m not at all sure of that,” said Annie. “Priscie is clever, no doubt; but Mabel is clever too – very clever.”

“Mabel Lushington! What do you mean?”

“What I say. She is awfully clever when she takes pains.”

“I must say I have never found it out.”

“Well, I have,” said Annie, her cheeks brightening and her eyes growing deeper in hue, “and I will just tell you how. She is always scribbling poetry. I found her at her desk one day, and taxed her with it. She was frightfully annoyed, and begged and implored of me not to mention it, for she said she would be ragged by every one if it were discovered. Then she confessed that her one ambition was to be a poet. Isn’t it absurd? Just think of her, with her pretty, round, dimpled sort of face, a poet, forsooth! But, nevertheless, appearances deceive, and Mabel is a poet already. I should not be a scrap surprised if she did very well with such a subject as Idealism.”

“You astonish me!” said Constance. “She must be far cleverer than I gave her credit for; and her very genius in hiding all trace of her talent is much to be commended.”

“Oh, now you are nasty and satirical,” said Annie, “and you don’t believe a word I say. Nevertheless, it is all true; our Mabel is a poet.”

“Well, poet or not,” remarked Constance, “she is a very jolly girl; I like her just awfully.”

“You would not want her to leave the school, would you?”

“Leave the school! Why, there isn’t a chance of it, is there?”

“I don’t know. I hope not. But I must go to her now, poor old darling! She is worrying over her prize essay, doubting her own ability, and all that sort of thing, whereas I know she could do capital work if she pleased.”

“And beat Priscilla?”

“Oh, Priscilla would not be in it if Mabel chose to exercise her powers. But the fact is, she is terribly afraid of your all finding her out. You won’t breathe what I have told you to a living soul, will you, Connie?”

“Not I. I am glad you confided in me. I shall listen to her essay with special pleasure this day fortnight, now that you have really enlightened me with regard to the order of her mind.”

Annie left the room and ran up to Mabel's bedroom.

Mabel's room and Annie's adjoined; but one of the strictest rules of the house was that after bed-time each girl should be unmolested by her schoolfellows. One of the worst offences at Lyttelton School was for a girl, after bed-time had arrived, to infringe the rules by going into the room of her schoolfellow. Before bed-time full liberty was, however, given, and Annie tapped now with confidence at Mabel's door.

Mabel said, "Come in," and Annie entered.

"Well, May," she cried, "has any light dawned on you?"

"Light dawned on me?" replied Mabel in a tone almost of passion. "None whatsoever. I am just in pitch darkness. I can't write a word that any one will care to listen to. I never could, as you very well know, and certainly am less capable than ever now of doing so. The very thought of all that hangs on my efforts quite unnerves me. I shall write twaddle, my dear Annie; in fact, I don't think I'll write at all."

"Oh, but you must; that would seem very bad, and make your aunt so angry. She might think that you had refused to do so out of temper, and might keep you two years at school instead of one."

"Do you think so, really? That would be too appalling."

"I am not at all sure; from what you tell me of her character, I think it would be extremely likely."

"Well, I will do something. For that matter, I *have* done something. Can't I send it in?"

"No, no!" said Annie. "You showed it to me, and I never read such rubbish in all my life. Now, look here, Mabel. You shall write a paper, and it must be the very best paper you can put together; and I will help you all I can."

"But there is no time."

"Yes, there is. We can do it to-night."

"To-night? You know we can't."

"I know we can. Miss Phillips goes round to see that all the girls are tucked up properly at ten o'clock. Soon afterwards she goes to bed, poor old dear! When the cat's away the mice will play. I will tap three times on my wall, and you must tap three times on yours. Not another soul will hear us. Then we'll both get up and slip stockings over our shoes, and we'll go down, hand-in-hand, through the silent house until we find ourselves on the ground-floor. I know a window where the hasp is broken. We'll raise the sash and go out. We will go to the summer-house at the far end of the grounds. I will have candles and manuscript paper and ink there all ready. You will write your essay there, in the summer-house, and I will help you."

"It is a very dangerous thing to do, Annie, and it strikes me we risk a great deal for very little. For if I were to steal out every night between now and prize day, and write an essay every night in the summer-house, I should not get a prize."

"You certainly wouldn't get a prize in that way; but what you do to-night will lead you to the prize."

"Now I don't understand you."

"I will tell you, Mabel. You must listen very attentively, and if you positively decide to have nothing to do with it, you must not be shocked with me or attempt to betray me. What I do I do for your good – although, I will confess, partly for my own also."

"Ah, I thought a little bit of self would come in," said Mabel, who knew her school friend better, perhaps, than most people did.

"Yes," said Annie quite calmly; "I don't pretend for a moment that I haven't a bit of self at the bottom of this. But let me tell you my scheme. Only before I breathe it, you will promise most, most faithfully not to betray me?"

"Of course I will. I know you better than you imagine, Annie. You have your good impulses, but you are not the very straightest girl in all the world."

“Oh, thank you so much,” said Annie. She coloured faintly. “Perhaps you would not be straight,” she said after a minute, “if you had no prospect whatever in life but Uncle Maurice – Uncle Maurice, and all the old women in the parish, every one of them, setting their caps at him, and knitting comforters for his dear throat, and working slippers for his dear feet, and asking about his precious cough, and if he would like some more red-currant jelly. Perhaps *you* would be a little crooked if you had to sit by the hour holding slobbering babies on your lap at mothers’ meetings, and getting your best frock jammed over by the horrid village children. Oh, it is not a life to recommend itself, I can tell you!”

“Poor Annie!” said Mabel, “I do pity you. But, of course, you won’t be always with your uncle Maurice. Now forgive me for speaking as I did, and tell me your plan.”

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nest you are trying to land me in, Annie! As if Priscilla would consent!”

“Priscilla will consent. I have sounded her, and I know she will. She fights shy of it, of course, at first, but she will consent, and before morning.”

“But, Annie, what good will it do her? My going away from the school won’t give her money to stay here.”

“Ah,” said Annie, “now comes the crux. You must give her money to stay; you must manage it. You always have heaps of pocket-money. You must undertake to pay all her school expenses for at least a year.”

“Now you are a silly!” answered Mabel.

“To begin with, I have not the slightest idea what Priscilla’s school bills amount to. I know nothing about my own school bills, far less hers. Aunt Henrietta pays for me, and there’s an end of the thing.”

“Mabel,” said Annie, who was now very much excited, “don’t be horrid, please. Listen to me.”

“I am listening. You are propounding an impossible plan, and I am telling you my opinion. Have you anything further to say to me?”

“A great deal. Your aunt is very rich.”

“Rich? Oh, I imagine so. My aunt Henrietta – Lady Lushington – can go where she likes and do what she likes. She never denies herself anything at all.”

“Nor you, Mabel, anything at all.”

“Isn’t she denying me my liberty, and is that nothing?”

“She does it for your good,” said Annie; “there is no question of money in the matter. Now do listen to me. I happen to know what dear Priscie’s school bills amount to. She is taken cheaper than the other girls, and all her expenses for one term are abundantly covered by thirty pounds. Now most likely your expenses for a single term would amount to fifty or sixty pounds, perhaps even to more; but poor old Pris is taken, on special terms. Mrs Lyttelton doesn’t wish it to be known, but I found out; for one day I came across a letter from her uncle, in which he enclosed a cheque to Priscie for last term’s expenses, and I know exactly what it amounted to: twenty-seven pounds seventeen shillings and fourpence. I thought it rather funny of him to enclose the cheque to her, and spoke to her about it. You know she is fearfully untidy, and she had left it with her handkerchiefs and ribbons and things in her top drawer. She told me then, poor girl! that her uncle always sent her the cheque, expecting her to hand it over at once to Mrs Lyttelton. ‘He hates even paying that much for me,’ she said, ‘and I do wish I could get away from him altogether. He is horrid to me, and I lead a hateful life on account of him.’”

“Poor thing!” said Mabel. “It must be disagreeable for her. In some ways she is worse off than I am.”

“She would give all the world to stay here for another year,” continued Annie; “and it’s most cruel of that horrid old uncle Josiah of here to take her from school; for I know quite well that if

she were allowed another twelve months here she could try for a big scholarship, and go to Girton or Newnham, and than be able to support herself in the way she likes best.”

“Yes, of course,” said Mabel, yawning and walking over towards the window, which she flung wide-open. “But still, I don’t see how I can help.”

“I know how you can help quite well, and how you shall help, and must help,” said Annie, speaking with great deliberation. “You must do what may seem just a *leetle* crooked in order that good may come Priscie’s life shall not be spoiled; you shall not have a dull year; and I – poor little Annie – must also have my fan, and perhaps before long. Now I will tell you at once, Mabel, how you can do it.”

