

Meade L. T.

The Little School-Mothers



L. Meade

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The Little School-Mothers

Book One – Chapter One

The Girls of the Third Form

“Robina Starling will arrive at the school this evening,” said Mrs Burton. “She is twelve years old, and has never been at school before. I want you girls of the third form to take her under your charge. Frederica and Patience Chetwold, do you hear? Harriet Lane and Jane Bush, I expect great tact and consideration; don’t forget. And as to you, dear Rose, and you. Cecil and Vivian Amberley, I know beforehand that you are always sweet and considerate to those a little younger and a little more ignorant than yourselves. Robina has been sent from home because of her mother’s illness. She is quite a little home bird, and I have no doubt will be sorry for herself. I have given her people to understand that she will be very happy at school, and I expect you girls of the third form to help me to carry out my prognostications. Now then, I think that is all. We will begin our usual lessons. Miss Sparke, will you take the third form girls for their history? Miss Devigny, the sixth form are waiting for you in the blue parlour.”

A minute later the several girls of Abbeyfield School had dispersed to their different classrooms, and the great hall in which they had assembled for prayers, and afterwards to hear Mrs Burton’s remarks with regard to Robina Starling, was empty. A busy hum of eager voices might have been heard issuing from the different classrooms. It was the subdued hum caused by young people kept in complete order and actively engaged in following the pursuit of knowledge.

Abbeyfield School was situated in the neighbourhood of the New Forest, and was within half an hour by train of Bournemouth. The time was midsummer, and the holidays were not far ahead. The school was a very select one, and did not consist of more than twenty pupils. There was the third form for the girls already mentioned: Frederica and Patience Chetwold, Harriet Lane, and Jane Bush, and the three Amberleys. There was the first form, where the little children played and learned a little and were happy – there were only three little children now in the first form – and then there was the sixth form, where the girls who were considered grown-up pursued their studies. Here might be seen grave Constance Amberley, the sister of Rose and Cecil and Vivian; here, also, were Julia Price and Agnes Winter, and several more, all well-behaved girls anxious to do their duty and to take advantage of the many excellent opportunities offered to them at Abbeyfield.

There were, to all appearance, no really naughty girls in the school, although it is true that Harriet Lane and Jane Bush were not quite so much liked as their fellows. Still, harmony was the order of the hour, and no young people looked happier than these as they went two by two into their pews to the old church on Sunday and appeared now and then at a fashionable flower show at Bournemouth, or – best time of all – played merrily in the fields and lanes which surrounded Abbeyfield.

On the day when Mrs Burton had announced the arrival of Robina Starling, there was to be a picnic, to which every member of the school had been invited. It was a special picnic given by Miss Devigny, the lady who superintended the studies of the sixth form girls. She was to take them to a well-known place called Mark Ash, about six miles away. They were to have a picnic tea, and were not to return home until late. Mrs Burton would not accompany them, but Miss Sparke and Miss Devigny were considered quite a sufficient escort. They would drive to Mark Ash in two waggonettes, and every heart was pit-a-pat with excitement at the thought of their happy afternoon.

Miss Devigny was the sort of teacher whom all girls idolise. It was not that she was exactly beautiful, nor perhaps especially clever, but she had that indescribable attribute which is best known

by the word “charm.” Without any apparent effort on her part, she charmed all those with whom she came in contact. Even the dullest pupil brightened and did her best under Miss Devigny’s influence; even the most sulky became good-tempered, and the most secretive became open and above-board. The great inducement for the little girls of the third form to struggle hard and conquer the difficulties of English, French, and German was the hope that they would be moved into Miss Devigny’s class. To work with her in the blue parlour was as good as a holiday – so the girls who were there already affirmed, and so all, without a single exception, believed.

Now, however, there was a new topic of interest. Something very wonderful had occurred. The third form girls were to receive a new companion. For a girl to arrive at the school so late in the term was itself rather remarkable, but for a girl to come and be immediately placed, as it were, in their charge; for a girl to be made over to them so that they alone were to be in a measure responsible for her well-being and happiness, was a state of things which at once dazzled and perplexed them.

During recess that morning the girls of the third form met in a little group to discuss the situation. Even the sixth form girls looked at them with a certain envy, and thought it somewhat strange of Mrs Burton to put this responsibility upon the young ones. The sixth form girls were, of course, much too grand to interfere, but they also were interested in Robina.

“She must be a sort of bird,” said Frederica. “Think of her funny name – Robina Starling.”

“We must not laugh at her,” said Patience; “we must be very careful about her. I wonder at what end of the dormitory she will sleep?”

“There is an empty bed at the far end near me,” said Harriet Lane.

“Oh, she won’t be put there, Harry; don’t you make any mistake,” said Jane Bush. “She is going to be petted and fussed over – I can see that. I know quite well what will happen. She will have the centre bed under the window – that’s the nicest bed of all. You’re in it now, Rose.” Here Jane laughed. “Well, you’ll have to turn out; the bird will want it; see if I am not right.”

“Don’t be nasty,” said Rose. “If I have to turn out, I don’t mind, not one bit. Poor little thing! She has never been at school before, and she is twelve years old. It’s rather nice to have the charge of her; don’t you think so, girls?”

“Yes,” said they all, except Harriet and Jane.

“I do wonder what she will be like?” said Cecil Amberley.

“I know,” cried Harriet. “You mark my words, girls.” Here she pushed herself forward in a silly, aggravating way she had. “You mark my words. There is something queer about that Robina. Why should we receive her in the sort of manner Mrs Burton seems to expect? Why should we be so precious good to her? She must be a weakling; perhaps she is deformed, or has a squint.”

“Oh! Harriet, you don’t think so!” said Vivian Amberley, the youngest of the four sisters, and in consequence the most petted. “I can’t bear girls with squints,” she added.

“But that would be better than having a hunchback,” said Jane.

“She is sure to have something,” continued Harriet. “It may not be either of these, but something. She is small, and ugly, and frightened – that I am certain of. Oh, of course we’ll have to be good to her; but at the same time, what I say is this, girls: we’ll have to let that young ’un know at once that she is not to have her own way about everything.”

“There is something in what you say,” remarked Patience Chetwold; “and although I never quite care for your sort of tone, Harriet, yet I think, too, we must not let the girl rule us all. She won’t love us a bit if we spoil her.”

“Of course she won’t,” said Frederica.

“Well, I am going to spoil her,” said Rose; “and I know for certain she is not a bit like what you say, you horrid thing,” and she darted an angry glance at Harriet Lane. “She has a very pretty name, to begin with, and I am certain she is just a dear.”

“Don’t let’s quarrel about her,” said Jane. “So far we are not a quarrelling lot. It would be too bad if that Robina started quarrelling in the school.”

“Oh, I say, girls, there’s the bell! Let’s go in. Let’s race to the door. Who’ll be first?”

“I say!” cried Harriet. “Who’ll follow? Come along, Jane Bush!”

The picnic was great fun. The girls said so afterwards. There was not a single flaw anywhere; there was no sort of dissension in the school; the children were well-behaved, they did not quarrel. It is true that Jane Bush could quarrel if there was anyone to quarrel with, and it is true that Harriet could be nasty, and even spiteful, were the occasion to offer. But then it did not offer. When there happen to be in a form two girls like the Chetwolds, and three girls like the Amberleys, two somewhat disagreeable girls have very little chance of making their presence felt. Accordingly, no one disputed for the favourite place near Miss Devigny, and no one rebelled or made nasty remarks when Jane Bush secured the last morsel of cream blancmange for herself; no one even whispered “Greedy pig!” but everyone was as ladylike and charming as possible.

Miss Devigny turned to Miss Sparke, and said, under her breath:

“I really never saw such well-behaved little girls; they do you great credit, Miss Sparke.”

“They are naturally amiable,” replied Miss Sparke; “and I only trust things will continue in as great harmony as at present after Robina Starling arrives.”

“Do you know anything about the child?” asked Miss Devigny, dropping her voice and coming closer to the other teacher.

“Not much, except that she is too troublesome at home to remain there any longer. Her mother is very far from well, and little Robina has never learned obedience. Dear Mrs Burton is not afraid of her on that account, however, and she believes that there will be no finer discipline for her than making her over, as it were, to the third form.”

“Perhaps so,” said Miss Devigny, a little doubtfully; “but I am not so sure on that point,” she added.

The girls were now playing hide-and-seek in the wood, and while the two governesses were talking, quite unperceived by them a little head peeped out from amongst a great mass of underwood, and two bright, mischievous black eyes looked keenly for a minute at Miss Devigny, and then the head popped back again before anyone could see. The governesses were quite unaware that one of the most troublesome children in the third form had overheard them. This child was no less a person than Jane Bush.

Jane was a little girl who had never known a mother’s care. She had been sent to this nice school when she was ten years of age. She had been at Abbeyfield now for nearly two years. She was a small girl for her age, somewhat stoutly built. She had very black eyes, and short black hair, which she always wore like a mop sticking up all over her funny round head. She was a perfect contrast to her own special friend and ally, Harriet Lane. Harriet was a tall, lanky, pale child. She had exceedingly light blue eyes, a large mouth, somewhat prominent teeth, and thin, hay-coloured hair. She was not at all pretty. Harriet had made up her mind on the subject of her own looks long ago.

“I must be something,” she thought. “If I am not pretty, I must at least be out of the common. I will make people see that I am awfully clever. It’s just as nice to be clever as to be pretty.”

Perhaps Harriet was more clever than her companions. She certainly did manage to impress the others with her power of learning French and German, with the excellent way in which she studied her “pieces” for the pianoforte, and with her really pretty little drawings, which, in her opinion, were almost works of art.

Harriet, in her heart of hearts, voted the Chetwolds dull and the three Amberleys molly-coddles.

“They are always fussing about their throats or having damp feet or getting a little bit of a chill,” she remarked on one occasion in a very superior tone to Jane. “I have no patience with girls who are always thinking of themselves; they just do it to be petted. As to that Vivian, she knows quite well that if she manages to cry a little and put her hand to her throat, she won’t have any more lessons for the rest of the day.”

“I call Vivian a horrid little cheat, although she is thought such a model,” said Jane.

“Oh, I hate models,” said Harriet. “Give me a naughty girl, by preference.”

“There are no naughty girls in this school,” said Jane; “they are every one of them as good as good. It’s awfully dull,” she added. “Even you and I can’t be naughty, Harriet; for there’s no one to be naughty with.”

These were the sentiments of these two really troublesome young people when they started on their picnic. In the course of that same evening, when the sun was about to set, and the slight summer breeze had dropped away, and there was a perfect calm all over nature and a serene pale blue sky overhead, then Jane Bush met Harriet Lane and, clutching her by the arm, said:

“Oh, Harry, Harry! What do you think?”

“I am sure I don’t know,” said Harriet, who looked taller and more lanky than ever. “I wish you wouldn’t get so frightfully excited, Jane. You quite take my breath away.”

“I have got news for you,” said Jane, making her mouth into a round “O,” and forming a trumpet for it with her hand. “News!” she repeated. “Wonderful grand news!” and now she managed to shout the words into Harriet’s ear.

“Don’t deafen me,” said Harriet. “I can’t help it if you have news. I don’t suppose there is anything in your new’s,” she continued.

