

Meade L. T.

Dumps – A Plain Girl



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Part 1, Chapter I

A Lesson in Patience

The boys were most troublesome. They never would mind in the very least when father had one of his worst headaches. It was not that they did not try to be good – I will say that Alex had the kindest heart, and that Charley was good-natured too – but it seemed to me as though they could not walk quietly; they would stomp upstairs, and they would go heavily across the big attic where they slept, and father was so fearfully sensitive; the least sound made him start up, and then he would get into a sort of frenzy and hardly know what he was doing. He would call out to the boys and thunder to them to be quiet; and then his head was worse than ever. Oh, it was all dreadful – dreadful! I sometimes did not know what to do.

I am going to tell the story of my life as far as I can; but before I begin I must say that I do wonder why girls, as a rule, have a harder time of it than boys, and why they learn quite early in life to be patient and to give up their own will. Now, of course, if father comes in after his very hard day's work, schoolmastering, as he calls it, and when he has one of his fearful headaches, I sit like a lamb and hardly speak; but it never enters into Alex's head, or into Charley's, that they ought to be equally considerate. I do not for a minute want to praise myself, but I know that girls have an opportunity very early in life of learning patience.

Well now, to begin my story.

I was exactly fifteen years and a half. I should not have a birthday, therefore, for six months. I was sorry for that, for birthdays are very nice; on one day at least in the year you are queen, and you are thought more of than any one else in the house. You are put first instead of last, and you get delicious presents. Some girls get presents every day – at least every week – but my sort of girl only gets a present worth considering on her birthday. Of all my presents I loved flowers best; for we lived in London, where flowers are scarce, and we hardly ever went into the country.

My name is Rachel Grant, and I expect I was a very ordinary sort of girl. Alex said so. Alex said that if I had beautiful, dancing dark eyes, and very red lips, and a good figure, I might queen it over all the boys, even on the days when it wasn't my birthday; but he said the true name for me ought not to be Rachel, but Dumps, and how could any girl expect to rule over either boys or girls with such a name as Dumps? I suppose I was a little stodgy in my build, but father said I might grow out of that, for my mother was tall.

Ah dear! there was the sting of things; for if I had had a mother on earth I might have been a very different girl, and the boys might have been told to keep their place and not to bully poor Dumps, as they called me, so dreadfully. But I must go on with my story.

I was Rachel or Dumps, and there were two boys, Alex and Charley. Alex was a year younger than I, and ought really to have been very much under my control; and Charley was two years younger. Then there was father, who was quite elderly, although his children were comparatively young. He was tall and had a slight stoop, and his hair was turning grey. He had a very beautiful, lofty sort of expression, and he did wonders in the great school or college where he spent most of his time. Our house belonged to the college; the rooms were large, and the windows looked out on the grounds of the college and I could see the boys playing, Alex and Charley amongst them, only I never dared to look if I thought Alex or Charley could see me; for if they had caught sight of me it would have been all over with me, for they did not particularly want the other boys to know they had a sister.

“If she was a beauty we’d be awfully proud,” said Alex, “but being only Dumps, you know,” – and then he would wink at me, and when he did this I felt very much inclined to cry.

Well, these things went on, and I went to school myself and learnt as hard as I could, and tried to keep the house in order for father, whom I loved very dearly, and who sometimes – not very often, but perhaps once or twice, on a birthday or some special occasion of that sort – told me that I was the comfort of his life, and I knew that I was patient, whatever other virtue I might lack.

There came a special evening in the beginning of November. It had been a drizzling sort of day, and rather foggy, and of course the old house looked its worst, and it was six months – six whole months – before I could have a birthday, and the boys were so loud, and father’s head was so bad, and altogether it was a most discouraging sort of day. I had invited Rita and Agnes Swan to come and have tea with me. They were my greatest friends. I hardly ever dared to ask them to come, because something would be sure to happen on the nights when they arrived. But at school that morning it had seemed to me that I might certainly enjoy a quiet hour with them, so I said, “If you will come in exactly at four o’clock – father won’t be in, I am sure, for two hours, for it is his late day at the school, and it is half-holiday for the Upper Remove and Alex will be out of the way, and if Charley does come in we can manage him – we’ll have the entire house to ourselves from four to five, and can have a glorious game of hide-and-seek.”

Rita said she would be charmed to come, and Agnes said the same, and I hurried home to do the best I could for my friends.

Rita and Agnes were not exactly beautiful; but they were not like me – no one could have called either of them Dumps. They had soft, pretty hair which waved about their little heads, and their features were quite marked and distinct, and I think their eyes were beautiful, although I am not absolutely sure. They were rather clever, and often got praised at school. I am afraid they were inclined to patronise me, but I thought if I could have them to tea, and could show them over our large house, and let them see what a splendid place it was for hide-and-seek, it being a very old house with lots of queer passages and corners, they might respect me more and get the other girls in the school to do so also.

Accordingly, when I got home about one o’clock on that November day I was in high spirits. But there was my usual lesson in patience waiting for me; for father came in at three o’clock instead of at six, as he had done every single Thursday since I could remember.

“Where are you, Rachel?” he called out when he entered the house.

I ran to him.

“Oh father, is anything wrong?”

“Only this abominable headache,” he replied. “It is worse than usual. I am going to my room to lie down. See that the house is kept quiet, Rachel.”

“Oh yes,” I replied. “Shall I get you a cup of tea?”

“No; I couldn’t touch anything. Just keep the house as quiet as possible. If those young rascals come in, tell them about me. I trust you, Rachel, not to allow a sound.”

“Very well, father,” I said.

He never noticed that I was in my best frock, pale-blue with a sash of the same, and that I had combed and brushed my hair until it fairly shone. I knew that my hair was thick and longer than most girls’ hair, and I was proud to let it fall over my shoulders, and I wondered if Rita and Agnes would remark it.

But here at once was a stop to our jolly game of hide-and-seek; we could not play a game of that sort without making a noise. We must sit in the parlour. The parlour was farthest away from father’s bedroom. We must sit there and be as still as possible. We might play games, of course; but then one could play games at the Swans’ house, which was a very ordinary, everyday sort of place, not a bit like ours, which at least was quaint and out of the common.

I had ordered queen-cakes for tea, and a fresh pot of jam to be opened, and I was all expectation, and primed, as Alex would say, to exert myself to the very utmost to entertain my friends, when who should come thundering up the steps, making a most horrible noise, but the boys, with two other boys bearing them company. I rushed out to the hall.

“You mustn’t really, Alex,” I said.

“Mustn’t what?” he cried, looking at my excited face. “What’s up now, Dumps?”

The other boys were strangers. One had red hair, and the other was dark. He looked like a foreigner; his hair fell straight in two lines down his forehead and almost met his eyebrows. He was sparely built, and very tall, and had great big hands. Alex glanced back at him.

“I wanted to take these fellows over the house,” he said. “This is Von Marlo” – here he introduced the taller boy – “and this is Squibs. You must have heard me talk of Squibs. Now, don’t stand in the way; let us come in. Von Marlo is Dutch, and very proud of his country – aren’t you, Von Marlo?”

Von Marlo smiled, and bowed to me.

“Now get out of the way, Dumps,” said Alex. “And what have you put on your best frock for, and why are you all prunes and prisms? What is the matter?”

“Only that father is at home. He is lying down; he has a shocking headache. You really mustn’t make a noise. – You must go away, please, Mr Von Marlo and Mr Squibs.”

“Oh, how jokingly funny!” exclaimed Alex, and he burst into a loud laugh and sank down on the bench in the hall. But the Dutch boy, Von Marlo, came up to me and made another little bow, and took my hand as though he would kiss it; he raised it to within a few inches of his lips and then dropped it again. I was told afterwards that this was the Dutch way of showing reverence to a lady, and I was immensely touched by it. He said, “Certainly, Miss Grant, we will go away. I did not know when Grant asked me to come in that your father was ill.”

“But I say, the Professor was in his class holding forth not half-an-hour back,” said Squibs, whose real name was Squire.

“Well, he’s lying down now, and there can be no noise,” I said.

I had scarcely uttered the words before up the steps came my own two special visitors, Rita and Agnes Swan.

“Oh Jiminy!” cried Alex; and he stepped back as the two young ladies sailed in.

“How do you do, Rachel?” said Rita.

“How do you do, Rachel?” said Agnes.

They were also dressed in their best, and were evidently highly pleased and intended to have a good time. They did not at all object to the fact that four rather tall, ungainly schoolboys were standing about in the hall.

“You know my brothers, don’t you, Rita?” I said, presenting Alex and Charley. “And this is Mr Von Marlo, and this is Mr Squire.”

Alex and Charley reddened up to the roots of their hair; Squibs looked as though he could not possibly get any redder – he was nearly always scarlet; but the Dutch boy, Von Marlo, bowed in the most graceful style, and then stood quite at his ease, glancing at the girls.

“I say,” said Alex, coming up to me and speaking in a very loud semi-whisper, “have they come to tea?”

“Yes – yes. Do go away – please go away – and take the boys with you.”

“But are there cookies and good things for tea?”

“Yes; but there really isn’t enough for four extra people. Do go away, Alex. I’ll have something nice for your supper by-and-by. Do! there’s a good boy.”

But neither Alex nor Charley would see the fun of that, and I am sure those girls who take the trouble to read my history will guess at my mortification when I tell them that four extra guests sat down to a tea-table only prepared for three.

Now Hannah, our servant, was by no means noted for her good temper. She brought in fresh bread-and-butter, fresh tea, fresh jam; but the fearful difficulty of keeping the room quiet and of making those boys abstain from laughter, of making even Rita and Agnes behave themselves, was enough to wear any poor girl out. I do not know what I should have done but for the Dutch boy, Von Marlo. He saw that I was annoyed, and he came up to me and offered me all the help he possibly could.

“It is quite a shame,” he said; “and you looked so nice when you opened the door. I thought you were the very prettiest girl I had ever laid eyes on. You see, I have not been in England more than two months. I have come here to go to this famous school.”

“You speak English very well,” I said.

“Oh yes, I learnt that in Holland; we all learn it there. We learn English, German, and French as soon as ever we can speak at all, I think; for, you see, our language – Dutch – is not much use to us outside our own country. There is nothing in that,” he continued modestly. “Now, what can I do to help you?”

I looked at him, and my ruffled spirits became soothed. After all, why should I not make the best of things?

“I’ll try to keep the fellows quiet,” said Von Marlo; “and you needn’t call me Mr – I am only a schoolboy. You can just say Von Marlo, as I am sure you say Squibs to Squire. We can all be jolly together. What do you say?”

“Done!” I cried; and after that the meal went swimmingly.

It was amazing what those fellows managed to eat; and it was still more amazing to see how Rita and Agnes enjoyed themselves. It was the thought of their disappointment which had so terribly annoyed me when the four boys insisted on bursting into our parlour and forcing themselves into our presence; but I soon saw that Rita and Agnes were only delighted. They laughed and joked, and as they laughed Alex and Charley became like lambs of sweetness and gentleness. Dear, dear! how nice a brother can be to other people’s sisters! It is quite extraordinary. I bent over to Rita and whispered to her, “I hope you are not vexed.”

“Vexed?” she whispered back. “No; I’m sure I’m delighted. I did not think it was to be a big party of this sort; and really the boys of the upper school are almost like men. It is very nice indeed; I am enjoying myself extremely.”

