

Meade L. T.

A World of Girls: The Story of a School



L. Meade

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Содержание

Chapter One	5
Chapter Two	7
Chapter Three	10
Chapter Four	13
Chapter Five	17
Chapter Six	19
Chapter Seven	21
Chapter Eight	25
Chapter Nine	28
Chapter Ten	31
Chapter Eleven	36
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	38

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Chapter One

“Good-Bye” to the Old Life

“Me want to see Hetty,” said an imperious baby voice.

“No, no; not this morning, Miss Nan, dear.”

“Me do want to see Hetty,” was the quick, impatient reply. And a sturdy indignant little face looked up at Nurse, to watch the effect of the last decisive words.

Finding no affirmative reply on Nurse’s placid face, the small lips closed firmly – two dimples came and went on two very round cheeks – the mischievous brown eyes grew full of laughter, and the next moment the little questioner had squeezed her way through a slightly open door, and was toddling down the broad stone stairs and across a landing to Hetty’s room. The room door was open, so the truant went in. A bed with the bedclothes all tossed about, a half worn-out slipper on the floor, a very untidy dressing-table met her eyes, but no Hetty.

“Me want Hetty, me do,” piped the treble voice, and then the little feet commenced a careful and watchful pilgrimage, the lips still firmly shut, the dimples coming and going, and the eyes throwing many upward glances in the direction of Nurse and the nursery.

No pursuit as yet, and great, great hope of finding Hetty somewhere in the down-stair regions. Ah, now, how good! those dangerous stairs had been descended, and the little voice calling in shrill tones for Hetty rang out in the wide hall.

“Let her come to me,” suddenly said an answering voice, and a girl of about twelve, dressed in deep mourning, suddenly opened the door of a small study and clasped the little one in her arms.

“So you have found me, my precious, my dearest! Brave, plucky little Nan, you have got away from Nurse and found me out! Come into the study, now, darling, and you shall have some breakfast.”

“Me want a bicky, Hetty,” said the baby voice; the round arms clasped Hester’s neck, but the brown eyes were already travelling eagerly over the breakfast table in quest of spoil for those rosy little lips.

“Here are two biscuits, Nan. Nan, look me in the face – here, sit steady on my knee; you lose me, don’t you Nan?”

“Course me do,” said the child.

“And I’m going away from you, Nan, darling. For months and months I won’t see anything of you. My heart will be always with you, and I shall think of you morning, noon, and night. I love no one as I love you, Nan. You will think of me, and love me too; won’t you, Nan?”

“Me will,” said Nan; “me want more bicky, Hetty.”

“Yes, yes,” answered Hester; “put your arms tight round my neck, and you shall have sugar, too. Tighter than that, Nan, and you shall have two lumps of sugar – oh, yes, you shall – I don’t care if it makes you sick – you shall have just what you want the last moment we are together.”

Baby Nan was only too pleased to crumple up a crape frill and to smear a black dress with sticky little fingers for the sake of the sugar which Hetty plied her with.

“More, Hetty,” she said; “me’ll squeeze ’oo vedy tight for more.”

On this scene Nurse unexpectedly entered.

“Well, I never! and so you found your way all downstairs by yourself, you little toddle. Now, Miss Hetty, I hope you haven’t been giving the precious lamb sugar; you know it never does suit the little dear. Oh, fie! baby; and what sticky hands! Miss Hetty, she has crumpled all your crape frills.”

“What matter?” said Hester. “I wanted a good hug, and I gave her three or four lumps. Babies won’t squeeze you tight for nothing. There, my Nancy, go back to Nurse. Nurse, take her away; I’ll break down in a minute if I see her looking at me with that little pout.”

Nurse took the child into her arms.

“Good-bye, Miss Hester, dear. Try to be a good girl at school. Take my word, missy – things won’t be as dark as they seem.”

“Good-bye, Nurse,” said Hester hastily. “Is that you, father? are you calling me?”