“You are as cross as two sticks, Harry,” said Jane; “but you won’t be when you hear what I have got to say. Come along; I must tell you before we start for home, and they are putting the horses to the waggonettes already. Let’s run down this glade. Let’s be very quick, or they’ll stop us. I see old Sparke coming back as fast as she can, and she’ll begin to call us all to the top of that little mound. It is there we are to wait for the waggonettes. Come – quick!”

Harriet, although she liked Jane, had a secret sort of contempt for her. She could be naughty, of course, but she was not clever. Harriet admired nothing but talent. She believed herself to be a sort of genius.

“I don’t suppose you have anything to tell me,” she repeated; “but I’ll come if you want me to. See, I’ll race you – one, two, three! I’ll get first to that tall tree at the end of the glade.”

In a race with Harriet, Jane was nowhere, for Harriet’s legs were so long and she was so light that she flew almost like the wind over the ground. She easily reached the meeting-place first, and Jane followed her, panting, red in the face, and a little cross.

“You did take the wind out of me,” she said. “Oh, oh, oh!”

She pressed her hand to her side.

“I cannot speak at all for a minute – I – I – can’t – tell you my news. Oh, you have winded me – you have!”

“Don’t talk, then,” said Harriet, who was leaning comfortably with her back against a tree; while Jane, round as a ball and crimson in the face, panted a little way off. By-and-by, however, Jane got back her voice.

“I’ve found out something about the new ‘un,” she said, “that bird thing, who will be here to-night. I was hiding down in the brushwood, just by the big oak, and you were all looking for me; but I buried myself under a holly tree, and no one could see even a squint of me, however hard one looked. *They*– didn’t know I was there.”

“Who do you mean by ‘they’?” interrupted Harriet.

“Sparke and Devigny,” said Jane. “Oh, of course I am fond of Miss Devigny, but I can’t be bothered to ‘Miss’ her when I’m in no end of a hurry. Well, they talked, and it was all about the new ‘un. *She* is not a model; that’s one comfort. She is so desperately naughty she has been sent from home – sort of expelled, you know – sort of disgraced for life; a nice sort of creature to come here! And we’re to mould her. What is to ‘mould’ a body, Harriet?”

“To make them like ourselves, I suppose,” said Harriet, whose eyes sparkled over this intelligence.

“That is what Sparke said; she hopes everything for the bird from our influence. Isn’t it fun? Isn’t it great? I am quite excited! See here now: think what larks we’ll have with a squint-eyed, hunchbacked, very naughty girl. Oh, won’t it be larks!”

“She may be a nuisance, there is no saying,” remarked Harriet.

“Why, aren’t you delighted, Harriet? I am.”

“Can’t say,” answered Harriet. “I only hope,” she added, “that whatever else she is, she is stupid. I don’t want any clever girls in the same form with me. Now, let’s go back, Jane.”

“You don’t seem at all obliged to me for telling you such a wonderful piece of news,” said Jane.

“I am not. We’d have found it all out for ourselves in no time, and you should *never* listen – you know you shouldn’t.”

“Oh, Harriet, you won’t tell on me – you promise you won’t?”

“I? Of course not, silly. Now let’s be quick. I hear Sparkie shouting. Let’s run back. Oh, I *am* glad I have got long legs!”

Book One – Chapter Two

Robina

Robina Starling was waiting all by herself in the school parlour. Mrs Burton had received her, and had been very nice to the small girl. She had talked to her affectionately, and even kissed her, and had herself taken her to the dormitory where the girls of the third form slept. She had shown her the little cubicle which was to be all her own, and said that she felt quite certain Robina would be happy at school.

“There is no unhappy girl in my school,” she said, “and if you are not as gay as a lark and as bright as the sunshine, you will be the first discontented girl who ever came to Abbeyfield. Now, dear, your things will be unpacked for you by Preston; but, in the meantime, you might brush your hair and wash your hands; then you can come down to me. We shall have tea together this first night. Afterwards, I will take you to the parlour, where you can wait for your companions.”

Mrs Burton left the dormitory as she spoke, and Robina stood there all alone. When she found herself quite alone, she blinked her eyes hard two or three times, then, tossing back her great mane of thick brown hair, said under her breath, “Now I am better.” Then she proceeded to investigate the room.

There were eight beds in the room, and it was, of course, very large. This dormitory, occupied by the third form girls, was perhaps the most beautiful bedroom it was possible to see. Each girl’s little division, or cubicle, was quite as large as an ordinary small bedroom. It was curtained off, and was completely furnished within with every requirement that a small girl could desire. There was, to begin with, a very pretty wash-hand stand with rows of wide, deep drawers beneath, and over the stand was a looking-glass. The wash-hand stand, with its drawers and glass, was so placed that a girl could see her face nicely. There was a little toilet table without a glass, and there was a deep cupboard in the wall full of shelves at one side and a hanging press at the other. The floor of the little cubicle was carpeted with pretty felt, and there were curtains to match at the windows.

Robina found herself in one of the most charming of the eight cubicles. Each cubicle was arranged with a different colour, and Robina’s was of a very delicate shade of mauve; the paint was white and the decorations mauve; the felt carpet was mauve, the curtains were mauve, and the little bed had a French canopy over it of mauve and white curtains tied back with broad mauve ribbons. There was also a mauve silk *couvrepiéd* on the bed, so that altogether the effect was most charming.

Robina was not, perhaps, a shy girl; and, having quickly taken in what her own cubicle contained, she marched into the others. Each cubicle was exactly like its fellow, except that its colouring was different: some were all in pink, some all in blue, some again in red and white, some again in palest primrose.

“I have the prettiest,” thought Robina; “not that I care.”

She now looked out of her window. The cubicle next to hers had no window, so she was highly privileged; but she was not in a mood to notice this at present. She stood quite still, gazing steadily out at the view. Her face was peculiar for so young a child, and had a look of power about it which would distinguish it all through life, and make people inclined to look twice at her. It was not exactly a beautiful face, but it arrested attention. The little nose was short, and perfectly straight; the brows thick; the forehead broad and very white. The eyes were good, but of a nondescript colour; so that one moment you spoke of them as brown, at another as blue, at another as grey. At night, they looked very black, and in times of emotion they would sparkle in quite a dangerous way. Robina’s mouth was well cut, but a little large. She had a clear skin that was somewhat pale, and was a square-built child, neither especially tall nor especially short for her age.

Having completed her toilet – not with any particular view to being tidy or making herself charming – she went downstairs. A maid directed her to Mrs Burton's sitting-room, where she and her mistress had tea.

During tea-time, Mrs Burton did what she could to draw Robina out. But this was not at all an easy task. Robina did not want to be drawn; and she was the sort of child whom it was absolutely difficult to force out of the way in which she wished to go. Mrs Burton tried her on the subject of her sick mother; but although Robina did blink her eyes twice in a rather suspicious manner, she replied quite calmly, saying that her mother was always an invalid and could not stand noise.

"I am noisy," said Robina, "so that is why I have been sent to you. Did you know that?"

"Yes," replied Mrs Burton.

"Do you expect me to be very quiet here?" continued Robina.

"In play-time," answered Mrs Burton, "you can be as noisy as you like."

"But when I am in the mood I am always noisy," said Robina.

"We don't have moods here," replied Mrs Burton, whereupon Robina stretched out her hand and helped herself without asking to a large piece of cake. She ate it almost greedily, stuffing great pieces into her mouth.

Mrs Burton was determined that no discipline should begin that evening, so she turned now to the subject of lessons. What did Robina know? Nothing, it seemed, and yet in a way everything.

"I have read lots," answered that young lady calmly; "but they couldn't manage me about my lessons; that was another reason why they sent me here. Did you know that?"

"Yes; I have heard it," replied Mrs Burton.

"Do you mean to manage me here?" asked Robina.

"I hope so," replied the headmistress.

"Nobody else has been able to do it," said Robina in a very calm voice.

Then she got up, allowing a lot of crumbs to fall upon the floor, and walked to the window. She stood – perhaps with intention – her broad back to her governess. Mrs Burton looked at the back, the well-squared shoulders, the sturdy little figure, the thick hair which fell in luxuriant masses far below the child's waist.

Mrs Burton was not one either to sigh or despair; but she knew quite well that she had undertaken no mean task in introducing Robina Starling into her orderly school. After a minute's pause she got up, and, going to her little pupil, took her hand.

"I want you to help me, Robina," she said. The wild eyes darted a quick glance into her face.

"How?" asked Robina. "I am not much good at that sort of thing."

"I won't tell you how to-night, my dear; but perhaps to-morrow we will have a talk. There is one rule in the school which has never been broken yet; and that is, that a new pupil – quite a new pupil – has tea with me all by herself on the day after her arrival. So you, Robina, will have the privilege of having tea alone with me to-morrow evening. You must come to me here at five o'clock – sharp at five o'clock, remember – and then you and I will have a little talk and I hope a nice time together. It is considered an honour, my love."

"That depends on who is considering, doesn't it?" said Robina very calmly.

"I am sure you will think it an honour," said Mrs Burton in as calm a voice. Then she took her pupil's hand, and led her into the school parlour. "You will find books here," she said, "and every single thing you want until the other girls come back. I expect them at eight o'clock, when you will all have supper, and then you will go to bed."

Robina said nothing, and the headmistress went away.

There were three special parlours in the school. They were called by the old-fashioned name of parlour, but they were in reality ordinary sitting-rooms. One was devoted to the sixth form girls, and this was a large and truly elegant apartment, furnished well, with a grand piano, and easels, and beautiful pictures on the walls. The sixth form girls had all sorts of comfortable chairs and everything

to conduce to that feeling of being grown-up which is so much liked by girls of from sixteen to eighteen years of age.

The little ones had also a parlour which was more like a play-room than anything else; and the third form parlour, in which Robina now found herself, was a large, square room with a round table in the middle, a book-shelf full of story-books, another book-shelf full of histories and works of travel, a pair of globes, and several bird-cages. A bird-cage hung down before each of the four windows, and in the cages were canaries, bullfinches, and other tame birds. There was also a parrot in a large cage in one corner of the room.

Robina, whose eyes had been quite dull, and who had felt an indescribable and most painful weight at her heart, quite brightened up when she saw the birds. She amused herself taking her chair from one window to another and examining the feathered creatures, who had now curled themselves up into round fluffy balls, and were sound asleep. Not for the world would she awaken them; but a new, tender sort of light came into her eyes as she watched them.

"Pretty darlings!" she said softly, under her breath. Her whole queer little face became happier in expression after she had examined the pet birds of the third form. She then crossed the room to look at the parrot. The parrot was an old grey bird with a solemn, wise face. He was not asleep: no one ever seemed to catch him nodding. He turned his head to one side and looked full at the new-comer.

"Mind what you're about!" he said sharply, and then he turned his back to her as though she were not of the slightest consequence.

Robina burst out laughing. The parrot laughed too, but still kept his back to her.

"Mind what *you're* about yourself," said Robina. Whereupon the parrot answered, "Ha, ha!" and the next minute began to "*miaow*" in the most distracted manner, as though he were an angry cat.

Robina, now in fits of mirth, stood and regarded him. She was so employed when all the girls of the third form burst into the room. They came in in great excitement, each pair of eyes fixed upon Robina, and all the seven pairs of lips eager to say something to the girl who had so strongly excited their curiosity.

"I am so glad to see you. How do you do?" said Frederica, who was slightly the oldest girl in the form, and therefore the one to take the lead. "You are Robina, are you not?"

"Yes," said Robina. She spoke with extreme calm. "You must be very tired."

"I am not a bit tired," said Robina.

