

Meade L. T.

A Sweet Girl Graduate



L. Meade

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Chapter One

Going out into the World

Priscilla's trunk was neatly packed. It was a new trunk, and had a nice canvas covering over it. The canvas was bound with red braid, and Priscilla's initials were worked on the top in large plain letters. Her initials were P.P.P., and they stood for Priscilla Penywern Peel. The trunk was corded and strapped and put away, and Priscilla stood by her aunt's side in the little parlour of Penywern Cottage.

"Well, I think I've told you everything," said the aunt.

"Oh, yes, Aunt Raby, I sha'n't forget. I'm to write once a week, and I'm to try not to be nervous. I don't suppose I shall be – I don't see why I should. Girls aren't nervous nowadays, are they?"

"I don't know, my dear. It seems to me that if they aren't they ought to be. I can understand girls doing hard things if they must. I can understand anyone doing anything that has to be done, but as to not being nervous – well – there! Sit down, Prissie, child, and take your tea."

Priscilla was tall and slight. Her figure was younger than her years, which were nearly nineteen, but her face was older. It was an almost careworn face, thoughtful, grave, with anxious lines already deepening the seriousness of the too serious mouth.

Priscilla cut some bread-and-butter, and poured out some tea for her aunt and for herself.

Miss Rachel Peel was not the least like her niece. She was short and rather dumpy. She had a sensible, downright sort of face, and she took life with a gravity which would have oppressed a less earnest spirit than Priscilla's.

"Well, I'm tired," she said, when the meal was over. "I suppose I've done a great deal more than I thought I had all day. I think I'll go to bed early. We have said all our last words, haven't we, Priscilla?"

"Pretty nearly, Aunt Raby."

"Oh, yes, that reminds me – there's one thing more. Your fees will be all right, of course, and your travelling, and I have arranged about your washing money."

"Yes, Aunt Raby, oh, yes; everything is all right."

Priscilla fidgeted, moved her position a little, and looked longingly out of the window.

"You must have a little money over and above these things," proceeded Miss Peel, in her sedate voice. "I am not rich, but I'll allow you – yes, I'll manage to allow you two shillings a week. That will be for pocket-money, you understand, child."

The girl's old-young face flushed painfully.

"I'll want a few pence for stamps, of course," she said. "But I sha'n't write a great many letters. I'll be a great deal too busy studying. You need not allow me anything like so large a sum as that, Aunt Raby."

"Nonsense, child. You'll find it all too small when you go out into the world. You are a clever girl, Prissie, and I'm going to be proud of you. I don't hold with the present craze about women's education. But I feel somehow that I shall be proud of you. You'll be learned enough, but you'll be a woman with it all. I wouldn't have you stinted for the world, Prissie, my dear. Yes, I'll make it ten shillings a month – yes, I will. I can easily screw that sum out of the butter money. Now, not another word. I'm off to bed. Good-night, my love."

Priscilla kissed her aunt and went out. It was a lovely autumn evening. She stepped on to the green sward which surrounded the little cottage, and with the moonlight casting its full radiance on her slim figure, looked steadily out over the sea. The cottage was on the top of some high cliffs. The

light of the moon made a bright path over the water, and Priscilla had a good view of shining, silvered water, and dark, deep blue sky.

She stood perfectly still, gazing straight out before her. Some of the reflection and brightness of the moonlight seemed to get into her anxious eyes, and the faint dawn of a new-born hope to tremble around her lips. She thought herself rich with ten shillings a month pocket-money. She returned to the house, feeling overpowered at Aunt Raby's goodness.

Upstairs in Prissie's room there were two beds. One was small; in this she herself slept. The other had now three occupants. Three heads were raised when Prissie entered the room, and three shrill voices exclaimed —

"Here we are, all wide-awake, Prissie, darling!" This remark, made simultaneously, was followed by prolonged peals of laughter.

"Three of you in that small bed!" said Priscilla. She stood still, and a smile broke all over her face. "Why, Hattie," she said, catching up the eldest of the three girls, and giving her a fervent hug — "how did you slip out of Aunt Raby's room?"

"Oh, I managed to," said Hattie, in a stage whisper. "Aunt Raby came upstairs half an hour ago, and she undressed very fast, and got into bed, and I heard her snoring in about a minute. It was then I slipped away. She never heard."

"Hop up on the bed now, Prissie," exclaimed Rose, another of the children, "and let us all have a chat. Here, Katie, if you'll promise not to cry you may get into the middle, between Hattie and me, then you'll be very close to darling Prissie."

Katie was the youngest of the three occupants of the bed: she was about eight years old; her small face was delicate in its outline, her mouth peevish; she did not look a strong child, and self-control could scarcely be expected of her.

Priscilla placed her candle on the chimney-piece, jumped on the bed according to orders, and looked earnestly at her three small sisters.

"Now, Prissie," said Hattie, in the important little voice which she always used, "begin, go on — tell us all about your grand college life."

"How can I, Hattie, when I don't know what to say. I can't *guess* what I am to do at college."

"Oh dear," sighed Rose, "I only wish I were the one to go! It will be very dull living with Aunt Raby when you are away, Priscilla. She won't let us take long walks, and if ever we go in for a real, jolly lark we are sure to be punished. Oh dear, oh dear!"

"Even though it is for your good, I wish with all my heart you were not going away, Prissie," said Hattie, in her blunt fashion.

Katie burst into sudden loud wails.

Priscilla coloured. Then she spoke with firmness. "We have had enough of this kind of talk. Katie, you shall come and sit in my lap, darling. I'll wrap you up quite warm in this big shawl. Now, girls," she said, "what *is* the use of making things harder? You know, perfectly, you two elder ones, why I must go away, and you, Katie, you know also, don't you, pet?"

"Yes, Prissie," answered Katie, speaking in a broken, half-sobbing voice, "only I *am* so lonely."

"But you're not going to be selfish, darling. By-and-by I'll come back to you all. Once every year, at least, I'll come back. And then, after I've gone through my course of study, I'll get a situation of some sort — a good situation — and you three shall come and live with me. There, what do you say to that? Only three years, and then such a jolly time. Why, Katie will be only eleven then."

Priscilla spoke in a remarkably cheerful voice, but the appalling magnitude of three years could not be diminished, and the three little sisters who were to stay behind with Aunt Raby were still disposed to view things dismally.

"If *she* wasn't just what she is — " began Hattie.

"If she didn't think the least tiny morsel of a lark wrong — " continued Rose.

"Why, then we could pull along somehow," sighed Hattie.

“Oh, you’ll pull along as it is,” said Priscilla. “I’ll write to you as often as ever I can. If possible I’ll keep a sort of journal, and send it to you. And perhaps there’ll be stories and larks in it. Now you really must go to sleep, for I have to get up so early in the morning. Katie, darling, I’ll make a corner for you in my bed to-night. Won’t that be a treat?”

“Oh, yes, Prissie.”

Katie’s pale face was lit up by a radiant smile; Hattie and Rose lay down side by side, and closed their eyes. In a few moments they were sound asleep.

As they lay in the sound happy sleep of healthy childhood Priscilla bent over them and kissed them. Then before she lay down herself she knelt by the window, looked up at the clear, dark sky in which the moon sailed in majesty, bent her head, murmured a few words of prayer, then crept into bed by her little sister’s side.

Prissie felt full of courage and good resolves. She was going out into the world to-morrow, and she was quite determined that the world should not conquer her, although she knew that she was a very poor maiden with a specially heavy load of care on her young shoulders.

Chapter Two

The Delights of being a Fresher

The college was quite shut away in its own grounds, and only from the upper windows did the girls get a peep of the old University town of Kingsdene. From these, however, particularly in the winter, they could see the gabled colleges, the chapels with their rich glory of architecture, and the smooth lawns of the college gardens as they sloped gently down to the river.

St. Benet's, the College for Women, was approached by a private road, and high entrance gates obstructed the gaze of the curious. Inside there were cheerful halls and pleasant gardens, and gay, fresh, unrestrained life. But the passer-by got no peep of these things unless the high gates happened to be open.

This was the first evening of term, and most of the girls were back. There was nothing very particular going on, and they were walking about the gardens, and greeting old friends, and telling each other their experiences, and more or less picking up the threads which had been broken or loosened in the long vacation.

The evenings were drawing in, but the pleasant twilight which was soon to be rendered brilliant by the full moon seemed to the girls even nicer than broad daylight to linger about in. They did not want to go into the houses; they flitted about in groups here and there, chatting and laughing merrily.

St. Benet's had three Halls, each with its own Vice-Principal, and a certain number of resident students. Each Hall stood in its own grounds, and was more or less a complete home in itself. There were resident lecturers and demonstrators for the whole college, and one Lady Principal, who took the lead, and was virtually head of the college.

Miss Vincent was the name of the present Principal. She was an old lady, and had a Vice-Principal under her at Vincent Hall, the largest and newest of these spacious homes, where young women received the advantages of University instruction to prepare them for the battle of life.

Priscilla was to live at Heath Hall – a slightly smaller house, which stood at a little distance away – its grounds being divided from the grounds of Vincent Hall by means of a rustic paling. Miss Heath was the very popular Vice-Principal of this Hall, and Prissie was considered a fortunate girl to obtain a home in her house. She sat now a forlorn and rather scared young person, huddled up in one corner of the fly which turned in at the wide gates, and finally deposited her and her luggage at the back entrance of Heath Hall.

Priscilla looked out into the darkness of the autumn night with frightened eyes. She hated herself for feeling nervous. She had told Aunt Raby that, of course, she would have no silly tremors, yet here she was, trembling, and scarcely able to pay the cabman his fare.

She heard a girl's laugh in the distance, and it caused her to start so violently that she dropped one of her few treasured sixpences, which went rolling about aimlessly almost under the horse's hoofs.

"Stop a minute, I'll find it for you," said a voice. A tall girl with big, brown eyes suddenly darted into view, picked up the sixpence as if by magic, popped it into Priscilla's hand, and then, vanished. Priscilla knew that this was the girl who had laughed; she heard her laughing again as she turned to join someone who was standing beside a laurel hedge. The two linked their arms together, and walked off in the darkness.

"Such a frightened poor Fresher!" said the girl who had picked up the sixpence to her companion.

"Maggie," said the other in a warning voice, "I know you, I know what you mean to do."

"My dear good Nancy, it is more than I know myself. What awful indiscretion does your prophetic soul see me perpetrating?"