She gathered up her muff and gloves, and ran out of the little study where she had been making believe to eat breakfast. A tall, stern-looking man was in the hall, buttoning on an overcoat; a brougham waited at the door. The next moment Hester and her father were bowling away in the direction of the nearest railway station. Nan’s little chubby face had faded from view. The old square grey house, sacred to Hester because of Nan, had also disappeared; the avenue even was past, and Hester closed her bright brown eyes. She felt that she was being pushed out into a cold world, and was no longer in the same snug nest with Nan. An intolerable pain was at her heart; she did not glance at her father, who during their entire drive occupied himself over his morning paper. At last they reached the railway station, and just as Sir John Thornton was handing his daughter into a comfortable first-class carriage, marked “For Ladies only,” and was presenting her with her railway ticket and a copy of the last week’s illustrated newspaper, he spoke —

“The guard will take care of you, Hester. I am giving him full directions, and he will come to you at every station, and bring you tea or any refreshment you may require. This train takes you straight to Sefton, and Mrs Willis will meet you, or send for you there. Good-bye, my love; try to be a good girl, and curb your wild spirits. I hope to see you very much improved when you come home at Midsummer. Good-bye, dear, good-bye. Ah, you want to kiss me – well, just one kiss. There – oh, my dear! you know I have a great dislike to emotion in public.”

Sir John Thornton said this because a pair of arms had been flung suddenly round his neck, and two kisses imprinted passionately on his sallow cheek. A tear also rested on his cheek, but that he wiped away.

Chapter Two

Travelling Companions

The train moved rapidly on its way, and the girl in one corner of the railway carriage cried silently behind her crape veil. Her tears were very subdued, but her heart felt sore, bruised, indignant; she hated the idea of school-life before her, she hated the expected restraints and the probable punishments; she fancied herself going from a free life into a prison, and detested it accordingly.

Three months before, Hester Thornton had been one of the happiest, brightest, and merriest of little girls in – shire; but the mother who was her guardian angel, who had kept the frank and spirited child in check without appearing to do so, who had guided her by the magical power of love and not in the least by that of fear, had met her death suddenly by means of a carriage accident, and Hester and baby Nan were left motherless. Several little brothers and sisters had come between Hester and Nan, but from various causes they had all died in their infancy, and only the eldest and youngest of Sir John Thornton's family remained.

Hester's father was stern, uncompromising. He was a very just and upright man, but he knew nothing of the ways of children, and when Hester in her usual tom-boyish fashion climbed trees and tore her dresses, and rode bare-backed on one or two of his most dangerous horses, he not only tried a little sharp, and therefore useless, correction, but determined to take immediate steps to have his wild and rather unmanageable little daughter sent to a first-class school. Hester was on her way there now, and very sore was her heart, and indignant her impulses. Father's "good-bye" seemed to her to be the crowning touch to her unhappiness, and she made up her mind not to be good, not to learn her lessons, not to come home at Midsummer crowned with honours and reduced to an every-day and pattern little girl. No, she would be the same wild Hetty as of yore: and when father saw that school could do nothing for her, that it could never make her into a good and ordinary little girl, he would allow her to remain at home. At home there was, at least, Nan to love, and there was mother to remember.

Hetty was a child of the strongest feelings. Since her mother's death she had scarcely mentioned her name. When her father alluded to his wife, Hester ran out of the room: when the servants spoke of their late mistress, Hester turned pale, stamped her feet, and told them to be quiet.

"You are not worthy to speak of my mother," she electrified them all one day by exclaiming. "My mother is an angel now, and you – oh, you are not fit to breathe her name!"

Only to one person would Hetty ever voluntarily say a word about the beloved dead mother, and that was to little Nan. Nan said her prayers, as she expressed it, to Hetty now; and Hetty taught her a little phrase to use instead of the familiar "God bless mother." She taught the child to say, "Thank God for making mother into a beautiful angel;" and when Nan asked what an angel was, and how the cosy mother she remembered could be turned into one, Hester was beguiled into a soft and tearful talk, and she drew several lovely pictures of white-robed angels, until the little child was satisfied and said —

"Me like that, Hetty – me'll be angel too, Hetty, same as mamma."

These talks with Nan, however, did not come very often, and of late they had almost ceased, for Nan was only two and a half, and the strange sad fact remained that in three months she had almost forgotten her mother.

Hester on her way to school this morning cried for some time, then she sat silent, her crape veil still down, and her eyes watching furtively her fellow-passengers. They consisted of two rather fidgety old ladies, who wrapped themselves in rugs, were very particular on the question of hot bottles, and watched Hester in their turn with considerable curiosity and interest. Presently one of them offered the little girl a sandwich, which she was too proud or too shy to accept, although by this time she was feeling extremely hungry.