"Well, I am glad you are not. I am sorry we were not at home to welcome you. We have had a lovely picnic!"

"Bother picnics!" said Robina.

This was a little disconcerting. Harriet Lane began to laugh. The parrot said instantly "Mind what you're about! Ha, ha!" and everyone laughed now. The ice was broken: it was impossible to be formal after Polly had declared himself. Robina found that she was surrounded by a lot of eager, good-looking, pleasant girls. Each seemed more eager than the other to give her a hearty welcome. The soreness round her heart was soothed for the time being. She sank down on a chair and looked them all over.

"You're not a bad lot for school-girls," she said; "but I don't know one from the other. Who is each? Please don't speak so fast – one at a time. You are Frederica? What a queer name! Now, who are you? And who are you? I will tell you very soon which of you I mean to be friends with. I always do what I like everywhere."

"Mind what you're about! Ha, ha!" said the parrot.

Book One – Chapter Three

Developments

In a very few days Robina Starling was settled at school. She was as completely settled there as though she had lived at Abbeyfield all her life. She was the sort of girl who quickly fitted herself into a new niche. She wasted no time in selecting her friends. She was not a scrap afraid. She looked calmly, not only at the girls in the third form, but at those superior beings – the sixth form girls. What she thought she always said. Those girls who admired her said that Robina was very straightforward, that it would be impossible for her to tell a lie, and that they admired her for this trait in her character extremely. The girls who did not admire her, on the contrary, said that she was rude and ill-bred; but that fact – for she knew quite well that they said it – seemed rather to please Robina than otherwise.

She was quick, too, about her lessons. Although she knew nothing in the school way of knowing things, she had in reality a mass of varied information in her little head. She had a startling way of announcing her knowledge in and out of school. Miss Sparke used to find herself sometimes put quite in the wrong by this extraordinary pupil.

“No, Miss Sparke,” Robina said very calmly one morning during class, when she had been a week in the school, “that was the old-fashioned view, but if you look in the latest volumes on the subject, you will see for yourself that things are changed now. Shall I look for you, Miss Sparke, or will you do it yourself? It is a pity that you should teach the wrong thing, isn’t it?”

Miss Sparke said, “Hold your tongue, Robina; you are not to correct me in school.”

But she had coloured high when her naughty pupil spoke; and Robina, who did not colour at all, nor show the slightest triumph, but who sat down again in her seat with the utmost calm, made a deep impression on her school-fellows. She, with several of the girls, examined the latest authorities that afternoon, and as Robina was proved absolutely correct, and Miss Sparke wrong, the poor teacher took a lower place in her pupils’ estimation from that moment.

“You see,” said Robina, “although I am young in years, I have always read grown-up sort of things. Father’s frightfully clever, and so is Mother, and as there are no other children at home, I just read what I like. Besides that, I hear Father talking with other learned men. Father’s a great scientist, and he knows. Poor Sparkie is very well, but she is no scientist, and she doesn’t know.”

“What is a scientist?” asked Frederica.

“Oh, Frederica!” said Harriet; “why surely you know that. A scientist is – ” but then she coloured, for Robina had fixed her bright eyes on her face.

“Well,” said Robina calmly, “you will explain to Frederica what a scientist is, won’t you, Harriet?”

“A person who knows science, I suppose,” answered Harriet, blurting out the words, and then dashing out of the room in a fury.

A laugh followed her to the door. She felt that she hated Robina. She had never really liked her from the very first; and now, with a choking sensation in her throat, she went out into the playground.

The first person she saw was Jane. Now Jane in her heart of hearts greatly admired the new pupil. The fact that she was really naughty at home had, it is sad to relate, but added to Jane’s liking for her. Harriet, it is true, was Jane’s own special friend, but Harriet was not nearly so amusing or so daring as the new pupil. Harriet now called her companion to her in an imperious voice.

“Come here, this minute, you silly!” she said. “Why do you stand there with your mouth gaping and your legs far apart? You look for all the world like one of those foolish sheep on the back lawn.”

“I am not a sheep; you needn’t say it,” answered Jane.

She had reached Harriet’s side by this time.

“Well, come for a walk with me in the paddock,” said Harriet. “I don’t want to be cross to you, Jane, but really that new girl, Robina – she is past bearing.”

“Oh, I like her so much,” said Jane.

“You do?” answered Harriet. “You mean to tell me, you horrid thing, that you would give me up for her?”

“Oh! no, no, Harry, of course not. I like you best, of course. You are my real, oldest friend. But I suppose a girl may have two friends, and I do like her. The thing that makes me so sad is this: she won’t be my friend; she snubs me like anything.”

“There’s one comfort,” said Harriet; “she’ll soon snub herself out of the school if she isn’t careful. Think of her correcting Sparkie this morning! I never heard of such cheek in the whole course of my life.”

Jane began to laugh. “It was very clever of her,” she said.

“It was very impertinent of her,” said Harriet.

“But she was right,” said Jane, “and Sparkie was wrong.”

“I have no doubt she was wrong herself,” said Harriet, “although,” she added, “she did prove her point in that horrid encyclopaedia.”

The little girls had now reached the paddock. Here was delicious shade and green grass, and the heat of the July sun was tempered by a lovely breeze. Harriet, whose cheeks were hot with annoyance, began to cool down. Jane watched her with eager eyes.

“Harriet,” said Jane; “you don’t think for a minute that I love anyone as much as you?”

“I hope you don’t, Janie,” said Harriet; “it would be awfully unkind of you. But now listen to me. We must do something to stop this.”

“To stop what?” asked Jane.

“That young ’un taking the lead in everything. It is too ridiculous. She hasn’t been more than a week in the school, and yet everything yields to her. She struts about with her head in the air and even talks to the girls of the sixth form, and isn’t a bit afraid of Sparkie or even of Devigny. The next thing we’ll find if this goes on is that Mrs Burton herself is corrected by her. I wish, I do wish, I wish beyond *anything*, I could get her proved in the wrong herself.”

“Oh, Harriet!” exclaimed Jane.

“Yes, I do,” said Harriet; “I don’t pretend otherwise; she has taken everything from me.”

“Oh, what *do* you mean?” said Jane.

“I had not much,” continued Harriet; “but yet I had one thing. I was at the head of my form; I was certain of the best prizes; I was considered the clever one. I was not vain of it, but I was glad. Now, I am the clever one no longer. She is at the head of the form. Although she has been such a short time in the school, she will get a prize at break-up; I know she will. It isn’t that she has ever been taught in the school way, but she knows such a lot. Oh, I do hate her, Janie! I wish – I wish she had not come!”

“Poor Harriet!” said Jane.

She felt immensely pleased herself at this confidence reposed in her. Hitherto Harriet, with her pale face, her lank hair, her tall young figure, had been very condescending to black-eyed, roly-poly Jane. She had kept Jane under, and had only condescended to listen to her now and then. It was delicious to be confided in; to have Harriet explain to Jane what she felt about things. After a time, Jane said softly: “Until Robina came, we were the *only* naughty girls in the school.”

“Oh, we were not a bit naughty in reality,” said Harriet. “It pleased you to think it, Janie. When I told you that we were the naughty ones, you used to be as proud as Punch; but we were not really naughty as she could be naughty. I declare since she came I feel that I could do anything.”

“Let us make *her* naughty,” said Jane, in a low tone.

“Let us what?” asked Harriet, turning and facing her little companion.

“I know!” said Jane after a pause. “I heard what they said when I was hiding under the holly bush. They said that she was sent to school because she was so noisy and wouldn’t obey anyone. Up

to the present she has only been a little naughty; she has done the sort of things that people forgive. Let us make her do something that people don't forgive: let's make her awfully disobedient."

"I declare, Janie," said Harriet, "you're a much cleverer girl than I gave you credit for. That isn't at all a bad idea. Of course it's naughty of us to wish anything of the sort; but then she is too aggravating, and – and – if she takes my character for cleverness away, and keeps the head of the form, and wins my prize – I *cannot* stand it. Oh, she put me to shame just now before the others – I won't tell you how, for it isn't worth while; but she – she laughed as I went out of the room, and – the others laughed, too. I *hate* her! I don't mind what I do to get her into trouble!"

"We mustn't do too much, we must be careful," said Jane. "But if she is really very disobedient at home, why should she not be disobedient just once at school? You are clever enough to manage that, aren't you, Harriet?"

"And you are clever enough to help me," answered Harriet. "Well, let's say no more now; mum's the word. They're going to have tea on the lawn, and we may as well join the others. I shall not feel nearly so bad now, Janie, since you are my friend, and we are making up a little plot together. Let's think very hard. Let's put on our considering caps, and let's meet again here this hour to-morrow."

"Oh, Harriet!" said Jane. "I am glad and I'm sorry. I'm a bit frightened, and yet my heart goes pit-a-pat with excitement. I do love you, Harriet. Oh dear, oh dear! I wonder if this is desperately wicked!"

"I'll give you a kiss if you will faithfully promise not to say one word of our conversation to another soul," said Harriet.

Her kisses were considered great favours by the hungry Jane, who now received solemnly a peck on her forehead from Harriet.

"We'd best not be seen too much together," said Harriet. "I will go round by the fish-pond to the lawn, and you can run into the house and come out that way."

There is no doubt whatever that these two girls felt a very extra spice of naughtiness in their hearts on that afternoon.

Meanwhile, Robina was enjoying herself; she was the centre of a large circle of girls. She was very nicely dressed, to begin with; and she looked, if not pretty, yet exceedingly interesting; her face was so full of intelligence and her expression was so varying, that it was quite a delight to watch her when she talked. She had the merriest laugh, too, like a peal of bells, and she had a very good-natured way of drawing a neglected girl to her side, and putting her arm about her and making friends with her for the time being. In particular, she was fond of little children, and the small girls of the school clung round her, pressing up to her side, and begging to be allowed to sit on her knee and fondle her, as tiny girls will.

The first form in the school at present only consisted of four little girls. There were Patty and Cissy Price – two wee sisters of seven and six years of age; and there was Curly Pate – as they called her – the youngest girl of all, who was not yet quite six; and there was little Annie, who was older than the others, but very small in stature and very delicate.

Curly Pate was the baby of the school, and was somewhat spoiled in consequence. She was a perfect roly-poly creature, with fat arms and creasy, fat neck and little fat legs. Her face was perfectly round – as round as a ball, and she had blue eyes and a soft complexion, and fluffy, curly, baby hair all over her little head. Her hair was short and thick, and of that fine, fine quality which only very tiny children and babies possess.

From the eldest to the next youngest girl in the school Curly Pate was the darling. Anyone would be proud to walk with her, to caress her, to submit to her whims; and Curly Pate, like all young queens, was exacting. She had her preferences. She liked Constance Amberley better than any of her own small companions. When Constance walked about the grounds with Curly Pate on her back – that young person pretending that she was riding her pony and desiring her "Gee-gee" to go faster, and pounding her on the head and shoulders in no inconsiderable degree – Constance, far from being

pitied, was envied by everyone else in the school. But lo, and behold! when Robina appeared, that fickle young person – the school baby – changed her tactics. She walked straight up to Robina on the first day of her appearance in the playground and said:

“I ’ike oo – new dirl!” and established herself on the spot, Robina’s ruler.

Robina was elected to be the baby’s slave, and the others laughed and joked at Constance, and watched the baby with delight. The other little girls followed suit, as very small girls will.