And so she was, and so was Agnes. When tea was over, however, an anxious moment arrived. We could not play any noisy games, and the boys immediately declared that they were not going away.

“We are going to see the fun out now,” said Alex. “Never mind to-morrow’s work. I’ll do that in the small hours – burn the candle, you know.”

Here he winked at Agnes, and she winked back at him, thinking herself exceedingly witty.

Games were proposed, and games were begun; but, alas! how could seven young people keep absolutely quiet? I was trembling all over. If father were but to come down and see the absolute riot in the parlour, I didn’t know what would happen. I was certain of one thing: neither Rita nor Agnes would ever be allowed to have tea with me again.

After a time I did a very injudicious thing. I left the room. I ran upstairs. I listened outside father’s room and heard him moving about. I knocked, and immediately the door was flung open, and there was father in his dressing-gown, with his beautiful grey hair pushed back off his forehead.

“What’s all that murmuring and muttering and shuffling that is going on downstairs?” he said. “And how flushed your cheeks are! And there is a smear of jam on one of them. What have you been doing?”

“Having tea, father.”

“You never offered me a cup.”

“Oh father! when you first came in I offered to get you some.”

“Well, I’d like some now. Bring me up something to eat.”

“Then, father darling, is your head better?”

“Yes, my dear, yes. Go downstairs and bring me up a tray full of food – toast and an egg and some tea. Bring them up with your own hands. See there isn’t a sound. If I have two or three hours of quiet I shall be quite fit to resume my work to-night. I have to lecture in Hall at nine o’clock this evening. I shall not be able to utter a word if this headache continues. Now, Rachel, be off; set to work and get me some food at once, as fast as ever you can.”

I was half-way downstairs when my father’s voice called after me:

“Do stop all that whispering and whistling and noise. I can’t imagine what is happening.”

“I will do what I can, father,” I said.

Part 1, Chapter II

The Poached Egg

I returned to the boys and to my school friends.

“Father is awake,” I said, “and he complains of the noise we are making.”

“Noise?” cried Alex. “Why, we are as mum as mice!”

“People must breathe, you know,” said Agnes in what I considered a very impertinent way.

I stared at her. She had no right to speak like that of my father, the great Professor Grant; for my father was a member of the Royal Society, no less, and you can imagine that to hear such talk from a silly little girl like Agnes Swan was, to say the least of it, disagreeable. So I drew myself up; but then I caught Von Marlo’s eyes, and I felt soothed, for he seemed to understand.

“If the Professor wishes it,” he said, “we will, of course, hardly speak at all. – It might be best,” he added, turning to Alex, “if we all went away. What do you think?”

“Please yourself, Von,” said Alex, speaking in a very patronising way, and flinging himself back in a deep chair. “Squibs and Charley and I stay; and as you are the quietest of the party, and inclined to patronise Dumps, I don’t see why you should go.”

Von Marlo came straight up to me and said:

“Can I do anything for you? They say I patronise you, but that is not true. I don’t exactly know what they mean by patronise, but I will do all I can to help you, for you are quite the nicest little girl I have met since I came to England.”

Agnes and Rita seemed neither of them to thoroughly appreciate these remarks of Von Marlo’s, for he was really the biggest and most imposing-looking of the four boys. Even Alex, who was a handsome fellow, looked very young beside him. As to me, I felt soothed. Of course, you must understand that if you have been called Dumps all your life, and told to your face that you haven’t one vestige of good looks, it must be a sort of pleasure to have a person suddenly inform you that you are – oh! better than good-looking – the very prettiest girl he has seen in the whole of the country. I felt, therefore, a flush of triumph stealing to my cheeks, and then I said, “Please keep things as quiet as you can. I must go to the kitchen to get some tea for father. Please don’t let them be noisy.”

“I’ll sit on them if they are,” said Von Marlo.

But Alex called out, “Go along, Von, and help her; that’ll be the best way. Good gracious! she’s in such a state of mind, because you are noticing her and bolstering her up, that she will fall, as likely as not, going down those slippery backstairs. Go along with her, old chap, and help her.”

“Yes, come,” I said, for I could not resist it.

So Von Marlo and I found ourselves in the big hall; then he took my hand and we went along the passage, and then down another passage, and then we opened a door and I called to Hannah.

“Hannah, are you downstairs?”

We were looking into pitch-black darkness, but we heard a muffled voice say, “Yes, Miss Rachel? Sakes alive! What’s wanted now?”

Then Hannah appeared at the foot of the stairs, holding a lighted candle.

“I’m coming down,” I said, “and I’m bringing a gentleman with me.”

Hannah very nearly fell in her amazement, but I went steadily down, Von Marlo following me.

“It is a very old house,” I whispered, “and some people say it is haunted. But you are not afraid of ghosts, are you?”

“I think they are the jolliest things in the world!” was his reply.

He said the word jolly in a very funny way, as though he was not accustomed to the word, and it sounded quite sweet.

At last we got to the lower regions, and then, guided by Hannah's candle – which was really only like a very little spark of light – we found our way into the kitchen.

“Once this was a grand house and grand people lived here,” I said. “Father lives here now because it belongs to the college. The house is a great deal too big for us, but it is a glorious place for hide-and-seek. This is the kitchen – monstrous dinners used to be cooked here.”

“Now then, Miss Rachel, what do you want?” said Hannah. “And I think young gents as ought to be at school ought to keep out of the Professor's kitchen. That's what I think.”

“Oh, please, Hannah,” I said, “this gentleman is from over the seas – he comes from Holland, where the beautiful tulips are grown, and his name is Mr Von Marlo.”

“Catch me trying to say a mouthful of a name like that!” was Hannah's rejoinder.

“He is exceedingly kind,” I continued, “and he is going to help us.”

“Yes, I will help you if you will let me,” said Von Marlo, speaking in his slow and rather distinct way, and not gabbling his words as we English do.

“I want tea and toast and an egg for father; he is waiting for them, and we must hurry,” I said. “Hannah, be as quick as you can.”

“My word,” said Hannah, “what a fuss!”

She was really a kind creature. She must have been good to live with us in that queer old house, for she was actually the only servant we kept. She must have been brave, too, to spend so much of her time in that desolate kitchen and in those black passages, for gas had never been laid on in the bottom portion of the old house, and it smelt very damp, and I am sure the rats had a good time there at night. But Hannah, forty-five years of age, with a freckled face and reddish hair, and high cheek-bones and square shoulders, had never known the meaning of the word fear.

“Ghosts?” she would cry. “Don't talk nonsense to me! Rats? Well, I guess they're more afraid of me than I am of them. Loneliness? I'm a sight too busy to be lonely. I does my work, and I eats my vittals, and when bedtime comes I sleeps like a top. I'm fond of the Professor, and proud of him, he's so cliver; and I'm fond of Miss Rachel, whom I've known since she was born, and of the boys, although they be handfuls.”

This was Hannah's creed; she had no fear, and she was fond of us. But she had a rough tongue, and could be very rude at times, and could make things unpleasant for us children unless we humoured her.

It was Von Marlo, the Dutch boy, who humoured her now. He offered to cut the bread for toast, and he not only offered, but he went boldly to the cupboard, found a loaf, and cut most delicate slices, and set to work toasting them before a clear little fire in a small new range at one end of the kitchen before Hannah had time to expostulate. Then he suggested that father's egg should be poached, not boiled, and he found a saucepan and put it on the fire and prepared to poach the egg. And when Hannah said, “My, what a fuss!” he found the egg, broke it into the boiling water, poached it beautifully, and put it on the toast. Really, he was a wonderful boy; even Hannah declared that never had she seen his like.

The tea was made fragrant and strong, and we put it on a little tray with a white cloth, and Von Marlo carried it for me up the dark stairs. We reached the hall, and then we stood and faced each other.

“You are going up all those other stairs with that tray?” said Von Marlo. “Then I insist upon carrying it for you.”

“But suppose father should come out? He sometimes does, you know,” I whispered.

“And if he does, what matter?” said Von Marlo. “He won't eat us! Come along, Miss Rachel.”

I was very glad he did not call me Dumps. He must have heard Hannah call me Miss Rachel, for, as far as the boys were concerned, I might have been christened Dumps, for they never addressed me as anything else.

We went up the stairs, I going first to lead the way, and Von Marlo following, bearing the little tray with its fragrant tea, hot toast, and poached egg. All went well, and nothing would have happened except the pleasant memory of our little adventure if suddenly at the top of the stairs we had not encountered the stern face of father himself. There was gas in that part of the house, and it had been turned on; father looked absolutely black with rage.

“What is the meaning of this?” he said. “Who are you? Von Marlo, I declare! And what, may I ask, are you doing in my house, and venturing up to my rooms, sir? – What is the meaning of this, Rachel? I shall punish you severely. – Go downstairs, sir; go down at once, and leave the house.”

If it had been Squibs, even had it been Alex or Charley, I think he would have turned at once at the sight of that angry, very fierce face; but Von Marlo was like Hannah – he knew no fear. He said quietly, “You are mistaken, sir; I have done nothing that I should be ashamed of. Your son, Mr Alex, invited me to come into the house, and he also invited me to have tea downstairs. Your daughter went to the kitchen to prepare your tea, and I offered to assist her. It is a way we have in my country, sir, to assist the ladies when they have more to do than they can well accomplish. It is the way we gentlemen act, Professor.”

There was something so quaint in Von Marlo’s utterance that even father was appeased. He murmured, “I forgot you were a foreigner. Well then, thanks; but go away now, for goodness’ sake. – Rachel, take the tea into my bedroom. – Von Marlo, you must go; I cannot have any one in my house this evening; my head is very bad.”

“Good-bye, Mr Von Marlo,” I said; “and thank you, thank you.”

Von Marlo boldly took my hand in the presence of father, and then bolted downstairs, I regret to say, with extreme noise; for, notwithstanding his gentlemanly manners, his boots were thick and rough, and the stairs were destitute of carpets.

“Lay the tea on the table, Rachel,” said my father.

He pushed his hands through his hair, which now seemed to stand up on his head and gave him a wild appearance.

“What does this mean? Tell me at once. Speak, Rachel.”

“I think Mr Von Marlo explained, father. I am awfully sorry. I did ask Agnes and Rita Swan to tea this evening. You said – or at least you never said that I wasn’t to ask them.”

“I never gave you leave to ask any one. How dare you invite people to my house without my permission?”

“I am lonely sometimes, father.”

I said the words in a sad voice; I could not help it; there was a lump in my throat. Father gazed at me, and all of a sudden his manner altered. He seated himself in a chair, and motioned to me to take another. He pulled the little tray with the nice tea towards him, poured out a cup, and drank it. Then he looked at the poached egg, put on his glasses, and gazed at it more fixedly.

“That’s a queer sort of thing,” he said; and then he ate it with considerable relish. “It’s very good,” he said when he had finished it. “Who did it?”

“Mr Von Marlo.”

“Rachel, you must be mad!”

“No, father; he isn’t an English boy, you know. He helped me; he is a very nice boy.”

My father sank back in his chair, and suddenly, to my amazement and relief, he burst into a roar of laughter.

“Well, well!” he said, “I admit that I was in a temper; and I was rude to the lad, too. If you ever have headaches like mine you will get into passions too, Rachel. Pray that you may never have them; my misery is something too awful; and when I saw that lad, with his great dark head, and that hair of his coming straight down to his eyebrows, marching up the stairs with you, I really thought a burglar had got into the house. But, after all, it was only the Dutch lad, and he is clever enough, and doesn’t know our English customs. And to think that he poached an egg!”