“You will, perhaps, prefer a cake, my dear?” said the good-natured little old lady. “My sister Agnes has got some delicious queen-cakes in her basket – will you eat one?”

Hester murmured a feeble assent, and the queen-cake did her so much good that she ventured to raise her crape veil and to look around her.

“Ah, that is much better,” said the first little old lady. “Come to this side of the carriage, my love; we are just going to pass through a lovely bit of country, and you will like to watch the view. See; if you place yourself here, my sister Agnes’s basket will be just at your feet, and you can help yourself to a queen-cake whenever you are so disposed.”

“Thank you,” responded Hester, in a much more cheerful tone, for it was really quite impossible to keep up reserve with such a bright-looking little old lady; “your queen-cakes are very nice, and I liked that one, but one is quite enough, thank you. It is Nan who is so particularly fond of queen-cakes.”

“And who is Nan, my dear?” asked the sister to whom the queen-cakes specially belonged.

“She is my dear little baby sister,” said Hester in a sorrowful tone.

“Ah, and it was about her you were crying just now,” said the first lady, laying her hand on Hester’s arm. “Never mind us, dear, we have seen a great many tears – a great many. They are the way of the world. Women are born to them. As Kingsley says – ‘women must weep.’ It was quite natural that you should cry about your sweet little Nan, and I wish we could send her some of these queen-cakes that you say she is so fond of. Are you going to be long away from her, love?”

“Oh, yes, for months and months,” said Hester. “I did not know,” she added, “that it was such a common thing to cry. I never used to.”

“Ah, you have had other trouble, poor child,” glancing at her deep mourning frock.

“Yes, it is since then I have cried so often. Please, I would rather not speak about it.”

“Quite right, my love, quite right,” said Miss Agnes in a much brisker tone than her sister. “We will turn the conversation now to something inspiriting. Jane is quite right, there are plenty of tears in the world; but there is also a great deal of sunshine and heaps of laughter, merry laughter – the laughter of youth, my child. Now, I dare say, though you have begun your journey so sadly, that you are really bound on quite a pleasant little expedition. For instance, you are going to visit a kind aunt, or some one else who will give you a delightful welcome.”

“No,” said Hester, “I am not. I am going to a dreadful place, and the thought of that, and parting from little Nan, are the reasons why I cried. I am going to prison – I am, indeed.”

“Oh, my dear love!” exclaimed both the little old ladies in a breath. Then Miss Agnes continued: “You have really taken Jane’s breath away – quite. Yes, Jane, I see that you are in for an attack of palpitation. Never mind her, dear, she palpitates very easily; but I think you must be mistaken, my love, in mentioning such an appalling word as ‘prison.’ Yes, now I come to think of it, it is absolutely certain that you must be mistaken; for if you were going to such a terrible place of punishment you would be under the charge of a policeman. You are given to strong language, dear, like other young folk.”

“Well, I call it prison,” continued Hester, who was rather flattered by all this bustle and Miss Jane’s agitation; “it has a dreadful sound, hasn’t it? I call it prison, but father says I am going to school – you can’t wonder that I am crying, can you? Oh! what is the matter?”

For the two little old ladies jumped up at this juncture, and gave Hetty a kiss apiece on her soft young lips.

“My darling,” they both exclaimed. “We are so relieved and delighted! your strong language startled us, and school is anything but what you imagine, dear. Ah, Jane! can you ever forget our happy days at school?”

Miss Jane sighed and rolled up her eyes, and then the two commenced a vigorous catechising of the little girl. Really, Hester could not help feeling almost sunshiny before that long journey came to an end, for she and the Misses Bruce made some delightful discoveries. The little old ladies very

quickly found out that they lived close to the school where Hetty was to spend the next few months. They knew Mrs Willis well – they knew the delightful rambling, old-fashioned house where Hester was to live – they even knew two or three of the scholars: and they said so often to the little girl that she was going into a life of clover – positive clover – that she began to smile, and even partly to believe them.

“I am glad I shall be near you, at least,” she said at last, with a frank sweet smile, for she had greatly taken to her kind fellow-travellers.

“Yes, my dear,” exclaimed Miss Jane. “We attend the same church, and I shall look out for you on Sunday, and,” she continued, glancing first at her sister and then addressing Hester, “perhaps Mrs Willis will allow you to visit us occasionally.”

“I’ll come to-morrow, if you like,” said Hester.