On this special afternoon Robina had the four small children in a circle round her. Curly Pate, it is true, occupied the place of honour on the young lady’s lap, but Patty and Cissie Price, and grave, pale little Annie were also close to the popular favourite.

“Tell us a story, Robina,” asked Cissie Price.

“Not now,” said Robina; “and you are not to pull me, babies, for it makes me too hot. Curly, sit still, you little imp! I’ll put you off my knee if you don’t behave.”

Now none of the other girls in the third form would have dared to speak to Curly in that tone. They would have received a slap in the face for their pains, but Curly took it quite meekly from Robina.

“I – is – dood. I is – vedy dood. I ’ove oo,” she said.

She nestled up close to Robina, pulling that young person’s hand round her waist, and patting the said hand with her own two fat little ones and saying, over and over again: “I ’ove oo, Wobbin – I ’ove oo!”

It was on this scene that Harriet and Jane appeared. Since Robina had come, Harriet had rather avoided her. She had been jealous, poor child, from the first moment; but now she altered her tactics, and forcing her way through the group, sat down close to the new favourite.

“There’s no room here,” said Robina. “Go a little further off, please, Harriet; you are pushing little Annie and making her cry.”

“I don’t care twopence for little Annie!” cried Harriet, rudely. “I have as good a right to sit here as anybody else. Don’t press me, Annie; if I am in the way, you’re the person to make room, not me. Go back to your nursery, won’t you?”

Annie, who was a very timid child, began to cry. Robina immediately rose, lifted Curly Pate on to her shoulder, and said to the three other little ones:

“I have changed my mind. I will tell you a story now, but no one else shall listen; it’s a lovely, true, true fairy tale. We’ll just sit under that tree, and you shall all hear it.”

They followed her, clinging to her skirt and one of them trying to grasp her hand. Harriet’s face grew black. Frederica said:

“Well, Harriet, you don’t look too well pleased; but for my part, I think Robina was quite right; you ought not to have taken poor little Annie’s place.”

“Do you mind telling me,” answered Harriet, “what right those children have to interfere with us? They belong to the first form; let them stay in their nursery.”

“Oh, as to that,” said Rose Amberley, “they have as good a right to the lawn as we have. They are always allowed to play here every afternoon; and Robina invited them to tea; she bought a lot of sweeties, chocolates and cakes for them. They are Robina’s guests; they just worship her.”

“Worship her, indeed!” said Harriet. “Well — *I* don’t worship her.”

“Anyone can see that, Harriet, and it is a great pity,” said Rose Amberley. “Robina is a very nice girl, and as good as gold.”

“Oh, is she!” said Harriet. “Jane, what do *you* think?”

“I know what I know,” said Jane, nodding her little head with great firmness.

Frederica looked very hard at Jane; then she glanced at her own sister.

“Look here,” she said suddenly; “we have all been very happy at school, haven’t we?”

“Who says we haven’t?” answered Harriet. She felt crosser than ever, for there were such peals of laughter coming from under the shelter of that tree, where Robina was telling the babies her fairy tale. “Who says we haven’t?” she repeated.

“The reason we have been happy,” continued Frederica, “is simply this: we have been – or at least we have tried to be – good. It would indeed,” continued the young girl, “be very difficult to be anything but good here – here, where things are so sweet and everyone is so kind, and even lessons, even lessons are made such a pleasure. Why shouldn’t we all keep on being good? why should we be jealous?”

“Who says anyone is jealous?” said Harriet.

“Oh, Harriet!” said Frederica; “you know you are, just a little bit.”

“I don’t wonder she’s jealous!” suddenly burst from Jane. “Robina has taken her place in class. Harriet is our clever one; she doesn’t want to – to – ”

“Oh, I am sure she is not small-minded enough for that,” said Frederica at once. “If a cleverer girl comes to the school – ”

“She is *not* cleverer!” burst from Harriet.

“Well, Harriet, you’ve got to prove it. If you are clever, work still harder, and resume your place in the class, and I’m sure we’ll all be delighted: fair play is fair play, and it’s very mean of you to be angry about nothing. Ah! here comes tea, and I am so thirsty. Let’s help to lay it out, girls!”

Immediately every girl had started to her feet: a white table-cloth was spread on the lawn, cups and saucers followed suit; tea, cake, bread and butter, dishes of fruit were soon being eagerly discussed. The small children gave a whoop of excitement, and Robina returned, still carrying Curly Pate, with the others in her train.

During tea, one of the little ones suggested that they should turn Robina into a queen. No sooner had the thought been uttered than it was put into execution. She was seated on a special chair and crowned with flowers, which the children had been gathering for her. A wreath of flowers surrounded her laughing face, and a garland of flowers was placed round her neck. Curly Pate looked on just for a minute, then said eagerly: “Me too! me too!”

“Why should there not be two queens?” said Robina. “Gather some white flowers for the baby, somebody.”

“Somebody” meant everybody – that is, except Harriet, for even Jane was drawn into the whirlpool of excitement. Nothing could be prettier than the happy faces of the children; and especially of the queen with her flowers – her cheeks slightly flushed, her queer, half-wild, half-pathetic eyes brighter and darker than usual, one arm encircling Curly Pate’s dear little fat body, and of Curly Pate herself, shrieking with delight while a crown of white daisies encircled her little head.

It was on this scene that Mrs Burton, accompanied by a gentleman whom the girls had never seen before, suddenly appeared.

Book One – Chapter Four

An Unusual Prize

The gentleman was holding by the hand a small boy. The boy could not have been more than seven or eight years of age. He was rather a little boy for that, so that some of the girls put him down as younger. He was a very beautiful boy. He had a little dark face, with that nut-brown skin at once clear and yet full of colour which is in itself a great loveliness. His eyes were large and brown like the softest velvet. He had very thick brown hair with a sort of bronze tone in it, and this hair hung in ringlets round his head. The boy was dressed in a peculiar way. He wore a suit of brown velvet, which fitted his agile little figure rather tightly. He had brown silk stockings and little breeches, and shoes with steel buckles. Round his neck he wore a large lace collar made in a sort of Vandyke fashion. Altogether, this little boy looked exactly as though he had stepped out of a picture.

He was not at all shy. His eyes travelled over the scene, and they fixed themselves on Curly Pate, while Curly Pate's eyes gazed on him.

There was dead silence for a minute, all the girls in the school looking neither at Mrs Burton nor at the gentleman, but at the queer, new, little, beautiful boy. Then Curly Pate broke the stillness.

"I is kene," (queen), she said, "and – him is king!" and she pointed with rapture at the boy.

"Oh, you're king, are you, Ralph?" said the gentleman. Then he said again: "Come over to me, little queen, and let me introduce you to the king."

Never was anyone less shy than the school baby, and never, perhaps, was anyone more fickle. She scrambled immediately off Robina's knee and, pushing aside her companions, went up to the boy and took his hand.

"Tiss I – king; won't oo?" she said, and she raised her little cherubic mouth to the small boy.

The boy, who was no more shy than Curly Pate herself, stooped, kissed her, and said:

"Oh, you little darling!" Curly Pate gave her fat hand to his Majesty, and the king and queen trotted off together.

"Does oo 'ike fairies, and butterflies and flowers?" the queen was heard to say as she conducted His Majesty round the garden.

The girls all looked after them with pleasure, and the gentleman said to Mrs Burton:

"Then I shall have no fear whatever. I see he is happy already, and I know all you girls will treat my little man kindly."

"Of course we will," said Robina, taking the lead in that way which nearly drove poor Harriet mad. "Is he going to stay here? What a perfect little darling he is!"

"He is going to stay from now until the end of the term," said the gentleman; "then I am coming back for him, and I am going to give a prize to the girl whom he himself likes best."

"Oh! then, of course, that will be Curly Pate," said Robina, still smiling and looking very interesting and absolutely out of the common.

"Curly Pate won't count," said the gentleman. "The prize is to be given by Mrs Burton's permission to a girl in the third form. Who are the girls in the third form, if I may venture to ask, my dear madam?"

The gentleman had a most courteous way; his manners were so nice, and his voice so – perhaps harmonious is the right word, that he might almost have been a king himself.

"Girls of the third form," said Mrs Burton in reply, "come and stand over here, will you?"

At the word of command, Frederica and Patience Chetwold, the three Amberleys, Harriet and Jane, and last, but by no means least, Robina Starling, stood in a long row before the strange gentleman and Mrs Burton.

“So you are the third form girls,” he said very kindly. “Well, I am exceedingly pleased to make your acquaintance. One of you – that one whom Mrs Burton considers the most truly kind to my little boy – shall receive from my hands, on my return to claim my child, a prize. It will be, after a fashion, a prize for conduct, for it will be given to that girl who does not spoil Ralph, but who helps him to be good, who wins his love, who, in short, understands him. I know he is a very pretty boy, and on the whole, perhaps he is good; but he is by no means all good, and perhaps it would be well, girls of the third form, to give you a hint – he can be led, but never driven. I think he is an honourable little fellow, and I am sure he would not willingly tell a lie, or be willingly disobedient. I want one of you to be, in short, his school-mother, and the school-mother who really adopts my Ralph shall be rewarded by me.”

Mrs Burton now spoke.

“You shall all be put on trial with regard to Ralph,” she said, “for the next week. At the end of that time he will himself select his school-mother, and unless something unforeseen occurs, I think, Mr Durrant, the prize will be already won. The fact is, my dear sir, there are a great many prizes to be competed for just now, and I do not want my girls to be kept in a state of suspense.”

“I will give as my prize,” said Mr Durrant, “a pony, with a side-saddle, and a habit made to order and to fit the girl who wins the prize. In order, too, that the pony shall be no expense to the fortunate owner, I will provide for its maintenance a certain sum per year, until the owner can assure me that she is in a position to undertake this expense herself. What I mean is this,” continued Mr Durrant: “I don’t want the girl’s parents to have any expense with the pony. He will be my gift to the little girl who mothers my boy. And now I think I have said all that is necessary.”

“I will talk to you girls on the subject of little Ralph this evening after prayers,” said the headmistress. Then she turned away with Mr Durrant, who, however, first of all shook hands with the girls of the third form, and said a few words to the sixth form girls, and, in short, charmed everyone.

Harriet was the person selected now to find the king and queen.

“Bring them both to the house, dear,” said Mrs Burton, and Harriet, well pleased, ran off to obey. Nowhere within sight could the little pair be found, and Harriet, after running for a few minutes, paused to consider.

She wondered if this unexpected state of affairs would in any way promote her own interest. As a matter of fact, she hated small children. There was no small girl at the school who was ever seen to interrupt Harriet’s work, or to fling herself against Harriet’s knees, or to look into Harriet’s face with that childish petition: “Oh! do tell us a story, please.” The little ones left Harriet wisely alone, and Harriet never concealed her aversion to them.

“Horrid little sticky things,” she was heard to say, “with their lollipops in their hands and their faces wanting washing, and their clothes so grubby!” These statements were quite false, for the small children were kept by their kind teacher, Miss Ford, in the most immaculate order. But Harriet was well-known in the school not to stick to the truth when she wished to give vent to her sentiments. Now, however, her feelings were changed. She must, of course, find the king and queen at once.

“Ridiculous name!” she murmured. “That little tiresome, fat baby girl and that small boy, dressed for all the world as though he were a peacock! But still – but still – a pony with a side-saddle and habit, and his keep provided for, is worth struggling to win. And then it would be *such* fun to get the prize over Robina’s head. She is certain sure of it already, I see by her smug face. I am sure I am clever enough to get this from her, and I will.”