“And he made the toast, father.”

My father laughed again.

“Whatever he did, he has cured my headache,” was his next remark; “I feel as right as a trivet. I’ll come downstairs, and I’ll turn those lads out, and those girls.”

“But, father – father darling – they have come by invitation. It isn’t their fault.”

My father took my hand.

“So you are lonely, Dumps?” he said. “And why in the world should you be lonely?”

“I want friends,” I said. “I want some one to love me.”

“All women make that sort of cry,” was his next remark. He pulled me close to him and raised my head and looked into my face.

“You have a nice little face of your own,” he said, “and some day you will find – But, pshaw! why talk nonsense to the child? How old are you, Dumps?”

“I’ll be sixteen in six months,” I said. “It is a long way off to have a birthday, but it will come in six months.”

“And then you’ll be seventeen, and then eighteen, and, hey presto! you’ll be a woman. My goodness, child! put off the evil day as long as you can. Keep a child as long as possible.”

“But, father, most children are happy.”

“And you are not? Good gracious me! what more do you want?”

“I don’t know, father; but it seems to me that I want something.”

“Well, look here, you want girls about you, do you?”

“Yes, some girls.”

“And you think Rita and Agnes Swan, the daughters of our local doctor, quite delightful companions?”

I made no answer.

“Just wait for me a minute, Dumps, and I’ll get dressed and come down and inspect them.”

“Oh, but you won’t frighten them?”

“Frighten them? Well, if they’re that sort they won’t be much good to you. But wait outside the door, and I’ll come down. To think that Von Marlo made the toast! And how do you say he prepared the egg?”

“Poached it, father.”

“Poached an egg for me, and cured my headache, and I scolded him as though he were a rascal! I’ll make amends when I see him next. Wait outside the door, Rachel; I’ll join you in a minute.”

I did wait outside the door, and when my father came out he looked quite spruce. He had absolutely put on a less greasy and shabby coat than usual, and he had brushed his grey hair across his lofty brow; his pale face looked its most dignified and most serene. He took my hand, and we went downstairs.

By this time, as I knew there would be, there were high-jinks going on in the parlour. Von Marlo was not present, but Alex, Charley, Squibs, and the girls were playing at blind-man’s buff. They were endeavouring not to be too noisy; I will say that. It was Rita who was blindfold when my father appeared. The tea-table was pushed into a distant corner of the room; a guard had been put on the fire; and Rita was running as silently as she could, but also as swiftly, round and round, with one of father’s own silk handkerchiefs tied across her eyes. Agnes was in convulsions of laughter, and the boys were also.

“Caught! caught!” she cried, not noticing the entrance of my father, and she clasped him firmly round the waist.

Her horror when the handkerchief was removed, and she found herself holding on to the Professor, may be better imagined than described. Poor Rita! she very nearly turned silly on the spot. I had to convey her to a chair. Father said, “I am your prisoner, Miss Rita Swan. Am I now to be blindfolded?”

“Oh no, father, you couldn’t think of such a thing,” I said.

He smiled and looked at me.

“Well, young people,” he said, “you seem to be having a very merry time. But where’s my Knight of the Poached Egg? Why is he not present?”

However inclined to be impertinent and saucy and rude to me Alex and Charley were when father was not present, they never dared to show this spirit when he was by.

Father related the story of Von Marlo and the poached egg to the other children.

“He is a chivalrous fellow, and I shall talk to him about it when I see him, and thank him. I was very rude to him just now; but as to you, Alex and Charley, if you ever let it leak out at college that he did this thing, or turn him into ridicule on account of it, you won’t hear the last of it from me. It’s a right good flogging either of you’ll get, so just keep your own counsel. And now, boys, if I don’t mistake, it’s time for you to get to your books. – Rachel, my dear, you and your friends can entertain one another; but would it not be nicest and more cheerful if you first of all requested the presence of Hannah to remove the tea-things?”

As father spoke he bowed to the girls, marched the boys in front of him out of the room, and closed the door behind him.

“Well, I never!” exclaimed Agnes. “To be sure, Dumps, you do have exciting times in this house!”

“I am very glad you have enjoyed it,” I said, and I sat down and pushed my hair away from my face.

“How flushed your cheeks are! And where is the Knight of the Poached Egg? What a very funny boy he must be!”

“But you two mustn’t tell the story about him either,” I said. “I mean, if you have any friends at the college, you mustn’t relate it, for they might laugh, and he was really very chivalrous. Father thinks a lot of him; I can see that. And as to me, I think he is the most chivalrous boy I have ever come across in the whole course of my life.”

“Oh, that’s because he said you were pretty. That’s a foreigner’s way of talking. Alex spoke about it when you had gone out of the room. He said of course his sister was good-looking; he would always stand up for his sister; but it was a foreigner’s way.”

As Agnes spoke she raised her somewhat piquant little face and glanced at me, as much as to say, “Poor Dumps! you are very plain, but of course your own people must stand up for you.”

“Well, we can have some games now,” I said, forcing myself to turn the conversation.

But the girls were disinclined for games; they preferred to sit by the fire and talk, and ask me innumerable questions about the school, my brothers, and Mr Von Marlo, and if Mr Von Marlo would be allowed to come to see them on Sunday evenings, and if I would bring him, and all sorts of talk of that sort. I answered that I shouldn’t be allowed to do anything of the sort, and that the only boy I knew in the school except my brothers was Squibs, and of course, now, Mr Von Marlo.

“Well, well! we’ll come and see you again if you like; and you must have tea with us, you know, Rachel. Come to see us the night after to-morrow, and we’ll have some friends who will surprise you a bit. You do look very nice in that pale-blue dress. But good-bye now, for it is getting late.”

Part 1, Chapter III

A Welcome Caller

Father looked mysterious during the next few days. I mean that he had begun a strange new habit. During meals he used to put down his knife and fork and stare hard at me. Now, until the affair of the poached egg he had hardly noticed me. He had an abstracted way about him, as though he did not see anybody. Sometimes he would address me as though I were one of the schoolboys, and would say, "Hurry up, Stumps, with your lessons;" or, "My dear Moore, you will never win that scholarship if you don't put your back into the thing." And then he would start violently and say, "Oh, it's only little Dumps, after all!"

But this new sort of staring was quite different. He was looking at me as though he saw me, and as though he were disturbed about something. I used to turn very red and fidget and look down, and look up again, and get the boys to talk, and employ all sorts of devices to get his eyes off me. But it was all of no use; those large, calm, thoughtful eyes of his seemed screwed to my face, and at times I got quite nervous about it.

After a second or even a third day had passed, and this habit of father's had become in a measure confirmed, I went down to the kitchen to consult Hannah.

"Hannah," I said, "I don't think father is at all well."

"And whatever do you come and say that to me for?" said Hannah.

She was crosser than usual. It was the sort of day to make any woman cross, for there was a dreadful fog outside, and a lot of it had got into the kitchen, and the little stove in the farther corner did not half warm it, and Hannah had a cold. That was certain, for she wore her plaid shawl. Her plaid shawl had been left to her by her grandmother, and she never put it on except when she was afflicted with a cold. She then wore it crossed on her chest and tied behind. She did not like to be remarked on when she wore that shawl, and the boys and I respected her on these occasions, and helped her as much as we could, and had very plain things for dinner.

So now, when I saw the shawl, and observed how red Hannah's nose was and how watery her eyes were, I said, "Oh dear, dear! I suppose I oughtn't to come complaining."

"I wish to goodness you'd keep up in your own part of the house – that I do," said Hannah. "This fog makes one choke, and it's so dismal and dark, and one can't get any light from these bits of candles. I misdoubt me if you'll get much dinner to-day, Miss Rachel. But I don't suppose you children will mind."

"I tell you what," I said; "I do wish you'd let me cook the dinner. I can, and I'd love to."

"You cook the dinner!" said Hannah in disdain. "And a pretty sort of mess you'd have for the Professor if you gave him his food."

"Well, at any rate, Hannah, you can't say that you are the only one who can cook. Think of Mr Von Marlo."

"Don't bother me by mentioning that gawky creature."

"I don't think he's gawky at all," I said.

"But I say he is! Now then, we won't discuss it. What I want to know is, why have you come bothering down, and why have you took it into your head that the Professor is ill? Bless him! he ain't ill; his appetite's too hearty."

"He does eat well," I admitted. "But what I wanted to tell you is this – he has taken to staring at me."

Hannah stopped in her occupation, threw her hands to her sides, and then taking up a lighted candle which stood on a table near, she brought it close to me and looked hard into my face. She made a rapid inspection.

“You ain’t got any spots on you, or anything of that sort,” she said.

“Oh, I hope not, Hannah!” I said. “That would be a terribly uninteresting way of explaining why father stares at me. I am sure I haven’t,” I continued, rubbing my hands over my face, which felt quite smooth.

“Then I don’t see why he do it,” said Hannah, “for you ain’t anything to look at.”

“I know that,” I replied humbly; “but that makes it all the more wonderful, for he does stare.”

“Then I can’t tell you why; but it’s no proof that he’s ill, for his appetite’s that hearty. I’ve ordered half a pound more rump-steak than usual for his supper to-night. I’m sure I’m pleased he can eat it. As to you children, you must do with a mutton bone and potatoes, for more you won’t get.”

“Very well, Hannah,” I said, and I sadly left the kitchen.

I traversed the dark passages outside, and found the long flight of stairs which led up to the ground-floor; and then I went into the big, big parlour, and sat close to the fire, and thought and thought.

It was dull at home – yes, it was dull. It would be nearly two hours before the boys came home and before father returned. I had finished all my lessons, and had no new story-book to read. The cracked piano was not particularly pleasant to play on, and I was not particularly musical. I could scarcely see through the fog, and it was too early to light the gas, but I made up my mind that if the fog did not lighten a bit in the next half-hour I would put the gas on and get the story-book which I had read least often and begin it over again. Oh dear! I did wish there was some sort of mystery or some sort of adventure about to happen. Even if Mr Von Marlo came in it would be better than nothing, but I dared not ask him, although I wanted to.

I had been to tea with Agnes and Rita Swan, but it had been quite a dull affair, and I had not found on closer acquaintance that those girls were specially attractive to me. They were silly sort of girls; quite amiable, I am sure, but it seemed such utter nonsense that they at their age should talk about boys, and be so interested in a boys’ school, and so anxious to get me to bring Alex and Charley, and even poor, ugly Squibs and Mr Von Marlo, to tea. I said that I could not possibly do it, and then they took offence and became suddenly cool, and my visit to them ended in a decided huff. The last two or three days at school they had scarcely noticed me, and I had become friends instead with Augusta Moore, who was more to my taste, although she was a very plain girl and lived in a very plain way.

Yes, there was nothing at all specially interesting to think about. School was school, and there was no stimulation in the life; and although our house was such a big one, such a barrack of a place, it was bitterly cold in winter; and we were poor, for father did not get a very large income, although he worked so hard. He was also somewhat of a saving turn of mind, and he told me once that he was putting by money in order to help the boys to go to one of the ’varsities by-and-by. He was determined that they should be scholars and gentlemen; and of course I thought this a very praiseworthy ambition of his, and offered to do without a new summer dress. He did not even thank me; he said that he thought I could do quite well with my present clothes for some time to come, and after that I felt my sacrifice had fallen somewhat flat.