Mabel sank down in a chair, and her face became quite white.

“This is what you must do,” continued Annie. “Mrs Priestley lends money to several ladies. I happen to know, for a maid Uncle Maurice had in his house last summer told me so. Mrs Priestley has made your dresses ever since you came to school; and your aunt pays the bills, doesn’t she, without worrying you much?”

“Yes.”

“And no one dresses so beautifully as you do in the whole school, Mabel.”

“Oh, well,” said Mabel, “it isn’t necessary for me to be careful – that is just it.”

“You will come to Mrs Priestley to-morrow, and I will go with you; or, if you like best, I will go alone and take a note from you to her. You have but to ask her to lend you thirty pounds, and to put it down in the bill, and there you are. She will have to lend it to you in notes and gold – of course a cheque would never do – and then you can give Pris the money for her next term’s schooling, and Mrs Lyttelton will accept it as a matter of course, and your aunt Henrietta will never know, for, at the worst, she will only scold you for being especially extravagant.”

“Yes – but – but,” said Mabel. Her cheeks were crimson and her eyes bright, and there was no doubt whatever that the temptation presented by cunning Annie was taking hold of her. “That is all very fine. But even if I dared to do the thing, the difficulties of keeping Priscie at the school might be got over for one term; but what about the two other terms? I can’t go on borrowing money from Mrs Priestley, more especially if I am not at the school myself.”

“As your aunt is so very rich, and as she will be taking you into society, it will be quite possible for you to spare thirty pounds each term out of your own allowance,” said Annie. “But even if you don’t wish to do that, I have no doubt at all that Lady Lushington is very generous, and that she will lend you the money for poor Priscie, if you only talk to her judiciously.”

“She might and she might not,” said Mabel; “there is no saying. And as to an allowance, she may not give me any, but just buy my things straight off as I want them. Oh dear, dear! I don’t see my way with regard to the other terms, even if I could borrow the money for this one.”

“You will see your way when the time comes; and, remember, you will have from now till Christmas to think of ways and means. In the meantime you will go to Paris, and from Paris to the different foreign spas, and, oh, won’t you have a jolly time, and won’t you be admired!”

“It certainly sounds tempting,” said Mabel, “although it seems to me that it is awfully wicked – ”

“As to its being so wicked,” interrupted Annie, “I can’t quite see that. Think what good it will do – helping poor old Pris, and giving yourself a right jolly time, and me also.”

“I can’t see where you come in,” said Mabel.

“Oh, but I do. You don’t suppose I am going to leave myself out in the cold, when I am managing so cleverly all these jolly things for you. You have got to get your aunt to invite me to join you in Paris. She will, I know, if you manage her properly. What fun we shall have together, May! How we shall enjoy ourselves! Of course I’ll have to come back here at the end of the holidays; but the summer holidays are long, and, oh! I shall be a happy girl.”

“You might certainly, if you came to visit me, think out a plan for paying Priscie’s school fees for the other terms,” said Mabel. “But, dear, dear! it is awfully dangerous. I don’t know how I can consent. If the whole thing were ever found out I should be disgraced for life!”

“If,” said Annie. “If is a very little word and means a great deal, May. These things won’t be found out, for the simple reason that it is to your interest, and to my interest, and to Priscie’s interest to keep the whole matter in the dark.”

Chapter Four

“I don’t want to do Wrong.”

When Annie had ended her conference with Mabel Lushington – a conference which left that young lady in a state of intense and even nervous excitement, in which she kept on repeating, “I won’t; I daren’t. Oh! but I long to. Oh! but I just wish I could,” until Annie felt inclined to beat her – she went away at last with the quiet assurance of a girl who had won a victory.

Her scheme was ripening to perfection. Mabel, of course, would yield; the money would be forthcoming. Priscilla would stay at the school, and Annie would have her hour of triumph.

It was half-an-hour before bed-time on that same evening when clever and wicked Annie had a further conference with Priscilla. She found poor Priscilla looking very pale and woe-begone, seated all by herself at one end of the long schoolroom.

“Come out,” said Annie; “it is a perfectly lovely evening, and we need not go up to our horrid beds for another half-hour.”

“You want to tempt me again,” said Priscilla, “I won’t go with you.”

“You needn’t,” said Annie with emphasis. “I have only this to say. Your prize paper is finished?”

“Yes.”

“I will come to your room for it very, very early to-morrow morning.”

“You know, Annie, you daren’t come to my room.”

“I dare, and will,” said Annie. “I will be with you at five o’clock, before any of the servants are up. At that hour we will safely transact a very important little piece of business.”

“You mean,” said Priscilla, raising her haggard face and looking with her dark-grey eyes full at the girl, “that you want me to go down for ever in my own estimation, and to proclaim to my good teachers, to dear Mrs Lyttelton, and to all the girls here that I am not myself at all. You want me to read an essay written by one of the stupidest girls in the school as my own, and you want her to read mine – which may probably be the best of those written – and you want her to win the prize which ought to be mine.”

“Yes, I do want her to win the prize,” said Annie, “and for that reason I want her to read your essay as though it were her own.”

“You forget one thing,” said Priscilla. “Mabel writes so atrociously that no one will believe for a single moment that my paper *could* be her work; and, on the other hand, people will be as little likely to go down in their high estimation of my talent as to suppose that I have seriously written the twaddle which she will give me. You see yourself, Annie, the danger of your scheme. It is unworkable; our teachers are all a great deal too clever to be taken in by it. It cannot possibly be carried out.”

“It can, and will,” said Annie. “I have thought of all that, and am preparing the way. In the first place, the paper you will read will be by no means bad. It will be the sort of paper that will pass muster, and long before prize day there will be an undercurrent of belief in the school that Mabel is by no means the dunce she is credited to be.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“You had best not know, Priscilla. The main thing for you to consider is this: You do not go to your horrid uncle Josiah. You spend your summer holidays with him, I know; but you return here afterwards. You have another happy year at Lyttelton School, and at the end of that time you win a splendid scholarship for Newnham or Girton, and go to Cambridge for three happy years. Think of it, Priscilla; and you can do it so easily. Do think of it, darling Pris. You are either a household drudge or a country dressmaker if you don’t do this thing; and if you do – and it’s really such a *very* little thing – you may be anything you like.”

Priscilla sat very still while Annie was talking to her, but in each of her cheeks there rose a brilliant spot of colour. It spread and spread until the whole young face looked transformed, the eyes brighter and darker than before, the lips quivering with suppressed excitement. The girl's figure became suddenly tense. She stood up; she caught Annie's hands between her own.

"Oh, how you tempt me!" she said. "*How* you tempt me! I did not know I could be so wicked as to listen to you; but I am tempted – tempted!"

"Of course you are, darling. Who would not be who was in your shoes? Isn't it the law of life to do the very best for one's self?"

"Oh, but it isn't the right law!" gasped poor Priscilla.

"Well, right or wrong," answered Annie, "it is the wisest law."

"But even – even if I did it," said Priscilla, "how is the money to be got?"

"You leave that to us," said Annie. "Your term's fees will be paid, and there will be something over. Leave all that to us."

"Go away now," said Priscilla; "don't talk to me any more at all; I must have time to think. Oh! I don't want to do wrong. I must pray to God to help me not to yield to you."

"You will not do that," said Annie, "for your own heart, and every argument in your mind, are inclining you in the other direction. I leave you now, for I feel certain of you; but Mabel and I will visit you to-morrow morning at five o'clock."

"You can't come in, for the door will be locked."

"You know," said Annie, staggered for a moment, "that it is against the rules for any girl to lock her door at night."

"It will be a much lesser transgression on my part to lock my room door than to allow you and Mabel in," answered Priscilla.

"Well, we will come on the chance," replied Annie. "Ta-ta for a time, Pris. Oh, what a jolly year you will have, and how hard you will work! How I shall rejoice to see it! – for, whatever you must think of me, I at least am not selfish. I lose my dear friend Mabel by this scheme, and I keep you, who have never yet been my very special friend; but you will be when we return together to Lyttelton School next autumn. Good-bye, till to-morrow morning."

Annie tripped from the room.

Chapter Five

Annie's Scheme

There are at all schools girls of different degrees of talent. There are the brilliant girls, the idle girls, the plodding girls. Now Annie belonged to the middle class. She knew how essential it was for her to work hard unless she were to accept a fate which she considered too horrible to contemplate – namely, that of companion to kind Uncle Maurice in the country rectory. Her hope was to do so well at school that she might, when she left, induce her uncle to send her for at least a year to Paris in order to put what might be called the final polish on her education. Then, if her present plans went well, she might go into society with the aid of Mabel Lushington, who of course would be from henceforth in her power.