“Well, dear, well – that must be as Mrs Willis thinks best. Ah, here we are at Sefton at last. We shall look out for you in church on Sunday, my love.”

Chapter Three

At Lavender House

Hester's journey had really proved wonderfully agreeable. She had taken a great fancy to the little old ladies who had fussed over her and made themselves pleasant in her behalf. She felt herself something like a heroine as she poured out a little, just a little, of her troubles into their sympathising ears; and their cheerful remarks with regard to school and school-life had caused her to see clearly that there might be another and a brighter side to the gloomy picture she had drawn with regard to her future.

But during the drive of two and a half miles from Sefton to Lavender House, Hester once more began to feel anxious and troubled. The Misses Bruce had gone off with some other passengers in a little omnibus to their small villa in the town, but Lavender House was some distance off, and the little omnibus never went so far.

An old-fashioned carriage, which the ladies told Hester belonged to Mrs Willis, had been sent to meet her, and a man whom the Misses Bruce addressed as "Thomas" helped to place her trunk and a small portmanteau on the roof of the vehicle. The little girl had to take her drive alone, and the rather ancient horse which drew the old carriage climbed up and down the steep roads in a most leisurely fashion. It was a cold winter's day, and by the time Thomas had executed some commissions in Sefton, and had reached the gates of the avenue which led to Lavender House, it was very nearly dark. Hester trembled at the darkness, and when the gates were shut behind them by a rosy-faced urchin of ten, she once more began to feel the cruel and desolate idea that she was going to prison.

They drove slowly down a long and winding avenue, and, although Hester could not see, she knew they must be passing under trees, for several times their branches made a noise against the roof of the carriage. At last they came to a standstill. The old servant scrambled slowly down from his seat on the box, and, opening the carriage-door, held out his hand to help the little stranger to alight.

"Come now, missy," he said in cheering tones, "come out, and you'll be warm and snug in a minute. Dear, dear! I expect you're nearly froze up, poor little miss, and it *is* a most bitter cold night."

He rang a bell which hung by the entrance of a deep porch, and the next moment the wide hall door was flung open by a neat maid-servant, and Hester stepped within.

"She's come," exclaimed several voices in different keys, and proceeding apparently from different quarters. Hester looked around her in a half-startled way, but she could see no one, except the maid, who smiled at her and said —

"Welcome to Lavender House, miss. If you'll step into the porter's room for one moment, there is a good fire there, and I'll acquaint Miss Danesbury that you have arrived."

The little room in question was at the right-hand side of a very wide and cheerful hall, which was decorated in pale tints of green, and had a handsome encaustic-tiled floor. A blazing fire and two lamps made the hall look cheerful, but Hester was very glad to take refuge from the unknown voices in the porter's small room. She found herself quite trembling with shyness, and cold, and an indescribable longing to get back to Nan; and as she waited for Miss Danesbury and wondered fearfully who or what Miss Danesbury was, she scarcely derived any comfort from the blazing fire near which she stood.

"Rather tall for her age, but I fear, I greatly fear, a little sulky," said a voice behind her; and when she turned round in an agony of trepidation and terror, she suddenly found herself face to face with a tall, kind-looking, middle-aged lad and also with a bright gipsy-looking girl.

"Annie Forest, how very naughty of you to hide behind the door! You are guilty of disobedience in coming into the room without leave. I must report you, my dear; yes, I really must. You lose two

good conduct marks for this, and will probably have thirty lines in addition to your usual quantity of French poetry.”

“But she won’t tell on me, she won’t, dear old Danesbury,” said the girl; “she couldn’t be so hard-hearted, the precious love, particularly as curiosity happens to be one of her own special little virtues! Take a kiss, Danesbury, and now, a you love me you’ll be merciful!” The girl flitted away, and Miss Danesbury turned to Hester, whose face had changed from red to pale during this little scene.

“What a horrid, vulgar, low-bred girl!” she exclaimed with passion, for in all the experiences of her short life Hester had never even imagined that personal remarks could be made of any one in their very presence. “I hope she’ll get a lot of punishment – I hope you are not going to forgive her,” she continued, for her anger had for the time quite overcome her shyness.

