

Meade L. T.

The Squire's Little Girl



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Chapter One

The Squire's little daughter rode her pony down the avenue. She stopped for a moment at the gate, and the children at the other side could get a good view of her. There were four children, and they pressed together and nudged each other, and took in the small erect figure, and her sturdy pony, with open eyes and lips slightly apart. The Squire's daughter was a fresh arrival at Haringay. Her existence had always been known, the children of the village and the children of the Rectory had talked of her, but she had never come to live amongst them until now, for her mother had died at her birth, and her father had gone to live abroad, and Phyllis, the one child of his house, had been with him. Now he had returned; Phyllis was twelve years old; the Hall was open once more, full of servants and full of guests, and Phyllis Haringay rode her pony in full view of the Rectory children. Phyllis had a thick, rather short bush of tawny hair. Her eyes were of a grey blue, her little features were short and straight, and her small face had many freckles on it. She was by no means a pretty child, but there was something piquant and at the same time dignified about her. She stopped now to speak to Mrs Ashley, the woman at the Lodge; and the children pressed a little nearer, and Ralph touched Rose, and Rose nodded to Susie, and all three gazed at Edward with the same question on each pair of lips and in each pair of eyes.

"Shall we introduce ourselves," said Susie to her brother. "Do say yes, Ned; it is such an opportunity, and we are longing to know her. Do say that we may speak to her now."

But Ned shook his head. "It is not manners," he said; "we must not push ourselves on her. If, indeed, we could do anything for her it would be different."

And just then, as if to help the children in their darling wish, the white gates which led to the Hall refused to open at Phyllis's push, and Ned and Ralph both rushed to the rescue.

"Thank you," said Phyllis, with a toss of her head and a smile in her bright eyes. Then she paused and looked the boys all over. They were sturdy little chaps, and Ned in particular had the brightest brown eyes and the most honest face in the world.

"It is awfully dull, isn't it?" said the Squire's daughter. "I wonder how any one can live in a place like this. Are there more than two of you, and have you lived here always?"

"There are more than two of us," answered Ned, lifting his cap in the most polite manner, "and we don't find it dull. Here are my two sisters," he added; "may we introduce ourselves to you?"

"Oh, what a funny speech, and how nice it sounds!" cried Phyllis. "Four of you, and all children! I haven't spoken to anything approaching a child for a whole fortnight. If it wasn't for Bob here," – she laid her hand on her pony's mane as she spoke – "I believe I should lose my senses."

"Well, you are all right now," said Ned, who certainly never lost his. "Here's Susie, and she's dying to know you; and here's Rosie, and I do believe she'd let her hair be cut short just for the pleasure of looking at you. And here am I, at your service; and I think I can promise that Ralph will do everything for you that boy could."

Phyllis's little face turned quite a bright pink. She glanced eagerly at both the girls, then she looked at Ralph, and finally she laughed.

"Let's be friends," she said. "I don't know who you are nor anything about you, but, oh, you are human beings, you are children! and I am so glad – I am so glad."

As she said the last words she held out her hand to Ned. He clasped it, and then let it drop, while the colour filled his own brown face.

“This makes all the difference in the world,” said Phyllis. “What shall we do? How are we to spend the afternoon? You don’t suppose, you four, that I’m going to lose sight of you, for if you do you are greatly mistaken.”

“What shall we do? Where shall we go?” cried Susie.

She came close to Phyllis and looked earnestly into her face.

Susie was a very pretty little girl; she had bright black eyes and a quantity of curling black hair, and her cheeks were rosy like the soft bloom of a peach, and her lips when she opened them showed pearly-white teeth.

Phyllis looked right down into Susie’s black eyes, and something in her heart stirred, so that the colour suffused her face, and she had difficulty in keeping back her tears.

“You are the Rectory children,” she said; “please tell me what your surname is.”

“Hilchester,” said Ralph, without a moment’s hesitation. “Oh! you will like father so much, Phyllis.”

“And mother too,” cried Rosie.

“Well, I tell you what it is,” cried Phyllis. “I am going with you as far as ever you’ll take me. Take me to the wildest and highest place in this neighbourhood, then I’ll get off my pony and run; I want to run for bare life; I want to feel wild and free; I want to forget that I’m the Squire’s little daughter, and that I’ve lots of money and grand dresses. I want to be, oh, *shabby!* oh, *wild!* dancing, joyful, just as if I hadn’t a care in the world.”

“Let’s do it,” cried Susie. “I know how; I know where. We’ll take her to the Friar’s Mount, won’t we, Ralph? Oh, you may ride, pretty little Phyllis, but I don’t think your pony can take you faster than we can run, and when we get to the Friar’s Mount you’ll know what freedom means.”