Now Annie had a fairly good gift for writing, and this gift on the present occasion she put absolutely at the disposal of her friend. Poor Mabel, excited by the scheme which Annie had proposed, trembling with fear that it might be found out, could not have written a single line of coherent English were it not for Annie's clearer and cleverer brain.

As they sat for hours together in the summer-house, Annie's thoughts really filled Mabel's manuscript.

"I will dictate to you, and you will put down exactly what I say," remarked Annie. "Now then, fire away. Idealism. You must get a sort of epitome of what your thoughts are on the subject."

"I have not any," said Mabel. "I can't give an epitome of what I know nothing about."

"Oh, come, Mabel; you are a goose! Here, let me dictate."

She began. Her sentences had little depth in them, but they were at least expressed in fairly good English, and would have passed muster in a crowd. After a long time the task was completed, and an essay was produced – an essay, compared to the one which poor Mabel had already written, almost fine in its construction. Annie, as she read it over, was in raptures with it.

"I only trust it is not too good," she said. "Don't you think it sounds very nice when I read it aloud, Mabel?"

"I suppose it does," answered Mabel. "I have got a horrid headache; I hate sitting up all night."

"You will have to sacrifice something to your year's bliss," replied Annie. "Now then, May, that is done. I have given you a paper. At five o'clock we will both go into Priscie's room. When there, a little transaction will very briefly take place. You will have to promise Pris that you will pay her school fees for another year – namely, for three whole terms; and she, in return for this kindness, will sign this essay as her own, and will hand it in as her essay during the course of the morning. Miss Phillips will lock it up, and it will lie *perdu* until the great prize day. Pris meantime will have given you a really good paper, which you will sign and give in as your own. Thus your victory will be accomplished, and you need dread nothing further."

"But," said Mabel, "I am looked upon as rather a fool in the school; no one for a moment thinks me clever."

"I am coming to that point. For the next fortnight I shall make myself intensely busy in circulating a little story. You must pretend to know nothing about it, and in all probability the tale will not reach your ears. But this story is to the effect that you are in reality a sort of hidden genius; in short, that you are a poet and write verses in private. Now what do you think of that? Am not I a friend worth having?"

"You are wonderfully clever," said Mabel. "I begin to be almost afraid of you."

"Oh, you needn't be that, dear. Who would be afraid of poor little Annie?"

"I don't know," said Mabel. "Your eyes look quite wicked sometimes. You must be frightfully wicked, you know, to have thought out this scheme so cleverly."

"I am not more wicked than you are – not one single bit," cried Annie. "Only I have the courage of my convictions, and the ability to think things out and to save my friends. If you imagine that I am unhappy now, you are vastly mistaken. Far from being unhappy, I feel intensely triumphant; for I have managed to help three people – Priscie, you, and myself."

"Oh Annie!" said Mabel, "I am not at all sure that Aunt Henrietta will invite you to Paris."

"Aren't you?" said Annie. She took the essay as she spoke, and rolled it up. She then proceeded to gather up some loose pages of foolscap paper, pen and ink, and blotting-paper, and finally she blew out the candles and added them to a little parcel which she proceeded to stow away in a small basket.

"We will go back to the house now," she said. "We must tread very softly."

Mabel found herself trembling a great deal and wishing most heartily she was out of this scrape as she followed Annie across the grass. There was a brilliant moon in the sky, and there was a little piece of lawn, bare of any shelter, which they had to cross in order to get to the home. Should any one happen to be looking out of a window, that person could not fail to see the girls as they crossed this moonlit lawn. Mabel thought of it with growing terror as they returned home, and when they found themselves standing at the edge of a belt of dark pine-trees preparatory to rushing across the lawn, she clutched her companion by the arm.

"Oh, I know we shall be seen!" she cried. "Oh, I wish I had not done it!"

"It is too late to go back now, Mabel," said Annie; "there is nothing for it but forward – right forward. Don't be a coward; – no one will see us. What teacher is likely to be out of bed at two o'clock in the morning? We shall be in the house in next to no time. We'll then creep upstairs to our private sitting-room, and all danger will be over. Come, May, come; there's no holding back now."

Annie took her companion's hand, and they rushed tremblingly across the lawn, each of them devoutly hoping that no one was up. A minute or two later they were safely inside the shelter of the house, and then, again, in another minute Annie had softly opened the door of the girls' sitting-room, where they were to stay until the time for invading Priscilla arrived.

"You may go to sleep if you like," said Annie. "I will hold your hand; you needn't be at all alarmed, for I have drawn the bolt of the door, so that if any one should come prying, that person would be prevented entering. But just before you drop asleep I want to arrange my part."

"I wish I were well out of the whole thing," said Mabel.

"You *can* be, of course," said Annie. "It is but to destroy, this paper that we have just composed together."

"Oh no, Annie; it isn't mine at all."

"Well, at least you have done the writing of it; if the thoughts are mine, the penmanship is yours. Come, Mabel, don't be a goose. Everything is in progress, and you'll be as happy as the day is long by this time to-morrow."

"You forget that I have still to get that horrid money."

"Of course you have; but as you seem so nervous and faint-hearted, you had much better write a little note now to Mrs Priestley. I will light one of the candles, and you can get that over. I will take it to-morrow afternoon, and trust me not to return without your thirty pounds safe and sound. But the one thing which must be settled, and positively settled, is my little part. You have got solemnly to promise that I shall spend the summer holidays with you."

"Suppose Aunt Henrietta refuses."

"But she is not to refuse, Mabel. If this thing were completed and I found that you had backed out of your honourable bargain with me, I should find it my duty to – Oh Mabel, need I go on?"

"No, no," said Mabel, "you needn't; I understand you. I don't expect I shall be as happy as I thought, even if I have my year of liberty; but still, I suppose I must make the best of a bad bargain, and of course I should like to have you with me in Paris."

"It will be necessary for you to have me with you, if you are to manage the money for the two remaining terms," said Annie.

“Very well; I will agree, I will agree.”

“You promise that I shall spend the holidays with you?”

“Yes; that is, after the first week or so. I must have at least a week to get round Aunt Henrietta.”

“Oh, I will give you a week, my dear; for I also must have that week to get round Uncle Maurice. Now then, all is right. Give me a kiss, dear; we shall have fun! You will never regret this night, I can tell you, Mabel.”

“I hope I sha’n’t. I do feel mean and small at present. But what about the note to Mrs Priestley? What am I to say?”

“Dear, dear,” said Annie, who was now in the highest spirits, “what it is to have brains! Come and sit in this corner, over here. Now I will light the candle for you; no one can see any light under the door. Here we are: and here’s our little candle doing its duty.”

As Annie spoke she swiftly struck a match.

“Here is your sheet of paper, Mabel; and here is your pen. And now I will dictate the note. Write what I say.”

Mabel began:

“Dear Mrs Priestley, – My friend Annie Brooke is taking this letter to you. The business is of great importance, and she will explain and make the necessary terms. I want you to lend me thirty pounds, please. Annie will arrange the terms; and I want you, please, not to tell anybody. You know Annie Brooke – she is my greatest friend. Aunt Henrietta will want me to have a specially beautiful dress to wear at the break-up, for I expect to take a most distinguished position there.”

“Oh, must I put that in?” said Mabel.

“You must put what I tell you,” answered Annie. “Go on. Have you written ‘distinguished position’?”

“Yes – oh yes. This letter sounds perfectly horrid, and not a bit like me.”

“It will soon be finished now,” said Annie.

“Come, Mabel; you *are* chicken-hearted. You must pay something for your thirty pounds, you know.”

“Yes; but how on earth am I to return it to her?”

“I’ll manage that, goosey, goosey. Now then, proceed.”

“I will call on you to-morrow in order to choose the dress. It must be very rich indeed, and with real lace on it. My aunt would wish me to look well dressed on the prize day. – Yours, Mabel Lushington.”

“Now, the date, please,” said Annie.

Mabel inserted it.

“Fold it up, please, and direct this envelope,” continued practical Annie. This was done and the letter slipped into Annie’s pocket. She then, to Mabel’s surprise, put another sheet of paper before that young lady.

“What does this mean?” said Mabel.

“You will write these words, please, Mabel:

“In acknowledgment of thirty pounds, I, Mabel Lushington, faithfully promise to invite Annie Brooke to spend the summer holidays with Lady Lushington and myself in Paris.”

“But, Annie,” cried poor Mabel, “I am terrified at having to write this.”

“Don’t write it, and the thing is off,” said Annie.

She moved to the other end of the room. Mabel sat the very picture of misery by the little table where the one candle burned. Some minutes went by. After a time Annie said:

“You may as well go on, for I hold your letter to Mrs Priestley in my pocket.”