“Oh, Maggie, as if anything could change your nature! You know you’ll take up that miserable Fresher for about a fortnight, and make her imagine that you are going to be excellent friends for the rest of your life, and then – p-f! you’ll snuff her out as if she had never existed; I know you, Maggie, and I call it cruel.”

“Is not that Miss Banister I hear talking?” said a voice quite close to the two girls.

They both turned, and immediately with heightened colour rushed up eagerly to shake hands with the Vice-Principal of their college.

“How do you do, my dears?” she said in a hearty voice. “Are you quite well, Maggie, and you, Nancy? Had you a pleasant holiday? And did you two great chums spend it together?”

The girls began answering eagerly; some other girls came up and joined the group, all anxious to shake hands with Miss Heath, and to get a word of greeting from her.

At this moment the dressing-gong for dinner sounded, and the little group moved slowly towards the house.

In the entrance-hall numbers of girls who had recently arrived were standing about; all had a nod, or a smile, or a kiss for Maggie Oliphant.

“How do you do, Miss Oliphant? Come and see me to-night in my room, won’t you, dear?” issued from many throats.

Maggie promised in her good-natured, affectionate, wholesale way.

Nancy Banister was also greeted by several friends. She, too, was gay and bright, but quieter than Maggie. Her face was more reliable in its expression, but not nearly so beautiful.

“If you accept all these invitations, Maggie,” she said, as the two girls walked down the corridor which led to their rooms, “you know you will have to sit up until morning. Why will you say ‘yes’ to everyone? You know it only causes disappointment and jealousy.”

Maggie laughed.

“My dear, good creature, don’t worry your righteous soul,” she answered. “I’ll call on all the girls I can, and the others must grin and bear it. Now we have barely time to change our dresses for dinner. Stay, though, Nance, there’s a light under Annabel Lee’s door; who have they dared to put into her room? It must be one of those wretched Freshers. I don’t think I can bear it. I shall have to go away into another corridor.”

“Maggie, dear – you are far too sensitive. Could the college afford to keep a room empty because poor dear Annie Lee occupied it?”

“They could, they ought,” burst from Maggie. She stamped her foot with anger. “That room is a shrine to me. It will always be a shrine. I shall hate the person who lives in it.” Tears filled her bright brown eyes. Her arched proud lips trembled. She opened her door, and going into her room, shut it with a bang, almost in Nancy Banister’s face.

Nancy stood still for a minute. A quick sigh came from her lips.

“Maggie is the dearest girl in the college,” she said to herself; “the dearest, the sweetest, the prettiest, yet also the most tantalising, the most provoking, the most inconsequent. It is the greatest wonder she has kept so long out of some serious scrape. She will never leave here without doing something outrageous, and yet there isn’t a girl in the place to be named with her. I wish – ” here Nancy sighed again, and put her hand to her brow as if to chase away some perplexity. Then, after a moment’s hesitation, she went up to the door of the room next to Maggie’s and knocked.

There was a moment’s silence, then a constrained voice said —

“Come in.”

Nancy entered at once.

Priscilla Peel was standing in the centre of the room. The electric light was turned on, revealing the bareness and absence of all ornament of the apartment; a fire was laid in the grate but not lit, and Priscilla’s ugly square trunk, its canvas covering removed, stood in a prominent position, half on the hearthrug, half on the square of carpet, which covered the centre of the floor. Priscilla had taken off

her jacket and hat. She had washed her hands, and removed her muddy boots, and smoothed out her straight, light brown hair. She looked what she felt – a very stiff and unformed specimen of girlhood. There was a great lump in her throat, brought there by mingled nervousness and home-sickness, but that very fact only made her manner icy and repellent.

“Forgive me,” said Nancy, blushing all over her rosy face. “I thought perhaps you might like to know one or two things as you are quite strange here. My name is Banister. I have a room in the same corridor, but quite at the other end. You must come and visit me, presently. Oh, has no one lit your fire? Wouldn’t you like one? The evenings are turning so chilly now, and a fire in one’s room gives one a home-like feeling, doesn’t it? Shall I light it for you?”

“No, no, thank you,” said Priscilla stiffly. She longed to rush at Nancy, and smother her with kisses, but she could only stand in the middle of her room, helpless and awkward, held in a terrible bondage of shyness.

Nancy drew back a step, chilled in spite of herself.

“I see there are matches on the chimney-piece,” she said, “so you can light the fire yourself, whenever you like. The gong that will sound in a minute will be for dinner, and Miss Heath always likes us to be punctual for that meal. It does not matter about any other. Do you think you can find your way to the dining-hall? Or shall I come and fetch you?”

“No – thank you. I – I can manage.”

“But I’ll come with pleasure if you like me to.”

“No, I’d rather you didn’t trouble, please.”

“Very well; if you’re sure you know the way. You go down the broad stairs, then turn to the right, then to the left. Good-bye, I must rush off, or I shall be late.”

Nancy shut the door behind her. She did it gently, although she did not feel gentle, for she had a distinct sensation of being irritated.

Meanwhile Priscilla, clasping her hands together behind the closed door, looked yearningly in the direction where the bright face and trim, neat girlish figure had stood. She was trembling slightly, and her eyes slowly filled with tears.

“I feel sick and lonely and horrid,” she said, under her breath. “Talk of nerves; oh, if Aunt Raby could see me now! why, I’m positively shaking, I can scarcely speak, I can scarcely think properly. What would the children say if they saw their Prissie now? And I’m the girl who is to fight the world, and kill the dragon, and make a home for the nestlings. Don’t I feel like it! Don’t I look like it! Don’t I just loathe myself! How hideously I do my hair, and what a frightful dress I have on. Oh, I wish I weren’t shaking so much. I know I shall get red all over at dinner. I wish I weren’t going to dinner. I wish, oh, I wish I were at home again.”

Crash! bang! pealed the great gong through the house. Doors were opened all along the corridor; light steps passed Priscilla’s room. She heard the rustle of silk, and the sweet, high tinkle of girlish laughter.

She stayed in her room till the last footsteps had died away, then in desperation made a rush for it, flew down the wide stairs in a bashful agony, and, as a matter of course, entered the spacious dining-hall by the door devoted to the dons.

A girl’s life at one of the women’s colleges is supposed to be more or less an unfettered sort of existence; the broad rules guiding conduct are few, and little more than those which must be exercised in any well-organised family. But there is the unspoken etiquette made chiefly by the students themselves, which fills the place like an atmosphere, and which can only be transgressed at the risk of surly glances and muttered comments, and even words of derision.

No student was expected to enter the hall by the dons’ entrance, and for this enormity to be perpetrated by a Fresher immediately made her the cynosure of all eyes. Poor Priscilla was unconscious of any offence. She grew scarlet under the gaze of the merciless young eyes, and further added to her sins by sitting down at one of the tables at the top of the hall.

No one reproved her in words, or requested her to take a lower seat, but some rude giggles were not inaudible; and Priscilla, who would thankfully have taken her dinner in the scullery, heard hints about a certain young person's presumption, and about the cheek of those wretched Freshers, which must instantly be put down with a high hand.

Priscilla had choked over her soup, and was making poor way with the fish that followed, when suddenly a sweet, low voice addressed her.

"This is your first evening at St. Benet's," said the voice. "I hope you will be happy. I know you will, after a little."

Priscilla turned, and met the full gaze of lovely eyes, brown like a nut, soft and deep as the thick pile of velvet, and yet with a latent flash and glow in them which gave them a red, half-wild gleam now and then. The lips that belonged to this face were slightly parted in a smile; the smile and the expression in the eyes stole straight down with a glow of delicious comfort into Priscilla's heart.

"Thank you," she said, in her stiff, wooden tone; but her eyes did not look stiff, and the girl began to talk again.

"I believe my room is next to yours. My name is Oliphant – Margaret Oliphant, but everyone calls me Maggie. That is, of course, I mean my friends do. Would you like to come into my room, and let me tell you some of the rules?"

"Thank you," said Priscilla again. She longed to add, "I should love beyond words to come into your room;" but instead she remarked icily, "I think Miss Heath has given me printed rules."

"Oh, you have seen our dear Dorothea – I mean Miss Heath. Isn't she lovely?"

"I don't know," answered Priscilla. "I think she's rather a plain person."

"My dear Miss – (I have not caught your name) – you really are too deliciously prosaic. Stay here for a month, and then tell me if you think Dorothea – I mean Miss Heath – plain. No, I won't say any more. You must find out for yourself. But now, about the rules. I don't mean the *printed* rules. We have, I assure you, at St. Benet's all kinds of little etiquettes which we expect each other to observe. We are supposed to be democratic, and inclined to go in for all that is advanced in womanhood. But, oh dear, oh dear! let any student dare to break one of our own little pet proprieties, and you will see how conservative we can be."

"Have I broken any of them?" asked Priscilla in alarm. "I did notice that everyone stared at me when I came into the hall, but I thought it was because my face was fresh, and I hoped people would get accustomed to me by-and-by."

"You poor dear child, there are lots of fresh faces here besides yours. You should have come down under the shelter of my wing, then it would have been all right."

"But what have I done? Do tell me. I'd much rather know."

"Well, dear, you have *only* come into the hall by the dons' entrance, and you have *only* seated yourself at the top of the table, where the learned students who are going in for a tripos take their august meals. That is pretty good for a Fresher. Forgive me, we call the new girls Freshers for a week or two. Oh, you have done nothing wrong. Of course not, how could you know any better? Only I think it would be nice to put you up to our little rules, would it not?"

"I should be very much obliged," said Priscilla. "And please tell me now where I ought to sit at dinner."

Miss Oliphant's merry eyes twinkled.

"Look down this long hall," she said. "Observe that door at the farther end – that is the students' door; through that door you ought to have entered."

"Yes – well, well?"

"What an impatient 'Well, well.' I shall make you quite an enthusiastic Benetite before dinner is over."

Priscilla blushed.

"I am sorry I spoke too eagerly," she said.

“Oh, no, not a bit too eagerly.”

“But please tell me where I ought to have seated myself.”

“There is a table near that lower entrance, Miss – ”

“Peel,” interposed Priscilla. “My name is Priscilla Peel.”

“How quaint and great-grandmotherly. Quite delicious! Well, Miss Peel, by that entrance door is a table, a table rather in a draught, and consecrated to the Freshers – there the Freshers humbly partake of nourishment.”

