

Meade L. T.

The Girl and Her Fortune



L. Meade

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Содержание

Chapter One	5
Chapter Two	10
Chapter Three	15
Chapter Four	22
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	23

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Chapter One

Leaving School

Brenda and Florence had both finished their school life. No pains had been spared to render them up to date in every particular. They had gone through the usual curriculum of a girl's education. Brenda was a little cleverer than Florence and had perhaps dived deeper into the heart of things, but Florence was the prettier of the two.

Now the last day of school was over. The last good-byes had been said. The last teacher had whispered words of affection in Brenda's ear, and the last and most loved school-fellow had kissed Florence on her pretty cheek and had hoped in that vague way which meant nothing at all that they should meet again. School belonged to the past. They had the world before them.

Florence was eighteen years of age, Brenda nineteen. To all intents and purposes they were children. Nevertheless, they regarded themselves as full-fledged women.

They were expecting an interview any day with their lawyer, Mr Timmins. Mr Timmins had provided the funds necessary for their education. He had arranged everything for them since the time when Florence at thirteen and Brenda at fourteen had lost their father and mother. Since then they depended on Mr Timmins – that is, as far as pounds, shillings and pence was concerned. He had seen them, not very often, but at intervals. He had always been nice and fussy and good, and had begged them to work hard. He had said to them over and over, "Be sure you don't miss your chance," and they invariably replied in the affirmative, and had assured him that they had no intention of missing it.

They had grieved for their parents, but that grief was now over. They were accustomed to the fact that they were fatherless and motherless. They had their dreams of the future, as most girls have. But the rough ways of the world had never hitherto assailed them.

In the holidays they always went to stay with a certain Mrs Fortescue. She was no relation; in fact, they were quite without relations. They were not only orphans, but they were relationless. The only children of an only son and an only daughter, they were solitary in the world, but that fact did not trouble them. They had never taken to their hearts the old proverb, that "blood is thicker than water." They were happy, healthy, everyday girls.

Florence was pretty, Brenda clever. They were really well-educated. Florence could sing very nicely – that is, for a girl of eighteen years of age. Her voice had possibilities which could even rise to a marketable value, but no one thought of the Heathcotes as people who required to make money by their accomplishments. They were supposed to be quite well off. They dressed well, the school they went to was expensive, and Mrs Fortescue charged quite a good sum for them in the holidays.

Mrs Fortescue was quite ordinary, but a lady. She knew nice people, and she introduced her young friends to them. The girls were welcomed by Mrs Fortescue's friends as desirable and even pleasant acquaintances. Mrs Fortescue took them out a little, and in her heart of hearts she thought of herself as their chaperone until they married. Of course they would marry. When their school-days were over, Mr Timmins, who arranged all their money matters, would take a house for them in London; and who so suitable to chaperone these nice, well brought up girls as Mrs Fortescue? She intended to suggest this to Mr Timmins when she saw him after their school work was over.

It had been arranged all along that they were to leave school when Florence was eighteen and Brenda nineteen. Some people said it was rather young, and that Florence ought to have an extra year of training in her special department. But then, when one came to consider it, she had no special

department, she was good all round – that is, fairly good. Brenda was different. Brenda had real talent – well, perhaps that was the wrong word, but a real bias towards philosophy. She liked to read books on ethical subjects. She was fond of the works of Tyndale, Huxley, and Darwin. Sometimes she startled her acquaintances and friends by her ideas, all borrowed, of course, from these great writers. Nevertheless, even Brenda was not in the least remarkable, and as she was much plainer than Florence, it was the younger sister who was looked at, who was smiled at, who was approved of.

Well, the last day at school was over, and, as usual, the Misses Heathcote arrived at Mrs Fortescue's house at Langdale.

Langdale was a pretty town situated not very far from Tunbridge Wells. It was winter when the girls left school, and the snow was lying as a pure and beautiful mantle all over the fields when they drove up to Sunny Side, as Mrs Fortescue called her somewhat unpretentious house in the suburbs of Langdale. She came out to meet the girls and spoke to them with her usual affection.

“Ah, here you are!” she cried, “and welcome, welcome as flowers in May. You must be frozen, both of you. I have desired Jane to light a fire in your room; it is burning quite brightly. Come in, come in, my loves. I have been suffering a good deal from neuralgia, so won't go out into the porch. Higgins, take the young ladies' trunks round to the back entrance, where Bridget will attend to them.”

The well-known cabman of the district said he would, and the girls found themselves shut into a warm hall, where a fire was lighted in the grate and where the place looked as homelike as it always did when they came back to it. They both kissed Mrs Fortescue as in duty bound. They liked her without loving her. She had never done anything for them except for a money consideration, and they knew this fact, although they did not speak of it. Somehow it seemed to keep their hearts at arm's length from her.

She was a pretty little woman of about forty years of age, with a keen, very keen eye to the main chance. Her own means were small. She was always glad to have the Heathcotes to help her to pay her Christmas bills and to enable her to take her summer holidays free. She looked upon them now as her property, and she always spoke of her house as their home.

The girls went up to their room. There Bridget, the one servant, who had served Mrs Fortescue for so long, was waiting for them. The room looked very pretty. There were two little beds side by side, ornamented with pink draperies at the back of the brass bedsteads, pink draperies at the foot, pretty pink eiderdowns covering the beds themselves, a nice green felt carpet on the floor, and green art serge window curtains, which were drawn now to keep out the wintry blast. The fire crackled and roared merrily. The room was sweet and fresh and clean. It had the fragrant smell of lavender. Mrs Fortescue grew a lot of lavender in her garden, and kept bags of it profusely sprinkled through her linen. The girls always associated the smell of lavender with Mrs Fortescue.

Bridget welcomed them back as she had done three times a year for so long now. They seemed never to remember anything else.

“How are you, Bridget?” said Florence, in her bright voice. “As well as ever, I hope?”

“Oh, yes, miss; what should ail me?” said Bridget.

She showed her teeth as she laughed, and looked gleesome and good tempered and pleasant. She felt as though she would like to kiss her two young ladies, as she invariably called the Misses Heathcote.

“Here is your hot water, miss,” she said, turning to Brenda; “and I think the fire is all right, and dinner will be ready in ten minutes. If you want anything else, you can ring for me.”

She knew all about their trunks. There were invariably three trunks, two of which were kept in the storeroom downstairs, one of which came upstairs and was for immediate use. This trunk contained the girls' pretty blouses and ribbons, their sponge-bags, their night-cases, their brushes and combs, their slippers for use in the bedroom, and their pretty embroidered shoes to wear at dinnertime. Bridget had already unfastened this trunk. She glanced round the room just as she had done three times a year for the last four or five years, and then went away, leaving the young ladies

to themselves. They were her young ladies; of course they would always come to Sunny Side. As far as she was concerned, this was only one more home coming, just like all the rest.

The girls hastily changed and made themselves smart, as was their wont, for dinner. Mrs Fortescue wanted them to look smart. She hated dowdy people. She always dressed extremely well herself, following the fashion as far as lay within her means, powdering her face, and arranging her dyed hair to the best possible advantage. She imagined that she did not look more than thirty years of age, but the girls knew quite well that her hair was dyed and her face powdered. They did not like her any the less for that, however. If she chose to be so silly, it was no affair of theirs. She was a good old thing. That is what they said to each other when they spoke of her at all – quite good-natured, and kind to them.