But now to-day, just in the midst of my dismal meditations, there came a smart ring at the hall door bell. There were all sorts of ways of pulling that bell; it was not an electric bell, but it had a good ringing sound which none of those detestable new bells ever make. It pealed through the half-empty house as though the person outside were impatient. I started and stood irresolute. Would Hannah trouble herself to attend to it? Hannah was dreadfully rude about the hall door. She often left people standing there three or four minutes, and on a bitterly cold day like this it was not pleasant to be in such an exposed spot. So I waited on tiptoe, and at the first sound of the second ring I went into the hall, deliberately crossed it, and opened the hall door.

A lady was standing without. She looked me all over, began to say something, then changed her mind and stepped into the house, and held out her hand.

“Why, of course,” she said, “you are Rachel Grant.”

“Yes, I am,” I replied.

“I have come to see you. Will you take me somewhere where I can have a chat with you?”

“But what is your name, please?” I could not help saying.

“My name is Miss Grace Donnithorne. The Professor knows all about me, and will explain about me presently; but I have just come to have a little chat with you. May I come in?”

“You may, of course, Miss Donnithorne,” I said. I was secretly delighted to see her; I liked her appearance. She was a fat sort of person, not at all scraggy or thin as poor Hannah was. She was not young; indeed, to me she looked old, although I dare say father would have thought her comparatively juvenile. But that sort of thing – the question of age, I mean – depends altogether on your point of view. I thought Hannah a woman almost dropping into the grave, but father spoke of her as an active body in the prime of life. So, as I did not feel capable of forming any correct judgment with regard to Miss Grace Donnithorne’s age, I asked her to seat herself, and I poked the fire, and then mounted a chair to turn on the gas. She watched me as I performed these little offices; then she said, “You will forgive me, child, but don’t you keep any servants in this great house?”

“Oh yes,” I replied, “we keep Hannah; but Hannah has a bad cold and is rather cross. You would like some tea, wouldn’t you, Miss Donnithorne?”

“I should prefer a cup of tea at this moment to almost anything in the world,” said Miss Donnithorne. “It’s this awful fog, you know; it gets into one’s throat.” Here she coughed; then she loosened her furs; then she thought better of it and clasped them more tightly round her person; then she drew her chair close to the fire, right on the rug, which father rather objected to, and put her feet, which were in goloshes, on the fender. She held out her hands to the blaze, and said, “It strikes me you haven’t much of a servant or much of a fire either. Oh, goodness me! I have my goloshes on and they’ll melt. Take them off for me, child, and be quick about it.”

I obeyed. I had begun by being rather afraid of Miss Donnithorne, but by the time I had got off her goloshes – and they seemed to stick very firmly to her boots – I was laughing; and when I laughed she laughed in unison, and then we were quite on equal terms and got on quite delightfully.

“What about tea?” she said. “My throat is as raspy as though it were a file.”

“I’ll see about it,” I said, speaking somewhat dubiously.

“Why, where’s the difficulty?”

“It’s Hannah.”

“Does she grudge you your tea?”

“No, I don’t think so; but, you see, we don’t have tea quite so early, and when your house is so big, and there are a great many stairs, and you have only one servant, and she is rather old – although father doesn’t think her so – and has got a bad cold in her head, and is wearing her grandmother’s plaid shawl, you have to think twice before you ask her to do anything extra.”

“It is a long catalogue of woes,” responded Miss Grace. “But I tell you what it is – oh, they call you Dumps, don’t they?”

“Have you heard?” I said, puckering my brows in distress.

“Yes; and I think it is quite a nice name.”

“But I’d much, much rather be called Rachel.”

“Well, child, I don’t mind – Rachel or Dumps – I must have tea. Go down to the kitchen, fetch a kettle with hot water, bring it up, and also the tea-caddy and sugar and milk if you can get them, and we’ll make the tea ourselves. But oh, good gracious, the coal-hod is empty! What an awful spot!”

Now really, I thought, Miss Donnithorne was becoming too free. It was all very well for her to force herself into the house; I had never even heard of her before; but to put her feet on the fender, and then to complain of the cold and to say she must have tea, and also to grumble because there was no more coal in the hod, rather took my breath away.

“I see,” said Miss Grace, “that I must help you.”

“Oh no,” I answered, “please don’t.”

For this would be the final straw. It was all very well to take Von Marlo down to the kitchen. A boy was one thing, but an elderly, stout lady about Hannah’s own age was quite another thing. So I said, “I’ll do my best, but you must stay here.”

Good gracious! I had imagined the two hours before father and the boys came home would be dull and would pass slowly, but I never was so worked in my life. First of all I had to go to the coal-cellar and fill the empty hod with coals and tug it upstairs. When I got into the parlour I let Miss Grace do the rest, and she did set to work with a will. While she was building up the fire I purloined a kettle from the kitchen while Hannah’s back was turned, and two cups and saucers, for I thought I might as well have tea with Miss Grace. There was some tea upstairs, and some sugar and a little bread-and-butter, and as father always had special milk for himself in a special can, and as this was kept in the parlour cupboard, I knew that we could manage the tea after a fashion. When I got back there was a roaring fire in the grate.

“There,” said Miss Donnithorne; “that’s something like a fire!”

She had unfastened her furs at last; she had even removed her jacket; and when I arrived with the kettle she stamped it down on the bed of hot coals, and looked round at me with a smile of triumph.

“There, now!” she said. “We’ll have our tea, and afterwards I want to have a chat with you.”

I must say I did enjoy it, and I liked the glowing heat of the fire; it seemed to blot away some of the fog and to make the room more cheerful. And Miss Grace, when she got her way, became very cheerful also. She laughed a great deal, and asked me a lot of questions, in especial about father, and what he was doing, and how he passed his time, and if he was a good-humoured sort of man.

Exactly at five o’clock she got up and took her departure.

“Well, child,” she said, “I am warm through, and my throat is much better, and I am sure you look all the better for a bit of heat and a bit of good food. I’ll come again to see you presently, and I’ll bring some new-laid eggs with me, and better butter than that stuff we have just eaten; it wasn’t fit for a Christian’s palate. Good-bye, child. You’ll see more of me in the future.”

Part 1, Chapter IV

Miss Grace Donnithorne

When father came in that evening I was quite lively, but he did not specially notice it. I hoped he would. I felt wonderfully excited about Miss Grace Donnithorne. The boys, of course, were also in the room, but they were generally in a subdued state and disinclined to make a noise when father was present.

Hannah came up with the dinner. She dumped down the tray on the sideboard, and put the appetising rump-steak in front of father. It was rump-steak with onions, and there were fried potatoes, and there was a good deal of juice coming out of the steak, and oh, such a savoury smell! Alex began to sniff, and Charley looked with keen interest and watering eyes at the good food.

“There,” said Hannah, placing a mutton bone in front of Alex; “you get on with that. There’s plenty of good meat if you turn it round and cut from the back part. It’s good and wholesome, and fit for young people. The steak is for the Professor. I’ve got some roast potatoes; thought you’d like them.”

The roast potatoes were a sop in the pan; but oh, how we did long for a piece of the steak! That was the worst about father; he really was a most kindly man, but he was generally, when not absorbed in lecturing – on which occasions, I was told, he was most animated and lively and all there – in a sort of dream. He ate his steak now without in the least perceiving that his children were dining off cold mutton. Had he once noticed it, he would have taken the mutton bone for himself and given us the steak. I heard Alex mutter, “It’s rather too bad, and he certainly won’t finish it!”

But I sat down close to Alex, and whispered, “Alex, for shame! You know how he wants it; he isn’t at all strong.”

Then Alex’s grumbles subsided, and he ate his own dinner with boyish appetite.

After the brief and very simple meal had come to an end the boys left the room, and the Professor, as we often called him, stood with his back to the fire. Now was my opportunity.

“Father,” I said, “I had a visitor this afternoon.”

“Eh? What’s that. Dumps?”

“Father, I wish you wouldn’t call me Dumps.”

“Don’t fret me, Rachel; what does it matter what I call you? The thing is that I address the person who is known to me as my daughter. What does it matter whether I speak of her as Dumps, or Stumps, or Rachel, or Annie, or any other title? What’s in a name?”

“Oh father! I think there’s a good deal in a name. But never mind,” I continued, for I didn’t want him to go off into one of those long dissertations which he was so fond of, quite forgetting the person he was talking to. So I added hastily, “Miss Grace Donnithorne called. She said she was a friend of yours. Do you know her?”

“Miss – Grace – Donnithorne?” said father, speaking very slowly and pausing between each word. “Miss – Grace – Donnithorne?”

“Why, yes, father,” I said, and I went close to him now. “She was, oh, so funny – such a fat, jolly sort of person! Only she didn’t like this house one bit.”

“Eh? Eh?” said my father.

He sank into a chair near the fire.

“That is the very chair she sat in.”

My father looked round at it.

“The shabbiest chair in the whole house,” he said.

“But the most comfy, father.”

“Well, all right; tell me about her.”

“She sat here, and she made me have a good fire.”

“Quite right. Why should you be cold, Dumps?”

“But I thought, father, that you did not want us to be extravagant?”

“It is far more extravagant, let me tell you, Dumps, to get a severe cold and to have doctors’ bills to pay.”

I was startled by this sentiment of father’s, and treasured it up to retail to Hannah in the future.

“But tell me more about her,” he said.

Then I related exactly what had happened. He was much amused, and after a time he said, with a laugh, “And so you got tea for her?”

“Yes; she insisted on it. She wouldn’t let me off getting that tea for all the world. I didn’t mind it, of course – indeed, I quite enjoyed it – but what I did find hard was bringing up the hod of coal from the coal-cellar.”

“Good practice, Dumps. Arms are made to be useful.”

“So they are,” I answered. “And feet are made to run with.”

“Of course, father.”

“And a girl’s little brain is meant to keep a house comfortable.”

“But, father, I haven’t such a little brain; and I think I could do something else.”

“Could what?” said father, opening his eyes with horror. “What in the world is more necessary for a girl who is one day to be a woman than to know how to keep a house comfortable?”

“Yes, yes,” I said; “I suppose so.”

I was very easily stopped when father spoke in that high key.

“And you have complained to me that you find life dull. Did you find Miss Grace Donnithorne dull?”

“Oh no; she is very lively, father.”

Father slowly crossed one large white hand over the other; then he rose.

“Good-night, Dumps,” he said.

“Have you nothing more to say?” I asked.

“Good gracious, child! this is my night for school. I have to give two lectures to the boys of the First Form. Good-night – good-night.”

He did not kiss me – he very seldom did that – but his voice had a very affectionate tone.

After he had gone I sat for a long time by the fire. The neglected dinner-things remained on the table; the room was as shabby and as empty as possible, but not quite as cold as usual. Presently Hannah came in. She began to clear away the dinner-things.

“Hannah,” I said, “I told father about Miss Grace Donnithorne’s visit.”

“And who in the name of wonder may she be?” asked Hannah.

“Oh, a lady. I let her in myself this afternoon.”

“What call have you to be opening the hall door?”

“Didn’t you hear a very sharp ring at the hall door about three o’clock?” I said.

Hannah stood stock-still.

“I did, and I didn’t,” she replied.

“What do you mean by you did and you didn’t?”

“Well, you see, child, I wasn’t in the humour to mount them stairs, so I turned my deaf ear to the bell and shut up my hearing one with cotton-wool; after that the bell might ring itself to death.”

“Then, of course, Hannah, I had to go to the door.”