“I see. Then I am as far from the right place as I can be.”

“About as far as you can be.”

“And that is why all the girls have stared so at me.”

“Yes, of course; but let them stare. Who minds such a trifle?”

Priscilla sat silent for a few moments. One of the neat waiting-maids removed her plate; her almost untasted dinner lay upon it. Miss Oliphant turned to attack some roast mutton with truly British vigour.

By-and-by Priscilla’s voice, stiff but with a break in it, fell upon her ear.

“I think the students at St. Benet’s must be very cruel.”

“My dear Miss Peel, the honour of the most fascinating college in England is imperilled. Unsay those words.”

Maggie Oliphant was joking. Her voice was gay with badinage, her eyes brimful of laughter. But Priscilla, unaccustomed to light repartee or chaff in any form, replied to her with heavy and pained seriousness.

“I think the students here are cruel,” she repeated. “How can a stranger know which is the dons’ entrance, and which is the right seat to take at table? If nobody shows her, how can a stranger know? I do think the students are cruel, and I am sorry – I am very sorry I came.”

Chapter Three

An Unwilling “At Home.”

Most of the girls who sat at those dinner-tables had fringed or tousled or curled locks. Priscilla's were brushed simply away from her broad forehead. After saying her last words, she bent her head low over her plate, and longed even for the protection of a fringe to hide her burning blushes. Her momentary courage had evaporated; she was shocked at having betrayed herself to a stranger; her brief fit of passion left her stiffer and shyer than ever. Blinding tears rushed to Priscilla's eyes, and her terror was that they would drop on to her plate. Suppose some of those horrid girls saw her crying? Hateful thought. She would rather die than show emotion before them.

At this moment a soft, plump little hand was slipped into hers, and the sweetest of voices said — “I am so sorry anything has seemed unkind to you. Believe me, we are not what you imagine. We have our fun and our prejudices, of course, but we are not what you think we are.”

Priscilla could not help smiling, nor could she resist slightly squeezing the fingers which touched hers.

“You are not unkind, I know,” she answered; and she ate the rest of her dinner in a comforted frame of mind.

After dinner one of the lecturers who resided at Heath Hall, a pleasant, bright girl of two- or three-and-twenty, came and introduced herself, and presently took Priscilla with her to her own room, to talk over the line of study which the young girl proposed to take up. This conference lasted some little time, and then Priscilla, in the lecturer's company, returned to the hall for tea.

A great many girls kept coming in and out. Some stayed to have tea, but most helped themselves to tea and bread-and-butter, and took them away to partake of in their own private rooms.

Maggie Oliphant and Nancy Banister presently rushed in for this purpose. Maggie, seeing Priscilla, ran up to her.

“How are you getting on?” she asked brightly. “Oh, by-the-bye, will you cocoa with me to-night at half-past ten?”

“I don't know what you mean,” answered Priscilla. “But I'll do it,” she added, her eyes brightening.

“All right, I'll explain the simple ceremony when you come. My room is next to yours, so you'll have no difficulty in finding me out. I don't expect to have anyone present except Miss Banister,” nodding her head in Nancy's direction, “and perhaps one other girl. By-bye, I'll see you at half-past ten.”

Maggie turned to leave the hall, but Nancy lingered for a moment by Priscilla's side.

“Wouldn't you like to take your tea up to your room?” she asked. “We most of us do it. You may, you know.”

“I don't think I wish to,” answered Priscilla, in an uncertain voice.

Nancy half-turned to go, then came back.

“You are going to unpack by-and-by, aren't you?” she asked.

“Oh, yes, when I get back to my room.”

“Perhaps you ought to know beforehand; the girls will be coming to call.”

Priscilla raised her eyes.

“What girls?” she asked, alarm in her tone.

“Oh, most of the students in your corridor. They always call on a Fresher the first night in her room. You need not bother yourself about them; they'll just talk for a little while and then go away. What is the matter, Miss Peel? Maggie has told me your name, you see.”

“What you tell me sounds so very – very formal.”

“But it isn’t – not really. Shall I come and help you to entertain them?”

“I wish – ” began Priscilla. She hesitated; the words seemed to stick in her throat.

“What did you say?” Nancy bent forward a little impatiently.

“I wish – yes, do come,” with a violent effort. “All right, you may expect me.”

Nancy flew after Maggie Oliphant, and Priscilla went slowly up the wide, luxurious stairs. She turned down the corridor which led to her own room. There were doors leading out of this corridor at both sides, and Priscilla caught glimpses of luxurious rooms bright with flowers and electric light. Girls were laughing and chatting in them; she saw pictures on the walls, and lounges and chairs scattered about. Her own room was at the far end of the corridor. The electric light was also brightening it, but the fire was unlit, and the presence of the unpacked trunk, taking up a position of prominence on the floor, gave it a very unhomelike feel. In itself the room was particularly picturesque. It had two charming lattice windows, set in deep square bays. One window faced the fireplace, the other the door. The effect was slightly irregular, but for that very reason all the more charming. The walls of the room were painted light blue; there was a looking-glass over the mantelpiece set in a frame of the palest, most delicate, blue. A picture-rail ran round the room about six feet from the ground, and the high frieze above had a scroll of wild roses painted on it in bold, free relief.

The panels of the doors were also decorated with sprays of wild flowers in picturesque confusion. Both the flowers and the scroll were boldly designed, but were unfinished, the final and completing touches remaining yet to be given.

Priscilla looked hungrily at these unexpected trophies of art. She could have shouted with glee as she recognised some of her dear, wild Devonshire flowers among the groups on the door panels. She wondered if all the rest of the students were treated to these artistic decorations, and grew a little happier and less homesick at the thought.

Priscilla could have been an artist herself had the opportunity arisen, but she was one of those girls all alive with aspiration and longing who never up to the present had come in the way of special culture in any style.

She stood for some time gazing at the groups of wild flowers, then remembering with horror that she was to receive visitors that night, she looked round the room to see if she could do anything to make it appear home-like and inviting.

It was a nice room, certainly. Priscilla had never before in her whole life occupied such a luxurious apartment, and yet it had a cold, dreary, uninhabited feel. She had an intuition that none of the other students’ rooms looked like hers. She rushed to light the fire, but could not find the matches, which had been removed from their place on the mantelpiece, and felt far too shy to ring the electric-bell. It was Priscilla’s fashion to clasp her hands together when she felt a sense of dismay, and she did so now, as she looked around the pretty room, which yet with all its luxuries looked to her cold and dreary.

The furniture was excellent of its kind. A Turkey carpet covered the centre of the floor, the boards round the edge were stained and brightly polished. In one corner of the room was a little bed, made to look like a sofa by day, with a Liberty cretonne covering. A curtain of the same shut away the wardrobe and washing apparatus. Just under one of the bay-windows stood a writing-table, so contrived as to form a writing-table, and a bookcase at the top, and a chest of drawers to hold linen below. Besides this there was a small square table for tea in the room, and a couple of chairs. The whole effect was undoubtedly bare.

Priscilla was hesitating whether to begin to unpack her trunk or not when a light knock was heard at her door. She said “Come in,” and two girls burst rather noisily into the apartment.

“How do you do?” they said, favouring the fresh girl with a brief nod. “You came to-day, didn’t you? What are you going to study? Are you clever?”

These queries issued rapidly from the lips of the tallest of the girls. She had red hair, tousled and tossed about her head. Her face was essentially commonplace; her small restless eyes now glanced at Priscilla, now wandered over the room. She did not wait for a reply to any of her queries, but turned rapidly to her companion.

"I told you so, Polly," she said. "I was quite sure that she was going to be put into Miss Lee's room. You see I'm right, this *is* Annabel Lee's old room; it has never been occupied since."

"Hush!" said the other girl.

The two walked across the apartment and seated themselves on Priscilla's bed.

There came a fresh knock at the door, and this time three students entered. They barely nodded to Priscilla, and then rushed across the room with cries of rapture to greet the girls who were seated on the bed.

"How do you do, Miss Atkins? How do you do, Miss Jones?"

Miss Jones and Miss Atkins exchanged kisses with Miss Phillips, Miss Marsh, and Miss Day. The babel of tongues rose high, and everyone had something to say with regard to the room which had been assigned to Priscilla.

"Look," said Miss Day, "it was in that corner she had her rocking-chair. Girls, *do* you remember Annabel's rocking-chair, and how she used to sway herself backwards and forwards in it, and half-shut her lovely eyes?"

"Oh, and don't I just seem to *see* that little red tea-table of hers near the fire," burst from Miss Marsh. "That Japanese table, with the Japanese tea-set – oh dear, oh dear! those cups of tea – those cakes! Well, the room *was* luxurious, *was* worth coming to see in Annabel's time."

"It's more than it is now," laughed Miss Jones in a harsh voice. "How bare the walls look without her pictures. It was in that recess the large figure of 'Hope' by Burne-Jones used to hang, and there, that queer, wild, wonderful head looking out of clouds. You know she never would tell us the artist's name. Yes, she had pretty things everywhere! How the room is altered! I don't think I care for it a bit now."

"Could anyone who knew Annabel Lee care for the room without her?" asked one of the girls. She had a common, not to say vulgar, face, but it wore a wistful expression as she uttered these words.

All this time Priscilla was standing, feeling utterly shy and miserable. From time to time other girls came in; they nodded to her, and then rushed upon their companions. The eager talk began afresh, and always there were looks of regret, and allusions, accompanied by sighs, to the girl who had lived in the room last.

"Well," said one merry little girl, who was spoken to by the others as Ada Hardy, "I have no doubt that by-and-by, when Miss – " She glanced towards Priscilla.

"Peel," faltered Priscilla.

"When Miss Peel unpacks her trunk, she'll make the room look very pretty, too."

"She can't," said Miss Day, in a tragic voice; "she never could make the room look as it used to – not if she was to live till the age of Methuselah. Of course you'll improve it, Miss Peel; you couldn't possibly exist in it as it is now."

"I can tell you of a capital shop in Kingsdene, Miss Peel," said Miss Marsh, "where you can buy tables and chairs, and pretty artistic cloths, and little whatnots of all descriptions. I'd advise you to go to Rigg's! he's in the High Street, Number 48."

"But Spilman has much the most *recherché* articles, you know, Lucy," interposed Miss Day. "I'll walk over to Spilman's to-morrow with you, if you like, Miss Peel."