But Florence brushed out her radiant hair now with a kind of viciousness which she had never exhibited before, and as she coiled it round her stately young head, she turned and spoke to her sister.

“Do you like that new shade of Mrs Fortescue’s hair or do you not, Brenda?”

“I did not notice it,” said Brenda.

“Well, I did; and I think it is hideous. What blouse will you put on, Brenda?”

“I don’t know: that pink one; won’t that do?”

“No, it doesn’t suit you. Wear white; I am going to.”

Both sisters put on white blouses made in the extreme of the fashion. Florence’s hair was one of her great beauties. It was of a very rich golden brown. She had quantities of it, and it had the natural fussiness and inclination to wave which made artificial means of producing that result unnecessary. Brenda’s hair was of a pale brown, without any wave or curl, but it was soft and thick and glossy. Brenda’s eyes were exactly the same colour as her hair, and she had rather pale eyebrows. Her face was quite a nice little one, but not beautiful. Florence’s face was beautiful – that is, it was beautiful at times. It could flash with animation, and her eyes could express scorn. She had a changing colour, too, and full red lips which revealed pearly teeth. Her looks were decidedly above the average, and there was a mocking light in her eyes which repelled and captivated at the same time.

Arm in arm, the two sisters went downstairs to the cosy drawing-room, where Mrs Fortescue was waiting for them.

“Ah, that is right, my loves. It is nice to see you both. Now I think I am entitled to a kiss, am I not?”

Florence went straight up at once and kissed the good lady on her forehead. Brenda did likewise.

“Aren’t you hungry?” said Mrs Fortescue.

“Yes,” said Brenda, “I am starving.”

“And so am I,” said Florence.

“Dinner is quite ready. Shall we all go into the dining-room?”

They went, the two fresh girls and the woman with the dyed hair, who imagined herself just as young as they – or rather tried to imagine herself their equal with regard to age. Mrs Fortescue looked at them with approval. She fancied she saw great success both for herself and Florence in Florence’s face. Of course Florence would make a brilliant match. Some one would fall in love with her – if possible, some one with a title. Brenda must be content with a humbler fate, but she, too, would secure a mate. When Florence was not by, she was an exceedingly nice-looking girl, so placid and gentle and clever-looking. Mrs Fortescue was very proud of Brenda’s cleverness. She liked to draw her out to talk on philosophical subjects. It was quite wonderful to hear her; and then that little tone – not of unbelief, oh no; but doubt, yes, doubt – was quite exciting and charming.

Brenda could talk better than Florence. The clergyman of the parish, Mr Russell, was unmarried. He would be an excellent husband for Brenda, just the very man, who would begin by converting her to truly orthodox views, and then would assure her how deeply he loved her. She would settle down at Langdale as the rector’s wife. It would be an excellent position and very nice for Mrs Fortescue, who, of course, would be always dear Brenda’s right hand, her mainstay in any perplexity.

She knew that the rector's wife would hold an excellent position in a small town like Langdale. She would be the first lady in the place. To her would be given the task of leading what society there was to lead. She would have to discern the sheep from the goats. Those who were not admitted within the charmed circle would not be worth knowing.

Mrs Fortescue thought of all these things as she looked at Brenda across the dinner-table. Presently, Florence laughed.

"What is the matter, dear?" said Mrs Fortescue.

"It seems quite incomprehensible," said Florence.

"What, my love? What do you mean?"

"Why, that our school-days are over. Things seem so exactly like they have always seemed. This is two days before Christmas. To-morrow we will go as usual to help with the church decorations. The next day will be Christmas Day. Then I suppose there'll be some sort of festivities going, and – and – But what I want to know is this?"

"Yes?" said Mrs Fortescue.

Bridget had left the room. An excellent dessert was on the board. The fire glowed red; the light was good.

"Yes?" she repeated.

"I want to know what is the end of it all. We are not going back to school at the end of January. We have done with school."

"Yes, darling," said Mrs Fortescue.

She rose as she spoke. She went swiftly up to the girl and put her arm round her neck.

"You have done with school in one sense, but all your beautiful future lies before you. You forget that Mr Timmins is coming to-morrow."

"I had forgotten," said Florence. "Had you, Brenda?"

"No," said Brenda, "how could I forget? I had a letter from him at Chester House this morning."

"What time did he say he would come, dear?" asked Mrs Fortescue.

"He said he would be here in the morning and he wanted us both to be in."

"He wants to talk to you about your future, darlings," said Mrs Fortescue; "very natural, very right. You had no idea, had you, Brenda, of going to Newnham or Girton I do trust and hope you had no thoughts in that direction. Men don't like women who have led collegiate lives: I know that for a fact; my own dear Frank often said so. He said he could not bear really learned women."

"I should have thought," said Brenda, "that men preferred women who could think. But I am afraid," she added, "that I don't very much care what men think on the subject. All the same, I am not going to either Newnham or Girton, so you can make your mind easy on that score, Mrs Fortescue."

"That is right, darling, that is right. I haven't an idea what Mr Timmins particularly wants to say to you, but I trust whatever he does say will be confided to me."

"Why, of course," said Florence.

"And in your future, darlings, I hope that I, your old friend, will bear a part."

The girls were silent, looking at her intently. She had expected an eager rush of words from those young lips, and their silence made her uneasy.

"I have done all I can for you, haven't I, my sweet ones?"

"Oh yes! You have been very kind, Mrs Fortescue," said Brenda.

"But that is not all," said Mrs Fortescue, her voice dropping. "I – and you must know it – I love you both."

Florence's fine dark eyes were opened to their fullest extent. Brenda looked very gently at the little woman with the dyed hair. Neither said a word. Mrs Fortescue sprang to her feet.

"We will go into the drawing-room now," she said. "You will tell me when you are sleepy and want to go to bed; would you like a game of cut-throat bridge first?"

The girls said they would like a game of bridge, and cards were produced. They played for about an hour, Mrs Fortescue invariably holding the best hand and the girls laughing good-humouredly at her luck. They played for love, not money. Mrs Fortescue thought the game uninteresting.

It was between ten and eleven when the sisters went up to their room. They said good-night to Mrs Fortescue on the landing.

They reached the comfortable bedroom where they had slept during the holidays for so many long years, and looked around them.

Florence suddenly said —

“Brenda, what should I do without you!” and Brenda flew to Florence, flung her arms round her neck and burst into tears.

“Why, what is it?” said the younger and taller sister of the two.

“I don’t know,” said Brenda.

She stopped crying almost immediately, mopped her eyes and smiled. Then she said, abruptly

—
“I don’t think I like Mrs Fortescue.”

“That is wrong of you, Brenda. She has always been good to us.”

“I know it is wrong of me,” said Brenda, “not to like her, but all the same, I don’t. I was never sure about it till to-night. Now I am practically certain I don’t like her.”

“But why?” said Florence. “Is it because she dyes her hair?”