“Had to? Young ladies don’t open hall doors.”

“Anyhow, I did go to the door, and I let the lady in, and she sat by the fire. She’s a very nice lady indeed; she’s about your age, but not scraggy.”

“I’ll thank you, Miss Dumps, not to call me names.”

“But you are scraggy, for that means thin.”

“I may be thin and genteel, and not fat and vulgar, but I won’t have it said of me that I’m scraggy,” said Hannah; “and by you too, Miss Dumps, of all people!”

“Very well, Hannah. *She* was fat and vulgar, if you like, and *you* are thin and genteel. Anyhow, I liked her; she was very jolly. She was about your age.”

“How d’you know what age I be?”

“Didn’t I see father put it down at the time of the last census?”

“My word! I never knew children were listening. I didn’t want my age known.”

“Hannah, you are forty-five.”

“And what if I be?”

“That’s very old,” I said.

“Tain’t,” said Hannah.

“It is,” I repeated. “I asked Alex one day, and he said it was the age when women began to drop off.”

“Lawks! what does that mean?” said Hannah.

“It’s the way he expressed it. I don’t want to frighten you, but he said lots of people died then.” Hannah now looked really scared.

“And that’s why, Hannah,” I continued, “I don’t like to see you in your grandmother’s shawl, for I am so awfully afraid your bad cold will mean your dropping off.”

“Master Alex talks nonsense,” said Hannah. “You give me a start for a minute with the sort of gibberish you talk. Forty-five, be I? Well, if I be, my grandmother lived to eighty, and my grandfather to ninety; and if I take after him – and they say I have a look of him – I have another good forty-five years to hang on, so there’s no fear of my dropping off for a bit longer.” As these remarks of Hannah’s were absolutely impossible for me to understand, I did not pursue the subject further, but I said, “Father made such a nice remark to-night!”

“And whatever was that? The Professor is always chary of his talk.”

“He said that it was very wrong to be cold, and that the fires ought to be large and good.”

“He said that?”

“Yes, he did. And then I said, ‘I thought you wanted us to be saving;’ and he said, ‘It’s not saving to catch cold and have doctors’ bills.’ So now, Hannah, you have your orders, and we must have a big, big fire in the parlour during the cold weather.”

“Don’t bother me any longer,” said Hannah. “Your talk is beyond anything for childishness! What with trying to frighten a body in the prime of life about her deathbed, and then giving utterance to rubbish which you put into the lips of the Professor, it is beyond any sensible person to listen to. It’s cotton-wool I’ll put in my right ear the next time I come up to see you, Miss Dumps.”

By this time Hannah had filled her tray. She raised it and walked towards the door. She then, with some skill and strength, placed the whole weight of the tray on her right arm, and with the left she opened the door. I have seen waiters in restaurants do that sort of trick, but I never could understand it. Even if Hannah was dropping off, she must have some strong muscles, was my reflection.

The next day I went to school as usual. The fog had cleared and it was fairly bright – not very bright, for it never is in the city part of London in the winter months.

At school I, as usual, took my place in the same form with Agnes and Rita Swan. I was glad to see that I got to the head of the form and they remained in a subordinate position that day. In consequence during play-hours they were rather less patronising and more affectionate to me than usual. But I held up my head high and would have little to do with them. I was much more inclined to be friends with Augusta Moore than with the Swans just then.

Now, Augusta lived in a very small house a long way from the school. She was very poor, and lived alone with her mother, whose only child she was. Augusta was an uncommunicative sort of girl. She worked hard at her books, and was slow to respond to her schoolfellows’ advances of friendship;

but when I said, “May I walk up and down in the playground with you, Augusta?” she on this occasion made no objection.

She glanced round at me once or twice, and then said, “I don’t mind, of course, your walking with me, Rachel, but I have to read over my poetry once or twice in order to be sure of saying it correctly.”

I asked her if she would like me to hear her, and she was much obliged when I made this offer; and after a few minutes’ pause she handed me the book, and repeated a very fine piece of poetry with considerable spirit. When she had come to the end she said, “How many mistakes did I make?”

“I don’t know,” I answered.

“You don’t know? But you said you would hear me.”

“I didn’t look at the book,” I said; “I was so absorbed watching you.”

“Oh! then you are no good at all,” said Augusta, and she looked really annoyed. “You must give me back the book and I must read it over slowly.”

“But you know it perfectly – splendidly.”

“That won’t do. I have to make all the proper pauses, you know, just as our recitation mistress required, and there mustn’t be a syllable too many or a syllable too few in any of the words, and there mustn’t be a single word transposed. That is the proper way to say poetry, and I know perfectly well that I cannot repeat Gray’s *Elegy* like that.”

I said I was sorry, and she took the book from my hands. Presently she went away to a distant part of the playground, and I saw her lips moving as she paced up and down. I walked quickly myself, for I wanted to keep warm, and just before I went into the house Rita Swan came up to me.

“Well, Dumps,” she said, “I wonder how you’ll like it?”

“Like what?” I asked.

Rita began to laugh rather immoderately. She looked at Agnes, who also came up at that moment.

“I don’t believe Dumps knows,” she said.

“Know what?” I asked angrily.

“Why, what is about to happen. Oh, what a joke!”

“What is it?” I asked again. I was so curious that I didn’t mind even their rude remarks at that moment.

“She doesn’t know – she doesn’t know!” laughed Rita, and she jumped softly up and down. “What fun! What fun! Just to think of a thing of that sort going to take place in her very own house – in her very own, own house – and she not even to have a suspicion of it!”

“Oh, if it’s anything to do with home, I know everything about my home,” I said in a very haughty tone, “and I don’t want you to tell me.”

I marched past the two girls and entered the schoolroom. But during the rest of the morning I am afraid I was not very attentive to my lessons. I could not help wondering what they meant, and what there was to know. But of course there was nothing. They were such silly girls, and I could not understand for one moment how I had ever come to be friends with them.

At one o’clock I went home, and there, lying on the parlour table, was a letter addressed to me. Now it is true, although some girls may smile when they read these words, I had never before received a letter. I have never made violent friendships. I met my school friends, for what they were worth, every day; I had no near relations of any sort, and father was always at home except for the holidays, when he took us children to some very cheap and very dreary seaside place. There was really no one to write to me, and therefore no one ever did write. So a letter addressed to Miss Rachel Grant made my heart beat. I took it up and turned it round and round, and looked at it back and front, and did all those strange things that a person will do to whom a letter is a great rarity and something precious.

I heard the boys tramping into the house at that moment, and I thrust the letter into my pocket. Presently father came in, and we sat down to our midday meal. Luckily for me, neither father nor the

boys knew anything about the letter; but it was burning a hole in my pocket, and I was dying for the boys to return to school, and for father to go back to his classes, so that I might have an opportunity of opening the precious epistle.

Just as father was leaving the room he turned back to me and said, “You may accept it if you like.”

“What, father?” I said in some astonishment.

“When it is offered to you, you may accept it.”

He stooped and, to my great astonishment, kissed me on the forehead. Then he left the room, and a minute or two later left the house.

What could he mean? Would the letter explain? Was there anything at all in the strange words of Agnes and Rita Swan?

Of course, any ordinary girl would have relieved her curiosity by tearing open the letter; but I was somewhat slow and methodical in my movements, and wished to prolong my luxury as much as possible. I had the whole long afternoon in which to learn a few stupid lessons, and then to do nothing.

Just then Hannah came up to remove the lunch-things. She seemed so sure that I would tackle her about her age that she had stuck cotton-wool into her right ear. I therefore did not speak at all; I was most anxious for her to depart. At last she did so, banging the door fiercely behind her. I heard her tramping off with her tray, and then I knew that my moment of bliss had arrived.

I got a knife and very deliberately cut the flap of the envelope open at the top. I then slipped my hand into the precious enclosure and took out its contents. I opened the sheet of paper; I could read writing quite well, and this writing was plain and quite intelligible to any ordinary eyes.

On the top of the sheet of paper were written the words, “Hedgerow House, near Chelmsford, Essex,” and the letter ran as follows:

“My dear Rachel or Dumps, – I want to know if you will come on Saturday next to pay me a little visit until Tuesday evening. I have heard that it is half-term holiday at your school, and should like you to see my pretty house and this pretty place. I believe I can give you a good time, so trust you will come. – Yours sincerely,
Grace Donnithorne.

“P.S. – In case you say yes, I will expect you by the train which leaves Liverpool Street at ten o’clock in the morning. I shall be waiting with the pony and cart at Chelmsford at eleven o’clock, and will drive you straight to Hedgerow House.

“P.S. 2. – I have a great many pets. I trust you will be nice about them. Don’t fear my little dog; his bark is worse than his bite.

“P.S. 3. – Your clothes will do; don’t bother about getting a fresh wardrobe.”

This extraordinary letter caused a perfect tumult in my heart. I had never gone on a visit in my life. I really was a very stranded sort of girl. Hitherto I had had no outlets of any sort; I was just Dumps, a squat, rather plain girl, who knew little or nothing of the world – a neglected sort of girl, I have no doubt; but then I had no mother.

A warm glow came all over me as I read the letter. The half-term holiday had not been looked forward to with any feelings of rapture by me. I could well guess what, under ordinary circumstances, would happen. I should be indoors all the morning as well as all the afternoon, for the half-term holiday was so planned that it should not in any way clash with the boys’ half-term holiday. If Alex and Charley had had a holiday at the same time, I might have coaxed one of them at least to come for a walk with me in Regent’s Park, or to take me to the British Museum, or to the Zoo, or to some other sort of London treat; but I shouldn’t be allowed to go out alone, and at present I was not in the humour to ask either Agnes or Rita Swan to entertain me. Now I need ask nobody, for I was going away on a visit. Of course, I understood at last the meaning of father’s words, “You may accept it;”

though it seemed strange at the time, now I knew all about it, and my excitement was so great that I could scarcely contain myself.

The first business was to answer the precious letter. I sat down and replied that I should be delighted to come to Miss Grace Donnithorne on the following Saturday, that I would be sure to be at Liverpool Street in good time to catch the train, that I adored pets, and was not at all afraid even of barking dogs. I did not mind going in a shabby dress, and above all things I hoped she would call me Rachel, and not Dumps.

Having written my letter, which took me a long time, for I was unaccustomed to writing of that sort, I got an envelope and addressed it to Miss Grace Donnithorne, Hedgerow House, near Chelmsford, Essex, and then went out and dropped it into the nearest pillar-box. When I returned the afternoon had fled and it was time for tea.

Father came in to tea. This was unexpected; he had not often time to leave his classes and rush across to the house to have tea; but he came in on this occasion, and when he saw me in the parlour bending over the warm fire making toast, he said at once, "Have you accepted it?"

"Then you know all about it, father?" I exclaimed. "Oh yes," he said, with a grave and yet queer smile trembling for an instant on his lips and then vanishing.

"I thought that must be what you meant, and I have accepted it," I said. "I mean about going to Miss Grace Donnithorne's."

"Yes, child; it is very kind of her to ask you."

"Yes, isn't it, father? And she is so nice and considerate; she says I may go in my shabby clothes."

"Your shabby clothes, Rachel!" he replied, putting on his spectacles and looking at me all over. "Your shabby clothes! Why should they be shabby?"

"Well, father," I answered, "they are not very smart. You know you haven't given me a new dress for over a year, and my best pale-blue, which I got the summer before last, is very short in the skirt, and also in the sleeves. But never mind," I continued, as he looked quite troubled; "I'll do; I know I'll do."