Before Priscilla had time to reply there was again a knock at the door, and this time Nancy Banister, looking flushed and pretty, came in.

She took in the scene at a glance: numbers of girls making themselves at home in Priscilla's room, some seated on her trunk, some on her bureau, several curled up in comfortable attitudes on her bed, and she herself standing, meek, awkward, depressed, near one of the windows.

“How tired you look, Miss Peel!” said Nancy Banister.

Priscilla smiled gratefully at her.

“And your trunk is not unpacked yet?”

“Oh! there is time enough,” faltered Priscilla.

“Are we in your way?” suddenly spoke Miss Marsh, springing to her feet. “Good-night. My name is Marsh, my room is thirty-eight.”

She swung herself lazily and carelessly out of the room, followed, at longer or shorter intervals, by the other girls, who all nodded to Priscilla, told her their names, and one or two the numbers of their rooms. At last she was left alone with Nancy Banister.

“Poor thing! How tired and white you look!” said Nancy. “But now that dreadful martyrdom is over, you shall have a real cosy time. Don’t you want a nice hot cup of cocoa? It will be ready in a minute or two. And please may I help you to unpack?”

“Thank you,” said Priscilla; her teeth were chattering. “If I might have a fire?” she asked suddenly.

“Oh, you poor, shivering darling! Of course. Are there no matches here? There were some on the mantelpiece before dinner. No, I declare they have vanished. How careless of the maid. I’ll run into Maggie’s room and fetch some.”

Miss Banister was not a minute away. She returned with a box of matches, and, stooping down, set a light to the wood, and a pleasant fire was soon blazing and crackling merrily.

“Now, isn’t that better?” said Nancy. “Please sit down on your bed, and give me the key of your trunk. I’ll soon have the things out, and put all to rights for you. I’m a splendid unpacker.”

But Priscilla had no desire to have her small and meagre wardrobe overhauled even by the kindest of St. Benet’s girls.

“I will unpack presently myself, if you don’t mind,” she said. She felt full of gratitude, but she could not help an almost surly tone coming into her voice.

Nancy drew back, repulsed and distressed.

“Perhaps you would like me to go away?” she said. “I will go into Maggie’s room, and let you know when cocoa is ready.”

“Thank you,” said Prissie. Miss Banister disappeared, and Priscilla sat on by the fire, unconscious that she had given any pain or annoyance, thinking with gratitude of Nancy, and with feelings of love of Maggie Oliphant, and wondering what her little sisters were doing without her at home to-night.

By-and-by there came a tap at her door. Priscilla ran to open it. Miss Oliphant stood outside.

“Won’t you come in?” said Priscilla, throwing the door wide open, and smiling with joy. It was already delightful to her to look at Maggie. “Please come in,” she added, in a tone almost of entreaty.

Maggie Oliphant started and turned pale. “Into that room? No, no, I can’t,” she said in a queer voice. She rushed back to her own, leaving Priscilla standing in amazement by her open door.

There was a moment’s silence; then Miss Oliphant’s voice, rich, soft, and lazy, was heard within the shelter of her own apartment.

“Please come in, Miss Peel, cocoa awaits you. Do not stand on ceremony.”

Priscilla went timidly across the landing, and the next instant found herself in one of the prettiest of the students’ rooms at St. Benet’s. A few rare prints and some beautiful photogravures of well-known pictures adorned the walls. The room was crowded with knick-knacks, and rendered gay and sweet by many tall flowers in pots. A piano stood open by one of the walls, and a violin lay carelessly on a chair not far off. There were piles of new music, and some tempting, small, neatly-bound books lying about. A fire glowed on the hearth, and a little brass kettle sang merrily on the hob. The cocoa-table was drawn up in front of the fire, and on a quaintly shaped tray stood the bright little cocoa-pot, and the oddly devised cups and saucers.

“Welcome to St. Benet’s?” said Maggie, going up and taking Priscilla’s hand cordially within her own. “Now you’ll have to get into this low chair, and make yourself quite at home and happy.”

“How snug you are here,” said Prissie, her eyes brightening, and a pink colour mounting into her cheeks. She was glad that Maggie was alone; she felt more at ease with her than with anyone, but the next moment she said, with a look of apparent regret —

“I thought Miss Banister was in your room?”

“No; Nancy has gone to her own room at the end of the corridor to do some work for an hour. She will come back to say good-night. She always does. Are you sorry to have me by myself?”

“Indeed I am not,” said Priscilla. The smile, which made her rather plain face attractive, crept slowly back to it. Maggie poured out a cup of cocoa and brought it to her, then, drawing another chair forward, she seated herself in it, sipped her own cocoa, and began to talk.

Long afterwards Priscilla remembered that talk. It was not what Maggie said, for her conversation in itself was not at all brilliant, but it was the sound of her rich, calm, rather lazy voice, the different lights which glanced and gleamed in her eyes, the dimples about her mouth, the attitude she put herself in. Maggie had a way of changing colour, too, which added to her fascinations. Sometimes the beautiful oval of her face would be almost ivory white, but then again a rosy cloud would well up and up the cheeks, and even slightly suffuse the broad, low forehead. Her face was never long the same, never more than a moment in repose; eyes, mouth, brow, even the very waves of her hair seemed to Priscilla, this first night as she sat by her hearth, to be all speech.

The girls grew cosy and confidential together. Priscilla told Maggie about her home, a little also about her past history, and her motive in coming to St. Benet’s. Maggie sympathised with all the expression she was capable of. At last Priscilla bade her new friend good-night, and, rising from her luxurious chair, prepared to go back to her own room.

She had just reached the door of Maggie’s room, and was about to turn the handle, when a sudden thought arrested her. She came back a few steps.

“May I ask you a question?” she said.

“Certainly,” replied Miss Oliphant.

“Who is the girl who used to live in my room? Annabel Lee, the other girls call her. Who is she? What is there remarkable about her?”

To Priscilla’s astonishment Maggie started a step forward, her eyes blazed with an expression which was half frightened – half angry. She interlocked one soft hand inside the other, her face grew white, hard, and strained.

“You must not ask me about Annabel Lee,” she said in a whisper, “for I – I can tell you nothing about her. I can *never* tell you about her – never.”

Then she rushed to her sofa-bed, flung herself upon it face downwards, and burst into queer, silent, distressful tears.

Someone touched Priscilla softly on her shoulder.

“Let me take you to your room, Miss Peel,” said Nancy Banister. “Don’t take any notice of Maggie; she will be all right by-and-by.”

Nancy took Priscilla’s hand, and walked with her across the corridor.

“I am so sorry I said anything to hurt Miss Oliphant,” said Priscilla.

“Oh, you were not to blame. You could not know any better. Of course, now that you do know, you will never do it again.”

“But I don’t know anything now. Please will *you* tell me who Annabel Lee is?”

“Hush! don’t speak so loud. Annabel Lee – ” Nancy’s eyes filled with tears – “no girl in the college was so popular.”

“Why do you say *was*? and why do you cry?”

“I did not know that I cried. Annabel Lee is dead.”

“Oh!”

Priscilla walked into her room, and Nancy went back to Maggie Oliphant.

Chapter Four

An Eavesdropper

The students at St. Benet's were accustomed to unlimited licence in the matter of sitting up at night. At a certain hour the electric lights were put out, but each girl was well supplied with candles, and could sit up and pursue her studies into the small hours, if she willed.

It was late when Priscilla left Maggie Oliphant's room on this first night, but, long as her journey had been, and tired as she undoubtedly felt, the events of the evening had excited her, and she did not care to go to bed. Her fire was now burning well, and her room was warm and cosy. She drew the bolt of her door, and, unlocking her trunk, began to unpack. She was a methodical girl, and well trained. Miss Rachel Peel had instilled order into Priscilla from her earliest days, and she now quickly disposed of her small but neat wardrobe. Her linen would just fit into the drawers of the bureau. Her two or three dresses and jackets were hung tidily away behind the curtain which formed her wardrobe.

Priscilla pushed her empty trunk against the wall, folded up the bits of string and paper which lay scattered about, and then, slowly undressing, she got into bed.

She undressed with a certain sense of luxuriousness and pleasure. Her room began to look charming to her now that her things were unpacked, and the first sharp pain of her home-sickness was greatly softened since she had fallen in love with Maggie Oliphant.

Priscilla had not often in the course of her life undressed by a fire, but then had she ever spent an evening like this one? All was fresh to her, new, exciting. Now she was really very tired, and the moment she laid her head on her pillow would doubtless be asleep.

She got into bed, and, putting out her candle, lay down. The firelight played on the pale blue walls, and lit up the bold design of the briar-roses, which ran round the frieze at the top of the room.

Priscilla wondered why she did not drop asleep at once. She felt vexed with herself when she discovered that each instant the chance of slumber was flying before her, that every moment her tired body became more restless and wide-awake. She could not help gazing at that scroll of briar-roses; she could not help thinking of the hand that had painted the flowers, of the girl whose presence had once made the room in which she now lay so charming.

Priscilla had not yet been twelve hours at St. Benet's, and yet almost every student she had met had spoken of Annabel Lee – had spoken of her with interest, with regret. One girl had gone further than this; she had breathed her name with bitter sorrow.

Priscilla wished she had not been put into this room. She felt absolutely nervous; she had a sense of usurping someone else's place, of turning somebody else out into the cold. She did not believe in ghosts, but she had an uncomfortable sensation, and it would not have greatly surprised her if Annabel had come gliding back in the night watches to put the finishing touches to those scrolls of wild flowers which ornamented the panels of the doors, and to the design of the briar-rose, which ran round the frieze of the room. Annabel might come in, and pursue this work in stealthy spirit fashion, and then glide up to her, and ask her to get out of this little white bed, and let the strange visitor, to whom it had once belonged, rest in it herself once more.

Annabel Lee! It was a queer name – a wild, bewitching sort of a name – the name of a girl in a song.

Priscilla knew many of Poe's strange songs, and she found herself now murmuring some words which used to fascinate her long ago: —

“And the angels, not half so happy in heaven,
Went envying her and me;
Yes! that was the reason (as all men know

In this kingdom by the sea)
That the wind came out of the cloud by night,
Chilling and killing my Annabel Lee!

“But our love it was stronger by far than the love
Of those who were older than we, —
Of many far wiser than we;
And neither the angels in heaven above,
Nor the demons down under the sea,
Can ever dissever my soul from the soul
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee.”