“I should just think so,” cried Phyllis. “I felt in prison until I saw you all, and now I’m so happy.”

She touched Bob’s neck with her whip, and soon she was cantering down the village street, the Rectory children following at her heels.

“Hullo!” cried a merry voice. “Where are you going, Phyl? Stop this instant, and tell me.”

The words came from Squire Harringay. He was standing on the steps of the principal inn. He did not know his little daughter with her cheeks on fire, her eyes bright, her mane of hair standing out from her pretty neck, and four shabbily dressed but decidedly energetic children following her.

“Don’t keep me now, Dad,” was Phyllis’s answer. “I’ve found playmates, and I am going to have a real good time. I’ll tell you in the evening, but not now.”

The gay little party turned a corner and were soon lost to view. The Squire turned to a neighbour

“That’s a pretty sight!” he exclaimed. “And who are those young termagants who, to all appearance, have made my little daughter lose her senses?”

“The Rectory children,” was the response; “quite the wildest young imps in the countryside.”

“Phyllis will be a match for them,” said her father, and he rubbed his hands in a contented manner.

Chapter Two

Phyllis came home quite late. Her habit was torn; Bob, the pony, was covered with mud; mud had also been splashed all over the little girl's neat costume – even her face and hands were more or less disfigured by it. Her curly hair was disfigured too with the mud from the swamps and dirty roads over which she had passed, but there was a brilliant colour in her cheeks and a happy light in her eyes. She rode into the yard, and a groom came up to take her pony.

“Miss Phyllis,” he exclaimed, “you have Bob in a lather!”

“Oh, never mind,” said Phyllis; “I have had a jolly time. I have found playmates.”

The groom touched his hat respectfully. It was the custom to be very respectful to the Squire's little daughter. She entered the house. Her governess, Miss Fleet, was waiting in the hall to receive her.

“Where have you been?” she said in a stern voice.

“Oh, Miss Fleet,” cried Phyllis, “I have had such a time! – such fun, such delight! I met a lot of children, and I went up on to the hills with them. They are quite the most splendid children I ever came across in the whole course of my life. There are four of them – two boys and two girls.”

“Don't you even know their names?” asked Miss Fleet.

“Yes, yes, of course. One is called Ned, and one Ralph; and there is a girl Susie, and another Rosie; and they adore me, and, oh, I am so happy!”

“You are very nearly late for dinner,” said Miss Fleet, “and you are in a most disgraceful mess; it will take half-an-hour to clean you and make you respectable; and you missed your music-master. In short, you are a very naughty girl.”

“I am a very happy girl,” said Phyllis in the most contented voice in the world. “Please don't scold me, Miss Fleet; but I may as well say at once that I don't greatly care whether you are angry or not.”

“Oh, don't you?” said Miss Fleet. “Do you suppose I am going to put up with such a very disobedient little girl?” Her voice was stern. She did not often scold Phyllis, for Phyllis, as a rule, was too good to be reprimanded. She followed her now to her pleasant bedroom. There Nurse was waiting to pet the little girl and make her presentable for dinner.

Miss Fleet looked into the room and said, “Here she is, Nurse, and I am extremely angry with her;” and then the governess closed the door and walked away.

Phyllis gazed at Nurse, her eyes brimful of laughter. Then she ran up to the old woman and said ecstatically —

“Oh! I am so happy, and I don't care a bit – not a bit – for what old cross-patch says.”

“My dear Miss Phyllis,” said Nurse, “you ought not to speak like that of your governess.”

“Well,” cried Phyllis, “she is cross-patch.”

“I never heard you say that sort of thing before.”

“I learnt it from the Rectory children. Oh, they are so nice – so very nice! I was with them all the afternoon. I am going again to-morrow, and the day after, and the day after that, and every day – every single day. Now, please, Nurse, help me to get tidy for dinner.”

Nurse, who in her heart of hearts felt that Phyllis could do no wrong, assisted with right goodwill to remove the mud-bespattered habit, and to get the little girl into her evening-frock. The Squire was immensely fond and proud of his little daughter, and she always dined in the evening with Miss Fleet and her father. Miss Fleet came downstairs first to the drawing-room.

“Where is Phyllis?” said the Squire.

“I am sorry to tell you, Mr Harringay, that Phyllis has been rather naughty. She has been out without leave, and came home just now in a disgraceful mess.”

“The young monkey,” said the Squire, laughing. “I saw her; she rode past the ‘Blue Dragon,’ a herd of children following her. I never was so amazed in my life; but she did look handsome and as if she were enjoying herself. I was told that the children belonged to the Rectory.”