He looked at his watch.

"I declare," he said, "this will never answer. I don't wish my daughter, Professor Grant's daughter, to go away on a visit, and of all people to Miss Grace Donnithorne, shabby. Look here, Dumps, can these things be bought to hand?"

"What do you mean, father?"

He took up a portion of my skirt.

"Things of that sort – can they be bought ready to put on?"

"Oh, I expect so, father."

"They're to be found in the big shops, aren't they?"

"Yes, yes," I said warmly, for it seemed to me that a new vista of wonderful bliss was opening out before me. "Of course they are. We could go to – to Wallis's shop at Holborn Viaduct. I have been there sometimes with the boys, and I've seen all sorts of things in the windows."

"Then go upstairs, put on your hat and jacket immediately, and I'll take you there. You shall not go shabby to Miss Grace Donnithorne's."

Wonder of wonders! I rushed up to my room; I put on my short, very much worn little jacket, and slipped my hat on my head, thrust my hands into my woollen gloves, and, lo! I was ready. I flew down again to father. He looked hard at me.

"But, after all, you *are* quite well covered," he said. It had certainly never before dawned upon his mind that a woman wanted to be more than, as he expressed it, covered.

"But, father," I said, "you can be shabbily covered and prettily covered. That makes all the difference; doesn't it, father?"

"I don't know, child; I don't know. When I read in the great works of Sophocles –"

He wandered off into a learned dissertation. I was accustomed to these wanderings of his, and often had to pull him back.

“I’m ready,” I said, “if you are.”

“Then come along,” was his remark.

When the Professor got out of doors he walked very fast indeed. He walked at such a fearful pace that I had nearly to run to keep up with him. But at last we found ourselves at Wallis’s. There my father became extremely masterful. He said to the shopman who came to meet him, “I want new garments for this young lady. Show me some, please – some that will fit – those that are ready-made.”

We were taken into a special department where all sorts of dresses were to be found. Now, I had my own ideas about clothes, which by-and-by would turn out quite right and satisfactory; but father’s ideas were too primitive for anything. He disliked my interfering; he would not consult me. In the end I was furnished up with a long brown skirt which reached to my feet, and a dark-red blouse. My father bought these garments because he said they felt weighty and would keep out the cold. He desired them to be packed in brown-paper, paid for them, and gave me the parcel to carry.

I felt a sense of absolute misery as I walked home with my hideous brown skirt and that dreadful red blouse. It was of a dark brick-red colour, and would not suit me; I knew that quite well. Still, father was highly pleased.

“There, now,” he said, “you won’t go to Miss Grace Donnithorne’s looking shabby. But, good gracious me! I’m five minutes late for class. Good-night, Dumps.”

“Won’t you be in to dinner, father?” I asked.

“I don’t know – don’t expect to. Now, not another word, or I shall have one of my furious headaches. Good-night, my dear.”

He banged the hall door, and I sat down with the brown-paper parcel in front of me.

Part 1, Chapter V

The Professor Chooses a Dress

Father was really quite interested about my wardrobe. He asked me two or three questions during the few days which ensued between Wednesday and Saturday, and in particular said what good weight the brown skirt was, and what an age it would last me.

“But it’s just a wee bit too long for me,” I could not help remarking.

He raised his brows very high when I said this, and pushed his glasses up on his forehead. Then he said after a pause, “There’s no pleasing some people. Didn’t you tell me that you had outgrown your clothes, and wasn’t I once and for all going to put a stop to that sort of thing? Do you suppose that a man who is saving his money to send his sons to Oxford or Cambridge can afford to buy dresses often? That skirt leaves room for growth, and as it thins off with age it will be less heavy. It’s exactly the sort you ought to have, Dumps, and I won’t hear a word against it.”

“Of course not, father. It was very kind of you to buy it for me.”

“Perhaps you’d best travel in it,” he said.

But to this I objected, on the score that it might get injured in the train.

“Very true,” he remarked. “But, all the same, I should like Miss Donnithorne to see you looking nice. Well, you can put it on when you get there. Be sure you do that. Go straight up to your room and put on your brown skirt and your red blouse, and go down to her looking as my daughter ought to look.”

“Yes, father,” I said meekly.

The joyful day arrived. Father could not take me to the station himself; but Hannah and I went there in a cab. Hannah was terribly cross. She said she knew I’d come home “that spoilt as would be past bearing.”

“You’re going to that fat, vulgar body,” she said. “Oh, don’t you talk to me about it’s being genteel to put on flesh, for I know better. But, anyhow, you’ll be a good riddance while you are away, Dumps. I’ll have time to give the parlour a rare good turning out.”

“Oh Hannah,” I said, nestling up a little closer to her in the cab, “aren’t you ever a little bit sorry that I’m going away?”

“Well, to be sure, child,” she said, her eyes twinkling, “I’ve no fault to find with you. You can’t help your looks, and you can’t help your aggravating manners, and you can’t help your perverse ways of going on. But there, there! you’re as you’re made, and I’ve no fault to find with you.”

This was a great deal from Hannah, and I was obliged to be satisfied with it.

“I don’t think I shall ever grow up vain,” I thought, “and I suppose I ought to be satisfied.”

By-and-by I was cosily travelling first-class, for father was peremptory on this point, down to Chelmsford. I had left smoky London behind me, and was in the country. It was very cold in the country; snow was over everything, and the whole place looked so white and so sweet, and I just pined for a breath of the fresh country air. So I flung open the window of the carriage nearest to me and poked out my head.

A poke of another sort was presently administered somewhere in my back, and turning, I saw a most irate old gentleman who had been sitting at the other end of the carriage.

“I’ll thank you, young person,” he said, “to shut that window without a moment’s delay. You must be mad to put your head out like that in such bitter weather. I’m certain to be attacked by bronchitis with your wilful and violent way of letting such extreme cold into the carriage.”

I shut the window in a great hurry and sat down, very red in the face. The old gentleman did not take any further notice of me; he buried himself behind his paper. After a minute or two I heard

him sneeze, and when he sneezed he gave me a very angry glance. Then he coughed, and then he sneezed again; finally he buried himself once more in his paper.

By-and-by we got to Chelmsford. It was nice to see Miss Grace Donnithorne standing on the platform. She was so round and so jolly and good-natured-looking, and her eyes, which were like little black beads in the middle of her face, quite shone with happiness.

“There you are, you poor Dumps!” she said. “Hop out, dear – hop out.”

I sprang from the carriage to the platform.

“Where is your luggage, my dear?”

“I have it,” I said; “it is in a brown-paper parcel on the luggage-rack.”

I thought I heard Miss Donnithorne murmur some thing; but all she said was, “Give it to me, dear. Be quick, or the train will move on.”

So I lugged it out as best I could, and there I stood in my shabby grey tweed dress, with my little worn-out jacket and my small hat, clutching at the brown-paper parcel. It was fairly heavy, for I had had to put other things into it besides the now dress and the new jacket; but it was tied very securely with cord, and addressed in my father’s handwriting with my name to the care of Miss Grace Donnithorne, Hedgerow House.

“Now then, child,” said Miss Grace, “we’ll get into my pony-trap and drive home. Why, you poor thing, you’re as cold as charity; and no wonder – no wonder.”

She insisted on carrying the brown-paper parcel herself. Waiting outside the station was a very neat little cart drawn by a shaggy pony. There was a boy standing by the pony’s head. He was dressed in quite a smart sort of dress, which I afterwards discovered was called livery. He sprang forward when he saw Miss Donnithorne and took the parcel, which she told him to put carefully in the back of the carriage, and on no account to trample on it with his feet.

Then we both got in, and a great fur rug was wrapped round us, and a cloak of Miss Donnithorne’s fastened round my neck.

“Now you can’t possibly catch cold,” she said. – “Jump up behind, Jim.”

Jim obeyed. Miss Donnithorne took the reins, and off we flew.

Oh, how wonderful, how delightful was the sensation!

We got to the cottage in about a quarter of an hour. Miss Grace told me that although it was called Hedgerow House, it was really only a cottage; but I could not tell what the difference was. It was a long, low, rambling sort of house, all built in one floor. The walls were so completely covered with creepers that, even though it was winter, you could not see much of the original stone-work; and where there were no creepers in full leaf there was trellis-work, which was covered with the bare branches of what in summer, Miss Donnithorne told me, would be roses.

“Do roses really grow like that?” I asked.

“Oh yes,” she replied; “and jasmine and wistaria and clematis, and all sorts of other things.”

The dog that Miss Donnithorne had warned me about came out to meet us. He was a fox-terrier, with a very sharp nose black as coal, and all the rest of his body was snow-white, except his sparkling, melting, wonderful brown eyes. I must say his eyes flashed very angrily when he first saw me, but Miss Donnithorne said, “Down, Snap – down!” and then she laid her hand on Snap’s collar and said, “You’re to be good to this young lady, Snap.”

Snap, after glancing at me in a crooked sort of way, as though he were not at all sure that he would not prove the significance of his name, condescended to wag his tail very slightly.

Miss Donnithorne took me into a very pretty little sitting-room at one side of the pretty little square hall. This room was filled with all sorts of unaccountable things. There were glass cases filled with stuffed birds of gay plumage. Miss Donnithorne glanced at them.

“I’ll tell you their names presently,” she said. “My brother who died brought them to me from South America.”

There were three of these cases. There were also stuffed animals, a hare, a fox, and a dog, perched above doors and at the top of the bookcase. Where there were not these cases of stuffed creatures there were books, so that you really could not see one scrap of the original paper of the room.

“Is this the drawing-room?” I asked.

“Oh, I don’t call it by that name,” said Miss Donnithorne. “I sit here because I have all my books and papers handy about the room. But come to the fire and warm yourself.”

Certainly the fire in that dear little grate looked very different from the dismal fire which Miss Donnithorne had seen in our big, fog-begrimed parlour. I came close to it, and I even so far forgot proprieties as to drop on my knees and to hold out my hands to the blaze.

“Chilblains, I declare!” said Miss Donnithorne, taking one of my hands between both her own. “The best cure for those is to bathe your hands once or twice a day in a very strong solution of salt and hot water. The water must be as hot as you can bear it. But the best cure of all is a good circulation.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Bless you, child! Don’t you know, and you go to school every day?”

I stood up; my hands were warm, and my feet were tingling with renewed life. I had a curious sensation that my nose, which was by no means my best feature, was very red, for it certainly felt hot. I turned round and said, “I am quite warm now.”

“Then you would like to go up to your room. Nancy will go with you. She’ll unpack your parcel for you.”

“Oh no, thank you,” I replied. Then I added, “Is Nancy one of your servants?”

“I have only one servant in this tiny house, my dear, and Nancy is the one. She is a very good-natured sort of girl, and quite pleased at the idea of your coming to stay with me. I treat her as a sort of friend, you see, as she and I are all alone in the house together.”

I began to like Miss Donnithorne better and better each moment. She was so jolly. Whenever she spoke her eyes sparkled as though they were laughing, while the rest of her face was grave. All the same, I did not want Nancy, and I said so.

“I can help myself,” I argued. “We have only got Hannah in our big house.”

“Well, well, dear! if you can manage for yourself, I am the last one to wish you to do otherwise,” said Miss Donnithorne. “Here is your parcel; you can take it upstairs.”

“But how am I to find my way to my room?”