Some ashes fell from the expiring fire; Priscilla jumped up in bed with a start. Her heart was beating fast. She thought of Maggie's exquisite face. She remembered it as she had seen it that night when they were sitting by the fire, as she had seen it last, when it turned so white, and the eyes blazed at her in anger.

Priscilla stretched out her hand for a box of matches. She would light her candle, and, as there was no chance of her going to sleep, sit up, put her dressing-jacket on, and begin to write a long letter home to Aunt Raby and to her little sisters. Such methodical work would calm nerves not often so highly strung.

She rose, and fetching her neat little leather writing-case from where she had placed it on the top of her bureau, prepared to open it.

The little case was locked. Priscilla went over to her curtained wardrobe, pushed it aside, and felt in the pocket of the dress she had worn that day for her purse. It was not there. Within that purse the little key was safely hiding, but the purse itself was nowhere to be found.

Priscilla looked all round the room. In vain; the neat brown-leather purse, which held the key, some very precious memoranda of different sorts, and her small store of worldly wealth, was nowhere to be found.

She stood still for a moment in perplexity. All her nervous fears had now completely vanished; a real calamity and a grave one stared her in the face. Suppose her purse were gone? Suppose it had been stolen? The very small supply of money which that purse contained was most precious to Priscilla. It seemed to her that nothing could well be more terrible than for her now to have to apply to Aunt Raby for fresh funds. Aunt Raby had stinted herself dreadfully to get Priscilla's modest little outfit together, and now – oh, she would rather starve than appeal to her again.

Suddenly as she stood in the middle of her room a memory came back to her. It was the recollection of a very trivial incident. She remembered something dropping on the floor as she sat by Maggie's side at dinner. She had felt too nervous and miserable at the time to take any notice of the slight sound made by the fall, but now it returned vividly to her memory. She was sure that her purse must have dropped out of her pocket at that moment, and was convinced that it was now lying quietly under the table where she had sat.

Priscilla felt far too excited to wait until the morning to make herself sure on this point. No; happen what might, she would set her fears at rest now, and find her way somehow through the strange and sleeping house until she discovered her lost treasure.

Partly re-dressing, she took her candle in her hand, and softly unhasped her door. It was a well-oiled lock, and made no click or noise of any kind as she turned the handle. When she opened the door wide it did not creak. The long corridor outside had a stone floor, and was richly carpeted. No fear of treacherous, creaking boards here. Priscilla prepared to walk briskly down the length of the corridor, when she was arrested by seeing a light streaming out of Maggie Oliphant's room.

The electric lights were all extinguished, and this light alone shone like a ray in the darkness.

Prissie stood still, with a gasp of dismay. She did not want Maggie to hear her now. She would have been distressed at Maggie being acquainted with her carelessness. She felt sure that a girl like Maggie Oliphant could never understand what a little purse, which only contained a sovereign or two, would mean to her.

On tiptoe, and shading the candle with her hand, she stole past the partly open door. A rich tapestry curtain hung at the other side, and Maggie doubtless thought the door was shut.

Priscilla had almost gone past the open door, when her steps were again arrested by the sound of voices. Someone said "Priscilla Peel," and then someone else laughed.

Priscilla stood perfectly still. Of course she had no right to listen, but she did; she waited breathless, in an agony of expectation, for the next words.

"I would not be jealous if I were you, Nancy," said Maggie's lazy, sweet voice. "The poor girl is as queer as her name, but it gives me a kind of aesthetic pleasure to be good to people. *You* have no cause to be jealous, sweet pet."

Priscilla raised one trembling hand, and noiselessly put out her candle. Her feet seemed rooted to the spot.

Nancy murmured something, which Priscilla could not hear. Then there was the sound of one girl kissing another, and Maggie's light laugh was heard again.

"The unfortunate girl has fallen in love with you, there's no doubt about that, Maggie," said Nancy.

"Well, my dear, she'll get over that little fever presently. When I'm kind to them, they all have it. I believe I am gracious to them just because I like to see that grateful, affectionate expression in their eyes. The fact is, Nance, I have a perfectly crazy desire to excite love."

"But do you give love, Maggie? Do you ever give it back in return?"

"Sometimes. I don't know, I believe I am rather fond of you, for instance."

"Maggie, was Geoffrey Hammond at St. Hilda's this afternoon?"

"I can't possibly say," replied Maggie, in a cold voice. Then she added excitedly, "I don't believe the door is shut! You are so careless, Nannie, so indifferent to the fact that there *may* be eavesdroppers about."

Priscilla crept back to her room. She had forgotten all about her purse; every other feeling was completely swallowed up in a burning, choking sense of anger.

Chapter Five

Why Priscilla Peel went to St. Benet's

Priscilla had received a shock, and hers was not the sort of nature to take such a blow easily. She was a reserved girl, but her feelings were deep, her affections very strong. Priscilla had a rather commonplace past, but it was the sort of past to foster and deepen the peculiarities of her character. Her father had died when she was twelve, her mother when she was fourteen. They were north-country folk, and they possessed all the best characteristics of their class. They were rigidly upright people, they never went in debt; they considered luxuries bad for the soul, and the smaller refinements of life altogether unnecessary.

Mr Peel managed to save a little money out of his earnings. He took year by year these savings to the nearest County Bank, and invested them to the best of his ability. The bank broke, and in one fell stroke he lost all the savings of a life. This affected his health, and he never held up his head or recovered his vigour of mind and body again.

He died, and two years afterwards his wife followed him. Priscilla was then fourteen, and there were three little sisters several years younger. They were merry little children, strong, healthy, untouched by care. Priscilla, on the contrary, was grave, and looked much older than her years.

On the night their mother was buried, Aunt Rachel Peel, their father's sister, came from her home far away on the borders of Devonshire, and told the four desolate children that she was going to take them away to live on her little farm with her.

Aunt Raby spoke in a very frank manner. She concealed nothing.

"It's only fair to tell you, Prissie," she said, addressing the tall, gawky girl, who stood with her hands folded in front of her – "it's only fair to tell you that hitherto I've just made two ends meet for one mouth alone, and how I'm to fill four extra ones the Lord knows, but I don't. Still, I'm going to try, for it shall never be said that Andrew Peel's children wanted bread while his sister, Rachel Peel, lived."

"We have none of us big appetites," said Priscilla, after a long, solemn pause; "we can do with very little food – very little. The only one who ever is *really* hungry is Hattie."

Aunt Raby looked up at the pale face, for Prissie was taller than her aunt even then, and said in a shocked voice —

"Good gracious, child! do you think I'd stint one of you? You ought all to be hearty, and I hope you will be. No, no, it isn't that, Prissie, but there'll be no luxuries, so don't you expect them."

"I don't want them," answered Priscilla.

The children all went to Devonshire, and Aunt Raby toiled, as perhaps no woman had ever toiled before, to put bread into their mouths. Katie had a fever, which made her pale and thin, and took away that look of robustness which had characterised the little Yorkshire maiden. Nobody thought about the children's education, and they might have grown up without any were it not for Priscilla, who taught them what she knew herself. Nobody thought Priscilla clever; she had no brilliance about her in any way, but she had a great gift for acquiring knowledge. Wherever she went she picked up a fresh fact, or a fresh fancy, or a new idea, and these she turned over and over in her active, strong, young brain, until she assimilated them, and made them part of herself.

Amongst the few things that had been saved from her early home there was a box of her father's old books, and as these comprised several of the early poets and essayists, she might have gone farther and fared worse.

One day the old clergyman who lived at a small vicarage near called to see Miss Peel. He discovered Priscilla deep over Carlyle's "History of the French Revolution." The young girl had become absorbed in the fascination of the wild and terrible tale. Some of the horror of it had got into her eyes as she raised them to return Mr Hayes' courteous greeting. His attention was arrested by

the look she gave him. He questioned her about her reading, and presently offered to help her. From this hour Priscilla made rapid progress. She was not taught in the ordinary fashion, but she was being really educated. Her life was full now; she knew nothing about the world, nothing about society. She had no ambitions, and she did not trouble herself to look very far ahead. The old classics which she studied from morning till night abundantly satisfied her really strong intellectual nature.

Mr Hayes allowed her to talk with him, even to argue points with him. He always liked her to draw her own conclusions; he encouraged her really original ideas; he was proud of his pupil, and he grew fond of her. It was not Priscilla's way to say a word about it, but she soon loved the old clergyman as if he were her father.

Some time between her sixteenth and seventeenth birthday that awakening came which altered the whole course of her life. It was a summer's day. Priscilla was seated in the old wainscotted parlour of the cottage, devouring a book lent to her by Mr Hayes on the origin of the Greek Drama, and occasionally bending to kiss little Katie, who sat curled up in her arms, when the two elder children rushed in with the information that Aunt Raby had suddenly lain flat down in the hayfield, and they thought she was asleep.

Prissie tumbled her book in one direction, and Katie in the other. In a moment she was kneeling by Miss Peel's side.

"What is it, Aunt Raby?" she asked, tenderly. "Are you ill?"

The tired woman opened her eyes slowly.

"I think I fainted, dear love," she said. "Perhaps it was the heat of the sun."

Priscilla managed to get her back into the house. She grew better presently, and seemed something like herself, but that evening the aunt and niece had a long talk, and the next day Prissie went up to see Mr Hayes.

"I am interested," he said, when he saw her enter the room, "to see how you have construed that passage in Cicero, Priscilla. You know I warned you of its difficulty."

"Oh, please, sir, don't," said Prissie, holding up her hand with an impatient movement, which she now and then found herself indulging in. "I don't care if Cicero is at the bottom of the sea. I don't want to speak about him, or think about him. His day is over, mine is – oh, sir, I beg your pardon."

"Granted, my dear child. Sit down, Prissie. I will forgive your profane words about Cicero, for I see you are excited. What is the matter?"

"I want you to help me, Mr Hayes. Will you help me? You have always been my dear friend, my good friend."

"Of course I will help you. What is wrong? Speak to me fully."

"Aunt Raby fainted in the hayfield yesterday."

"Indeed? It was a warm day; I am truly concerned. Would she like to see me? Is she better to-day?"

"She is quite well to-day – quite well for the time."

"My dear Priscilla, what a tragic face! Your Aunt Raby is not the first woman who has fainted, and got out of her faint again and been none the worse."

"That is just the point, Mr Hayes. Aunt Raby has got out of her faint, but she *is* the worse."