“Oh, oh!” said Mabel, “I get more frightened of you, Annie, each moment. Well, what am I to say? I forget.”

“Darling, it is so easy,” said Annie in her gentlest tone. “Now then, I will dictate once more.”

She did so. The words were put down. Annie herself folded up this precious piece of paper, and put it for safety into the bosom of her dress.

“Now we are all right,” she said; “and I’ve got some chocolates to give you, and we can both curl up on the sofa and go to sleep until it’s time to wake Pris.”

Mabel and Annie were about to retire to the comfortable old lounge which occupied a place of honour in the sitting-room, when they were at once frightened and rejoiced by hearing a voice say very distinctly outside the schoolroom door:

“It is I – Priscie. Let me in.”

Annie immediately flew to the door, drew back the bolt, and admitted Priscilla. Priscilla was wearing a long, ugly, grey dressing-gown; her face looked nearly as grey. She came swiftly forward and put her manuscript on the table.

“Sign it,” she said to Mabel. “Be quick. Don’t hesitate, or I will draw back. I have lived through the most awful night; but there’s no use in waiting until five o’clock. I was up, and saw you two run across the lawn. I guessed you would come here, and I made up my mind. Be quick, Mabel Lushington – sign.”

“Here is your pen,” said Annie. – “Pris, you are a plucky girl. You’ll never repent of this.”

“You promise,” said Priscilla, “to pay me a year’s schooling?” She did not glance at Annie; her eyes were fixed on Mabel.

“Yes,” said Mabel, nodding to her and speaking with difficulty.

“You will get your money to-morrow evening, dear, at latest,” said Annie; “I mean the money for the autumn term.”

Still Priscilla did not look at Annie.

“Where is your paper?” she asked, her eyes still glued on Mabel’s face.

Annie supplied it.

“It is a very good paper,” she said. “You won’t be at all ashamed to read it. I only trust,” she added, “that it is not too good.”

One very bitter smile crossed Priscilla’s face for a moment. Then, going on her knees, she deliberately wrote with a defiant air her own signature at the foot of the essay which Annie had dictated and Mabel had written. Mabel’s weaker handwriting signed Priscilla’s paper. Then Priscilla, gathering up the false essay, folded it within her dressing-gown, and, without glancing at either girl, left the room.

“There,” said Annie when the door had closed behind her, “isn’t she just splendid? Haven’t we managed well? Oh! I am tired and sleepy. Aren’t you, Mabel?”

“I don’t know,” said Mabel. “I am bewildered. I never knew what it was before to feel just awfully wicked.”

“You will get over that, dear. We’ll just wait a minute longer, and then we’ll creep up to our rooms. What a good thing it was that I oiled the locks! There is no fear of any one finding us out.”

Chapter Six

Mrs Priestley

The town of Hendon was only a mile away from the school, and the girls constantly rode there on their bicycles. They were never allowed to go without a teacher accompanying them. Quite a favourite exercise was to ride through the little town and out into the country at the other end.

Mrs Priestley was one of the most fashionable dressmakers at Hendon, and had the custom of most of the best girls of the school. Those, however, who were a little poor or short of funds employed a certain Mrs Arnold, who was also fairly good, but did not produce nearly such stylish gowns as those which issued from the Priestley establishment.

When Annie, in her pretty way – for her manners could be exceedingly pretty when she chose – asked Mrs Lyttelton for permission to go to Mrs Priestley on the afternoon of the following day, that lady neither expressed nor felt surprise.

“You can certainly do so, my dear,” she said; “only don’t stay long. And why is not Mabel Lushington going herself? I did not know, Annie, that you had your dresses made by Mrs Priestley.”

“I don’t as a rule,” replied Annie in her sweet little, gentle voice. “My uncle can’t afford it. But on this special occasion – oh, it is a great secret, Mrs Lyttelton! – Uncle Maurice will let me have a very plain white muslin made by Mrs Priestley. You know it isn’t the material that counts so much; it is the way a dress is cut and made up. Mrs Priestley has such exquisite style.”

“That is certainly the case,” said Mrs Lyttelton. “Then you are going there about your dress?”

“I am; but, please, you won’t betray me?”

“Betray you, dear Annie? What do you mean?”

“I don’t want the girls to know that I am to wear a Priestley dress until the great day. It is just my own little secret. You won’t breathe it, dear Mrs Lyttelton?”

“Certainly not, my child. I am glad that such a small thing gives you pleasure. And it is quite natural,” she added, “that a young girl should wish to be well dressed. But don’t think too much of it, Annie. Our dresses are by no means the most important things in life.”

“I could not live with you,” said Annie, “without being well aware of that.”

There came a pretty colour into her cheeks, which always made her look very nearly beautiful; and her eyes lost that expression which made some people who were not her greatest friends consider Annie Brooke just a tiny bit “not straight, you know.”

Annie now rushed off in a tumult of happiness. It was wonderful how easily her plans were being brought to perfection. She rode into Hendon on her nice free-wheel bicycle, accompanied by two or three other girls and also by a teacher. The teacher and the girls were to leave Annie at Mrs Priestley’s, and to come again for her on their return from their own ride into the country. Annie would thus have plenty of time for her purpose.

When she was admitted into Mrs Priestley’s very fashionable waiting-room, hung round with dresses in various stages of development, and all equally fascinating according to Annie’s ideas, she felt her heart beat with satisfaction. By-and-by the mistress of the establishment made her appearance.

“I want to speak to you,” said Annie, rising. “In one moment, miss.”

Mrs Priestley would not have treated Mabel Lushington in so off-hand a manner; but Annie Brooke was not one of her customers – at least, had not been up to the present; and as she was very busy sending off a large order to Paris, she did not trouble her head about keeping the young lady waiting for nearly a quarter of an hour. During this time Annie felt very indignant. Mrs Priestley dared to sit by a large desk in her presence and to write several orders which her forewoman was dictating to her. At last the letter was finished. Mrs Priestley said, “Get this posted immediately.” Then she turned to Annie:

“What can we do for you, miss?”

“I have come to see you on a matter of some importance,” said Annie. “I have come from Miss Lushington.”

“Oh, indeed, miss? We are very sorry that we were obliged to keep you waiting, but we have a wedding order at present on hand, and it is necessary to get some special laces and flowers from Paris without any delay. What can we do for Miss Lushington, miss?”

“First of all,” said Annie, “I want to know if you will make a dress for me. I want to wear it on the prize day at Mrs Lyttelton’s school.”

“Yes, miss, we could manage; although the time is not very long. Still, we have so many of Mrs Lyttelton’s pupils on our books that we should be sorry not to oblige.” Mrs Priestley spoke as though she were royalty. “What sort of dress did you think of our making for you, miss?”

“It must not be expensive,” said Annie, whose secret thought was that she might purchase it partly out of her own money and partly out of Mabel Lushington’s very abundant pocket-money. “I think a pale-blue muslin; and can you make it for about two guineas?”

Mrs Priestley raised her eyebrows in a somewhat scornful manner.

“Quite impossible, miss. But perhaps Mrs Arnold could do it for you.”

Whenever Mrs Priestley wanted to crush a customer she alluded to Mrs Arnold, whose style was so execrable, and whose “ladies” – as Mrs Priestley spoke of them – could be known at any distance by the bad hang of their garments. Annie argued a little longer on the subject of her own dress, and finally a very simple frock was arranged for her, which would not cost the young lady much over three pounds.

Mabel’s letter was then produced.

“This is very, very private,” said Annie Brooke as she gave it to Mrs Priestley.

“Dear Miss Lushington!” murmured Mrs Priestley. “We always take such a great interest in her clothes. It is our wish to do our very utmost to mould our garments round her fine figure.”

“Read the note, please,” said Annie.

Mrs Priestley did so. If she felt surprise at the contents, her face expressed nothing.

“You will excuse us, miss,” she said when she came to the end; “we will return in a few minutes.”

She left the room. Annie sank down into a chair, feeling limp. What if Mrs Priestley were to refuse? Such a possible and awful contingency had never even occurred to her.

Mrs Priestley was away for some time, quite half-an-hour. When she did return the expression on her face had slightly changed.

“We will come into our private sitting-room, miss,” she said.

She went first; Annie followed her. Mrs Priestley’s private room was very small and very much crowded. Nearly the whole of it was taken up by an enormous desk containing various pigeon-holes. There was, however, room for two chairs. Annie was asked to seat herself in one.

“We have been looking,” said Mrs Priestley, “into our accounts. You, we understand, miss, are acquainted with the contents of the letter of our much-esteemed client, Miss Lushington.”