“That is one thing,” said Brenda. “The character of the woman who dyes her hair must be objectionable to me. I don’t want her to have anything to do with my future. I shall tell Mr Timmins so to-morrow.”

“Oh, will you really? She will be so terribly disappointed.”

“I can’t help it,” said Brenda.

Florence had seated herself in a very comfortable easy-chair and Brenda was kneeling at her feet.

“You see,” she said solemnly, “we have only one life in this world – one life and one youth, and I don’t want mine to be commonplace. I think Mrs Fortescue would make it so. I can stand her for four weeks at Christmas; I can even endure her for seven weeks in the summer. But always! No, Flo, no: I couldn’t endure her always, could you?”

“Oh,” said Florence with a laugh, “I mean to get married very soon and have done with her. She will be quite useful until I am married. Why – how shocked you look, Brenda!”

“You are only eighteen; how can you think of such a thing as getting married?” said Brenda.

Florence laughed and stroked her sister’s hair.

“I think of it very often,” she said, “almost every day; in fact, it is the only thing before me. I mean to marry a rich and great man.”

“But you must love him,” said Brenda.

“I dare say I shall be able to manage that too,” cried Florence.

Chapter Two

A Startling Announcement

The next day Mr Timmins arrived. He came by the train which reached Langdale at three o'clock. He invariably did come by that train. There was nothing at all remarkable in his paying the girls a visit. He was their business man. It was his custom to have an interview with them and with Mrs Fortescue at least once a year. It is true he had come last to see them in the summer, so that it was somewhat remarkable for him to state his intention of coming to Langdale again so soon. But the girls thought nothing at all about this, and if Mrs Fortescue did, she was more pleased than otherwise. Of course, now that her dear young charges had left school for ever, there would be a good deal to talk over and their future to be arranged. She would probably have to take a larger house. The cottage where she lived was very nice and quite sufficiently good to receive schoolgirls in the holidays; but it was not a fit home for young heiresses, who would naturally want to entertain company when they were at home, and who would also naturally require to visit the great world.

Mrs Fortescue felt excited. There were two years yet of her lease to run; but she thought she might manage to induce her landlord to take the little house off her hands, or she might sublet it. In all probability Mr Timmins would require her to live in London with the Misses Heathcote. He would himself choose a pretty house for her there. Her eyes shone as she thought of her future. In London she would have to dress better. She would, in all probability, have to visit one of those celebrated beauty shops in Bond Street in order to get herself quite up to the mark. There were all kinds of inventions now for defying the ravages of age, for keeping a youthful bloom on the cheek and a youthful lustre on the hair. It would be necessary for Mrs Fortescue to look as charming as ever in order to take her young charges about. How pleasant it would be to go with them from one gay assembly to another, to watch their innocent triumphs!

As she lay down in bed on the first night after their arrival she appraised with a great deal of discernment their manifest charms. Florence was, of course, the beauty, but Brenda had a quiet distinction of her own. Her face was full of intellect. Her eyes full of resource. She was dignified, too, more so than Florence, who was all sparkling and gay, as befitted the roses in her cheeks and the flashes of light in her big brown eyes. Altogether, they were a charming pair, and when dressed as they ought to be (how Mrs Fortescue would love that part of her duty!) would do anybody credit.

Mrs Fortescue and the Misses Heathcote! She could hear their names being announced on the threshold of more than one notable reception room, could see the eager light in manly eyes and the deference which would be shown to her as the chaperone of the young heiresses!

Yes, Mr Timmins' visit was decidedly welcome. He should have the very best of receptions.

On the day when Mr Timmins had elected to come it was Christmas Eve. In consequence, the trains were a little out of order, and Mrs Fortescue could not tell exactly when he would arrive.

"He said three o'clock, dears," she remarked to her young charges as they sat together at breakfast, the girls wearing pretty brown dresses which suited their clear complexions to a nicety. "Now, as a rule, the three o'clock train is in to the moment, but of course to-day it may be late – in all probability it will be late. I shall order hot cakes for tea; Bridget is quite celebrated for her hot cakes. We will have tea ready for him when he comes. Then when he has had his chat with me, he will want to say a word or two to you, Brenda, and you, Florence. You had better not be out of the way."

"We thought of going for a good walk," said Florence. "It is you, after all, he wants to see, Mrs Fortescue. He never has had much to say to us, has he?" Here she looked at her sister.

"No," said Brenda, thoughtfully. "But," she added, "when he wrote to me this time, he said he particularly wanted to see you and me alone, Flo. He didn't even mention your name, Mrs Fortescue."

“Ah well, dear,” said Mrs Fortescue, with a smile; “that is quite natural. You have left school, you know.”

“I can’t quite believe it, can you, Brenda?” said Florence. “It seems just as if we must be going back to the dear old place.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Brenda. “We are not going back: we said good-bye to every one, don’t you remember?”

“You are never going back, dears, and for my part, I am glad,” said Mrs Fortescue. “You will be my charge in future; at least, I hope so.”

The girls were silent, looking hard at her. “As I have taken care of you since you were quite young girls, you will naturally wish for my protection until you are both married.”

Brenda was silent. Florence said eagerly – “I mean to marry as soon as possible.” Here she laughed, showing her pearly teeth, and a flashing light of anticipated triumph coming into her eyes.

“Of course you will marry soon, Florence,” said Mrs Fortescue. “You are far too pretty not to be somebody’s darling before long. And you, Brenda, also have an exceedingly attractive face. What are your dreams for the future, my love?”

“I cannot tell you,” said Brenda.

She got up as she spoke, and walked to the window. After a time, she said something to her sister, and the girls left the room arm-in-arm.

Mrs Fortescue felt rather annoyed by their manners. They were very independent, as independent as though they were of age; whereas at the present moment they had not a shilling – no, not a shilling in the world that she did not supply to them under Mr Timmins’ directions. Were they going to prove troublesome? She sincerely hoped not. They were good girls but that house in London might not be quite so agreeable as her dreams had pictured if Brenda developed a very strong will of her own and Florence was determined to marry for the sake of marrying. Still, Mr Timmins would put all right, and he would be with them at three o’clock.

The girls absented themselves during the whole of the morning, but appeared again in time for lunch, which they ate with a healthy appetite. They praised Mrs Fortescue’s food, comparing it with what they had at school to the disadvantage of the latter. Mrs Fortescue was pleased. She prided herself very much on Bridget’s cooking.

“And now,” she said, when the meal had come to an end, “you will go upstairs and put on your prettiest dresses and wait in the drawing-room for Mr Timmins. I shall not be far off. He will naturally want to see me as soon as he has had his talk with you both, so I shall remain writing letters in the dining-room. There are so many letters and cards to send off at Christmas time that I shall be fully occupied, and when you touch the bell, Brenda, I shall know what it means. In any case, I will send tea into the drawing-room at a quarter to four. That will give you time to get through your business first, and if you want me to come in and pour out the tea, I shall know if you will just touch the bell.”

“Thank you,” said Brenda. “But it isn’t half-past one yet, and the day is a lovely one. Florence and I want to take a good brisk walk between now and three o’clock. We shall be back before three. We cannot be mewed up in the house until Mr Timmins chooses to arrive.”