Mr Hayes looked hard into his pupil's face. There was no beauty in it. The mouth was wide, the complexion dull, the features irregular. Even her eyes – and perhaps they were Prissie's best point – were neither large nor dark; but an expression now filled those eyes and lingered round that mouth which made the old rector feel solemn.

He took one of the girl's thin unformed hands between his own.

"My dear child," he said, "something weighs on your mind. Tell your old friend – your almost father – all that is in your heart."

Thus begged to make a confidence, Priscilla did tell a commonplace, and yet tragic, story. Aunt Raby was affected with an incurable illness. It would not kill her soon; she might live for years, but

every year she would grow a little weaker, and a little less capable of toil. As long as she lived the little farm belonged to her, but whenever she died it would pass to a distant cousin. Whenever Aunt Raby died, Priscilla and her three sisters would be penniless.

“So I have come to you,” continued Prissie, “to say that I must take steps at once to enable me to earn money. I must support Hattie and Rose and Katie whenever Aunt Raby goes. I must earn money as soon as it is possible for a girl to do so, and I must stop dreaming and thinking of nothing but books, for perhaps books and I will have little to say to each other in future.”

“That would be sad,” replied Mr Hayes, “for that would be taking a directly opposite direction to the path which Providence clearly intends you to walk in.”

Priscilla raised her eyes, and looked earnestly at the old rector. Then, clasping her hands tightly together, she said with suppressed passion —

“Why do you encourage me to be selfish, Mr Hayes?”

“I will not,” he replied, answering her look; “I will listen patiently to all you have to say. How do you propose to earn bread for yourself and your sisters?”

“I thought of dressmaking.”

“Um! Did you – make – the gown you have on?”

“Yes,” replied Priscilla, looking down at her ungainly homespun garment.

The rector rose to his feet, and smiled in the most sweet and benevolent way.

“I am no judge of such matters,” he said, “and I may be wrong. But my impression is that the style and cut of that dress would scarcely have a large demand in fashionable quarters.”

“Oh, sir!” Prissie blushed all over. “You know I said I should have to learn.”

“My dear child,” said Mr Hayes, firmly, “when it becomes a question of a woman earning her bread, let her turn to that path where promise lies. There is no promise in the fit of that gown, Prissie. But here – here there is much.”

He touched her big forehead lightly with his hand.

“You must not give up your books, my dear,” he said, “for, independently of the pleasure they afford, they will also give you bread-and-butter. Go home now, and let me think over matters. Come again to-morrow. I may have important things to say to you.”

From this conversation came the results which, shortly after the completion of her eighteenth year, made Priscilla an inmate of St. Benet’s far-famed College for Women. Mr Hayes left no stone unturned to effect his object. He thought Priscilla could do brilliantly as a teacher, and he resolved that for this purpose she should have the advantages which a collegiate life alone could offer to her. He himself prepared her for her entrance examination, and he and Aunt Raby between them managed the necessary funds to give the girl a three-years’ life as a student in these halls of learning.

Prissie knew very little about the money part of the scheme. She only guessed what had become of Aunt Raby’s watch and chain; and a spasm crossed her face when one day she happened to see that Aunt Raby’s poor little jewel case was empty. The jewels and the watch could certainly not fetch much, but they provided Prissie with a modest little outfit, and Mr Hayes had got a grant from a loan society, which further lightened expenses for all parties.

Priscilla bade her sisters, her aunt, and the old rector good-bye, and started on her new life with courage.

Chapter Six

College Life

The routine of life at St. Benet's was something as follows: —

The dressing-bell was rung at seven, and all the students were expected to meet in the chapel for prayers at eight. Nothing was said if they did not appear; no reproofs were uttered, and no inquiries made; but the good-fellowship between the students and the dons was so apparent in the three Halls, that known wishes were always regarded, and, as a rule, there were few absentees.

The girls went to chapel in their white-straw sailor-hats, simply trimmed with a broad band of ribbon of the college colours, green with a narrow stripe of gold. Breakfast immediately followed chapel; tea and coffee and different cold meats were placed on the side-tables, and the girls helped themselves to what they pleased.

The great event at breakfast was the post. Each student, when she entered the breakfast-hall, would make an eager rush to the side-table where the letters were neatly placed. During breakfast these were read and chatted over. The whole meal was most informal, and seldom lasted more than a quarter of an hour.

After breakfast the notice-board in the large entrance-hall was visited and eagerly scanned, for it contained a detailed account of the hours for the different lectures, and the names of the lecturers who would instruct the students during the day. By the side of the large official notice-board hung another, which was read with quite as deep interest. This contained particulars of the meetings of the different clubs and societies for pleasure or profit got up by the girls themselves.

On the morning after her arrival, Priscilla, with the other students, read the contents of these two boards, and then, in the company of a Fresher, nearly as shy as herself, she wandered about the lovely grounds which surrounded Heath Hall until nine o'clock, when lectures began.

Lectures continued without interruption until lunch-time, a meal which was taken very much when the girls pleased. The time allowed for this light midday refreshment was from half-past twelve to two. The afternoons were mostly given up to games and gymnastics, although occasionally there were more lectures, and the more studious of the girls spent a considerable part of the time studying in their own rooms.

Tea was the convivial meal of the day; to this the girls invited outside friends and acquaintances, and, as a rule, they always took it in their own rooms.

Dinner was at half-past six, and from half-past seven to half-past nine was usually the time when the different clubs and societies met.

There was a regularity and yet a freedom about the life; invisible bounds were prescribed, beyond which no right-minded or conscientious girl cared to venture, but the rules were really very few. Students might visit their friends in Kingsdene, and receive them at the college. They might entertain them at luncheon or dinner, or at tea in their own rooms, at a fixed charge; and provided the friends left at a certain hour, and the girls themselves asked for leave of absence when they wished to remain out, and mentioned the place to which they proposed to go, no questions were asked, and no objections offered.

They were expected to return to the college not later than eleven at night, and one invitation to go out in the week was, as a rule, the most they ever accepted.

Into this life Priscilla came, fresh from the Devonshire farm and from all the pursuits and interests which had hitherto formed her world. She had made a very firm niche for herself in Aunt Raby's old cottage, and the dislodgment therefrom caused her for the time such mental disquiet and so many nervous and queer sensations that her pain was often acute and her sense of awkwardness considerable.

Priscilla's best in her early life always seemed but a poor affair, and she certainly neither looked nor was at her best at first here. After a few days, however, she fitted into her new grooves, took up the line of study which she intended to pursue, and was quickly absorbed in all the fascinations which it offered to a nature like hers.

Her purse was restored to her on the morning after her arrival, and neither Maggie Oliphant nor Nancy Banister ever guessed that she had overheard some words of theirs on the night of her arrival, and that these had put bitterness into her heart and nearly destroyed her faith in her fellow-students. Both Maggie and Nance made several overtures of kindness to Prissie, but the cold manner which was more or less habitual to her never thawed, and, after a time, they left her alone. There is no saying what might have happened to Prissie had she never overheard this conversation. As it was, however, after the first shock it gave her courage.

She said to herself —

"I should think very little of myself if I did not despise a girl like Miss Oliphant. Is it likely I should care to imitate one whom I despise? There was a brief, dreadful hour when I absolutely pined to have pretty things in my room as she has in hers; now I can do without them. My room shall remain bare and unadorned. In this state it will at least look unique."

It did. The other students who lived in the same corridor came to visit Priscilla in the free and easy manner which characterised them, and made remarks the reverse of flattering. When *was* she going to put her pictures up? Miss Day would be delighted to help her whenever she chose to do it. When did she intend to go down to Kingsdene to order her easy-chairs and little Japanese tables, and rugs, and the other small but necessary articles which would be required to make her room habitable?

For several days Priscilla turned these inquiries aside. She blushed, stammered, looked awkward, and spoke of something else. At last, however, she summoned up courage, and, once for all, delivered herself from her tormentors. She did that remarkably brave thing which sometimes very nervous people can brace themselves to do.

It was evening, and Miss Day, Miss Marsh, and Nancy Banister had all come in for a few minutes to see Priscilla on their way to their own rooms.

"Do come and cocoa with me to-night, Miss Peel," said Miss Day. "You're so dreadfully unsociable, not a bit like an ordinary St. Benet's girl. If you go on in this fashion you'll be moped to death before your first term is over."

"I am accustomed to a very quiet life," responded Priscilla, "and I want to work; I have come here to work."

"Dear, dear! anyone would suppose you were going in for a tripos. If this were your last term I could understand it — but your first!"

It was Miss Marsh who said these words. She was a bright-eyed, merry-looking girl, the reverse of over-studious herself.

"Oh, come along, dear: I'll give you such a delicious cup of cocoa," said Miss Day.

She crossed the room, and tried to link her hand affectionately in Prissie's arm. Miss Peel drew back a step.

"Thank you," she said, "but I — I — cannot come."

"I must say you have a blunt way of refusing," said Miss Day. She felt inclined to be offended, but Nancy Banister, who was standing by, and had not hitherto spoken, bestowed a quick glance of approval on Priscilla, and then said something soothing to Miss Day.

"May I cocoa with you instead, Annie?" she said. "I am afraid no one can accuse me of killing myself with work, but we all respect earnest workers — we must. It is for them St. Benet's is really meant. It was endowed for them, and built for them, and we poor drones must not throw disparaging remarks on the busy bees."

"Oh, nonsense!" said Miss Marsh; "St. Benet's was made for sociability as well as study, and I have no patience with the students who don't try to combine the two. By the way," she added, turning

round, and speaking in a rather impertinent voice to Priscilla, "I sent you a message to say I was going down to Kingsdene this afternoon, and would be happy to take you with me if you would care to visit Spilman's."

"Thank you," said Priscilla, "I got your note just too late to answer it. I was going to speak to you about it," she added.

"Then you would have come?"

Priscilla's face grew very red.

"No, I should not have come."

It was Miss Marsh's turn to get red.

"Come! Annie," she exclaimed, turning to Miss Day, "we had better waste no more time here. Miss Banister, we'll see you presently, won't we? Good-night, Miss Peel. Perhaps you don't mind my saying something very frank?"

"I do," said Priscilla, "but that won't prevent your saying it, will it?"