Harriet now spied both children standing much too near the edge of a round pond which ornamented part of the grounds.

“Oh, Curly Pate!” she shrieked. “Come back this minute, you naughty child, from the edge of the water!”

Curly Pate, who had been gazing at her own little image in the pond, looked up. Her fair face was flushed with passion, and seizing Ralph’s hand, she said imperiously:

“Turn away, king. Curly Pate hates that howwid dirl.”

Harriet was near enough to hear the words. Angry already, and disliking Curly Pate more than words could say, she rushed up to her now, seized her by the waist, and planted her several feet away from the pond.

“There, you naughty, disobedient little thing!” she said. “You’ll be drowned if you don’t take care!”

Curly Pate burst into roars of tears, and set to work screaming as she alone knew how. Ralph, furious at having his queen abused, turned to Harriet and began to beat her.

“Go away, go away!” he said. “You’re not a bit a nice girl. Go away, you horrid thing!”

“Horrid thing yourself!” said Harriet and she slapped Ralph across the face.

Little Ralph Durrant was much too proud to cry; the slap stung him, and the little olive-tinted face grew red. After a minute, during which he was struggling with himself, he turned towards Harriet and said gently:

“’Twasn’t ladylike of you to slap me, but I forgive you.”

“Oh, your Mightiness! Do you, indeed?” said Harriet. “I am sure, your Majesty, I am exceedingly obliged.”

The scornful tone was quite new to little Ralph. What would have happened next is hard to tell, if at that moment Robina had not rushed up.

“Well, Curly,” she said; “well, my little precious! Why, what are you crying about? And Ralph, dear, is anything the matter with you?”

Curly, whose tears were now growing less, flung herself impetuously into Robina’s arms, while Robina laid a trembling hand on her shoulder. Robina by this time was on her knees, both children fondling her. Harriet stood still for a minute. Then she said in a lofty tone:

“Take them to the house – or rather, take the boy to the house. *I* was sent to fetch them, but of course it would be like you to interfere. You want to be his school-mother, and to get the pony – I know you; and let me say at once that I despise you for your horrid ways!”

Robina turned scarlet.

“You have no right – no right to say such things to me!” was her first remark. Then with a great effort she managed to quiet herself. Her eyes, with a wild light in them, were fixed on Harriet’s face.

“I despise you too much,” she said slowly, “to take any notice of your words. Curly, you shall have a ride, my sweet, on my shoulder; and Ralph, you will hold one of my hands. We must come quickly to the house, for Mr Durrant wants you to say good-bye.”

“Oh, good-bye,” said Ralph; “that hurts, doesn’t it?”

He forgot Harriet, who was watching the scene from a few feet away. A new expression filled his beautiful little face, his eyes were fixed on Robina with a world of appeal.

“Yes,” said Robina; “it hurts; but brave people don’t mind pain.”

“I am brave; I shan’t mind it,” said Ralph. “Hold my hand for a bit after *he* goes, will you? and then I shall not mind at all.”

Book One – Chapter Five

Explained

After prayers that evening Mrs Burton, as she had arranged, had a talk with the girls of the third form in her own private sitting-room. She spoke very simply, and explained what she considered her view of the matter.

“My dears,” she said, “this is a very nice opportunity for you, for really to win the affection of a little fellow like Ralph is to achieve a victory; and I earnestly want you all to try, not so much for the sake of the prize as because the looking after a little fellow like that, who will be very spirited and, doubtless, also very exacting, will be good for your own character, teaching you forbearance, unselfishness, and much thought for others, which are qualities every girl ought to cultivate. These are essentially girls’ qualities, my dears; for all those girls who hope to be true women by-and-by ought to possess them. They are better and of greater value to the possessor than money or cleverness or beauty, for they mean beauty of the heart, and will last, my loves, when mere outward beauty fails, and, in short, even beyond this life, when time is no more. And now, dears, I am going to tell you my little plan.

“There are altogether seven of you, excluding Robina. Now, Robina has a special power with children, and has already captivated the affections of Ralph. It would not be fair that Robina should exercise her influence over him during the trial week, but each of the rest of you shall in turn take care of the little man for an entire day. I will give you no directions whatever with regard to how you will treat him. During that day the girl who has him in charge will be excused from lessons. She will look after him from morning till night, dress him and undress him, take him for a walk, and provide for his amusement generally. She will help him to learn his simple lessons; she will, in short, be his mother *pro tem*. I do not expect any one of you absolutely to fail, and at the end of the week Ralph is himself to choose his school-mother. Now, nothing can be fairer than this. Frederica, my dear, you, as the eldest girl in the form, will look after Ralph to-morrow. And now I think I have said all that is necessary.”

Mrs Burton asked the girls to leave the room, which they did in a body, and great was the discussion which took place in the third form parlour on that special evening.

Frederica was the first to speak.

“Of course, I will look after Ralph,” she said, “and I don’t believe I shall find it difficult. I have several brothers and sisters at home, and though I don’t know that I am especially good with children, I think, on the whole, I can manage them fairly well.”

“You are not to spoil him, you know,” said Harriet.

“Perhaps,” interrupted Frederica, “we had best each keep our own counsel as to the manner in which we are to treat Ralph. It is a great responsibility, and as something hangs on it – for I don’t pretend for a moment I should not like to get the pony – the less we say to each other the better.”

“There’s one thing,” said Rose Amberley at that moment. “Mrs Burton, I am sure, will not wish any of us to give Ralph sweets or cakes, or the sort of things that might make him ill. Otherwise, I suppose each girl will manage him her own way. Now, let us see. To-morrow will be Wednesday. You are to look after him to-morrow, Frederica. I suppose Patience comes next, and then I; and then, I think, it is your turn, Harriet, isn’t it? I presume we’ll come according to our ages. You are next oldest to Rose, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” said Harriet.

“Very well then, Harriet. If I look after Ralph to-morrow,” said Frederica, “and Patience has him on Thursday, and Rose on Friday, Saturday will be your day.”

“Oh, I hate having him on Saturday,” said Harriet, “for that is our half-holiday, and there are such lots of things to be done.”

“Still, that can scarcely be helped,” said Frederica again, “for your turn comes on Saturday, so there is nothing to be said.”

“What a nuisance!” said Harriet. “And I suppose Jane will have him Sunday; I wish my day were Sunday.”

The other girls made no reply, and Harriet presently went out of the room, her hand linked in Jane’s.

“Now, Janie,” she said, “you understand, of course, that I mean to get that pony.”

“I know you mean it,” said Jane.

“What I mean I generally manage to do,” was Harriet’s response.

“You do, as a rule,” replied Jane.

“If I get the pony,” said Harriet, “I will let you ride him pretty often. You shall come over to our place, and you shall use my beautiful side-saddle; of course, my habit won’t fit you, you are such a round podge of a girl, but you can wear any old skirt. Shan’t I make that pony fly! I’ll give him beans! Oh, yes; I mean to have him.”

“But, after all,” said Jane, “that depends upon whether Ralph chooses you as his school-mother or not.”

“You leave that to me,” said Harriet.

“I am sure he won’t choose you,” said Jane. “He will choose Robina; he loves her now like anything.”

“He will choose me,” said Harriet. “I have a plan in my head, and he’s certain to.”

“But he hated you to-day,” said Jane. “If you really meant to win his heart, you shouldn’t have been so horridly cross to Curly Pate, and you shouldn’t have slapped him on the face.”

“I know,” said Harriet, in a contrite voice; “my passion got the better of me, but you may be certain I will be on my guard on Saturday. And look here, Jane: you have not the remotest chance on your own account of winning the prize, but if you help me to get it I won’t forget you in the matter of rides, and I will try and get Father and Mother to invite you over to our place very often during the holidays. You will like that, won’t you, Jane?”

“Love it,” said Jane, who, however, was by no means certain on that point, for, although Harriet had great power over her, she was a little afraid of her.

“Well, you shall come very often these holidays, and perhaps Mother might be coaxed to take you to the seaside with us; but everything depends on whether you help me to be school-mother to that boy. You will have to do your very best on Sunday. You’ll have to talk to him about me, and tell him all the wonderful things that I will do for him when I have him to look after, and you will have – whatever you do – to frighten him about the others, and most especially frighten him about Robina. Now, I think that is all. I shan’t bother about him, you may be sure, until Saturday. I think I know my way at last how to spite Robina, horrid thing! She is just mad to get that pony. I know life will be quite happy again if I can get it from her. Oh, she is sure of it – and Mrs Burton is so sure she’ll win, that she is not even going to be given a day to look after Ralph! Very unfair, I call it.”

Jane said nothing, but that night when she lay down in her little bed in the third form dormitory, her thoughts kept her awake. She did not much like the task she had undertaken. Harriet certainly was a tyrannical friend, and Harriet was growing less good each minute. Now that naughtiness was coming so terribly to the fore, poor little Jane felt in her heart of hearts that she did not enjoy it. It was all very well to burst out laughing during lessons and to play a practical joke on another girl, and to hide behind doors and spring out upon a frightened servant or a still more timid schoolfellow, and it was delicious to make apple-pie beds and to set booby traps and all those sort of things, but this sort of naughtiness, somehow, was different.

Jane had been impressed by Mrs Burton's words: – "You must be unselfish, and forbearing, and thoughtful for others, and all these attributes will be good for your character, and will help you to be true women by-and-by." Above all, Jane was struck with what Mrs Burton had said about these things being better than beauty, or riches, or talent, for these things were the best of all, and would stay with a girl and would help her through her life, and – and – help her after death. Jane was very frightened of death. The thought of it came to her sometimes in the middle of the night, but she always pushed it out of sight. Now, however, Mrs Burton spoke of something which would help her even after that had taken place. She shivered in her little bed. She did not at all like the task which was put upon her.

Meanwhile, things went apparently well in the school. Robina was as bright as ever on the next morning, and just as clever over her lessons, and just as apparently indifferent to her fellow-pupils. She had to all appearance forgotten the words she said to Harriet on the previous night. She talked cheerfully to Harriet. Harriet was forced to reply in the same tone. Afterwards the girls played in the garden, as they had done on the day before; but Harriet and Jane did not meet as they had previously arranged in the paddock. It was not necessary to meet, they both felt, for something had occurred since then, and their course was in a measure plain. Curly Pate was with them, too, and so were the other little children. The only one who was absent was Frederica; she and Ralph were not to be seen.

Late that night Frederica came up to the dormitory, and went to bed as usual. All the others clustered round her.

"Well – well," they said, "could you manage? Aren't you dead tired? What sort is he, really? Oh, do say if you think you have any chance of getting the pony!"

"I can say nothing – it wouldn't be fair," said Frederica. "Mrs Burton doesn't wish any one of the girls on her trial to help the others by saying things. I have had a good day, I think, and am tired, and should like to go to sleep. Patience, you are to go to Ralph's nursery at seven o'clock to-morrow morning."

The next day was Thursday, and Thursday was Patience Chetwold's day. It passed very much as Wednesday had done, only that Jane looked rather miserable, and Harriet took no notice of her at all. Friday was Rose Amberley's day, and on that day the girls heard – or fancied they heard – peals of laughter in the distance. They were all rather anxious, for Rose was so remarkably nice, and had quite a way with little children. Before Robina came she had shared the honours with her elder sister, Constance, of being the babies' favourite. The girls began to say amongst themselves that Rose would carry off the prize, and that, on the whole, they would like her to have it, for she was so kind and nice, and so remarkably pretty.