“Oh, my dear children! He will think it queer.”

“I am sorry,” said Brenda, “but he had no right to choose Christmas Eve as the day when he was to come to see us. His train may not be in till late. Anyhow, we want to take advantage of the sunshine. Come, Florence.”

The girls left the room and soon afterwards were seen going out arm-in-arm. They walked down the little avenue, and were lost to view.

There was a certain style about them both. They looked quite different from the ordinary Langdale girls. Florence held herself very well, and although she acknowledged herself to be a beauty, had no self-conscious airs. Brenda’s sweet face appeared to see beyond the ordinary line of vision, as though she were always communing with thoughts deeper and more rare than those given to most.

People turned and looked at the girls as they walked up the little High Street. Most people knew them, and were interested in them. They were the very charming young ladies who always spent their holidays with Mrs Fortescue. They were, of course, to be included in all the Christmas parties given at Langdale, and Mrs Fortescue would, as her custom was, give a party on Twelfth Night in their honour.

That was the usual state of things. The girls did not seem in the mood, however, to greet their old friends beyond smiling and nodding to them. As they were returning home, Brenda said —

“We are more than half an hour late. I wonder if he has come.”

“Well, if he has, it is all right,” said Florence. “Mrs Fortescue is dying to have a chat with him all by herself, and she will have managed to by this time. She will be rather glad, if the truth may be known, that we are not in to interrupt her. I can see that she is dying with curiosity.”

“I don’t want her to live with us in the future,” said Brenda.

“But she has set her heart on it,” said Florence.

“I know,” remarked Brenda; “but, all the same, our lives are our own, and I don’t think we can do with Mrs Fortescue. I suppose Mr Timmins will tell us what he has decided. We are not of age yet, either of us. You have three years to wait, Flo, and I have two.”

“Well, we must do what he wishes,” said Florence. “I intend to be married ages and ages before I am twenty-one; so that will be all right.”

While they were coming towards the house, an impatient, white-headed old lawyer was pacing up and down Mrs Fortescue’s narrow drawing-room. Mrs Fortescue was sitting with him and doing her utmost to soothe his impatience.

“Dear Mr Timmins, I am so sorry the girls are out. I quite thought they would have been back before now.”

“But they knew my train would be in by three o’clock,” said Mr Timmins.

He was a man of between fifty and sixty years of age, rather small, with rosy cheeks and irascible eyes. His hair was abundant and snow-white, white as milk.

“I said three o’clock,” he repeated.

“Yes,” said Mrs Fortescue, “but on Christmas Eve we made sure your train would be late.”

The lawyer took out his watch.

“Not the special from London; that is never late,” he remarked. “I want to catch the half-past four back; otherwise I shall have to go by one of those dreadful slow trains, and there’s a good deal to talk over. I do think it is a little careless of those girls not to be at home when they are expecting me.”

Mrs Fortescue coughed, then she ’hemmed.

“It might —” she began. The lawyer paused in his impatient walk and stared at her. “It might expedite matters,” she continued, “if you were to tell me some of your plans. For instance, I shall quite understand if you wish me to leave here and take a house in London. It is true the lease of this house won’t be up for two years, but I have no doubt my landlord would be open to a consideration.”

“Eh? What is it you were going to say? I don’t want you to leave your house,” blurted out Mr Timmins. “I have nothing whatever to do with your future, Mrs Fortescue. You have been kind to my young friends in the past, but I think I have — er — er — fully repaid you. And here they come — that is all right. Now, my dear madam, if you would leave the young ladies with me — no tea, thank you; I haven’t time for any — I may be able to get my business through in three-quarters of an hour. It is only just half-past three. If I leave here at a quarter-past four, I may catch the express back to town. Would you be so very kind as to order your servant to have a cab at the door for me at a quarter-past four — yes, in three-quarters of an hour I can say all that need be said. No tea, I beg of you.”

He was really very cross; it was the girls’ doing. Mrs Fortescue felt thoroughly annoyed. She went into the hall to meet Brenda and Florence.

“Mr Timmins has been here for nearly twenty minutes. His train was in sharp at three. He is very much annoyed at your both being out. Go to him at once, girls — at once.”

“Oh, of course we will,” said Florence. “Who would have supposed that his train would have been punctual to-day! Come, Brenda, come.”

They went, just as they were, into the pretty little precise drawing-room, where a fire was burning cheerily in the grate, and the room was looking spick and span, everything dusted and in perfect order, and some pretty vases full of fresh flowers adding a picturesqueness to the scene. It was quite a dear little drawing-room, and when the two girls – Florence with that rich colour which so specially characterised her, and Brenda a little paler but very sweet-looking – entered the room, the picture was complete. The old lawyer lost his sense of irritation. He came forward with both hands outstretched.

“My dear children,” he said; “my poor children. Sit down; sit down.”

They were surprised at his address, and Florence began to apologise for being late; but Brenda made no remark, only her face turned pale.

“I may as well out with it at once,” said Mr Timmins. “It was never my wish that it should have been kept from you all these years, but I only obeyed your parent’s special instructions. You have left school – ”

“Oh yes,” said Florence; “and I am glad. What are we to do in the future, Daddy Timmins?”

She often called him by that name. He took her soft young hand and stroked it. There was a husky note in his voice. He found it difficult to speak. After a minute or two, he said abruptly —

“Now, children, I will just tell you the very worst at once. You haven’t a solid, solitary hundred pounds between you in this wide world. I kept you at school as long as I could. There is not enough money to pay for another term’s schooling, but there is enough to pay Mrs Fortescue for your Christmas holidays, and there will be a few pounds over to put into each of your pockets. The little money your father left you will then be quite exhausted.”

“I don’t understand,” said Brenda, after a long time.

Florence was silent – she, who was generally the noisy one. She was gazing straight before her out into Mrs Fortescue’s little garden which had a light covering of snow over the flower-beds, and which looked so pretty and yet so small and confined. She looked beyond the garden at the line of the horizon, which showed clear against the frosty air. There would be a hard frost to-night. Christmas Day would come in with its old-fashioned splendour. She had imagined all sorts of things about this special time; Christmas Day in hot countries, Christmas Day in large country houses, Christmas Day in her own home, when she had won the man who would love her, not only for her beauty, but her wealth. She was penniless. It seemed very queer. It seemed to contract her world. She could not understand it.

Brenda, who had a stronger nature, began to perceive the position more quickly.

“Please,” she said – and her young voice had no tremble in it – “please tell me exactly what this means and why – why we were neither of us told until now?”

Mr Timmins shrugged his shoulders.

“How old were you, Brenda, when your father and mother died?” he asked.

“I was fourteen,” she answered, “and Florence was thirteen.”

“Precisely; you were two little girls; you were relationless.”

“So I have always been told,” said Brenda.

“Your father left a will behind him. He always appeared to you to be a rich man, did he not?”

“I suppose so,” said Brenda. “I never thought about it.”

“Nor did I,” said Florence, speaking for the first time.

“Well, he was not rich. He lived up to his income. He earned a considerable amount as a writer.”

“I was very proud of him,” said Brenda.