“Yes,” said Annie; “I know all about it. As well as I remember, my great friend, Mabel Lushington, said that I could arrange the matter with you.”

“We are coming to that – if you have no objection, miss.”

Annie felt snubbed. It so happened that she had never before had any personal contact with the great Priestley. She had seen her beautiful gowns on several ladies at Hendon and on some of the best-dressed girls of the school, but not until now had she been face to face with this awful priestess of the art of dressmaking.

“We would not wish,” said Mrs Priestley, “to do anything to disoblige our clients and it is true that there have been times when it has been our pleasure to assist a lady in the manner indicated, but there has usually been a little sort of arrangement made in order to secure our money. You, we understand, come here to-day with such a proposal, do you not, miss?”

Annie felt more and more uncomfortable.

"I simply thought," she said, "that you would oblige. You see, Mabel is very rich."

"If we were not firmly convinced on that point," interrupted Mrs Priestley, "we would not entertain the proposal for a quarter of a minute."

"Mabel is very rich," continued Annie. "I mean that her aunt, Lady Lushington, is enormously wealthy."

"We have that distinguished lady's patronage," said Mrs Priestley. "We have made gowns for her as well as for the young lady, her niece."

"You send Miss Lushington's accounts to Lady Lushington?" said Annie. The high priestess of the art of dressmaking thought it only necessary to bow her stately head. "Then perhaps you will lend Mabel the money?" said Annie, who felt herself getting into greater and greater hot water.

"It can be done," said Mrs Priestley, "but only in one way. We must treat our young customer as we do the other clients whom it has been our privilege to oblige on more than one occasion. We must either have the lady's jewels to the value of the sum borrowed, or we must add the thirty pounds to Miss Lushington's account in our books. At the present moment Miss Lushington's bill amounts to close on forty pounds, and if we add thirty more it will make seventy. Are we to understand that Lady Lushington will pay so large a bill without comment for a young lady who is only a schoolgirl?"

"Oh, I am sure she will," said Annie, whose one desire at that moment was to get the money and leave Mrs Priestley's presence. "She is so enormously rich," continued the girl, "she thinks nothing of spending a hundred pounds on one dress for herself. Why, seventy pounds," said Annie, who would have rejoiced just then to possess three, "is a mere nothing to her – just a bagatelle. I know it."

"Your statement, miss, is satisfactory, as far as it goes. We will therefore, being assured by our own experience that you are right, lend Miss Lushington the required sum, but on the distinct understanding that if Lady Lushington raises any question with regard to the account, we are at liberty to mention your name in the matter."

"How so?" asked Annie, very much alarmed. "I am only a little schoolgirl," she added, "with no money at all."

"Nevertheless, miss, we must mention your name – Miss Annie Brooke, is it not?"

Annie nodded. Mrs Priestley made a note of it, adding the date of Annie's visit and the fact that she was a resident at Lyttelton School. She then, without any further ado, produced gold and notes to the amount of thirty pounds, which she folded up into a little parcel and gave to Annie.

"You will give us a receipt for this, miss," she said; and Annie did so in due form. "And now, miss," continued the woman, "all is well, and you will never hear any more with regard to this matter if we are paid our account in full; but if there is difficulty – and even rich ladies sometimes grumble at a bill such as we shall be forced to produce – then you may get into hot water. We will now wish you good-afternoon, miss, for our time is not our own but our customers'."

How flushed Annie was! When she got into the open air she panted slightly. She looked up the street and down the street. She had had an awful time with Mrs Priestley, and she had quite forgotten the dress which was to be made for Mabel. She could not remedy that omission now, however; for nothing would induce her to see the terrible Mrs Priestley again. Her companions were not yet in sight, and she paced up and down thinking her own thoughts.

After a time she felt calmer. The money was safe in her pocket. There would be no fuss for three months at least. Annie was a sort of girl who could not think of trouble three months ahead. In half-an-hour she felt quite happy. The memory of her depression vanished, and when the girls on their bicycles hove in sight she met them with a gay word.

"You *have* had a ride!" she said. "I have been out of Mrs Priestley's for ages."

"I thought," said Agnes Moore, one of the girls, "that you would never be tired of an interview with a dressmaker, Annie. Is she quite as imposing as people describe her? I go to Mrs Arnold, you know."

“She is withering,” said Annie, with a laugh. “She invariably speaks of herself as ‘we,’ and is a perfect mass of pomposity. I do wish, Agnes, you could have heard the withering tone in which she alluded to ‘Mrs Arnold’s ladies.’ Oh dear, oh dear! I nearly died with laughter.” During the rest of the ride home Annie amused herself in taking off Mrs Priestley, which she did to the life. That very same evening thirty pounds in gold and notes had been transferred, first from Annie’s pocket to that of Mabel Lushington, and then from Mabel Lushington to Priscilla Weir.

Priscilla turned very white when her hand touched the little packet.

“It hurts me,” she said aloud. Mabel and Annie were both present when she made this remark, but neither of them asked her to explain herself. On the contrary, Mabel took Annie’s arm and hurried her away.

“How did you manage with Mrs Priestley?” she asked.

“It is all right, love,” said Annie. “She has added thirty pounds to your account.”

But Mabel looked not at all satisfied. “I didn’t want it to be done in that way,” she said. “Aunt Henrietta will be wild. She is always quarrelling with me about my dresses, and says that I spend twice too much on them. Good gracious! I do trust that I sha’n’t get into trouble about this.”

“You must not,” said Annie; “for if, by any chance, such a thing were to happen, I should never hear the end of it. Oh Mabel! I have done a lot for you. I have in a way made myself responsible. I had to. Mabel – I must tell you, for I think you ought to know – if there is any difficulty in paying Mrs Priestley’s bill, she means to tell Mrs Lyttelton about me – about me! – how I visited her, and asked her for the money; and she has my receipt to show. She put a stamp on it, and made me write my name across the stamp. Oh Mabel! I have done wonderful things for you, and you know it. You can never, never be grateful enough.”

“I suppose I am grateful,” said Mabel. “It was plucky of you to do that for me, Annie, and I am not one to forget.”

“We will enjoy ourselves in Paris,” said Annie. “I know Mrs Priestley won’t send in the account for about three months, so we’ll have a good time first, whatever happens.”

“Oh, if the thing is three months off, I’m not going to fret about it in advance,” said Mabel, who instantly became very talkative and lively.

Chapter Seven

The Poet

The days which passed between the occurrences related in the last chapter and the great prize day went on wings. The girls were all exceedingly busy. If there were many prizes to be won, and there was hard work beforehand to win them, there was the thought, too, of the long and delightful summer holidays to gladden each young heart; the reunion with fathers and mothers and brothers and sisters; the pleasures of the seaside resort or the country house; the knowledge that lessons, however useful in themselves, might be put away for six long, delightful weeks.

The girls were in the best of humour; and, as though Nature herself were in sympathy with them, the sun rose day by day in a cloudless sky, the flowers bloomed in more and more profusion, and the whole world seemed preparing for a grand holiday. Lyttelton School was famed for its roses, and the profusion of roses that blossomed during this special summer was long remembered by every member of the school.

Mabel Lushington was not a girl especially remarkable for conscientiousness. She was now completely under Annie's spell, who, having won her point, was determined that there should not be a single flaw in her grand scheme. Her whispers about Mabel had spread a rumour in the school that Mabel Lushington, who had long been remarkable for her fine figure, handsome face, and a certain haughtiness of bearing, was also exceedingly clever. It is no easy matter to convert a girl who has hitherto been renowned as a dunce into a genius. Nevertheless, clever Annie managed to effect this object.

"She writes such good verses, you know," Annie said first to one girl, and then to another; and as Mabel had been forewarned on the subject, she was not taken by surprise when the girls used to crowd round her and beg to see some specimens of her art.

"Oh, I can't, I can't!" Mabel would say, blushing and even giggling a little. "Don't, don't ask me; I should die of shame."

These were her invariable retorts, and, as a rule, she managed to excuse herself with a certain amount of success. But schoolgirls are tenacious. The subject of Mabel's gift for poetry became the general talk of the school, and finally a whole bevy of girls waited on Miss Lushington with the request that she would allow them to sample her poems.

"The fact is," said Constance Smedley, "seeing is believing. You must read us something, Mabel; you really must."

Mabel found herself turning pale, and Constance, who was a remarkably keen observer of character, noted the fact. Annie was nowhere within reach. Mabel began to feel as though a torture-screw were put on.

"Come, Mabel," said Constance, "it is but fair. We love poetry, and will not be hard on you."

"What I think is this," said another girl. "Mabel is a satirist; she has been laughing at us all in her sleeve. She writes about us, and doesn't want us to know. – Come, May, I know that is the case, otherwise you would not be so red."