It was on the evening of Friday that Jane ran up to Harriet, pulled her by her arm, and said in a low tone: —

"I want to walk with you in the paddock."

"Now, what's up?" said Harriet crossly.

"Come," said Jane.

Jane's black eyes were shining, and her short black hair resembled a mop more than ever, and her little round figure seemed rounder. There was quite an agitation about Jane which made her roundness and queer short hair and round black eyes look too comical for words; at least, this was what Harriet said, when she found herself with her friend in the paddock. Harriet was such a contrast to Jane, and looked more lanky and more pale than ever on this occasion.

"Now – what is up?" she said. "You do look precisely like a fat Christmas goose just before he is going to be killed for Christmas dinner. What *is* up with you now?"

"Only that – I – I – mean – I don't want to be the school-mother."

Harriet burst into a peal of laughter. "Isn't it a case of sour grapes?" she said. "You just know you can't be the school-mother, so you think you'll cover your defeat by saying that sort of thing."

“I want to say more,” whispered Jane. “I am frightened to do what you want; I mean I am frightened to say what isn’t true about the others – and, particularly, about Robina. I don’t want to do it; I thought I would tell you.”

“I always knew you were a sneak,” said Harriet, “but please yourself, of course. It won’t be very nice for you when I send you to Coventry.”

“What do you mean by sending to Coventry?” asked Jane.

“You *are* a silly! You are frightfully ugly, and you have no brains at all. Coventry means that I won’t speak to you; and what’s more, I’ll get a lot more girls in the school not to speak to you. Perhaps you won’t enjoy that – but please yourself, I don’t care.”

“Harriet, you *are* cross! You know, you know quite well that I would please you if I could. But – but I do want to be the sort of girl Mrs Burton spoke about.”

“Oh, you are turning goody-goody!” said Harriet. “Then, indeed, I have no further use of you. I am going to take up Vivian Amberley. She is quite a nice little thing – very different from you.”

Jane gave utterance to a very quick sigh. Vivian was perhaps the girl in the third form who had the weakest character. She was not like her two elder sisters: she could be very good with good girls and quite naughty with girls who were not good. Jane had always known this fact, and had always been terribly afraid that Harriet would make use of Vivian, and turn her to her own purposes. In that case, of course, Harriet would never speak to poor Jane again; and Jane did care for her and could be intensely jealous about her. So now she said: —

“I know you are very clever, Harriet, and I suppose you do know best; only I wish that little voice inside of me wouldn’t talk so loud. It keeps me awake at nights, and I get frightened; but if you really, really think – ”

“I think nothing!” said Harriet crossly. “Please yourself. Vivian will help me, if you won’t. I will know what you have done by Monday morning. You can do exactly as you please; and now don’t keep me, for I have got to finish learning my piece to recite on Sunday afternoon.”

Book One – Chapter Six

Beguiled by Promises

There was no doubt that Harriet was clever, but even she felt a little nervous when she went into Ralph's bedroom to awaken him on Saturday morning.

Ralph had a sweet little room to sleep in. It opened into Miss Ford's, but the door between the two was shut; for Ralph's whole endeavour was to be a very manly boy, and manly boys always liked best to sleep alone. He looked very pretty indeed, now, in his sleep, his mop of brown curls pushed back from his forehead, the long black lashes lying like a cloud on his rounded cheeks; his red, red lips slightly parted, a smile on his little face. But Harriet saw no beauty in the sleeping boy.

"Little tiresome thing!" she murmured under her breath. "If it wasn't for that pony and my determination to win the prize over Robina, wouldn't I give him a time to-day!"

But the pony was worth winning, and Harriet was clever. She bent down over Ralph, and touched him gently on his arm. He woke with a start, looked at Harriet, coloured brightly, and then said: —

"What's up?"

"Time for you to rise," said Harriet. "I am your school-mother for to-day."

"Oh," said Ralph. His face turned a little pale, but he did not start.

"You can lie in bed as long as ever you like," said Harriet; "I don't care; I'm not going to tell on you; you may be as naughty as you please to-day – you needn't do any single thing except just what you like."

"Needn't I, really?" said the boy.

"Of course, you needn't," said Harriet. "Why should you bother to be good?"

"But Father likes me to be good," said Ralph; "and – and – Mrs Burton does. I love Mrs Burton, don't you?"

Harriet longed to say "No," but, shutting up her lips, she nodded her head.

"You are the girl who was so horrid and rude to me the other day," said Ralph; "you slapped me on my cheek."

"And you beat me," said Harriet.

Ralph's eyes began to twinkle.

"So we're quits," said Harriet. "Let's shake hands; let's be pals."

"It's nice of you to forgive," said Ralph.

"Oh, that's nothing," replied Harriet. "If you but knew me, you'd consider that I am quite the nicest girl in the school."

"Are you really?"

"Yes; but what do you think, after all, of getting up? I have such a wonderful plan of spending our day together."

"Have you?" said Ralph.

"A delicious plan; you can't guess how you will enjoy yourself."

"Can't I, really?"

"Hadn't you better get up. You can wash yourself, you know."

"Oh, I never washed myself yet," said Ralph.

"Well, you'll have to begin some time. I'll sit and stare out of the window, and you can pop into your tub, and have a good splash; I don't care a bit if you wet the floor; manly boys can't be always thinking of those sort of things. Now, then, up you get, and I'll stare out of the window."

Harriet suited the action to the word. Ralph saw a long, narrow back and very thin light hair only partly concealing it. He observed that the lanky little figure sat very still. He felt impressed,

much more impressed than he had been when kind Frederica and unselfish Patience, and even pretty, pretty Rose Amberley had been his school-mothers. They had been commonplace – quite nice, of course, but nothing special. The lanky person was not commonplace.

He hopped up with a little shout, washed and dressed himself after a fashion, and then went up to Harriet.

“Well, pal,” she said, just glancing at him, “are you ready?”

“Quite,” said Ralph. “I like you to call me your pal. You’re a very big girl compared to me, aren’t you?”

“You’re not a girl at all,” said Harriet; “you’re a very manly boy, and you’re awfully pretty; don’t you know that you are very pretty?”

“No,” said Ralph, turning scarlet, “and boys ought not to be pretty; I hate that.”

“Well, then, you’re handsome. I’ll show you your face in the glass presently. But come down now. I am allowed to do just what I like with you to-day, and we’re going to have such a good time!”

The beginning of the good time consisted in having a real picnic breakfast out of doors. Ralph and Harriet collected twigs and boiled the kettle in one corner of the paddock. It didn’t matter to Harriet that the paddock was rather damp and cold at this hour, and it certainly did not matter to Ralph, who was wildly excited, and quite forgot everything else in the world while he was trying to light the dry wood. Really, Harriet was nice; she did not even mind his having matches.

“They never allowed me to have matches before I came here.”

“You can put them in your pocket, if you like,” said Harriet. “Manly boys like you should not be kept under. You wouldn’t burn yourself on purpose, would you?”

“Of course not.”

“Have you a knife of your own?”

“No; Father says I’m rather young.”

“But you’re not; I’ll give you a knife if you like. I have an old rusty one upstairs with a broken blade. You shall have it.”

“Thanks aw-filly!” said Ralph. “But, perhaps,” he added, after a minute’s pause. “I had best not have it, for Father would not like me to.”

“Oh, please yourself,” said Harriet. “Have you had enough breakfast?”

“Yes, thank you awfully, and it was *so* good. I suppose,” added Ralph, a little timidly, “we’d best begin my lessons now. I hate reading to myself, but I suppose I must learn.”

“You needn’t learn from me,” said Harriet. “I’m not going to give you any lessons.”

“Oh – but – oughtn’t you to?”

“Whether I ought to or not, I don’t mean to,” said Harriet. “Now, look here, what shall we do with ourselves?”

“I don’t know,” said Ralph, who was so excited and interested that he leaned up against Harriet, who would have given worlds to push him away, but did not dare.

“You’re very nice, really, truly,” he said, and he touched her lank hair with his little brown hand.

“Yes, am I not nice?” said Harriet, smiling at him. “Now, if you were to choose me for your school-mother, you would have a jolly time.”

“Am I to choose who I like?” said Ralph.

“Of course, you are. We are all trying our hands on you; but you are to make your own choice. Didn’t the other girls tell you?”

“No.”

“Do you like being with the others?”

“They were *very* kind,” said Ralph.

“Did you have a picnic breakfast with them?”

“Oh, no.”

“If I were your school-mother,” said Harriet, after a pause, “we would have one every day, and – and – no lessons; and you might play with matches, and you might have a pop-gun, and there’s something else we would do.”

“Oh, what is it?”

“We’d go and see the gipsies.”

“But I am frightened of gipsies,” said Ralph. As he spoke he pressed a little nearer to Harriet. “Are there gipsies about?”

“There are some gipsies living two fields off – you look almost like a gipsy boy yourself, you are so dark. There are a lot of little brown babies rolling about on the grass, and big brown men, and big brown women, and there are dogs, and a donkey, and an old horse; but the most wonderful thing of all is the house on wheels.”

“The house on wheels?” said Ralph.

“Yes, the old horse draws it, and the gipsies live inside; oh, it is wonderful!”

“Aren’t gipsies very wicked people?”

“Wicked?” said Harriet. “They’re the most lovely people in all the world. I can’t take you to see them to-day, but if I were your school-mother, we would manage to slip off and have a good time with them. They love little brown boys like you, and you would love them. Oh, you don’t know what a gipsy is! Frightened of them, are you? Well, I’ll tell you a story of what they did for me when I ran away once and stayed with them for a whole night. I never had such a good time in all my life.”

Harriet made up a story out of her head. It is true she had once been for a very frightened half-hour with some gipsies on the common nearest to her father’s house; but that time now was changed into something quite fairy-like.

Ralph listened with his eyes shining, his lips apart, and his breath coming fast.

“Oh, I didn’t know they were like that,” he said. “Let us go now, now; don’t put it off, please; let’s come this very instant-minute.”

“No,” said Harriet firmly. “I could not possibly take you to-day. But I will manage it if you choose me for your school-mother. Of course, you won’t choose me. I know who you’ll choose.”

“Who?” asked Ralph.

“That Robina girl.”

“Who?” asked Ralph.

“Oh, that creature who came for you and Curly Pate when you were sent for, to say good-bye to your father.”

“Is *she* Robina?” asked Ralph. “Oh, I like her so much!”

“That is because you don’t know her. Shall I tell you some things about her?”

“Would it be right?” asked Ralph.

“You needn’t listen if you don’t like,” replied Harriet. “You can go to the other side of the paddock. I am going to say them aloud, whether you listen or not.”

Harriet instantly crossed her hands on her lap, and began saying in a chanting tone: —

“Robina was so naughty at home, and made such a dreadful noise in the room with her poor sick mother that she had to be sent away. She was sent here to this school, and since she came all the rest of us are dreadfully unhappy, for, although she looks kind, she is not a bit kind; she is the sort of girl who doesn’t obey. She was sent away from home because she was so disobedient – ”

“Oh, don’t!” said Ralph suddenly.

“Why – what is the matter?” said Harriet. “Were you listening?”

“I couldn’t help myself; you spoke so loud. I didn’t want to, but you did speak very loud. Why do you say those horrid things about her?”