“Oh, my dear, my dear! we should all be forgiving,” exclaimed Miss Danesbury in her gentle voice. “Welcome to Lavender House, love; I am sorry I was not in the hall to receive you. Had I been, this little *rencontre* would not have occurred. Annie Forest meant no harm, however – she’s a wild little sprite, but affectionate. You and she will be the best friends possible by-and-by. Now, let me take you to your room; the gong for tea will sound in exactly five minutes, and I am sure you will be glad of something to eat.”

Miss Danesbury then led Hester across the hall and up some broad, low, thickly-carpeted stairs. When they had ascended two flights, and were standing on a handsome landing, she paused.

“Do you see this baize door, dear?” she said. “This is the entrance to the school part of the house. This part that we are now in belongs exclusively to Mrs Willis, and the girls are never allowed to come here without leave. All the school-life is lived at the other side of this baize door, and a very happy life I assure you it is for those little girls who make up their minds to be brave and good. Now kiss me, my dear, and let me bid you welcome once again to Lavender House.”

“Are you our principal teacher, then?” asked Hester.

“I? oh dear, no, my love. I teach the younger children English, and I look after the interests and comforts of all. I am a very useful sort of person, I believe, and I have a motherly heart, dear, and it is a way with little girls to come to me when they are in trouble. Now, my love, we must not chatter any longer. Take my hand, and let us get to your room as fast as possible.”

Miss Danesbury pushed open the baize door, and instantly Hester found herself in a different region. Mrs Willis’s part of the house gave the impression of warmth, luxuriance, and even elegance of arrangement. At the other side of the door were long, narrow corridors, with snow-white, but carpetless floors, and rather cold, distempered walls. Miss Danesbury, holding the new pupil’s hand, led her down two corridors, and past a great number of shut doors, behind which Hester could hear suppressed laughter and eager, chattering voices. At last, however, they stopped at a door which had the number “32” written over it.

“This is your bedroom, dear,” said the English teacher, “and to-night you will not be sorry to have it alone. Mrs Willis received a telegram from Susan Drummond, your room-mate, this afternoon, and she will not arrive until to-morrow.”

However bare and even cold the corridors looked, the bedroom into which Hester was ushered by no means corresponded with this appearance. It was a small, but daintily-furnished little room. The floor was carpeted with green felt, the one window was hung with pretty draperies, and two little, narrow, white beds were arranged gracefully with French canopies. All the furniture in the room was of a minute description, but good of its kind. Beside each bed stood a mahogany chest of drawers. At two corresponding corners were marble washhand-stands, and even two pretty, toilet tables stood side by side in the recess of the window. But the sight that perhaps pleased Hester most was a small bright fire which burnt in the grate.

“Now, dear, this is your room. As you have arrived first you can choose your own bed and your own chest of drawers. Ah, that is right, Ellen has unfastened your portmanteau; she will unpack your

trunk to-night, and take it to the box-room. Now, dear, smooth your hair and wash your hands. The gong will sound instantly. I will come for you when it does.”

Chapter Four

Little Drawing-Rooms And Little Tiffs

Miss Danesbury, true to her word, came to fetch Hester down to tea. They went down some broad carpetless stairs, along a wide stone hall, and then paused for an instant at a half-open door from which a stream of eager voices issued.

“I will introduce you to your school-fellows, and I hope your future friends,” said Miss Danesbury. “After tea you will come with me to see Mrs Willis – she is never in the school-room at tea-time. Mdlle. Perier or Miss Good usually superintends. Now, my dear, come along – why, surely you are not frightened?”

“Oh, please, may I sit near you?” asked Hester.

“No, my love; I take care of the little ones, and they are at a table by themselves. Now, come in at once – the moment you dread will soon be over, and it is nothing, my love – really nothing.”

Nothing! never, as long as Hester lived, did she forget the supreme agony of terror and shyness which came over her as she entered that long, low, brightly-lighted room. The forty pairs of curious eyes which were raised inquisitively to her face became as torturing as forty burning suns. She felt an almost uncontrollable desire to run away and hide – she wondered if she could possibly keep from screaming aloud. In the end she found herself, she scarcely knew how, seated beside a gentle, sweet-mannered girl, and munching bread and butter which tasted drier than sawdust, and occasionally trying to sip something very hot and scalding which she vaguely understood went by the name of tea. The buzzing voices all chattering eagerly in French, and the occasional sharp, high-pitched reprimands coming in peremptory tones from the thin lips of Mdlle. Perier, sounded far off and distant – her head was dizzy, her eyes swam – the tired and shy child endured tortures.