"She was pale a minute ago," said Constance. – "What are you changing colour about, you silly old May? We won't mind whether you satirise us or not. Come, get your verses."

"I – I – can't; I – won't," said Mabel. She had not an idea what the girls meant when they spoke of her as a satirist. She wished herself far away. As she said afterwards, she could have sunk through the ground at that moment. Her tortures were at their height when Annie Brooke appeared. Annie and Priscilla were crossing the lawn arm-in-arm. Annie had been talking eagerly. Priscilla, very grave and quiet, was replying in monosyllables. Suddenly Priscilla looked up.

"What is the matter with Mabel?" she said.

“How queer she looks!”

“I had best go to her, I suppose,” said Annie. “She is such an old silly that unless I keep by her side she is sure to do some thing wrong.”

“Here you are, Annie,” cried Constance. “Now you will be on our side. You have assured us that Mabel is not the dunce of the school, but the genius.”

“So she is,” said Annie indignantly. “Who dares to deny it?”

“None of us,” said Constance; “only we want proof.”

“What do you mean?” said Annie, still quite calm in appearance, but feeling a little uncomfortable nevertheless.

“We want proof,” repeated Constance.

“Yes,” said Agnes – “proof.”

“Proof, proof!” echoed several other voices. “Mabel writes verses – very clever verses. We want to see them.”

“So you shall,” said Annie at once.

“Oh Annie, I won’t show them,” said poor Mabel.

“Nonsense, May! that is absurd. Girls, you can see them to-morrow afternoon. To-morrow is our half-holiday; Mabel will read her verses aloud herself to you at four o’clock to-morrow on this identical spot. She has no time now, for the gong has just sounded for tea.”

Mabel turned a flushed, surprised face towards Annie. Priscilla stood perfectly still in unbounded astonishment. The girls were not quite satisfied; still, there was nothing to complain of. They must go to tea now. Immediately after tea school-work would recommence; there would not be a moment of time to read the verses before the following day. Annie, leaving Mabel to her fate, marched into the house, her hand on Constance Smedley’s arm.

“I am glad I came out,” she said. “Poor May is quite abnormally sensitive on the subject of her verses.”

“Nonsense!” said Constance. “If she writes verses she won’t mind our seeing them.”

“She ought not to mind; and if she were an ordinary girl she would not,” said Annie. “But, you see, she is not ordinary. There is many a girl with a genius who, as regards other matters, is even a little silly. The fact is, Mabel is frightened of her own talent.”

“Well, we are glad you came up, for we are quite determined to get a specimen of our genius’s work,” said Constance.

“You shall know all about it; she will read them to you herself. Ta-ta for the present.”

Annie marched to her own place at the tea-table, and nothing more was said. But she was not comfortable. She had got herself and her unfortunate friend into a hornet’s nest. Verses of some sort must be produced; but how? Annie could not write the most abject doggerel. Clever enough with regard to her prose, she was hopeless as a rhymster. Perhaps Priscie could do it. Annie looked wildly at Priscie, but as she looked even this hope faded away. She had had a conversation with that young lady on that very afternoon, and Priscie, although she was to have her extra year at school – for everything was quite arranged now – did not seem to be happy about it. She had even gone to the length of telling Annie that she would prefer learning how to manage a farm-house or becoming a country dressmaker to staying on at Lyttelton School under the present conditions. Annie had assured her that if she failed them now, the mischief she would do would be so incalculable that it would practically never end, and Priscilla had been quieted for the time being. But Priscilla’s conscience must not be further tampered with; Annie was resolved on that point. What, oh! what was she to do?

During the rest of that evening, while apparently busy over her studies, the mind of Annie Brooke was in a whirl. In what sort of way was she to fulfil her promise made to all those odious girls that Mabel would read her verses aloud? She saw that the girls were already slightly suspicious. She knew it was all-important for Mabel’s success when she won the literary prize that the girls’ minds should be already prepared with regard to her genius. If they were really satisfied that she wrote even

moderately good verse, they would accept without comment the fact that she had won the prize over Priscilla's head. But how – oh! how – in what sort of fashion were these verses to be produced?

Annie was in the mood when she would have stopped short at very little. Could she have safely pilfered the verses of anybody else she would have done so; but there was no great store of poetry at the school. The few books out of which the girls learned their different pieces for recitation were too well-known to be tampered with, and yet Annie must do something. Her head ached with the enormity of the task which she had so unwittingly undertaken. Why, oh! why had she started that awful idea of Mabel's poetical genius in the school? Far better would it have been even to have the girls' suspicions slightly aroused by the excellence of her prize essay. Poor Annie had not only to think of this and to solve the riddle set her, but she had to appear before the eyes of her schoolfellows as utterly calm and cool. She was at her wits'-end, and certainly matters were not improved when Mabel that night tapped at her wall – the signal that the girls had arranged between them when it was necessary for one to speak to the other.

It was about eleven at night when Annie, feeling miserable beyond words, crept into Mabel's room. Mabel was sitting up in bed with all her fine hair hanging about her shoulders.

"I have not had a minute to speak to you before," said Mabel. "You know perfectly well, Annie, that I never wrote a line of poetry in my life. I can't abide the stuff; I can't even read it, far less write it. And now what is to be done? You are going to produce a specimen of my verse which I am to read aloud before all those odious girls to-morrow!"

"Oh, I'll manage it," said Annie; "only don't keep me now, May. I had to start that little rumour in order to make it all safe for you on prize day. You don't suppose, darling did May, that I have brought you as far as this with such wonderful success in order to desert you now? You leave it to me, May Flower. I'll manage it for you somehow."

Mabel lay back on her pillow. "I did get an awful fright," she said. "I can't tell you how terrible it was when they all clustered round me, and Agnes remarked one thing about me, and Constance another. Agnes said I was a satirist. What on earth is a satirist, Annie?"

"Oh, not you, darling, at any rate," said Annie, kissing her friend. "Poor May! that is the very last thing you could ever be."

"I know you think me very stupid," said Mabel in an offended tone. "It is too awful to give a girl the imputation of a genius, when you know all the time that she is an absolute fool."

"A very pretty one, at any rate," said Annie, kissing her friend again. "You're not offended, silly May, because I said you were not a satirist? Why, a satirist is an *awful* creature, dreaded by everybody. A satirist is a person who makes fun of her best friends. Now, you would never make fun of your own Annie, would you?"

"No, indeed! I am glad I am not a satirist," said May. "What a horror those girls must think me!"

"Go to by-by now, May, and leave me to settle things for you," said Annie; and she crept back to her own bed.

Chapter Eight

A Touch of the Sun

Towards morning a thought came to Annie. She could not quite tell when it first darted through her brain. Perhaps it came in a dream. She was never quite certain, but it certainly caused her to jump, and it made her heart beat tumultuously.

"I wonder," she said aloud; and then she added, "The very thing!" Then she said once more, "I will do it, or my name is not Annie Brooke."

That morning the mistress and the girls missed the pleasant face of Annie Brooke from the breakfast-table. Mabel Lushington, as her greatest friend, was begged to go to her room to see if anything was the matter. She tapped at Annie's door. A very faint reply came, and Mabel entered in much consternation. She found her friend lying in bed, a handkerchief wrung out of eau-de-Cologne and water on her brow, her hair dishevelled, her face pale.

"Oh Annie, you are ill!" said poor Mabel. "What is wrong?"

"My head, dear; it aches so badly."

"Oh, I am sorry!" said Mabel. "Mrs Lyttelton sent me upstairs to know what is wrong."

"Tell her she must not be at all alarmed," said Annie. "It is just one of my very worst headaches, no more. I sha'n't be able to do any lessons to-day. But I will creep out into the garden presently. I want air and perfect quiet. I'll get into one of the hammocks in the garden and lie there. Tell them all not to be a bit anxious, for I know what I want is rest."

"You do look bad," said Mabel. "Dear Annie, I know I am the cause of it."

"You are most truly," thought Annie under her breath. But aloud she said, "No, dear, not at all; I am subject to headaches."

"I never knew you with one before," said Mabel.

"I have kept them to myself, darling; but Mrs Lyttelton knows, for I told her. This is just worse than the others, and I can't keep it to myself. If Miss Phillips likes to come up, she might bring me a cup of tea and a little toast. I couldn't eat anything else, indeed. Now, love, go down; don't be distressed; your Annie will be all right in the afternoon."

Mabel longed to say, "What are you going to do about the poem?" but in sight of that pale presence with its look of suffering, and the bondage on the head, she thought that such a remark would be quite too heartless. She stepped, therefore, very softly out of the room, and going downstairs, made a most effective announcement with regard to Annie.