“I don’t care whom they belong to,” said Miss Fleet. “They are very naughty children, and badly behaved; and if Phyllis has much to do with them she will get just as rough and wild herself.”

“Bless her! she is perfect whatever happens,” said the Squire energetically.

“Mr Harringay,” said the governess, “may I ask you a question?”

“My dear Miss Fleet, certainly. You know that I have the highest opinion of you.”

“Have I the charge of Phyllis or have I not?”

“Bless me, bless me!” said the Squire, in some agitation, “of course you have the charge of her.”

“Then that is all right; and she has got to obey me, has she not?”

“Of course, my good creature, of course.” Just then Phyllis danced into the room. She looked very pretty in her evening-frock, and her happy afternoon had brought a red colour into her cheeks and a glow of happiness into her grey eyes.

The trio went into the dining-room, and Phyllis amused her father during dinner with accounts of Rosie and Susie and the two boys.

“I like the country,” she said to her father; “I am glad we have come to live at the Hall; I am glad about everything. I am very, very happy to-night.”

The Squire kissed her and petted her, and it was not until she was just going to bed that he broke a piece of news to her which she scarcely appreciated.

“My dear, it is good-bye as well as good-night.”

“Good-bye, Father? Why?” asked Phyllis.

“Because I have to go to town to-morrow early, long before you are awake, my little daughter, and I shall probably not return to the Hall for quite a fortnight. But as you are so happy and have found friends, why, it does not matter so much, does it?”

“But I shall miss you,” said Phyllis, little guessing how very, very much she was to regret the Squire’s absence.

“I will write to you, pet, almost every day if I can; and if there is anything you fancy from town, you have but to say the word.”

“I will write and tell you, Father. Are you prepared to give me quite big, big things if I want them?”

“I expect I am. You are my only child, and my pockets are pretty well lined.”

“But big, big things for other people?” repeated Phyllis in an emphatic whisper.

“Come, Phyllis, it is time for bed,” said Miss Fleet.

Phyllis gave her father another hug. Her eyes looked into his, and his eyes looked into hers, and there was no doubt that the Squire and his little daughter thoroughly understood each other. Then she danced away from him, and took her governess’s hand and left the room.

“Miss Fleet manages her well,” thought the Squire. “She is a very good woman, is very trustworthy and reliable, and the dear little thing wants a bit of discipline. Nothing will induce me to send Phyllis to school. I have the greatest confidence in Miss Fleet. I wish I hadn’t to leave the child just now, but she is all right with the governess and Nurse – oh, and yes, there are the Rectory children; they see a lot of her, and she won’t miss me, not a bit.”

So the Squire went happily to bed and slept soundly, and went off at an early hour the following morning, kissing his hand as he did so in the direction of Phyllis’s window.

Chapter Three

When Phyllis awoke the next morning she had the pleasureable sensation down deep in her heart that something very agreeable was about to happen. For a time she lay still, hugging the pleasant knowledge to herself. Then she sat up in bed with a laugh. Nurse had come into the room with Phyllis's bath, and was pouring the hot water out for her and preparing to help her to dress.

"Well, Miss," she said, "what is the matter?"

"Oh Nursey! those nice children from the Rectory are coming over to-day, and I mean to give them such a jolly time. The whole four are coming, and we mean to have hide-and-seek in the grounds and in the house. We'll be a bit wild and we'll be a bit noisy, but you don't mind, do you, Nursey?"

"No, darling," replied Nurse, "I don't mind; I am glad you have something to cheer you now that the Squire has gone."

"Oh, I forgot that!" said Phyllis. "I shall miss my darling father, but I am all the more glad that the Rectory children are coming."

Phyllis rose in high spirits, and presently she and Miss Fleet met in the schoolroom.

In the Squire's absence they were to have their meals in the schoolroom, and the table was laid now and placed in the cheerful bay-window, and the schoolroom maid was bringing in coffee, toast, and other good things for breakfast.

"I am hungry," said Phyllis. – "Good-morning, Miss Fleet."

"Good-morning, my dear," said Miss Fleet. "Take your seat quietly, please – not quite so noisily. Shall I give you a cup of coffee?"

"Yes, please," said Phyllis.

As a rule she rather resented Miss Fleet's remarks, but she was in such good spirits to-day that she determined, as she expressed it, to be extra well-behaved.

"I have been thinking, Phyllis," said the governess as she slowly ate her own breakfast, "that this is an excellent opportunity for us to begin a more exhaustive routine of work."

"Exhaustive routine? What is that?" asked Phyllis.