“You cannot lose it, my dear. Go up that little staircase, and when you reach the landing you will see an open door. Go through that doorway and you will be in your own bedroom. There’s no other bedroom on that landing, so you cannot miss it, can you?”

“No,” I replied, laughing.

I seized my brown-paper parcel and ran upstairs. It certainly was nice in the country, and how delicious a small house was! One could be warm in a small house; it was impossible to be warm in that great, rambling, old-fashioned house which belonged to the college and where father and the boys and I lived.

I found my bedroom. Now, girls who are accustomed to nice bedrooms all their lives take, I suppose, no particular interest in another nice bedroom when they are suddenly introduced into it. But my room at home could never, under any pretext, be considered nice. For some extraordinary reason, big as the house was, I had always slept next to Hannah in one of the attics. There was no earthly reason for this, except perhaps that when I was a child I was nearer to Hannah in case I should turn ill. It had never occurred to me to change my room, and it had certainly never occurred to anybody else to make it comfortable. There was a bedstead and a bed of a sort, and there was a looking-glass, with a crack right down the middle, which stood on a little deal table. The deal table was, as a rule, covered with a cloth, which seldom looked white on account of the London fogs. There was a huge wooden press – it could certainly not be called by the modern name of wardrobe – in which I kept my clothes; and there was a wooden chair on which I placed my candle at night, and that was about all. One side

of the room had a sloping roof, and the window was at the best of times of minute proportions. But the room itself had a vast amount of unoccupied space; it was a huge room, and terribly ugly.

Never had I realised that fact until I went into the sweet little apartment which Miss Grace Donnithorne had ordered to be got ready for me. In the first place, its window looked out on a pure expanse of snow-covered country, and I jumped softly up and down as I gazed at that view, for the sun was shining on it, and the sky overhead was blue – blue as sapphires. Then in the grate there was a fire – a fire just as bright as the one in the little sitting-room with the stuffed birds downstairs; and all the hangings of the room were of white dimity, which had evidently been put up fresh from the wash. It was by no means a grand room; it was simple of the simple, but it did look sweet. There was a little nosegay of chrysanthemums on the dressing-table; there were dainty hangings round my snow-white couch; and on the floor was an old-fashioned carpet made of different shades of crimson, and very thick and soft it felt to the feet. The china in the room was very pretty, being white with scarlet berries on it; it all looked Christmasy and wintry and yet cheery, like the sort of Christmases one reads of in the fairy-tales of long ago.

I unfastened my parcel. I had just taken my long brown skirt out of its wrappings, and was shaking it out preparatory to putting it on, when I heard Miss Grace say from the bottom of the stairs, “Dumps, how long will it be before you are downstairs? I am just having the cutlets dished up.”

“Oh dear!” I said to myself. – “I’ll be down in a very few minutes,” I answered.

Now, I had promised father that I would certainly go down in the brown skirt and red blouse, and I would not break that promise to him for the world; so I quickly divested myself of my shabby little travelling costume and got into the brown skirt. It was a little tight in the waist, for I must say mine was very broad, but in every other single particular it was too big for me; it was so long in front that I could scarcely walk without stumbling. Still, I had no doubt that I made a very imposing figure in it. It was thick, it felt warm, and I remembered my father’s remark that there would be room for growth, and that the thinning process would eventually make it not quite so heavy.

But the brown skirt, although a partial success, was nothing at all to the red blouse. I have said that it was a brick-red, and it did not suit my face. It was of common material, made with thick folds, and the sleeves were much too long. I got into it somehow, and cast a glance at myself in the glass. How funny I looked! – my head not too tidy; my face flushed, in by no means a becoming way; with a brick-red blouse and a brown skirt. Nevertheless, I was dressed, and there was a sort of satisfaction in feeling grown-up just for once. I wished that I had had time to plait my hair and pin it round my head; then I might have impressed Miss Grace Donnithorne with the fact that not a child but a grown-up young lady had come to visit her. But as there was no time for that, and as there was a most appetising smell coming up the narrow stairs, I flew down just as I was, in my new costume. I very nearly stumbled as I ran downstairs, but I saved myself by picking up my skirt, and then I entered the little drawing-room.

“Come, come, child!” said Miss Donnithorne. “Not that way; come into this room now.”

I turned and crossed the little hall and entered the dining-room. The dining-room was twice the size of the little room where the stuffed birds dwelt. It was furnished in quite a modern fashion, and looked very nice indeed to me. The cloth on the table was so white that it did not even look dirty by contrast with the snow outside, and the silver shone – oh, like a number of looking-glasses; and the knives were so clean and new-looking.

Miss Grace just opened her eyes for the tenth of a second when I entered the room, and I wondered what reflection passed through her mind, but she gave utterance to none. She invited me to seat myself, and I had the most delicious meal I had ever partaken of in the whole course of my life. Nancy flew in and out, serving us with more and more dainties: puddings, jellies – oh dear, what delicious things jellies are when you have never tasted them before! Then there was fruit – apples which, Miss Donnithorne told me, had grown and ripened in her own garden; and finally we cracked

nuts and became excellent friends, sitting close to the fire. Nancy's final entrance had been with coffee on a little tray. Miss Donnithorne poured out a cup for me and a cup for herself.

"We'll go out presently," she said. "It's a lovely day for a walk. I shall take you a good way and show you some of the beauties of the place. But what about your boots? Are they strong?"

"Oh, pretty well," I replied.

"I can lend you some rubbers; but what size are your feet?"

I pushed out one of my feet for inspection.

"Dear, dear!" said Miss Donnithorne, "they're bigger than mine. Mine are rather small, and yours – you will forgive me, but yours are enormous; they really are. Have you been attended to by a shoemaker?"

"Oh, Hannah gets my boots for me," I said. "She always has them made to order, as she says they last twice as long; and she always insists on having them made two sizes too large. She says she can't be troubled by hearing me complain that they are too small."

"Dear me, child!" said Miss Donnithorne. "Do you know that you aggravate me more each moment?"

"Aggravate you?" I answered.

"Yes. You make something plainer and plainer. There! not a word more at present. But before I go upstairs, do tell me, was it Hannah or yourself who chose *that*?"

As she spoke she pointed to the red blouse and the brown skirt. She evidently thought of them as a costume, for she did not speak of them in the plural; she spoke of them as "that," and if ever there was condemnation in a kind voice, it was when she uttered that word.

"It was father who got them at Wallis's," I said. "I told him when I was coming to you that my clothes were rather shabby, and he bought them – he chose them himself."

"Bless him!" said Miss Donnithorne.

She looked at me critically for a minute, and then she burst into a perfect shriek of laughter. I felt inclined to be offended. It had never occurred to me that anybody in all the world could laugh at the Professor; but Miss Donnithorne laughed till the tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Mercy! Mercy me!" she repeated at intervals.

When she had recovered herself she said, "My dear, you mustn't be angry. I respect your father immensely, but his gift does not lie in the clothing of girls. Why, child, that is a woman's skirt. Let me feel the texture."

She felt it between her finger and thumb.

"Not at all the material for a lady," was her comment. "That skirt is meant for a hard-working artisan's wife. It is so harsh it makes me shudder as I touch it. A lady's dress should always be soft, and not heavy."

"Father thought a great deal of the weight," I could not help saying. "He thought it would keep me so warm."

"Bless him!" said Miss Donnithorne again. "But after all," she continued, "the skirt is nothing to the blouse. My dear, I will be frank with you; there are some men who know nothing whatever about dress, and that blouse is – atrocious. We'll get them both off, Rachel, or Dumps, or whatever you call yourself."

"But," I said, "I have nothing else much to wear. I only brought this and my little, shabby everyday dress."

"Now, I wonder," said Miss Donnithorne; but she did not utter her thought aloud. She became very reflective.

"I should not be surprised," she said under her breath. "Well, anyhow, we'll go out in the shabby little things, for I couldn't have you look a figure of fun walking through Chelmsford with me. That would be quite impossible."

“All right, Miss Donnithorne,” I said, inclined to be offended, although in my heart of hearts I had no love for the brown skirt and the red blouse.

“That costume will do admirably for that Hannah of yours,” said Miss Donnithorne after another pause. “From what you tell me of that body, I should think it would suit her; but it’s not the thing for you.”

“Only father – ” I expostulated.

“I’ll manage your father. Now go to your room, child, and get into your other things as fast as possible.”

I went away, and Miss Donnithorne still continued to sit by the fire. Could I believe my own ears? I thought I heard her sigh when I got into the hall, and then I heard her laugh. I felt half-inclined to be offended; I was certainly very much puzzled. Truly my cheeks were red now. I looked at myself in the glass. No, I was not pretty. I saw at once now why people called me Dumps. It is a great trial for a girl when her nose is half an inch too short, and her eyes are too small, and her mouth a trifle too broad, and she has no special complexion and no special look of intelligence, and no wonderfully thick hair, and has no beautiful shades of colouring – when she is all made up of drabs and greys, and her nose is decidedly podgy, and her cheeks inclined to be too fat – and yet when all the time the poor girl has a feverish desire in her soul to be beautiful, when she thinks more of beauty of feature and beauty of form, and beauty, in fact, of every sort, than of anything else in the world. It was a girl with that sort of exterior who now looked into the round glass. It was an old-fashioned glass, but a very good one, and I, Dumps, could see myself quite distinctly, and knew at last that it was fit and right that I should have the name. It was absurd to call a creature like me Rachel. Was not the first Rachel always spoken of as one of the most beautiful women in all the world? Why should I dare to take that sacred name? Oh yes, I was Dumps. I would not be offended any longer when I was called by it. My figure very much matched my face, for it was squat and decidedly short for my age. In the hideous red blouse, and with that brown skirt, I looked my very worst. I was glad to take them off. Talk of heat and weight! I knew at last what it was to be too hot and to have too much to carry.

I was delighted to be in my little, worn-out, but well-accustomed-to garments, and I ran down to Miss Donnithorne, feeling as though I, like Christian, had got rid of a heavy burden.

Part 1, Chapter VI At Hedgerow House

We took a long walk. We went right through Chelmsford, and I was enchanted with the appearance of that gay little country town. Then we got out into the country, where the snow lay in all its virgin purity. We walked fast, and I felt the cold, delicious air stinging my cheeks. I felt a sense of exhilaration, which Miss Donnithorne told me the snow generally gives to people.

“It makes the air lighter,” she said; “and besides, there is so much ammonia in it.”

I did not understand what she meant, but then I did not want to understand. I was happy; I was having a good time. I liked her better each moment.

We got back to the little cottage in time for tea, which we had cosily in the sitting-room with the stuffed birds and animals.

After tea Miss Donnithorne showed me some of her treasures – vast collections of shells, which she had been gathering in different parts of the world ever since she was a small child. I was fascinated by them; she told me that I might help to arrange them for her, and I spent a very blissful time in this fashion until it was time for supper. Supper was a simple meal, which consisted of milk and bread-and-butter and different sorts of stewed fruit.

“I don’t approve of late dinners,” said Miss Donnithorne. “That is,” she added, “not for myself. Now, Dumps, do tell me what sort of meal the Professor eats before he goes to bed at night.”

“Oh, anything that is handy,” I answered.

“But doesn’t he have a good nourishing meal, the sort to sustain a brain like his?”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “Hannah sees to it.”

“But don’t you?” said Miss Donnithorne, looking rather severe, and the laugh going out of her eyes. “Don’t you attend to your father’s wants?”