"I don't think it will. After you have been at St. Benet's a little longer you will know that we not only appreciate cleverness and studious ways, but also obliging and sociable and friendly manners; and – and – pretty rooms – rooms with easy-chairs, and comfortable lounges, and the thousand and one things which give one a feeling of home. Take my advice, Miss Peel, there's no use fighting against the tide. You'll have to do as others do in the long run, and you may as well do it at once. That is my plain opinion, and I should not have given it to you, if I had not thought you needed it. Good-night."

"No, stop a minute," said Priscilla. Every scrap of colour had left her face, every trace of nervousness her manner. She walked before the two girls to the door, and closed it. "Please stay just for a minute longer, Miss Day and Miss Marsh, and you too, Miss Banister, if you will."

She went across the room again, and, opening the top drawer of her bureau, took out her purse. Out of the purse she took a key. The key fitted a small padlock, and the padlock belonged to her trunk. She unlocked her empty trunk and opened it.

"There," she said, turning to the girls – "there," she continued, "you will be good enough to notice that there are no photographs concealed in this trunk, no pictures, no prints." She lifted the tray. "Empty, you see," she added, pointing with her hand to the lower portion of the trunk – "nothing here to make my room pretty, and cosy, and home-like." Then she shut the trunk again and locked it, and going up to where the three girls stood, gazing at her in bewilderment and some alarm, she unfastened her purse, and turned all its contents into the palm of her hand.

"Look, Miss Marsh," she said, turning to the girl who had spoken last. "You may count what is here. One sovereign, one half-sovereign, two or three shillings, some pence. Would this money go far at Spilman's, do you think?"

Priscilla put it all slowly back again into her purse. Her face was still absolutely colourless. She laid the purse on the top of her bureau.

"I do not suppose," she said, in a low, sad voice, "that I am the sort of girl who often comes to a place of this sort. I am poor, and I have got to work hard, and I have no time for pleasure. Nevertheless," she added – and now a great wave of colour swept over her face, and her eyes were lit up, and she had a sensation of feeling quite glad, and strong, and happy – "I am not going away because I am poor, and I am not going to mind what anyone thinks of me as long as I do right. My room must stay empty and bare, because I have no money to make it full and beautiful. And do you think that I would ask those – those who sent me here – to add one feather's weight to their cares and expenses, to give me money to buy beautiful things because I am afraid of you? No, I should be *awfully* afraid to do that; but I am not afraid of you."

Priscilla opened the drawer of her bureau and put her little light purse back again in its hiding-place.

"Good-night, Miss Peel," said Miss Day, in a thin, small kind of voice.

“Good-night, Miss Peel,” said Miss Marsh. The girls went gently out of the room. They closed the door behind them, without making any noise. Nancy Banister remained behind. She came up to Priscilla, and kissed her.

“You are brave,” she said. “I admire you. I – I – am proud of you. I am glad to know that a girl like you has come to live here.”

“Don’t – don’t,” said poor Prissie. Her little burst of courage had deserted her. She covered her face with her trembling hands. She did not want Nancy Banister to see that her eyes were full of tears.

Chapter Seven

In Miss Oliphant's Room

"My dear," said Nancy Banister that same evening – "my dear and beloved Maggie, we have both been guilty of a huge mistake."

"What is that?" asked Miss Oliphant. She was leaning back in a deep easy-chair, and Nancy, who did not care for luxurious seats, had perched herself on a little stool at her feet. Nancy was a small, nervous-looking person; she had a zealous face, and eager, almost too active movements. Nancy was the soul of bustling good-nature, of brightness and kindness. She often said that Maggie Oliphant's laziness rested her.

"What is it?" said Maggie, again. "How are we in the wrong, Nance?"

She lifted her dimpled hand as she spoke, and contemplated it with a slow, satisfied sort of smile.

"We have made a mistake about Miss Peel, that is all; she is a very noble girl."

"Oh, my dear Nance! Poor little Puritan Prissie! What next?"

"It is all very fine to call her names," replied Nancy – here she sprang to her feet – "but *I* couldn't do what she did. Do you know that she absolutely and completely turned the tables on that vulgar Annie Day and that pushing, silly little Lucy Marsh. I never saw any two look smaller or poorer than those two when they skedaddled out of her room. Yes, that's the word – they skedaddled to the door, both of them, looking as limp as a cotton dress when it has been worn for a week, and one almost treading on the other's heels; and I do not think Prissie will be worried by them any more."

"Really, Nancy, you look quite pretty when you are excited! Now, what did this wonderful Miss Peel do? Did she box the ears of those two detestable girls? If so, she has my hearty congratulations."

"More than that, Maggie – that poor, little, meek, awkward, slim creature absolutely demolished them. Oh! she did it in such a fine, simple, unworldly sort of way. I only wish you had seen her! They were twitting her about not going in for all the fun here, and, above everything, for keeping her room so bare and unattractive. You know she has been a fortnight here to-day, and she has not got an extra thing – not one. There isn't a room in the Hall like hers – it's so bare and unhomelike. What's the matter, Maggie?"

"You needn't go on, Nancy: if it's about the room, I don't want to hear it. You know I can't – I can't bear it."

Maggie's lips were trembling, her face was white, she shaded her eyes with her hand.

"Oh, my darling, I am so sorry. I forgot – I really did! There, you must try and think it was any room. What she did was all the same. Well, those girls had been twitting her. I expect she's had a nice fortnight of it! She turned very white, and at last her blood was up, and she just gave it to them. She opened her little trunk. I really could have cried. It was such a poor, pathetic sort of receptacle to be capable of holding all one's worldly goods, and she showed it to them – empty! 'You see,' she said, 'that I have no pictures nor ornaments here!' Then she turned the contents of her purse into her hand. I think, Maggie, she had about thirty shillings in the world, and she asked Lucy Marsh to count her money, and inquired how many things she thought it would purchase at Spilman's. Then, Maggie, Priscilla turned on them. Oh, she did not look plain, then, nor awkward either. Her eyes had such a splendid, good, brave sort of light in them. And she said she had come here to work, and she meant to work, and her room must stay bare, for she had no money to make it anything else. 'But,' she said, 'I am not afraid of you, but I *am* afraid of hurting those' – whoever 'those' are – 'those' – oh, with such a ring on the word – 'who have sent me here!'

"After that the two girls skedaddled; they had had enough of her, and I expect, Maggie, your little Puritan Prissie will be left in peace in the future."

“Don’t call her my little Puritan,” said Maggie. “I have nothing to say to her.”

Maggie was leaning back again in her chair now; her face was still pale, and her soft eyes looked troubled.

“I wish you wouldn’t tell me heroic stories, Nancy,” she remarked, after a pause. “They make me feel so uncomfortable. If Priscilla Peel is going to be turned into a sort of heroine, she’ll be much more unbearable than in her former character.”

“Oh, Maggie, I wish you wouldn’t talk in that reckless way, nor pretend that you hate goodness. You know you adore it – you know you do! You know you are far and away the most lovable and bewitching, and the – the very best girl at St. Benet’s.”

“No, dear little Nance, you are quite mistaken. Perhaps I’m bewitching – I suppose to a certain extent I am, for people always tell me so – but I’m *not* lovable, and I’m *not* good. There, my dear, do let us turn from that uninteresting person – Maggie Oliphant. And so, Nancy, you are going to worship Priscilla Peel in future?”

“Oh, dear no! that’s not my way. But I’m going to respect her very much. I think we have both rather shunned her lately, and I *did* feel sure at first that you meant to be very kind to her, Maggie.”

Miss Oliphant yawned. It was her way to get over emotion very quickly. A moment before her face had been all eloquent with feeling; now its expression was distinctly bored, and her lazy eyes were not even open to their full extent.

“Perhaps I found her stupid,” she said, “and so for that reason dropped her. Perhaps I would have continued to be kind if she had reciprocated attentions, but she did not. I am glad now, very glad, that we are unlikely to be friends, for, after what you have just told me, I should probably find her insupportable. Are you going, Nancy?”

“Yes, I promised to have cocoa with Annie Day. I had almost forgotten. Good-night, Maggie.”

Nancy shut the door softly behind her, and Maggie closed her eyes for a moment with a sigh of relief.

“It’s nice to be alone,” she said, softly, under her breath, “it’s nice, and yet it isn’t nice. Nancy irritated me dreadfully this evening. I don’t like stories about good people. I don’t wish to think about good people. I am determined that I will not allow my thoughts to dwell on that unpleasant Priscilla Peel, and her pathetic poverty, and her burst of heroics. It is too trying to hear footsteps in that room. No, I will not think of that room, nor of its inmate. Now, if I could only go to sleep!”

Maggie curled herself up in her luxurious chair, arranged a soft pillow under her head, and shut her eyes. In this attitude she made a charming picture: her thick, black lashes lay heavily on her pale cheeks; her red lips were slightly parted; her breathing came quietly. By-and-by repose took the place of tension – her face looked as if it were cut out of marble. The excitement and unrest, which her words had betrayed, vanished utterly; her features were beautiful, but almost expressionless.

This lasted for a short time, perhaps ten minutes; then a trivial circumstance, the falling of a coal in the grate, disturbed the light slumber of the sleeper. Maggie stirred restlessly, and turned her head. She was not awake, but she was dreaming. A faint rose tint visited each cheek, and she clenched one hand, then moved it, and laid it over the other. Presently tears stoic from under the black eyelashes, and rolled down her cheeks. She opened her eyes wide; she was awake again; unutterable regret, remorse, which might never be quieted, filled her face.

Maggie rose from her chair, and, going across the room, sat down at her bureau. She turned a shaded lamp, so that the light might fall upon the pages of a book she was studying, and, pushing her hands through her thick hair, she began to read a passage from the splendid *Prometheus Vincit* of Aeschylus —

“O divine ether, O swift-winged winds!”

She muttered the opening lines to herself, then turning the page began to translate from the Greek with great ease and fluency:

“O divine ether, and swift-winged winds,
O flowing rivers, and ocean with countless-dimpling smile,
Earth, mother of all, and the all-seeing circle of the sun,
to you I call;
Behold me, and the things that I; a god, suffer at the hands of gods.
Behold the wrongs with which I am worn away, and which I shall suffer
through endless time.
Such is the shameful bondage which the new ruler of the Blessed Ones
has
invented for me.
Alas! Alas! I bewail my present and future misery – ”

Anyone who had seen Maggie in her deep and expressionless sleep but a few minutes before would have watched her now with a sensation of surprise. This queer girl was showing another phase of her complex nature. Her face was no longer lacking in expression, no longer stricken with sorrow, nor harrowed with unavailing regret. A fine fire filled her eyes; her brow, as she pushed back her hair, showed its rather massive proportions. Now, intellect and the triumphant delight of overcoming a mental difficulty reigned supreme in her face. She read on without interruption for nearly an hour. At the end of that time her cheeks were burning like two glowing crimson roses.