"She says it is nothing," remarked Mabel, who was almost in tears; "but she looks quite dreadful – so ghastly white."

Little did Mabel know that Annie had smeared powder over her face to give it that death-like appearance. She had managed it with great skill, and trusted to its not being noticed.

"Miss Phillips," said Mrs Lyttelton, "will you go and see what is wrong? If Annie is feverish we must get a doctor. She may have a little touch of the sun, my dears; it is always unwise to be out too much this hot weather."

"She looked awfully flushed," said one girl, "when we met her in the High Street yesterday. It was after she had been with Mrs Priestley."

"It must be a touch of the sun," said Mrs Lyttelton; "perhaps I had better go to her myself."

"Let me go first, dear Mrs Lyttelton," said Miss Phillips; "I can soon let you know if there is anything wrong."

Accordingly, Miss Phillips went gently upstairs Annie had the curtains drawn at the windows, but the windows themselves had their sashes open. She was lying in such a position that the powder on her face could not be noticed. When Miss Phillips came in Annie uttered a groan.

“Oh, why do you trouble?” she said, opening half an eye and looking at the mistress.

Her dread was that Mrs Lyttelton herself might appear. It would be difficult to hide the powder from her. Old Phillips, however, as she termed her, was a person easily imposed upon. “Don’t fuss about me, please,” said Annie. “I have just a bad headache. I am sorry I can’t be in the schoolroom this morning; but I just can’t. I am not a bit hot – not a bit – but my head is dreadful. I want to go out and lie in one of the hammocks in the garden. Do you think Mrs Lyttelton will let me?”

“Indeed she will, poor dear!” said Miss Phillips. “She is ever so sorry for you. You do look bad, Annie. Wouldn’t you like me to draw back the curtain, dear? Your room is so dark.”

“Oh, please don’t!” said Annie. “I can’t bear the light.”

“Well, my dear – well, of course – how thoughtless of me! I have brought you some tea.”

“Thank you; I shall be glad of a cup.”

“Poor child! Then you wouldn’t like to see Mrs Lyttelton herself?”

“Not for the world,” said Annie with unnecessary vehemence. But then she added prettily, “It is so sweet of her to think of it, and for little me – as if I were of any consequence. It’s just a headache, and I’ll be all right in the garden, and at dinner-time you will see me looking just as usual.”

“I hope so, indeed,” said Miss Phillips, who went downstairs to report that Annie was singularly pale, but not in the least feverish, and that her great desire was to lie in a hammock during the entire morning in the shady garden.

“Go up at once and tell her that she has my permission,” said Mrs Lyttelton.

Miss Phillips opened the door very softly. Annie was still lying with her eyes shut, the bandage at once shading and concealing her face; but the cheeks, the tip of the little nose, and the chin were all dreadfully white; only the pretty lips were still rosy.

Annie just opened languid eyes.

“I am better, really,” she said in the faintest and most patient voice.

“You poor, sweet thing,” said Miss Phillips. “How I sympathise with you! I get those frantic headaches myself sometimes.”

“It hurts me even to talk,” said Annie. “I do value your sympathy, but I can’t express what I feel. May I go into the garden? Did you find out?”

“Yes; Mrs Lyttelton has given you her permission. I am so sorry, dear, that none of us will be able to be with you. Mrs Lyttelton herself is going to drive to London, and of course the rest of us will be busy; but if you want any one, love, I could send one of the maids to you.”

“I shall want nothing,” said Annie, whose voice, in her eagerness, had suddenly become strong. Any one who was not poor Phillips would have been suspicious on the spot. “I am so dreadfully sorry,” said Annie, “that you should be put out about me; but if I am allowed to treat my headache in my own way, I shall be all right by early dinner. Now go, dear, won’t you? I will get dressed and creep down to the garden as soon as lessons begin.”

“You are such a thoughtful, unselfish girl,” said Miss Phillips. “Anybody else who looked so terribly ill would make a fuss.”

“Sweet Miss Phillips!” murmured Annie; and with these words sounding in her ear Miss Phillips left the room.

The moment she did so Annie sprang to a sitting position on her bed. She flung the bandage across the room with a petulant movement, and the next instant she had locked the door and begun an active and hurried toilet. The powder was removed. The small, fair face assumed its normal complexion, and by the time prayers were over and the girls were all assembled in the different classrooms, Annie, in her neat cotton dress, wearing a big shady hat, with gloves drawn over her small white hands, and a parasol ready to shade her from the sun, stood waiting by her open window.

Presently she heard a welcome sound – the noise of wheels disappearing down the avenue. Now was her time. Across the lawn she went. The hammocks were there, but Annie had no use for them at present. Until she was well out of sight of the house she did not dare to run, but when a depression

in the ground hid the house from view she put wings to her feet, and flew panting and racing along by the shrubbery, until, at the farthest end, she found a small postern door.

This door opened by means of a certain catch, so that to the uninitiated it always seemed locked, whereas to the initiated it would open any minute. Annie was one of the initiated. She let herself out being very careful to close the door after her, so that it would respond to that same apparently gentle touch when she wished to come back. It was most important that she should make all things right with regard to the door, as by that means she saved at least half-an-hour of her precious – her most precious time. Oh, if only Miss Phillips could see her now! Where was the pallid, suffering girl? Surely she was not represented by this red-faced, panting, strong-looking creature who was careering along the dusty roads *en route* for Hendon.

By-and-by she reached the suburbs, turned down a side street, and knocked loudly at a little green door. The door was opened by a woman who was evidently at once the owner of the house and her own servant.

“How do you do, Miss Brooke?” she said, looking at Annie in some astonishment. “I am very sorry indeed, miss, but Susie has been having her bad days, and your dresses are not ready for you. She’ll send them down this evening, if possible; but when her back aches at its worst she cannot manage the machine, miss; so I do hope, Miss Brooke, that you won’t be hard on her.”

“Not at all; I am very sorry for her,” said Annie in her gentle voice. “May I go in and talk to her for a few minutes, Mrs Martin?”

“To be sure, miss; you will find her upstairs in the sewing-room.”

Annie seemed to know her way quite well about this house. She ran up some very steep stairs and entered a low room which had at the end a sloping roof. There was a bed tucked as it were out of sight under the eaves; but right in the fall blaze of the summer sun, and where the room was most stiflingly hot, sat a very pallid girl with a large, over hanging brow, pale, tired-looking eyes, and a sensitive mouth.

The girl was bending over a large sewing-machine, the work of which she was guiding with her hand, while her feet worked the treadles. The moment she saw Annie she looked at her with a great rush of colour spreading over her face.

“Why, Miss Brooke!” she said.

“Ah,” said Annie, “you are behaving very badly indeed to me, Susie. I have just seen your mother, and she says that your back is so bad you can’t do your machining, and in consequence my work —*mine*, Susan – is not finished. Oh Susan! it is somebody else’s dress you are making now, and you are quite well enough to do your machining. I am surprised.”

“It is true what mother said, all the same, miss,” replied the girl, interrupting her words as she spoke with a great and exhausting fit of coughing. “I ain’t fit for no work, and this room is that stifling with the sun pouring in and no means of opening more than that little crack of the window. I haven’t done your work, miss, for I knew you ’ud be kind, and Mrs Hodge at the mill is so cross if I don’t carry out her least wish. But I meant – I did indeed, miss – to go on with your things this afternoon. I did most truly, miss, for it’s a real pleasure to work for you, Miss Brooke.”

“Never mind my things to-day,” said Annie; “you’re not fit, and that is the simple truth. You ought to go downstairs, Susan, and get your mother to take you into the park; that is what you want.”

“I may want it, miss,” said Susan, “but I won’t get it, for mother have her hands full with the parlour lodger and the drawing-room lodger. Much time she do have for walking out with me as though I were a fine lady.”

“Poor Susie!” said Annie; “and you so clever, too.”

“Ah, miss, nothing frets mother like me thinking myself clever. She says that all I want is to know the three R’s – reading, writing, and ’rithmetic – that’s how she calls ’em. She hates my books, miss; and as to my thoughts – oh, dear Miss Brooke! you are the only one in all the world as knows about them.”

“And I want to help you,” said Annie. “I have come here all the way this morning to ask you to lend me that manuscript book of yours. I mean to show your lovely poems to a great, clever, and learned man, and if by chance he should publish any of them, you would be famous, Susan, and you need never do this horrible grinding work any more.”

“Oh, miss,” said the poor girl, “you don’t say so!”

“I do say so, Susie; and I suppose I ought to know. Give me the book, dear, at once; don’t keep me, for I haven’t a minute. These are school hours, and I had to pretend I had a headache in order to get away to see you. You must let me manage about your poetry, Susie; and of course you will never tell.”