“When he died,” continued Mr Timmins, taking no notice of this remark – “you know your mother died first – but when he died he left a will, giving explicit directions that all his debts were to be paid in full. There were not many, but there were some. The remainder of the money was to

be spent on the education of you two girls. I assure you, my dears, there was not much; but I have brought the accounts with me for you to see the exact amount realisable from his estate and precisely how I spent it. I found Mrs Fortescue willing to give you a home in the holidays, and I arranged with her that you were to go to her for so much a week. I chose, by your father's directions, the very best possible school to send you to, a school where you would only meet with ladies, and where you would be educated as thoroughly as possible. You were to stay on at school and with Mrs Fortescue until the last hundred pounds of your money was reached. Then you were to be told the truth: that you were to face the world. After your fees for your last term's schooling have been met and Mrs Fortescue has been paid for your Christmas holidays, there will be precisely eighty pounds in the bank to your credit. That money I think you ought to save for a nest-egg. That is all you possess. Your father's idea was that you would live more happily and work more contentedly if you were allowed to grow up to the period of adolescence without knowing the cares and sorrows of the world. He may have been wrong; doubtless he was; anyhow, there was nothing whatever for me to do but to obey the will. I came down myself to tell you. You will have the Christmas holidays in which to prepare yourselves for the battle of life. You can tell Mrs Fortescue or not, as you please. She has learned nothing from me. I think that is about all, except – ”

“Yes?” said Florence, speaking for the first time – “except what?”

“Except that I would like you both – yes, both – to see Lady Marian Dixie, a very old client of mine, who was a friend of your mother's, and I believe, would give you advice, and perhaps help you to find situations. Lady Marian is in London, and if you wish it, I will arrange that you shall have an interview with her. What day would suit you both?”

“Any day,” said Brenda.

Florence was silent.

“Here is a five-pound note between you. It is your own money – five pounds out of your remaining eighty pounds. Be very careful of it. I will endeavour to see Lady Marian on Monday, and will write to you. Ah, there is my cab. You can tell Mrs Fortescue or not, just as you please. Good-bye now, my dears, good-bye. I am truly sorry, truly sorry; but those who work for their own living are not the most unhappy people, and you are well-educated; your poor father saw to that. Don't blame the dead, Brenda. Florence, think kindly of the dead.”

Chapter Three

Plans for the Future

Mrs Fortescue was full of curiosity.

The girls were absolutely silent. She talked with animation of their usually gay programme for Christmas. The Blundells and the Arbuthnots and the Aylmers had all invited them to Christmas parties. Of course they would go. They were to dine with the Arbuthnots on the following evening. She hoped the girls had pretty dresses.

“There will be quite a big party,” said Mrs Fortescue. “Major Reid and his son are also to be there. Michael Reid is a remarkably clever man. What sort of dresses have you, girls? Those white ones you wore last summer must be rather *outré* now. It was such a pity that I was not able to get you some really stylish frocks from Madame Aidée in town.”

“Our white frocks will do very well indeed,” said Florence.

“But you have grown, dear; you have grown up now,” said Mrs Fortescue. “Oh my love!” She drew her chair a little closer to the young girl as she spoke. “I wonder what Mr Timmins meant. He did not seem at all interested in my house. I expressed so plainly my willingness to give it up and to take a house in town where we could be all happy together; but he was very huffy and disagreeable. It was a sad pity that you didn’t stay in for him. It put him out. I never knew that Mr Timmins was such an irascible old gentleman before.”

“He is not; he is a perfect dear,” said Florence.

“Well, Florence, I assure you he was not at all a dear to me. Still, if he made himself agreeable to you, you two darling young creatures, I must not mind. I suppose I shan’t see a great deal of you in the future. I shall miss you, my loves.”

Tears came into the little woman’s eyes. They were genuine tears, of sorrow for herself but also of affection for the girls. She would, of course, like to make money by them, but she also regarded them as belonging to her. She had known them for so long, and, notwithstanding the fact that she had been paid for their support, she had been really good to them. She had given them of those things which money cannot buy, had sat up with Florence night after night when she was ill with the measles, and had read herself hoarse in order to keep that difficult young lady in bed when she wanted to be up and playing about.

Of the two girls Florence was her darling. She dreamed much of Florence’s future, of the husband she would win, of the position she would attain, and of the advantage which she, Mrs Fortescue, would derive from her young friends – advancement in the social scale. Beauty was better than talent; and Florence, as well as being an heiress, was also a beauty.

It cannot be said that the girls did much justice to Bridget’s hot cakes. They were both a little stunned, and their one desire was to get away to their own bedroom to talk over their changed circumstances, and decide on what course of action they would pursue with regard to Mrs Fortescue. In her heart of hearts, Florence would have liked to rush to the good lady and say impulsively —

“I am a cheat, an impostor. I haven’t a penny in the world. You will be paid up to the end of the Christmas holidays, and then you will never see me any more. I have got to provide my own living somehow. I suppose I’ll manage best as a nursery governess; but I don’t know anything really well.”

Brenda, however, would not encourage any such lawless action.

“We won’t say a word about it,” said Brenda, “until after Christmas Day.”

She gave forth this mandate when the girls were in their room preparing for dinner.

“Oh,” said Florence; “it will kill me to keep it a secret for so long!”

“It won’t kill you,” replied Brenda, “for you will have me to talk it over with.”

“But she’ll go on asking us questions,” said Florence. “She will want to know where we are going after the holidays; if we are going to stay on with her, or what is to happen; and unless we tell her a lot of lies, I don’t see how we are to escape telling her the truth. It is all dreadful from first to last; but I think having to keep it a secret from Mrs Fortescue is about the most terrible part of all.”

“It is the part you feel most at the present time,” said Brenda. “It is a merciful dispensation that we cannot realise everything that is happening just at the moment it happens. It is only by degrees that we get to realise the full extent of our calamities.”

“I suppose it is a calamity,” said Florence, opening her bright eyes very wide. “Somehow, at the present moment I don’t feel anything at all about it except rather excited; and there are eighty pounds left. Eighty pounds ought to go far, oughtn’t they? Oughtn’t they to go far, Brenda?”

“No,” said Brenda; “they won’t go far at all.”

“But I can’t make out why. We could go into small lodgings and live quite by ourselves and lead the simple life. There is so much written now about the simple life. I have read many books lately in which very clever men say that we eat far too much, and that, after all, what we really need is abundance of fresh air and so many hours for sleep and very plain food. I was reading a book not long ago which described a man who had exactly twenty pounds on which he intended to live for a whole year. He paid two and sixpence a week for his room and about as much more for his food, and he was very healthy and very happy. Now, if we did the same sort of thing, we could live both of us quite comfortably for two years on our eighty pounds.”

“And then,” said Brenda, “what would happen at the end of that time?”

“Oh, I should be married by then,” said Florence, “and you would come and live with me, of course, you old darling.”