“They are true,” said Harriet. “I don’t mean to be unkind to her. I wouldn’t be unkind to anybody, but, at the same time, I want to warn you in case you are taken in by her ways and choose her as your school-mother.”

Ralph was quite silent. After a minute he said in an altered voice:

“Let’s do something now – what shall we?”

Harriet suggested that they should visit the farmyard at the back of the house and coax Jim, the groom, to let them ride on some of the horses. This, of course, was most fascinating, and no sooner had it been thought of than it was done. The ride was followed by something still more exciting. Jim was going to drive to the nearest town with the spring cart, and he offered to take the two children with him.

Harriet no sooner heard this proposal than she accepted it, and she and Ralph had a glorious drive to town. There she spent sixpence – all the money she possessed – on different sweetmeats.

“I wish I had some more,” she said. “I’d give you all my money – I would, indeed!”

“There are quite enough sweets there,” said Ralph; “but if you really want to buy other things, Harriet, I have got money.”

“Have you? Let’s see what you’ve got,” said Harriet.

Ralph put his hand into his breeches pocket, and took out a handful of coppers, a shilling, and two sixpences.

“Here’s lots,” he said. “Isn’t it lots, Harriet?”

“Yes,” said Harriet, looking at it greedily. “We might buy a picnic tea for ourselves out of that.”

“Oh! might we?” said Ralph. “How perfect-ly beautiful!”

The picnic tea was purchased; it was not wholesome. The children went back. Ralph and Harriet had their dinner all alone, for during the trial day the arrangement was that the rest of the school children were not to interfere. Afterwards, they had their picnic tea out of doors, and after that was over, Harriet again spoke of the gipsies, and the delight of knowing them, and the certain fact that they would give them tea, or, perhaps, dinner, in the wonderful house on wheels, and the still more certain fact that Ralph would not be a true boy until he had visited the gipsies with Harriet.

On the whole, Harriet considered that her trial day was a success. It was an untidy, flushed, and not a healthy little boy who crept rather late into bed that night, and whom Harriet undressed without troubling herself whether he was washed too carefully or his hair brushed or not. Even to his cry that he had just a *weeny, teeny* pain, and that he did not feel *quite* quite well, she made no response. But when she was bidding him good-night, she said: —

“Remember the gipsies, and I am the sort of girl who always keeps her word.”

“Good-night, dear, dear Harriet!” said the little fellow. “I have had quite a lovely day!”

After Harriet went away, it was some time before Ralph fell asleep. Of course, he was a manly boy, and he did not mind a bit being alone, and it was nice, very nice, to have a little room all to himself. But, notwithstanding his bravery, and his fixed determination not to be lonely without Father, and never to cry even the smallest tear, there was an ache in his heart. He kept on thinking so much of his school-mother that he could not sleep. The girls in the school were very nice. Rose had been sweet to him, so had Frederica, so had Patience, and his school-mother of the past day – oh, she had been the most exciting of all. She was not a bit a pretty girl – in his heart of hearts he thought her rather ugly; but she had done things none of the others had done. She had given him adventures – that breakfast out of doors, a box of matches to keep in his own pocket; that ride on Firefly’s back – Firefly was a very spirited pony – and the girl had looked on admiringly while Ralph kept his seat; and then the drive to town, and the spending of all Harriet’s money on sweetmeats and of all Ralph’s money on a picnic tea. Oh, yes; he had had a good day, very good, and there had been no lessons.

Ralph could not honestly say that he loved lessons. He used to pretend he did, for he hated to grumble about things, and manly boys learned things – at least, so his father used to say. Manly boys always knew how to read, and they spelt words properly, and they wrote neat, good hands, and they learned, too, how to add up long, terrible rows of figures. All these things were necessary if a boy was to be manly and wise. Ralph knew perfectly well that he must go through with these unpleasant things. Nevertheless, he had to own that he did not like them. This school-mother, if he were to select

her, would not be very particular about his reading aloud, and spelling properly, and working at his sums. Oh, no, he would have a good time with her; matches in his pocket, knives to play with – although his father did not like him to have knives – and, above all things, such a wonderful, glorious hope was held out to him! They would go away together, he and his school-mother, to see the gipsies. They would climb up the steps into that house on wheels; and, perhaps – perhaps – it would move, and they would feel it moving, and the brown babies would roll about on the grass at his feet, and the brown men and women would talk to him.

Harriet had spoken much to him about the delights of gipsy life. Ralph felt that he would give a great deal to taste it for himself. He tossed from side to side of his little bed, and presently he sat up, his cheeks flushed, his hair tumbled. “What would Father say to all this? Father liked boys to do lessons, and to lead orderly lives, and – ”

“Oh, Father!” sobbed the child. He could not help crying just a little bit. He wanted his father more than anything in all the world just then; yes, although his heart was full of Harriet and her proposal to visit the gipsies.

Book One – Chapter Seven

The Choice

The three remaining days of trial of the school-mothers went quickly by. There was suppressed excitement all over the third form. Harriet alone would not be induced to talk on the subject. She put on quite a good little air.

“No,” she said, “don’t let’s worry over the thing. Ralph will make his own choice. He is quite a nice little boy. He has a great deal of go in him, but he will make his own choice, whatever we say.”

Then Harriet would bend over her book, and pretend to be very industrious; while all the time she was watching Robina.

Robina had the wonderful faculty of jumping at conclusions. She caught at the sense of a thing in a flash. She had also an amazing memory. It was not the least trouble to Robina to learn a long poem by heart. She also remembered every single word told her by her teachers. She had never before been taught in the manner she was taught at school; but already she was amassing knowledge in a marvellous way. Notwithstanding all Harriet’s efforts, Robina, without the slightest trouble, kept at the head of the class. Every day Harriet tried to supplant her, or, rather, to get back her old position, but every single day she tried in vain. Robina kept her place in class, and the other girls now openly said to Harriet that she had not a chance.

“You have met your master,” they said, “and you may as well accept the position at once.”

It was by no means in Harriet’s nature to accept any such position, and her lanky little figure and pale face seemed to bristle all over with suppressed passion when she was addressed in this way.

On the night before Ralph was to make his decision with regard to the school-mothers, Harriet said a word to Jane.

“By this time to-morrow,” said Harriet, “we shall know everything.”

“Oh, yes; I suppose so,” said Jane. Then she added quickly: “I wish he had not come to the school.”

“Who do you mean by that?” asked Harriet.

“Ralph – I wish he had not come.”

“It can’t make any matter to you,” said Harriet.

“It does,” said Jane. “He is a nice little boy. I like him just awfully. He won’t be happy with you.”

“What do you mean by that?” said Harriet.

Jane was silent.

“You think,” said Harriet, in a low tone, “that I am sure to be selected by Mrs Burton as his school-mother?”

Jane nodded her head. Her little round face was quite flushed, and her black eyes were shining.

“Did he say anything to you,” asked Harriet, in great excitement. Jane nodded. Harriet felt her heart beating fast. She suddenly put her long, thin arm round Jane’s neck, drew her up to her, and kissed her.

“Then you have helped me,” she said. “I knew you would. I won’t forget it when the holidays come.”

Just then some other girls appeared in view, and Jane and Harriet had to separate. The other girls walked on arm-in-arm. They consisted of Rose and Vivian Amberley, Patience Chetwold and Robina. Robina was not quite *au fait* to the ins and outs of the school. She still lived more or less in a world of her own. Now, she was rather surprised when Vivian, who was leaning on her arm, gave it a violent tug, and said in a smothered voice, which only reached Robina’s ears:

“Oh, I am quite unhappy!”

This was the sort of remark which could not fail to interest Robina profoundly. She had been an only child all her life, and although she had now and then played with another child, and although the one dream of her existence was to be surrounded by other children, she had never enjoyed this pleasure daily and hourly until she came to school. Robina was full of faults, but she had a kind and generous nature. There was nothing mean about her, and she was, for an only child, absolutely unselfish. Vivian's remark in a low tone was not heard by either Rose or Patience. Robina took an opportunity to draw the little girl aside, and to ask her what she meant.

"It's about Ralph," said Vivian.

"What about Ralph?" asked Robina.

"I dare not tell," said Vivian.

"Very well," said Robina; "then there is no use in questioning you."

"But I am very, very unhappy, all the same," said Vivian.

Robina looked at her longingly. "Sit down," she said suddenly.

They had come to a wooden seat under an old oak tree. Vivian popped down at once, but Robina still stood.

"I don't know much about school," said Robina. "I have not been here long. I am not a specially good girl; I was often very troublesome at home, but I think I know a few things, and perhaps I learnt those things at home."

"What are they?" asked Vivian.

"I have learned," said Robina, "to know a good girl when I see her. There are some girls in this school who are not good."

"Oh, yes; oh, yes!" said Vivian. She turned white, and clasped her small hands tightly together.

"And there are some girls in this school," proceeded Robina, "who are not strong," and she fixed her grey eyes on Vivian's face.

"Yes," said Vivian again, falteringly.

"I won't name them," said Robina; "but I will only just say this: that if I were a weak girl in the school, I'd just make up my mind that I was. I would not pretend that I was strong, for instance, and I'd go and tell anything that made me unhappy to the person who ought to know."

"Oh, but you wouldn't, if you were me," said Vivian, suddenly speaking in great excitement.

"Does the cap fit?" asked Robina.

"Yes, yes," answered Vivian; "it fits. But I can't, I can't!"

"I haven't the least idea what is the matter," said Robina; "but you are unhappy, for you have said so, and you are weak, not strong, for you admit it and, anyhow, I know. Now, being weak in a school like this, where there are some girls who are not good, you have no chance at all, unless you go to someone stronger than yourself to help you."

"Who ought I to go to?" asked Vivian, trembling very much.

"You ought to go to some of your teachers."

"Oh, I can't do that – it would be quite too dreadful; you don't know what they would say of me."

"That is what you *ought* to do," said Robina; "but if you haven't courage for that, you ought to go to one of your school-fellows. You have your two sisters."

"They are no good at all; they are not, really." Robina was silent for a minute. Then she said: —

"Well, I am of some good, I suppose, and I think, on the whole, I am just a tiny bit strong."

"Oh, you are, you are," said Vivian. "You are just wonderful."

"Well, then, you can come to me."

"But they'll call me a tell-tale-tit; they will, they will. You don't know, you can't know."

"I tell you what you will do," said Robina. "You will take my hand, and you and I together will go and stand before the girls who are making you unhappy. You will say: 'I can't stand this, and I am going to tell Robina, and Robina will help me to decide as to what is best to be done.' You

won't be mean if you do that, Vivian, for they will understand. That is what you ought to do. Now, I have told you."

"I ought, but I can't," said Vivian. She wriggled in her seat. Suddenly she sprang up, caught hold of Robina's hands, and kissed them. But Robina wrenched them away.

"No, no; don't do that," she said. "I hate being kissed by cowards."

She turned and left Vivian. The poor girl had never felt so small and abject in all her life, for poor Vivian was more or less in the secret. Not only had Jane explained to Ralph the great advantage of choosing Harriet as his school-mother, but Vivian had also been forced into the cause. She had spent a truly most miserable day, knowing perfectly well what Harriet's real character was, and yet afraid to do anything but urge Ralph to choose her as his school-mother during the remainder of the term. Alas and alas! what a dreadful thing it was to be a weak girl, and how Robina despised her; and how strong Robina seemed herself, and what would not Vivian give in all the wide world to have Robina's strength, and to follow the advice which she had given.