"I will explain to you. We have been going about for so many years that you have never settled properly to your studies. Your father has given me *carte blanche* to do exactly as I please with regard to your education. I mean to have the carriage this afternoon and to drive into Dartfield, the nearest large town, in order to see about new books for you, and also to get you music-masters, drawing-masters, and a dancing-master; you will probably have to join a dancing-class at Dartfield once or twice a week, and we may have to go there for your music. I, myself, will undertake your English education, and for the present will instruct you in French and German. We cannot quite arrange matters so as to fill up your time before Monday – this is Thursday – but on Monday I trust that we shall have a complete system so that every hour may be occupied."

"It sounds very dull," said Phyllis when her governess paused for want of breath. "Is there to be no time for play?"

"Play!" said Miss Fleet, with scorn. "You have played all your life. You want to work now."

"But 'all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy,'" said Phyllis in a flippant tone.

"Your uttering that remark, dear," said the governess, "shows how sadly you have been neglected. Of course you shall play after a fashion. You must take regular exercise, and have half-an-hour a day at gymnastics, and I may be able to arrange to take you to Dartfield for tennis and hockey according to the season."

"But why go to Dartfield for my games?" said Phyllis. "There are the Rectory children."

Miss Fleet opened her eyes. She did not speak at all for a moment; then she said gently —

"As we have finished breakfast, will you please say grace, Phyllis, and then meet me here in half-an-hour for lessons?" Phyllis muttered her grace in a decidedly cross voice. Miss Fleet

immediately afterwards left the room. Phyllis went and stood by the fire. Suddenly she gave a little jump and her eyes danced.

“Why, of course I can’t go with her – horrid old thing! – to Dartfield to-day,” she exclaimed joyfully. “They are coming, the darlings, and I cannot be out of the way on any account whatsoever.”

The remembrance that the Rectory children were coming cheered her immensely, and she danced gaily about the room putting things in order for Miss Fleet.

The moment the governess appeared Phyllis ran up to her.

Chapter Four

“Oh, you have brought all those horrid dingy books!” said Phyllis, seeing that Miss Fleet carried a huge pile of half-worn-out lesson-books in her arms.

“Keep away, Phyllis, a minute; I want to put them on the table,” said the governess.

“What stupid things they are!” said Phyllis, forgetting for a minute the excitement which the thought of her little guests had given her, in her dismay at the appearance of the books.

She took up one volume after another, letting it fall on the table with an expression of great disdain.

“*Child’s Guide to Knowledge*,” she said. “Horrid book. And oh! what is this? *Mrs Markham’s History of England*. I hate *Mrs Markham*. Oh, and this – and this! – I say, Miss Fleet!”

“Phyllis, I wish to speak to you,” said her governess.

“What is it now?” said Phyllis, but she was aroused by the tone.

She looked full up into Miss Fleet’s small grey eyes, and her heart beat fast. For although Miss Fleet was really affectionate to the little girl, and was as a rule gentle, there were times when she could be quite the reverse. Phyllis saw that such a time had arrived.

“I wish to speak to you,” said Miss Fleet. “During lessons you are to be industrious, careful, studious, and respectful. These books are not to be treated with levity; they are to be studied, and pondered over, and digested.”

“Well, let’s begin and get it over,” said Phyllis.

She sat down by the table, drew a blotting-pad towards her and a bottle of ink, and looked up at her governess.

“And, oh, Miss Fleet! I want to say something. I can’t go with you to Dartfield to-day.”

“Why not, pray?”

“The four Hilchesters, the Rectory children, are coming here; I asked them yesterday. They are coming immediately after lunch, and they will stay to supper. I thought perhaps we might have supper in the evenings now that father is away. You don’t mind, do you, Fleetie dear?”

“But I do mind very much indeed,” said Miss Fleet. “What business had you to ask the Hilchesters without my permission?”

Phyllis bit her lips; her face grew scarlet.

“Well, I did, you know,” she said.

“And extremely naughty you were. Did your father know that you had asked them?”

“I never told Dad; I – I forgot.”

“Then you, a little girl of twelve years old, took it on you to ask a party of wild, disreputable, untrained children to this house without either his leave or mine!”

“Please, Miss Fleet,” said Phyllis, who had a very quick temper when roused, “they are not disreputable and they are not wild.”

“I repeat what I have said – disreputable, untrained children. I will have none of it.”

“You cannot prevent it now – you daren’t.”

“Oh, we will see. Take this page of *Child’s Guide* and learn it carefully. I will be back in a few minutes.”

Miss Fleet went out of the room. Phyllis looked after her until the door was closed; then she gave a wild, sharp scream, and rushing to the window, looked out. From there she had a view of the stables, and presently she saw one of the grooms get on her own special pony, Bob, and gallop off. The groom carried a note in his hand.

“What are you doing, David?” shrieked Phyllis from the schoolroom window.

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