“No; that I wouldn’t,” said Brenda. “I am not at all content to sit down and wait. I want to do something. As far as I am concerned, I am rather glad of this chance. I never did care for what are so-called ‘society pleasures.’ I see now the reason why I always felt driven to work very hard. You know father was a great writer. I shall write too. I will make money by my books, and we will both live together and be happy. If you find your prince, the man you have made up your mind to marry, why, you shall marry him. But if you don’t, I am always there. We will be very careful of our money, and I will write a book; I think I just know how. I am not father’s daughter for nothing. The book will be a success, and I shall get an order for another book, and we can live somehow. We shall be twenty thousand times happier than if we were in a house with Mrs Fortescue looking out for husbands for us – for that is what it comes to when all is said and done.”

“Oh, you darling! I never thought of that,” said Florence. “It is perfectly splendid! I never admired you in all my life as I admire you now, Brenda. Of course, I never thought that you would be the one to save us from destruction. I used at times to have a sort of idea within me that perhaps you would have to come and live with me some day when all our money was spent. I can’t imagine why I used to think so often about all our money being spent; but I used to, only I imagined it would be after I had got my trousseau and was married to my dear lord, or duke, or marquis – anyhow, some one with a big place and a title; and I used to imagine you living with me and being my dear companion. But this is much, much better than any of those things.”

“Yes; I think it is better,” said Brenda. “I will think about the book to-night, and perhaps the title may come to me; but in the meantime, we are not to tell Mrs Fortescue – not at least till Christmas Day is over; and we’ve got to take out our white dresses and get them ironed, and see that they look as fresh as possible. Now, we mustn’t stay too long in our room: she is dying with curiosity, but she can’t possibly guess the truth.”

“No; she couldn’t guess the truth, that would be beyond her power,” said Florence. “The truth is horrible, and yet delightful. We are our own mistresses, aren’t we, Brenda?”

“As far as the eighty pounds go,” replied Brenda.

“What I was so terrified about,” said the younger sister, “was this. I thought we should have to go as governesses or companions, or something of that sort, in big houses and be – be parted.” Her lips trembled.

“Oh no; we won’t be parted,” said Brenda; “but all the same, we’ll have to go to see Lady Marian Dixie – that is, when she writes to ask us. Now may I brush your hair for you? I want you to look your very prettiest self to-night.”

The white frocks were ironed by Bridget’s skilful fingers. It is true, they were only the sort of dresses worn by schoolgirls, but they were quite pretty, and of the very best material. They were somewhat short for the two tall girls, and Brenda smiled at herself when she saw her dress, which only reached a trifle below her ankles. As to Florence, she skipped about the room in hers. She was in wonderfully high spirits. For girls who had been brought up as heiresses, and who expected all the world to bow before them, this was extraordinary. And now it was borne in upon her that she had only forty pounds in the world, not even quite that, for already a little of the five pounds advanced by Mr Timmins had been spent. Mrs Fortescue insisted upon it. She said, “You ought to wear real flowers; I will order some for you at the florist’s round the corner.”

Now flowers at Christmas time are expensive, but Florence was reckless and ordered roses and lilies of the valley. Brenda looked unutterable things, but after opening her lips as though to speak, decided to remain silent. Why should not Florence have her pretty way for once? She looked at her sister with great admiration. She thought again of her beauty, which was of the sort which can scarcely be described, and deals more with expression than feature. Wherever this girl went, her bright eyes did their own work. They drew people towards them as towards a magnet. Her charming manners effected the rest of the fascination. She was not self-conscious either, so that women liked her as much as men did.

But now Christmas Day had really come, and Mrs Fortescue, in the highest of high spirits, accompanied her young charges to Colonel Arbuthnot’s house. Year by year, the girls had eaten their Christmas dinner at the old Colonel’s house, which was known by the commonplace name of The Grange. It was a corner house in Langdale, abutting straight on to the street, but evidently at one time there had been a big garden in front, and just before the hall door was an enormous oak tree, which spread its shadows over the low stone steps in summer, and caused the dining-room windows which faced the street to be cool even in the hottest weather.

At the back of the house was a glorious old garden. No one had touched that. It measured nearly three acres. It had its walled-in enclosure, its small paddock, and its wealth of flower garden. The flowers, as far as Florence and Brenda could make out, seemed to grow without expense or trouble, for Colonel Arbuthnot was not a rich man, and could not even afford a gardener every day, but he worked a good deal himself, and was helped by his daughter Susie, a buxom, rather matronly young woman of six or seven and thirty. The girls liked Susie very much, although they considered her quite an old maid.

No; Colonel Arbuthnot was by no means rich – that is, as far as money is concerned; but he possessed other riches – the riches of a brave and noble heart. He was straight as a die in all his dealings with his fellow-men. He had a good deal of penetration of character, and had long ago taken a fancy to Mrs Fortescue’s young charges. It did not matter in the least to him whether the girls were heiresses or not. They were young. They were both, in his opinion, pretty. He liked young and pretty creatures, and the idea of sitting down to his Christmas dinner without these additions to his party would have annoyed him very much.

Colonel Arbuthnot’s one extravagance in the year was his Christmas dinner. He invited all those people to it who otherwise might have to do without roast beef and plum pudding. There were a good many such in the little town of Langdale. It was a remote place, far from the world, and no one was wealthy there. Money went far in a little place of the sort, and the Colonel always saved several pounds out of his income in order to give Susie plenty of money to pay for a great joint at

the butcher's, and to make the old-fashioned plum pudding, also to prepare the mince pies by the old receipt, and to wind up by a sumptuous dessert.

It was on these rare occasions that the people who came to The Grange saw the magnificent silver which Colonel Arbuthnot possessed. It was kept wrapped up in paper and baize during the remainder of the year: for Susie said frankly that she could not keep it clean; what with the garden and helping the young servant, she had no time for polishing silver. Accordingly, she just kept out a few silver spoons and forks for family use and locked the rest up.

But Christmas Day was a great occasion. Christmas Day saw the doors flung wide, and hospitality reigning supreme. The Colonel put on his best dinner coat. He had worn it on more than one auspicious occasion at more than one famous London club. But it never seemed to grow the least bit old-fashioned. He always put a sprig of holly with the berries on it in his button-hole, and would not change this symbol of Christmas for any flower that could be presented to him.

As to Susie, she also had one dinner dress which appeared on these auspicious occasions, and only then. It was made of a sort of grey "barège," and had belonged to her mother. It had been altered to fit her somewhat abundant proportions, and it was lined with silk. That was what Susie admired so much about it. The extravagance of silk lining gave her, as she expressed it, "a sense of aristocracy." She said she felt much more like a lady with a silk lining in her dress than if she wore a silk dress itself with a cotton lining.

"There is something pompous and ostentatious about the latter," she said, "whereas the former shows a true lady."

She constantly moved about the room in order that the rustle of the silk might be heard, and occasionally, in a fit of absence – or apparent absence – she would lift the skirt so as to show the silk lining. The dress itself was exceedingly simple; but that did not matter at all to Susie. She wore it low in the neck and short in the sleeves; and it is true that she sometimes rather shivered with cold; for on no other day in the remaining three hundred and sixty-four did she dream of putting on a low dress. In the front of the dress she wore her mother's diamond brooch – a treasure from the past, which alone she felt gave her distinction; and round her neck she had a string of old pearls, somewhat yellow with age, but very genuine and very good.