A knock came at her door; she started and turned round petulantly.

“It’s just my luck,” muttered Maggie. “I’d have got the sense of that whole magnificent passage in another hour. It was beginning to fill me: I was getting satisfied – now it’s all over! I’d have had a good night if that knock hadn’t come – but now – now I am Maggie Oliphant, the most miserable girl at St. Benet’s, once again.”

The knock was repeated. Miss Oliphant sprang to her feet.

“Come in,” she said in a petulant voice.

The handle of the door was slowly turned, the tapestry curtain moved forward, and a little fair-haired girl, with an infantile expression of face, and looking years younger than her eighteen summers, tripped a few steps into the room.

“I beg your pardon, Maggie,” she said. “I had not a moment to come sooner – not one, really. That stupid Miss Turner chose to raise the alarm for the fire brigade; of course I had to go, and I’ve only just come back and changed my dress.”

“You ought to be in bed, Rosalind: it’s past eleven o’clock.”

“Oh, as if that mattered! I’ll go in a minute. How cosy you look here.”

“My dear, I am not going to keep you out of your beauty sleep. You can admire my room another time. If you have a message for me, Rosalind, let me have it, and then – oh, cruel word, but I must say it, my love – Go!”

Rosalind Merton had serene baby-blue eyes; they looked up now full at Maggie. Then her dimpled little hand slid swiftly into the pocket of her dress, came out again with a quick, little, frightened dart, and deposited a square envelope with some manly, writing on it on the bureau, where Maggie had been studying *Prometheus Vincit*. The letter covered the greater portion of the open page. It seemed to Maggie as if the Greek play had suddenly faded and gone out of sight behind a curtain.

“There,” said Rosalind, “that’s for you. I was at Kingsdene to-day – and – I – I said you should have it, and I – I promised that I’d *help* you, Maggie. I – yes – I promised. I said I would help you, if you’d let me.”

“Thank you,” replied Miss Oliphant, in a lofty tone. The words came out of her lips with the coldness of ice. “And if I need you – I – promise – to ask your help. Where did you say you met Mr

Hammond?” Maggie took up her letter, and opened it slowly. “At Spilman’s; he was buying something for his room. He – ” Rosalind blushed all over her face.

Maggie took her letter out of its envelope. She looked at the first two or three words, then laid it, open as it was, on the table.

“Thank you, Rosalind,” she said in her usual tone. “It was kind of you to bring this, certainly; but Mr Hammond would have done better – yes, undoubtedly better – had he sent his letter by post. There would have been no mystery about it then, and I should have received it at least two hours ago. Thank you, Rosalind, all the same – good-night.” Rosalind Merton stepped demurely out of the room. In the corridor, however, a change came over her small childish face. Her blue eyes became full of angry flame, and she clenched her baby hand and shook it in the direction of the closed door.

“Oh, Maggie Oliphant, what a deceiver you are!” she murmured. “You think that I’m a baby, and notice nothing, but I’m on the alert now, and I’ll watch – and watch. I don’t love you any longer, Maggie Oliphant. Who loves being snubbed? Oh, of course, you pretend you don’t care about that letter! But I know you *do* care; and I’ll get hold of all your secrets before many weeks are over, see if I don’t!”

Chapter Eight

The Kindest and Most Comforting Way

Maggie was once more alone. She stood quite still for nearly half a minute in the centre of her room. Her hands were clasped tightly together. The expression of her face and her attitude showed such intense feeling as to be almost theatrical. This was no acting, however; it was Maggie's nature to throw herself into attitudes before spectators or alone. She required some vent for all her passionate excitement, and what her girl-friends called Miss Oliphant's poses may have afforded her a certain measure of relief.

After standing still for these few seconds, she ran to the door and drew the bolt; then, sinking down once more in her easy-chair, she took up the letter which Rosalind Merton had brought her, and began to read the contents. Four sides of a sheet of paper were covered with small, close writing, the neat somewhat cramped hand which at that time characterised the men of St. Hilda's College.

Maggie's eyes seemed to fly over the writing; they absorbed the sense, they took the full meaning out of each word. At last all was known to her, burnt in, indeed, upon her brain.

She crushed the letter suddenly in one of her hands, then raised it to her lips and kissed it; then fiercely, as though she hated it, tossed it into the fire. After this she sat quiet, her hands folded meekly, her head slightly bent. The colour gradually left her cheeks. She looked dead tired and languid. After a time she arose, and, walking very slowly across her room, sat down by her bureau, and drew a sheet of paper before her. As she did so her eyes fell for a moment on the Greek play which had fascinated her an hour ago. She found herself again murmuring some lines from *Prometheus Vincit*: —

“O divine ether, and swift-winged winds —”

She interrupted herself with a petulant movement. “Folly!” she murmured, pushing the book aside. “Even glorious, great thoughts like those don't satisfy me. Whoever supposed they would? What was I given a heart for? Why does it beat so fiercely, and long, and love? and why is it wrong — wrong of me to love? Oh, Annabel Lee! oh, darling! if only your wretched Maggie Oliphant had never known you!”

Maggie dashed some heavy tears from her eyes, then, taking up her pen, she began to write.

“Heath Hall, —

“St. Benet's. —

“Dear Mr Hammond —

“I should prefer that you did not in future give letters for me to any of my friends here. I do not wish to receive them through the medium of any of my fellow-students. Please understand this. When you have anything to say to me, you can write in the ordinary course of post. I am not ashamed of any slight correspondence we may have together; but I refuse to countenance, or to be in any sense a party to, what may even seem underhand.

“I shall try to be at the Marshalls' on Sunday afternoon, but I have nothing to say in reply to your letter. My views are unalterable.

“Yours sincerely, —

“Margaret Oliphant.”

Maggie did not read the letter after she had written it. She put it into an envelope and directed it. Hers was a large and bold hand, and the address was swiftly written —

“Geoffrey Hammond, Esq,

“St. Hilda's,

“Kingsdene.”

She stamped her letter and, late as it was, took it down herself, and deposited it in the post-bag.

The next morning, when the students strolled in to breakfast, many pairs of eyes were raised with a new curiosity to watch Priscilla Peel. Even Maggie, as she drank her coffee, and munched a piece of dry toast, for she was a very poor eater, could not help flashing a keen and interested glance at the young girl as she came into the room.

Prissie was the reverse of fashionable in her attire; her neat brown cashmere dress had been made by Aunt Raby. The hemming, the stitching, the gathering, the frilling, which went to make up this useful garment were neat, were even exquisite; but then, Aunt Raby was not gifted with a stylish cut. Prissie's hair was smoothly parted, but the thick plait on the back of the neck was by no means artistically coiled. The girl's plain pale face was not set off by the severity of her toilet; there was no touch of spring or brightness anywhere, no look or note which should belong to one so young, unless it was the extreme thinness of her figure.

The curious eyes of the students were raised when she appeared, and one or two laughed and turned their heads away. They had heard of her exploit of the night before. Miss Day and Miss Marsh had repeated this good story. It had impressed them at the time, but they did not tell it to others in an impressive way, and the girls, who had not seen Prissie, but had only heard the tale, spoke of her to one another as an "insufferable little prig."

"Isn't it too absurd," said Rosalind Merton, sidling up to Maggie, and casting some disdainful glances at poor Priscilla, "the conceit of some people! Of all forms of conceit, preserve me from the priggish style."

"I don't understand you," said Maggie, raising her eyes and speaking in her lazy voice. "Are there any prigs about? I don't see them. Oh, Miss Peel," – she jumped up hastily – "won't you sit here by me? I have been reserving this place for you, for I have been so anxious to know if you would do me a kindness. Please sit down, and I'll tell you what it is. You needn't wait, Rosalind. What I have got to say is only for Miss Peel's ears."

Rosalind retired in dudgeon to the other end of the room, and, if the laughing and muttering continued, they now only reached Maggie and Priscilla in the form of very distant murmurs.

"How pale you look," said Maggie, turning to the girl, "and how cold you are! Yes, I am quite sure you are bitterly cold. Now you shall have a good breakfast. Let me help you. Please, do. I'll go to the side-table, and bring you something so tempting; wait and see."

"You mustn't trouble, really," began Prissie Miss Oliphant flashed a brilliant smile at her; Prissie found her words arrested, and, in spite of herself, her coldness began to thaw. Maggie ran over to the side-table, and Priscilla kept repeating under her breath —

"She's not true – she's beautiful, but she's false; she has the kindest, sweetest, most comforting way in the world, but she only does it for the sake of an aesthetic pleasure. I ought not to let her. I ought not to speak to her. I ought to go away, and have nothing to do with her proffers of goodwill, and yet somehow or other I can't resist her."

Maggie came back with some delicately carved chicken and ham, and a hot cup of delicious coffee.

"Is not this nice?" she said; "now eat it all up, and speak to me afterwards. Oh, how dreadfully cold you do look!"

"I feel cold – in spirit as well as physically," retorted Priscilla.

"Well, let breakfast warm you – and – and – a small dose of the tonic of sympathy, if I may dare to offer it."

Priscilla turned her eyes full upon Miss Oliphant.

"Do you mean it?" she said, in a choked kind of voice. "Is that quite true what you said just now?"

"True? What a queer child! Of course it is true. What do you take me for? Why should not I sympathise with you?"

“I want you to,” said Prissie. Tears filled her eyes; she turned her head away. Maggie gave her hand a squeeze.

“Now eat your breakfast,” she said. “I shall glance through my letters while you are busy.”

She leant back in her chair, and opened several envelopes. Priscilla ate her chicken and ham, drank her coffee, and felt the benefit of the double tonic which had been administered in so timely a fashion. It was one of Miss Oliphant’s peculiarities to inspire in those she wanted to fascinate absolute and almost unreasoning faith for the time being. Doubts would and might return in her absence, but in the sunshine of her particularly genial manner they found it hard to live.

After breakfast the girls were leaving the room together, when Miss Heath, the Principal of the Hall in which they resided, came into the room. She was a tall, stately woman of about thirty-five, and had seen very little of Priscilla since her arrival, but now she stopped to give both girls a special greeting. Her manners were very frank and pleasant.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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