In after-days, in long after-years when the memory of Lavender House was to come back to Hetty Thornton as one of the sweetest, brightest episodes in her existence – in the days when she was to know almost every blade of grass in the gardens, and to be familiar with each corner of the old house, with each face which now appeared so strange, she might wonder at her feelings to-night, but never even then could she forget them.

She sat at the table in a dream, trying to eat the tasteless bread and butter. Suddenly and swiftly the thick and somewhat stale piece of bread on her plate was exchanged for a thin, fresh, and delicately-cut slice.

“Eat that,” whispered a voice – “I know the other is horrid. It’s a shame of Perier to give such stuff to a stranger.”

“Mdlle. Cécile, you are transgressing: you are talking English,” came in a torrent of rapid French from the head of the table. “You lose a conduct mark, ma’amselle.”

The young girl who sat next Hester inclined her head gently and submissively, and Hester, venturing to glance at her, saw that a delicate pink had spread itself over her pale face. She was a plain girl; but even Hester, in this first moment of terror, could scarcely have been afraid of her, so benign was her expression, so sweet the glance from her soft, full brown eyes. Hester now further observed that the thin bread and butter had been removed from Cecil’s own plate. She began to wonder why this girl was indulged with better food than the rest of her comrades.

Hester was beginning to feel a little less shy, and was taking one or two furtive glances at her companions, when she suddenly felt herself turning crimson, and all her agony of shyness and dislike to her school-life returning. She encountered the full, bright, quizzical gaze of the girl who had made personal remarks about her in the porter’s room. The merry black eyes of this gipsy maiden fairly twinkled with suppressed fun when they met hers, and the bright head even nodded audaciously across the table to her.

Not for worlds would Hester return this friendly greeting – she still held to her opinion that Miss Forest was one of the most ill-bred people she had ever met, and, in addition to feeling a considerable amount of fear of her, she quite made up her mind that she would never be on friendly terms with so underbred a girl.

At this moment grace was repeated in sonorous tones by a stern-looking person who sat at the foot of the long table, and whom Hester had not before noticed. Instantly the girls rose from their seats, and began to file in orderly procession out of the tea-room. Hester looked round in terror for the friendly Miss Danesbury, but she could not catch sight of her anywhere. At this moment, however, her companion of the tea-table touched her arm.

“We may speak English now for half an hour,” she said, “and most of us are going to the play-room. We generally tell stories round the fire upon these dark winter’s nights. Would you like to come with me to-night? Shall we be chums for this evening?”

“I don’t know what ‘chums’ are,” said Hester; “but,” she added, with the dawning of a faint smile on her poor, sad little face, “I shall be very glad to go with you.”

“Come then,” said Cecil Temple, and she pulled Hester’s hand within her arm, and walked with her across the wide stone hall, and into the largest room Hester had ever seen.

Never, anywhere, could there have been a more delightful play-room than this. It was so large that two great fires which burned at either end were not at all too much to emit even tolerable warmth. The room was bright with three or four lamps which were suspended from the ceiling, the floor was covered with matting, and the walls were divided into curious partitions, which gave the room a peculiar but very cosy effect. These partitions consisted of large panels, and were divided by slender rails the one from the other.

“This is my cosy corner,” said Cecil, “and you shall sit with me in it to-night. You see,” she added, “each of us girls has her own partition, and we can do exactly what we like in it. We can put our own photographs, our own drawings, our own treasures on our panels. Under each division is our own little work-table, and, in fact, our own individual treasures lie round us in the enclosure of this dear little rail. The centre of the room is common property, and you see what a great space there is round each fire-place where we can chatter and talk, and be on common ground. The fire-place at the end of the room near the door is reserved especially for the little ones, but we elder girls sit at the top. Of course you will belong to us. How old are you?”

“Twelve,” said Hester.

“Oh, well, you are so tall that you cannot possibly be put with the little ones, so you must come in with us.”

“And shall I have a railed-in division and a panel of my own?” asked Hester. “It sounds a very nice arrangement. I hope my department will be close to yours, Miss?”

“Temple is my name,” said Cecil, “but you need not call me that. I am Cecil to all my friends, and you are my friend this evening, for you are my chum, you know. Oh, you were asking me about our departments – you won’t have any at first, for you have got to earn it, but I will invite you to mine pretty often. Come now, let us go inside. Is not it just like the darlingest little drawing-room? I am so sorry that I have only one easy chair, but you shall have it to-night, and I will sit on this three-legged stool. I am saving up my money to buy another armchair, and Annie has promised to upholster it for me.”