Susie's hair was turning slightly grey and was somewhat thin, but then she never remembered her hair at all, nor her honest, flushed, reddish face, hardened by exposure to all sorts of weather, but very healthy withal.

From the moment she entered the drawing-room to receive her guests, she never gave Susie Arbuthnot a thought, except in the very rare moments when she rustled her grey barège in order to let her visitors know that the lining was silk. That silk lining was her one vanity. As a rule, we all have one, and that was hers. It was a very innocent one, and did no one any harm.

On this special Christmas Day, the Reids were coming to dinner. Major Reid was an army man who had retired a long time ago. He was always expecting his promotion, but had not got it yet. He was somewhat discontented, but liked to talk over old days with Colonel Arbuthnot. His son Michael had been a favourite with the Heathcote girls as long as they could remember. He was considered to be of their own rank in life, and Mrs Fortescue, in consequence, asked him to dine, and play with them during the holidays. When he was very small, he rather bullied them; but as he grew older, he began to think a great deal of Florence's beauty, and even to imagine himself in love with her. He was the sort of young man who always kept his father in a state of alarm with regard to money, and spent a great deal more than he had a right to do. He was a good-looking fellow, and popular in his regiment; and as he could make himself very agreeable, was a great favourite.

When Christmas Day dawned on the snowy world, Major Reid spoke to his son.

"Well, Michael," he said, "it's a great pleasure to have you with me. I consider myself a particularly lucky fellow to be able to say that I haven't missed a single Christmas since your birth without having you by my side. But I don't suppose this state of things will go on. You are sure to

accept foreign service between now and next year, and, all things considered, I should like you to marry, my boy.”

“Oh, I’m a great deal too young for that kind of thing,” said Michael, helping himself to some kidneys on toast as he spoke, and eating with great relish and appetite.

“Well, my boy, I don’t know about that, there’s nothing like taking time by the forelock. Why, how old are you, Mike?”

“I shall be twenty-four my next birthday,” said the young man.

“Well,” said the major; “many a man has married before then, and done none the worse.”

“And a great many have ruined their lives by marrying too young,” said Reid. “Besides, I am only a lieutenant, father; I ought not to think of such a thing until I get my captaincy.”

Major Reid looked attentively at his son.

“The fact is, Michael,” he said, “you ought to marry money. Of course, to engage yourself to a girl who has not plenty of money would be sheer madness.”

Michael Reid looked at his father with a twinkle in his grey eye. He had quite a nice face, although it was very worldly. He could read through the old man’s thoughts at the present moment as though they were spread before him on an open page.

“What are you thinking of, dad?” he said. “Out with it, whatever it is.”

“This,” said the Major, colouring as he spoke; “those two girls have come back to Mrs Fortescue’s. Florence is remarkably pretty. They must both be exceedingly well off. I spoke to Mrs Fortescue the other day, and she told me that she doesn’t know the extent of their fortune, but believes it to be something quite considerable. In fact, I should imagine from the way they have been brought up, that they must have something which runs into at least four figures a year. Now, the moment such girls go into society, they will be surrounded by adventurers, men who wish to secure them simply for the sake of their money. You, my dear boy, I understand, have already paid attentions to Florence, and why not carry them on? This is your chance; she is an exceedingly attractive girl: in fact, she is a beauty. She will be rich. At present you are not supposed to know anything about her fortune; but if it comes as a surprise, why, so much the better.”

Lieutenant Reid, of His Majesty’s – th, thought of certain debts he had incurred, debts which if he explained their full significance to his father, would ruin the old man. He sat silent for a time, thinking.

“When last I saw Florence,” he said, after a minute’s pause, “she was just a pretty little hoyden of a girl; but, as you say, we were always good friends. Did you say they were still with Mrs Fortescue?”

“Of course they are,” said Major Reid, tapping his foot impatiently. “Don’t they always spend their holidays with her? But they are leaving school now, in fact, they have left school. Mrs Fortescue quite expects to go to London with them in order to take them into the gay world. If ever you have a chance, it is now; and if I were you, I would make the best of it.”

Michael Reid was silent, but he broke a piece of toast, and ate it reflectively. His father saw that he need say no more, and after a minute’s pause left the room.

As to the young man, he went to church on that Christmas Day although he had no previous idea of doing so. He did not dare even to say to himself that his object was to see the Misses Heathcote. But he looked very hard at both girls as they walked up the aisle of the church, accompanied by Mrs Fortescue. Even in her plain school dress, Florence had an air of distinction, and Brenda looked quiet and charming. Michael Reid felt his heart beating quite agreeably. His father’s advice, after all, was sound. If he could secure a wife who had four, five, six, or seven hundred a year – and, of course, there was a great likelihood that she would have much more – why, his fortune would be made. Florence had seen no other man as yet, but she had a schoolgirl friendship for him. Now was his opportunity. He would strike while the iron was hot.

Accordingly, in the course of the afternoon, as he and his father were pacing up and down in the sheltered corner by the laurel hedge beside the Major's old house, Michael linked his hand within the old man's arm, and said —

“If you will allow me to manage things my own way, and will not appear in the very least to interfere; why – I – I will do my best.”

“Thank you, my boy. I knew you would,” said the Major. “God bless you, my son; and God grant you success.”

Michael did not think it necessary to reply to these remarks, which were really uttered as a matter of course; but he went upstairs early to his bedroom, and took great care in selecting the white tie he would wear with his dinner suit that evening. Instead of the morsel of mistletoe, which was considered the correct thing among the young ladies at Langdale for the gentlemen to wear at the Arbuthnots' dinner parties, he went out and purchased a rose. He paid a shilling for a rose with a bud attached, and put it with care into his button-hole. When he had finished dressing, he surveyed himself in the glass with great satisfaction. He was a good-looking fellow, and might, he thought, attract the admiration and affection of any girl. He tried hard to remember what colour Florence's eyes were; but hers was an evasive face, which baffled inquiry. It was full of subtle changes. The eyes looked brown one moment, green the next; and then again a careful observer would swear that they were grey. But they had a story in them at all times. So Michael thought to himself. He thought that to compare them to the stars of heaven would be a happy metaphor, and that he might use it with effect that evening. He hoped the night would be fine, so that they could go out between the dances. They always danced at Colonel Arbuthnot's on Christmas night. When dinner was cleared away, the tables were pushed to one side, and the polished floor left ready for the tread of the dancers.

Then was Susie's really proud moment. She would sit at the old piano – never in perfect tune – and play one old-fashioned waltz and old-fashioned polka after another. She played a set of the Lancers too when she was pressed to do so; but was often heard to say she considered them too rompy. Notwithstanding, she was never tired of rattling out her old tunes on the old piano; and Reid thought of the dancing and of the happy minute when he would get Florence to himself under the stars and compare her bright eyes to those luminaries.

When he had finished dressing, he went downstairs and spoke to his father.

“You are going in a cab, I suppose, as usual?”

“Well, yes; there's a good deal of snow on the ground, and it is some little distance to the Arbuthnots', so I told Hoggs to call. Dinner is at seven. The cab will be here at ten minutes to the hour.”