Immediately after breakfast the next day Mrs Burton called the eight girls of the third form into her parlour. When they had all assembled, she said to them:

"You have had your day of trial each, with the exception of Robina, whom it was more fair not to count. I may as well tell you frankly that I think Robina will be elected as Ralph's school-mother, and I may as well, also, tell you now that I shall be glad if that is the ease. At the same time I may be mistaken."

There came a sort of gasp from several of the girls. Harriet was standing quite in the background. Her face was quite pale. She felt her heart beating almost to suffocation. Oh, that pony, with his side-saddle. Oh, that habit made to fit so perfectly! Oh, the joy of going home in the holidays with such a companion – such an unfailing source of delight! Would not Harriet in future be a heroine in her home? What would not the others give to be the owner of a real flesh and blood pony? She did not mind how low she stooped in order to obtain it.

Mrs Burton paused, and looked round at the different girls.

"My dears," she said, "I doubt not that you are interested, not, perhaps, in Ralph for himself, but in the thought of the prize which Ralph's father, Mr Durrant, has offered you. I have my own ideas with regard to that prize; but Mr Durrant wishes you to have it, and there is nothing more to be said. The girl whom little Ralph himself selects as his school-mother will at the end of the term be the possessor of the pony – that is, always provided that she fulfills her duties to my perfect satisfaction. When Ralph has made his choice, he must, of course, abide by it, unless something quite out of the common occurs; but I must assure you in advance, my dear girls, that the post of school-mother will be no sinecure. The girl who has charge of Ralph must be patient and remember that he is only a very little boy. He will be necessarily thrown a great deal with the younger children, and the girl who is his school-mother must not only be patient with him, but she must help him to learn his little lessons. He must sit by her side at meals, and every morning she must rise a little earlier than usual in order to dress him, and every evening she must leave the playground in order to put him to bed. It will soon be perceived whether he is happy or not in her company. Now, I think I have said all that is necessary, and Ralph himself shall come in and decide."

Mrs Burton rang a little silver bell which stood on the table. Miss Ford, the mistress who had the charge of the small children, immediately appeared.

"Will you bring Ralph Durrant into the room?" said Mrs Burton.

A minute later, Ralph marched in. He looked his very manliest. Every girl in the form felt her heart going pit-a-pat as she watched him. He was wearing a little suit of white on this warm day, but there was a crimson tie fastening his collar. Nothing could have been sweeter than his dress, and no little face in all the world could have looked more eager and lovely. He had the perfect self-possession of a very young child. He came straight up to Mrs Burton, holding out his hand.

"Good morning, Mrs Burton," he said.

“Good morning, Ralph, my dear,” she replied. “Will you come and stand with me, Ralph, up here?”

“Oh, thank you so very much,” said Ralph.

He mounted on to the little dais, and Mrs Burton, taking his hand, led him forward.

“You see all these girls, Ralph,” she said. “They are all your great friends, are they not?”

“Oh, yes!” said Ralph. He looked eagerly from one face to the other. To begin with, there was Robina. He had not seen her for a week. She was standing very erect; her face was quite calm and strong and kind. She looked full at Ralph, but with no special pleading in her eyes. She would have liked to be his school-mother, and she wanted the pony very much; but not for worlds would she condescend to plead with him. A great deal can be conveyed by the glance of an eye, and Robina’s eyes were of the sort that could convey any number of messages to the sensitive, warm heart of a little child. But at the present moment they were dumb. Ralph looked past her.

“Here are all your kind friends,” said Mrs Burton. “You know Robina Starling. This is Robina. You remember how very kind she was to you and Curly Pate on the day you arrived. She helped you during that hard time when your father went away.”

“And I didn’t cry not one tear,” said Ralph, giving an eager glance at Mrs Burton, and then looking back at Robina. Oh, if only her eyes had said then: “Come to me,” he would have chosen her above all the others. But the proud eyes were dumb.

“Yes,” continued Mrs Burton, “this is Robina Starling, your great friend. And here comes Frederica. You had, I know, a very pleasant day with her.”

“Very pleasant,” said Ralph. “Good morning, Frederica,” he added, saying the words in a clear, sweet little voice.

“And this is Patience, Frederica’s sister.” Patience smiled at him quite broadly, and he smiled back at her just as though they held a secret between them, and the secret was very good fun.

“And this is Rose. You cannot forget how happy you were with Rose.”

“Oh, yes, of course, I was,” said Ralph. “Good morning, Rose.”

“Good morning, dear,” said Rose.

“And this is,” said Mrs Burton, slightly altering her voice, as though it were scarcely worth while to speak of Harriet, “this is Harriet. You spent Saturday with Harriet.”

Ralph coloured. All the girls noticed how a flame of red swept over his little face. His eyes grew dark. He looked full at Harriet, as though she fascinated him.

“And this is Jane Bush. And now we come to Cecil Amberley. I am sure Cecil would be kind to any little boy.”

“Yes, oh, yes,” said Ralph.

“And last but not least, here is Vivian. You were with Vivian yesterday, don’t you remember?”

“I remember,” said Ralph.

“Then, my dear little boy, you are acquainted with every girl in the third form. Now, listen to me. It is your dear father’s wish that one of these girls should take, as far as possible, the place of a mother to you during the remainder of the term. For three weeks, Ralph, until your father returns, you will be given over to the special care of one of these girls; and your father wishes you, as being, he considers, a very wise little boy, to choose your school-mother yourself. Having made a choice, you must abide by it, unless I personally interfere. That I shall not do except under extreme circumstances. Now, my boy, you have no cause to be afraid. Choose boldly the girl you like best, the girl with whom you will be happiest. Remember, Robina was your oldest friend, and Vivian your newest friend; the others came between. Look well at them all, and make your choice, as a wise little boy should.”

Again Ralph looked full at Robina, and again Robina knew that her eyes had but to say: “Come,” and not all the gipsies in all the world, nor all the picnic teas and breakfasts and boxes of matches in a little boy’s pocket, and possible knives – the temptation to possess which a little boy might succumb to – could have influenced Ralph in the very least. But alack and alas! for all that was to follow:

those eyes still were dumb. So Ralph's own brown eyes wandered past Robina and rested, without any special desire or longing in them, on Frederica's face, and past Frederica to Patience, and then they lingered and seemed to dilate, and the whole little face trembled as the boy gazed at Harriet. But even now he was wise, and would not make his choice too hastily; for, past Harriet, his eyes travelled to Jane, who looked down, and turned white and pink, and from Jane he gazed at Cecil, who was all unconscious and looked full back at him, being quite certain in her heart of hearts that she would not be the one chosen; and then he looked at Vivian, who, as a matter of fact, counted nothing at all to him.

His heart beat. He thought of a hundred things, but most of all at that moment of not learning to read much, of not troubling himself with figures, of being the manly sort of boy who would play with fire and not be burnt, and have knives and not be cut, and, above all things, of a certain gipsy caravan which was called a house on wheels. Once again, his eyes sought those of Harriet; and now she looked boldly at him, and Ralph looked boldly back at her, and smiled, and, loosing his hold of Mrs Burton's hand, he said in a loud voice:

“I choose Harriet for my school-mother, because I love her the best of all.”

Book One – Chapter Eight

Consequences

The astonishment which this announcement caused in the school may be better imagined than described. Even Mrs Burton was struck dumb for a minute. Then she said quietly:

“Harriet, you are the favoured one. Will you please take Ralph to Miss Ford, and get her to set him his lessons, and then will you take him into the third form room, and give him a seat by yourself and attend to his work in the intervals when you can spare some moments from your own? I will arrange later on that you have plenty of time to do this. Now, my dear, attend to your duties. You have been elected in a fair field, and I don’t think any favour has been shown, and I congratulate you, and hope you will be the proud possessor of the prize pony on the day when you leave school.”

The rest of the girls in the form congratulated Harriet also, and she walked out of Mrs Burton’s parlour with her head in the air, holding Ralph by the hand. Never had such a moment of intoxicating triumph been given her before. She was trembling from head to foot.

“Now we’ll have fun, won’t we?” whispered Ralph. “Yes, of course,” said Harriet back. “But come along at once, Ralph. We must get your lessons. You will be a very good little boy, won’t you, and not too troublesome?” She longed to add: “I can’t stand troublesome children,” but refrained for the time being.

Miss Ford gave Ralph some easy lessons, telling Harriet where his weak points lay, and how often he ought to repeat them over to her.

“You must be very particular indeed with regard to his sums,” she said. “These sums in addition and this little one in subtraction must be done perfectly. I think that is all for to-day.”

Harriet, still holding Ralph’s hand, but holding it rather loosely, marched now in the direction of the third form class-room. As they were going there, Ralph spoke:

“I thought – I thought – that – if you were my school-mother, there would *not* be sums and things.”

“Oh, nonsense!” replied Harriet, rather tartly. “There must be sums and *things*, as you call them. How are you to be wise if you don’t learn?” she continued. Then, seeing that the colour swept over his face, she added hastily, “I won’t be hard on you, no fear, and when lessons are over, we’ll have great fun.”

“Yes, great fun,” repeated Ralph. “The gipsies, perhaps?” he added, pleadingly.

But Harriet, who had not the least idea in her heart of hearts of bothering herself with regard to gipsies, was silent. They entered the school-room, where all eyes followed them to their seats. Ralph’s choice was considered too wonderful for words, and more than one girl felt that the thing had been managed by foul play. What had occurred they could not tell, but they were positively certain that Ralph of his own accord would never have chosen Harriet.

Meanwhile, lessons went on, and Ralph struggled over tasks which Robina or any other girl in the form would have rendered easy and pleasant for him, but which Harriet did not trouble herself to think about.

“Don’t bother!” she whispered once quite crossly, when he pulled her sleeve.

Towards the end of the morning it was with great difficulty that the little boy could keep back his tears. Of course, he had made a splendid choice, and Harriet was delightful; but, still – but, still – how he *did* wish he knew how to take nine from seven! Nine would not go from seven because seven wasn’t as much as nine. Oh, how was it done? Then there was six from five. He came to the conclusion at last that sums were not meant for little boys; it was beyond the power of the human brain to manage sums; not even his own father could take six from five. He began in his restlessness

to tear up paper, making five little pieces, and then six little pieces, and wondering how he could ever take the greater out of the less.

“Harriet,” he whispered at last, tugging at her arm, “it can’t be done; see for yourself.”

“Don’t bother,” whispered Harriet again. But then she saw Robina’s eyes fixed on her face, and, suddenly recovering herself, bent down over Ralph.

“What *is* the matter, you little troublesome thing?” she said.

“I can’t take six from five,” answered the boy.

“Oh, you goose!” said Harriet; “borrow ten. Now, then, peg away.”

What Harriet meant was Greek to Ralph. “Borrow ten?” he murmured to himself, “borrow ten?”

It was a very hot day, and Ralph, try as he would, could not borrow ten. There was no one to borrow it from. The windows were open at the opposite side of the great room, and a bee came in and sailed lazily round. The bee, in his velvety brown coat, was watched by a pair of eyes as soft, as brown as his own velvet coat. The bee never borrowed ten, that was certain; no more could he. Oh, he was sleepy, and lessons were horrid, and sums were the worst of all. And why, why, why did not his school-mother really help him?

He was just dropping off to sleep when a brisk voice said in his ear:

“What is the matter, Ralph?” He looked round, and there was Robina.

“I am sleepy,” said Ralph. “It’s because I can’t borrow ten. Will you lend it to me?”

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