“As much as I can, Miss Donnithorne. You see, I am still supposed to be nothing but a child, and Hannah has the management of things.”

“You are supposed to be nothing but a child?” said Miss Donnithorne, and she looked me all up and down.

How I did hate the length of leg that I showed in my very short skirt! She fixed her eyes in a very obstinate manner on those said legs, clothed as they were in coarse stockings, which, alack and alas! were darned in more places than one. Then her eyes travelled lower and rested on my feet. I had taken off my huge boots now; but what was the good of that when my feet were enveloped in shoes quite as large, and of the very ugliest possible make?

Miss Donnithorne heaved a profound sigh.

“I wish – ” I said impulsively.

“You wish what, Rachel?”

“That you would let me wear the brown skirt.”

“And why, child? It is absolutely hideous.”

“But it is long,” I cried. “You would not see my legs nor my ugly feet.”

“Rachel, you want a great deal of attention; you are being sadly neglected.”

“Am I?” I said. Then I added, “Why do you say so?”

“It is but to look at you. You are not such a child that you could not do hundreds of things which at present never enter into your head.”

“How do you know, Miss Donnithorne?”

“I know,” she answered. “A little bird has told me.” Now, all my life I had hated women who spoke about having confidences with little birds; and I now said impulsively, “Please don’t say that. I am so inclined to like you just awfully! But if you wouldn’t speak about that bird – ”

“You have heard of it before?” she asked, and the sparkle came back into her eyes. “Well, never mind how I know. I suppose I know because I have got observation. But, to begin with, tell me how old you are.”

“I’ll be sixteen in a little less than six months.”

“Bless us!” said Miss Donnithorne, “why can’t the child say she is fifteen and a half?”

“Oh, that’s because of the birthdays,” I replied.

“The birthdays?” she asked, raising her brows.

“Miss Donnithorne,” I said impulsively, “a birthday is *the* day in the whole year. A birthday makes up for many very dismal days. On a birthday, when it comes, the sun shines and the world is beautiful. Oh, Miss Donnithorne, what would life be without birthdays?”

I spoke with such emotion and earnestness that the little lady’s face was quite impressed; there even came a sort of dimness over her eyes.

“Then most of your days are dull, little Rachel?” she said.

“They are lonely,” I replied.

“And yet you go to school; you have heaps of companions.”

“But no friends,” I replied.

“I wonder if Hermione Aldyce will suit you?” was her next remark.

“Hermione Aldyce! What a queer name! And who is she?”

“You will see her to-morrow. She is different from you, but there is no reason why you should not be friends. She is much the same age.”

“Is she coming here to-morrow?”

“No; you are going to her. Her father and mother have invited us both to dine with them.”

“Oh!” I said.

I looked down at my length of leg and at my ugly feet, and felt a little shiver going through my frame. Miss Donnithorne laid her hand on my arm.

“I wonder, Dumps,” she said, “if you are a very proud girl?”

“Yes,” I said, “I think I have plenty of pride.”

“But there are all sorts,” said Miss Donnithorne. “I hate a girl who has none. I want a girl to be reasonable. I don’t want her to eat the dust and to do absurd things, or to lower herself in her own eyes. I want a girl to be dignified, to hold her head high, to look straight out at the world with all the confidence and sweetness and fearlessness that a good girl ought to feel; but at the same time I want her to have the courage to take a kindness from one who means well without being angry or absurd.”

“What does all this mean?” I asked.

“It means, my dear Dumps, that I have in my possession at the present moment a very pretty costume which you might exchange for the red blouse and brown skirt. I know a person in Chelmsford who would be charmed to possess that red blouse and brown skirt, and if you wore the costume I have now in my mind, why, you would look quite nice in it – in fact, very nice indeed. Will you wear it?”

“What!” I answered; “give away the clothes father bought for me, and take yours?”

“I could make it right with your father. Don’t be a goose, Dumps. Your father only bought them because he didn’t know what was suitable. Now, will you let me give you the costume that I have upstairs?”

“But when did you get it?”

“The fact is, I didn’t get it. I have some clothes by me which belonged to a girl I was once very fond of. I will tell you about her another time.”

“A girl you were fond of – and you have her clothes, and would like me to wear them?”

“Some of them would not fit you, but this costume would. Will you put it on to-morrow? Will you at least wear it to-morrow for my sake?”

Of course there are all sorts of prides, and it did seem wrong to hurt Miss Donnithorne, and the temptation to look nice was great. So I said softly, “I will wear it to-morrow – yes, I will wear it to-morrow – because you wish me to.”

“Then you are a darling child,” said Miss Donnithorne.

She gave a great sigh of relief, jumped up from her seat, and kissed me.

Soon after that, being very tired with the adventures of the day, I went to bed. How delicious that bed was – so warm, so white, so inviting! How gaily the fire blazed in the grate, sending up little jets of flame, and filling the room with a sense of comfort! Miss Donnithorne came in, and saw that I had hot water and everything I required, and left me.

I undressed slowly, in the midst of my unwonted luxury. Perhaps if I lived always with Miss Donnithorne I should be a different sort of girl; I might even grow up less of a Dumps. But of course not. Nothing could lengthen my nose, or shorten my upper lip, or make me big. I must make up my mind to be quite the plainest girl it had ever been my own misfortune to meet. For I had met myself at last in the looking-glass in Miss Donnithorne’s bedroom; myself *and* myself had come face to face.

In the midst of my pleasure a scalding tear rolled down one of my cheeks at the memory of that poor reflection. I had been proud to be called Rachel, but now I was almost glad that most of my world knew me as Dumps.

Notwithstanding these small worries, however, I slept like a top, and woke in the morning to see Nancy busy lighting the fire.

“Oh dear!” I said, “I don’t want a fire to dress by.”

“Yes, you do, miss, to-day, for it’s bitter cold,” said Nancy.

She soon had a nice fire blazing; she then brought me in a comfortable hot bath, and finally a little tray with a cup of tea and a thin slice of bread-and-butter.

“Now, miss,” she said, “you can get up and dress slowly. Missis said she won’t have breakfast until a quarter to nine this morning, and it is only a quarter to eight now. And, miss, them are the clothes. They’re all beautifully aired, and ready to put on, and missis says that you’ll understand.”

Really it was exciting. It seemed to me that I had been wafted into Fairyland. I sipped my tea and ate my bread-and-butter, and thought what a delightful place Fairyland was, and that, after all, none of the children’s books had half described its glories. I then got up and dressed luxuriously, and at last turned to the chair on which lay the costume I was to wear that day. There was a very pretty skirt of a rich dark-blue; it was trimmed all round the edge with grey fur, and I did not think that in all my life I had ever seen anything quite so lovely. It had even further advantages, for when I walked it made a swishing sound, and raising the skirt, I saw that it was lined with silk.

Now, Hannah had once described to me the wonderful glories of a dress which had belonged to her mother, and which was lined with silk. She said she had bought it at a pawnbroker’s, and she knew quite well the last owner had been a duchess, for only duchesses could afford to wear such an expensive thing as silk hidden away under the skirt.

The bodice of this costume was as pretty as the skirt; it was also silk-lined, and full of little quaint puffings, and there was fur round the neck and on the cuffs. It fitted me to perfection, and I do think that even Dumps looked better in that dark-blue dress, with its grey fur, than I had believed it possible for her to appear in anything.

But there were even further delights; for the dark-blue dress had a beautiful dark-blue coat to match, and there was a little grey fur cap to be worn with it, and a grey fur muff. Oh dear, dear, I was made! And yet there were further treasures to be revealed. I had not seen them before, but I had to put them on before I went down to breakfast – neat stockings of the very finest cashmere, and little shoes with rosettes and buckles. There were also walking shoes of the most refined and delicate make. And, wonder of wonders! they fitted me. I felt indeed that I had come to Fairyland!

Miss Donnithorne was far too much of a lady to make any remark when I came into the room in my dark-blue costume for breakfast. She hardly glanced at me, but went deliberately to the sideboard and began to carve some delicate slices of rosy ham.

I sat down facing the fire. I felt almost self-conscious in the glories of that wonderful costume, and Miss Donnithorne must have guessed that I would have such feelings. She therefore began to talk in her most matter-of-fact style.

“We shall have a very busy day, Rachel,” she said. “There is not much time even for us to finish breakfast, for I have a class in the Sunday-school, and you, if you like, can come with me. Of course, if you prefer it, you can come to church later with Nancy.”

“Oh, I should much prefer to go with you,” I replied.

“That’s right – that’s right,” said Miss Donnithorne. “After church we go straight to the Aldyces’; they’ll take us in their carriage. We shall dine with them, and I think you might like Hermione to come back to have tea with us.”

“You are good,” I said. “It does sound wonderful.”

Then I added, as I broke a piece of crisp toast in two, “I have never ridden in a carriage in all my life.”

“Oh, you are not at all remarkable in that,” replied Miss Donnithorne in her frank way. “London girls, unless their fathers happen to be very rich, don’t have carriages to drive in. But there is one thing I would bid you remember, Dumps.”

“What is that?” I asked, raising my eyes to her face.

“You will meet, my dear, in your way through life, all sorts and conditions of men and women, rich and poor, lowly and haughty, and you will have to remember distinctions. One man may be better than his neighbour; one man may be lower than his neighbour; but the thing that makes the difference between man and man is not what he possesses, but what he is in himself. Now, your father, my dear Rachel, happens to be a much greater and much more distinguished man than Squire Aldyce.”

I wondered why she spoke so. Her laughing eyes were not laughing now; they were wonderfully serious; and her lips wore a remarkable expression of great firmness and yet of great sweetness.

“I am proud to know Professor Grant,” she said, “and you ought to be an exceedingly proud girl to be his daughter.”

“Oh, I love him very much,” I said; but then I added a little tremblingly, “My brother Alex has sometimes told me that father is a great scholar, but I didn’t know – I didn’t understand that all the world – I mean that other people knew about him.”

“Bless the child!” said Miss Donnithorne. “She has been brought up, so to speak, in the dark. You are a little mole, Dumps. You have kept your eyes shut. Some day you will realise what the Professor really is. He has a bigger brain than any other man I happen to know about. He is the foremost man in a most advanced realm of thought; his powers of imagination are great. Did he live in another age, he might have been a second Milton. You ought to be very, very proud indeed to be his daughter.”

It was thus she spoke to me, and so I quite forgot about the dark-blue costume, and accompanied her to Sunday-school, feeling composed and at the same time proud.

The Sunday-school was a very nice one, and the children were the ordinary sort of children one meets in the country. The superintendent of the school came up and shook hands with me. He said he was very proud to meet Professor Grant’s daughter. It was quite amazing – Fairyland was growing more dazzling each moment. It was not only that I was lifted right out of my ugly surroundings, but that I, plain as I was, was turned into a sort of princess. Surely no princess had ever worn a more lovely dress; and surely no princess could hold her head higher, if what Miss Donnithorne said about my father was true.

In church I regret to say that I more than once stroked the grey fur muff and softly felt the texture of my dress. But after church was over fresh excitement was in store for me.

Hermione Aldyce was waiting in the church porch for us. She was alone. I don't in the least remember what she wore. She was very tall and very slim, and I am sure she was very young, for she wore her hair in two great plaits down her back. Her hair was dark-brown, and her eyes were exactly the same colour. She had a face with a pale, creamy complexion, and when she smiled she showed two rows of little even teeth, white as pearls.

“Dear Miss Donnithorne,” she said. “And is this Dumps?”

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