“You don't greatly mind if I walk on in advance?”

“Of course not, my boy, if you prefer it. But be sure you put on good stout walking shoes, and change them for your pumps when you get in.”

“All right, Dad,” said this soldier of his Majesty's – th Foot; and, slipping on an overcoat, he stepped out into the frosty night.

Yes; the stars at least would be propitious. Although there were great banks of cloud coming up from the west, they were moving slowly, and he did not think they would interfere with the enjoyment of that Christmas dinner.

Lieutenant Reid was the very first of the guests to arrive at the Arbuthnots' house. In fact, he was so much too early that the little maid who was hired for the occasion had not her cap on, and kept him waiting at the hall door for a considerable time. But at last he was admitted, and was ushered into the Colonel's smoking-room, that apartment being set aside for the accommodation of the gentleman guests. There Reid changed his walking shoes for his pumps, took off his overcoat, looked at his face in the glass, saw that his button-hole was in perfect order, and was the very first to enter the drawing-room.

There he saw to his immense satisfaction Susie Arbuthnot standing by the fire quite alone. The Colonel had not yet come downstairs. Susie, in that grey barège, with a flush of excitement all over her face, Susie with her very stout figure, her diamond brooch, her pearl necklace, gave Reid an extraordinary desire to laugh. While all the world was going on, poor Susie was standing still. It flashed through his mind after a minute's reflection that when he and Florence were married, they would send her anonymously a fashionable new dinner dress. He began to consider what colour it ought to be – purple, mauve, red, violet? He decided to leave the choice of the dress to Florence, who, of course, would know all about such things. Meanwhile, he went eagerly up to shake hands with the little lady.

“You are early, Captain,” she said.

She invariably called him “Captain,” and although he had no right whatever to the name, he enjoyed the sound very much, and never dreamed of correcting her.

“I do hope,” she continued, her brow puckering slightly, “that nothing has occurred to keep your dear, good father from joining in our Christmas festivities. I don't know what the Colonel would say if the Major were not present at our Christmas dinner. Do tell me at once, Captain, that nothing is wrong with your esteemed father.”

“Nothing whatever,” said Reid; “he is coming along presently in one of Hoggs' cabs. I thought I would come first for the simple reason that I want to have a word alone with you, Miss Susie.”

“Oh, I am only too delighted,” said Susie; and she rustled her silk petticoat as she spoke, getting closer to the young man, and looking redder in the face than ever. “What is it? If there is anything in my power – ”

“Oh, it is quite a simple matter,” he said. “You know I dine out a great deal, but I may say without verging a hair's line from the truth, that I never enjoy any dinners as I do yours – a little old-fashioned of course – but so good, the food so – A.1. Now I noticed last Christmas that you, Miss Susie – ah! Miss Susie! – you must have been in London since I saw you last and picked up some of the modes of the great world. I noticed that you had adopted some of the latest London fashions: for instance, the names of the guests put beside their plates.”

“It was Lady Lorrimer, when she was here two years ago, who told me about that,” said Susie. “I generally use a number of correspondence cards, cutting them very carefully to the necessary shape, and printing the names in my very best writing. It helps our servants, and our visitors know where to sit.”

“Quite so. I think it is an excellent idea. But please tell me – where am I to sit at dinner to-night?”

She laughed, and half blushed. She had meant this good “Captain Reid” to take herself in to dinner, having reserved a much more elderly lady for Major Reid. But somehow, as she looked into his face, an intuition came to her. She was a woman with very quick intuitions, and she could read a man's thoughts in a flash.

“Never mind whom you were to take in,” she said. “Tell me quickly – quickly – whom you wish to sit next. Ah, there's another ring at the bell!”

“Well, to tell you the truth, I want to take Florence Heathcote into dinner to-night. Can you manage it?”

“I certainly can, and will. Dear, beautiful Florence! No wonder you admire her. I will give directions this minute. Just sit down, won't you, near the fire. I will go and alter the dinner-table.”

Lieutenant Reid seated himself with a smile round his lips. He had achieved his purpose.

“I thought she would help me,” was his inward reflection. “I was to take her in – poor Susie! but I am flying for higher game. 'Pon my word! the pater is right, and Florence is worth making an effort to secure. Now, it's all right. We'll go into the garden after dinner, and during dinner I can begin to lay my little trap for the entanglement of that gentle heart. She looked very beautiful in church to-day, but I do wish I could remember the colour of her eyes.”

Chapter Four

Christmas Festivities

At night there was no doubt whatever that Florence Heathcote's eyes looked their best. By night they were invariably dark; their brightness was enhanced by artificial light. They were softened, too, particularly at such a table as Colonel Arbuthnot and his daughter prepared for their guests. For nothing would induce the Colonel to have anything but candles on his dinner-table. Candles, in large silver branches, adorned the board; and if girls don't know, they ought to be informed that there is no possible light so soft and becoming to eyes and complexion as that caused by these minor stars of illumination. There is no garishness in the light of a candle, and it does not make hideous revelations like electricity nor cause the deep shadows that a gaselier flings on your head.

Florence, in spite of herself, was feeling a little sad to-night, and that sadness gave the final touch to her charms. She was quite pleased to be taken into dinner by her old playmate, Michael Reid. She told him so in her sweet, bright, open way.

"What a lot we shall have to talk of!" she said. "How long is it since I have first known you?"

He tried to count the years on his fingers and then, moved by an inspiration, said —

"No; I won't count — I can't count. I have known you for ever."

"Oh," she said, with a laugh; "but of course you haven't." And then, rather to his horror, she called across the table to Brenda — "When did we first meet Michael? I mean, how old were you?"

Brenda was talking very gently to an elderly clergyman — a dull sort of man, who always, however, appealed to Brenda because, as she said to her sister, he was so very good. She paused and looked thoughtful; and Susie, at the bottom of the table, gave her silk lining a swish. After a minute's thought, Brenda said —

"We have known you, Michael, for four years." And then she related in a gentle but penetrating voice the occasion of their first meeting. "Florence was," she said, "fourteen at the time. She is eighteen now. You pulled her hair: you were a very rough boy indeed, and you made Flo cry."

"No, that he didn't!" interrupted Florence. "He put me into a towering passion."

"Yes," pursued Brenda, "and you cried while you were in the passion."

"I don't know how to apologise," said the somewhat discomfited lieutenant: "but I suppose boys will be boys."

"And girls will be girls," said Florence. "You would not pull my hair now, would you?"

He looked at her lovely hair, arranged in the most becoming fashion and yet so simply, and murmured something which she could not quite catch but which caused her ears to tingle, for she was quite unaccustomed to compliments except among her school-fellows, and they did not count.

After dinner, the pair found themselves alone for a few minutes. Then Reid drew a chair close to Florence's side, and said —

"I wish with all my heart and soul that you were as poor as a church mouse, so that I might show you what a man's devotion can do for a girl."

Florence found herself turning pale — not at the latter part of his speech but at the beginning; for was she not quite as poor as a church mouse? in fact, poorer, for even the church mouse manages to exist; and she could not exist beyond quite a limited time on the small amount of money which the girls possessed between them.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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