“Why, miss, is it likely?”

“Well, fetch the book, then.”

Susie crossed the room, went on her knees before an old chest of drawers, and with the colour now high in her wasted cheeks and her light eyes darker with emotion, she presented the treasured book to Annie.

“There is my last bit, miss; you will find it at the end. It’s ‘Thoughts on the Sunset’ I was thinking them in reference to my own early death, miss, and they’re very affecting indeed. Perhaps you will show them the first, miss, for they seem to me the very best I have done.”

Susie looked with a world of pathos at Annie. Her eyes said as plainly as eyes could speak, “Oh! do read the poem before you go, and tell me what you think of it.” Annie read the message in the eyes, but had not an idea of acceding to poor Susie’s wish.

“You will have your book back in a few days,” she said, “and I do hope I’ll have good news for you; and here is half-a-crown, and you needn’t hurry about my things. Good-bye, Susie. Do go into the park if you can.”

Susan nodded. She felt so grateful to Annie, and so excited, that she could not speak. With the book tucked under her arm, Annie flew downstairs.

She was much annoyed at being intercepted in the passage by Mrs Martin.

“I do ’ope, miss,” said that poor woman, “that you ain’t been ’ard on my girl. She does do her very best; for, what with the unpickin’ of your old dresses, and what with tryin’ to turn ’em into new ones, it don’t seem as though it were worth while. You pays her very little, miss; and what with never givin’ her anythin’ new, it don’t seem worth the trouble, that it don’t.”

“Oh! I am so sorry,” said Annie, who in her moment of victory was inclined to be kind to any one; “but, you see, I take an interest in Susan for other matters. She is not well, and she wants rest. I am so glad to have some one to alter my old things, and if I did not give the work to Susan, I should have to employ a girl I know at home. But I will try – I really will – to give her some new plain cotton dresses to make for me later on. In the meantime, Mrs Martin, I have been recommending her to go for a walk in the park. She has great talent, and her life ought not to be sacrificed.”

“There, miss!” said Mrs Martin, putting her arms akimbo and looking with great dissatisfaction at Annie. “It’s *you* as encourages her in scribblin’ of that poetic stuff. Never did I hear such rubbish in all my born days. If it wasn’t for you, miss, she would burn all the stuff instead of sittin’ up a-composin’ of it. What with sunsets, and deathbeds, and heartaches, and green grass, and other nonsense, I don’t know where I be when I listen to her words; I don’t really. I see you’ve got the book under your arm now, miss; and I do wish you’d burn it – that I do!”

“It would hurt her very much indeed if I did,” said Annie; for a further thought had darted through her brain at Mrs Martin’s words. Here would be an easy way to hide her own deed for ever and ever. If Mrs Martin sanctioned the burning of her daughter’s book, surely Annie’s wicked scheme would be concealed for ever.

“I agree with you,” said Annie, “that it is bad for poor Susan to write so much poetry. Her heart is set on it, I know; still, if you disapprove – ”

“That I do, miss; I wish you’d give me the book now, and I’ll keep it under lock and key.”

“No, no,” said Annie eagerly. “Don’t do that on any account whatever. I have thought of a much better plan. She has lent me the book, for I promised to read her poems, poor girl! and to talk them over with a friend of mine. I need not give them back to her for the present.”

“Oh, miss! I’d be *that* grateful if you’d keep them altogether.”

“I don’t see that I can quite do that. Still, if you wish it – ”

“I do, miss; that I do.”

“Well, good-bye for the present. You mustn’t keep me now, as I am in a great hurry.”

Mrs Martin moved aside, and once more Annie pursued her way up the dusty road. The postern door presented no hindrance when she reached it, and by-and-by, with a sigh of relief, she found herself in the cool shade of the grounds. How inviting looked that hammock under the trees! But she had not a moment of time to indulge in rest just then. Unperceived by any one, she managed to reach her room. She locked the door. She made a quick selection from poor Susan’s verses. She then calmly dressed, washed her face and hands, and when early dinner was announced, took her place at table.

The girls were all pleased to see her, and when she assured them that she was as well as ever they all congratulated her. Priscilla Weir sat at table near Annie. Priscilla was not looking well. The headache which Annie pretended to have was in reality possessed by poor Priscilla. She was easily startled, too, and changed colour when any one addressed her in a hurry.

Towards the end of the meal, as the girls were about to leave the room, she bent towards Annie and said:

“Is it really true that Mabel Lushington is going to read some poems at four o’clock this afternoon?”

“She is going to read some of her *own* poems. Why not?” said Annie. She spoke defiantly.

“Her own poems?” echoed Priscilla, a world of scorn in her voice.

“Yes. Why not?” said Annie.

Priscilla was silent for a minute. Then she said in a very low voice:

“I know how clever you are; but even your genius cannot rise to this. I have seen you struggle to make even the slightest rhyme when we have been playing at making up verses. You can’t manage this.”

“Never mind,” said Annie. She jumped up almost rudely. The next minute she had seized Mabel by the arm. “We have half-an-hour. Come with me at once to my room.”

Mabel did so. When they reached the room Annie locked the door.

“Now then,” she said, “who’s a genius? I said I would find a way out. Sit down immediately before my desk and write what I tell you.”

“Oh Annie, what do you mean?”

“I mean exactly what I say, and the fewer questions you ask the better. I will dictate the poem, and you shall copy it.”

“But – but,” said Mabel, turning from red to white – “it isn’t, I hope, from a printed book. I have thought of that I have been so frightfully miserable that I’ve thought of everything; but that would be so terribly unsafe.”

“This is not unsafe at any rate,” said Annie, “Now you begin. Write what I tell you.”

Annie’s look of triumph and her absolutely fearless manner impressed Mabel. She wrote as best she could to Annie’s dictation, and soon two of poor Susan Martin’s attempts at verse were copied in Mabel’s writing.

“There you are!” said Annie. “That ‘sunset’ one will take the cake, and that pretty little one about ‘my favourite cat’ will come home to every one.”

“But I haven’t a favourite cat,” said Mabel, “and why ever should I write about it?”

“Did you never in the whole course of your life,” was Annie’s answer, “hear of a poet’s licence? You can write on anything, you know, if you are a poet.”

“Can I?” replied Mabel. “Then I suppose the cat will do.”

“It will do admirably.”

“I hope,” said Mabel, “they won’t question me afterwards about the animal. It sounds exactly as though it were my own cat, and every one in the school knows that I can’t even touch a cat.”

“What a pity you didn’t tell me that before,” said Annie, “and I would have chosen something else! But there’s no time now; we must fly downstairs immediately.”

“You are clever, Annie. I can’t think how you got these poems. But the ‘sunset’ one sounds dreadful too. I never even looked at a sunset. And then there’s the thoughts about dying – as if – as if I *could* know anything of that.”

“You must read them as pathetically as you can,” said Annie, “and make the best of a bad job. I believe they’ll go down admirably. Now then, fold them up and put them away; and don’t let’s be found closeted together here.” Sharp at four that afternoon Mabel appeared before her assembled schoolfellows and read – it must be owned rather badly – first some “Lines to a Favourite Cat,” and then “Thoughts on the Sunset.” The poems were not poetry in any sense of the word; nevertheless, there was a vague sort of far-off suggestion of poetry about them. It is true the girls giggled at the thought of Mabel and her cat, and were not specially impressed by the violet and rose tints of the sunset, or by the fact that florid, large, essentially living-looking Mabel should talk of her last faint breath, and of the time when she lay pale and still and was a corse.

She read the lines, however, and they seemed thoroughly genuine. When she had finished she looked at her companions.

“Well, I’d like to say, ‘I’m blowed!’” said Agnes; while Constance Smedley, the head-girl of the school, said in a low tone:

“I congratulate you, Mabel; and I’m very much surprised. There is no saying what you will do in the future, only I hope you won’t speak of dead people as corses, for I dislike the term.”

“And of course after this,” said a merry, round-faced girl who had hitherto not spoken, “we will expect to have further lines on pussie, poor, pussie; and, oh, Mabel, *what* a cheat you are! And you always said you loathed cats!”

At this instant one of the youngest girls in the school rushed up and flung a tabby-cat into Mabel’s lap. The cat was large; a very rough specimen of the race. Being angry at such treatment, it unsheathed all its claws. Mabel shrieked with terror, and flung the poor animal aside with great vehemence.

“Oh, poor pussie, poor pussie!” laughed the others; “but she loves you all the same.

“When pussy comes, so sleek and warm,
And rubs against my knee,
I think we’re safe from every harm,
My pretty cat and me.

“Oh Mabel, Mabel! you are a humbug.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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