“Is Annie one of the maids?”

“Oh, dear, no! – she’s dear old Annie Forest, the liveliest girl in the school. Poor darling, she’s seldom out of hot water; but we all love her, we can’t help it. Poor Annie, she hardly ever has the luxury of a department to herself, so she is useful all round. She’s the most amusing and good-natured dear pet in Christendom.”

“I don’t like her at all,” said Hester; “I did not know you were talking of her – she is a most rude, uncouth girl.” Cecil Temple, who had been arranging a small dark green table-cloth with daffodils

worked artistically in each corner on her little table, stood up as the newcomer uttered these words, and regarded her fixedly.

“It is a pity to draw hasty conclusions,” she said. “There is no girl more loved in the school than Annie Forest. Even the teachers, although they are always punishing her, cannot help having a soft corner in their hearts for her. What can she possibly have done to offend you? – but oh! – hush – don’t speak – she is coming into the room.”

As Cecil finished her rather eager defence of her friend, and prevented the indignant words which were bubbling to Hester’s lips, a gay voice was heard singing a comic song in the passage – the play-room door was flung open with a bang, and Miss Forest entered the room with a small girl seated on each of her shoulders.

“Hold on, Janny love; keep your arms well round me, Mabel. Now then, here we go – twice up the room and down again. No more, as I’m alive. I’ve got to attend to other matters than you.”

She placed the little girls on the floor amid peals of laughter, and shouts from several little ones to give them a ride too. The children began to cling to her skirts and to drag her in all directions, and she finally escaped from them with one dexterous bound which placed her in that portion of the play-room where the little ones knew they were not allowed to enter.

Until her arrival the different girls scattered about the large room had been more or less orderly, chattering and laughing together, it is true, but in a quiet manner. Now the whole place appeared suddenly in an uproar.

“Annie, come here – Annie, darling, give me your opinion about this – Annie, my precious, naughty creature, come and tell me about your last scrape.”

Annie Forest blew several kisses to her adorers, but did not attach herself to any of them.

“The Temple requires me,” she said, in her sauciest tones; “my beloved friends, the Temple as usual is vouchsafing its sacred shelter to the stranger.”

In an instant Annie was kneeling inside the inclosure of Miss Temple’s rail and laughing immoderately.

“You dear stranger!” she exclaimed, turning round and gazing full into Hester’s shy face, “I do declare I have been punished for the intense ardour with which I longed to embrace you. Has she told you, Cecil darling, what I did in her behalf? How I ventured beyond the sacred precincts of the baize door and hid inside the porter’s room? Poor dear, she jumped when she heard my friendly voice, and as I spoke Miss Danesbury caught me in the very act. Poor old dear, she cried when she complained of me, but duty is Danesbury’s motto; she would go to the stake for it, and I respect her immensely. I have got my twenty lines of that horrible French poetry, to learn – the very thought almost strangles me, and I foresee plainly that I shall do something terribly naughty within the next few hours; I must, my love – I really must. I have just come here to shake hands with Miss Thornton, and then I must away to my penance. Ah, how little I shall learn, and how hard I shall think! Welcome to Lavender House, Miss Thornton; look upon me as your devoted ally, and if you have a spark of pity in your breast, feel for the girl whom you got into a scrape the very moment you entered these sacred walls.”

“I don’t understand you,” said Hester, who would not hold out her hand, and who was standing up in a very stiff, shy, and angular position. “I think you were very rude to startle me, and make personal remarks the very moment I came into the house.”

“Oh, dear! – I only said you were tall, and looked rather sulky, love – you did, you know, really.”

“It was very rude of you,” repeated Hester, turning crimson, and trying to keep back her tears.

“Well, my dear, I meant no harm; shake hands, now, and let us make friends.”

But Hester felt either too shy or too miserable to yield to this request – she half turned her back, and leaned against Miss Temple’s panel.

“Never mind her,” whispered gentle Cecil Temple; but Annie Forest’s bright face had darkened ominously – the school favourite was not accustomed to having her advances flung back in her face.

She left the room singing a defiant, naughty song, and several of the girls who had overheard this scene whispered one to the other —

“She can’t be at all nice – she would not even shake hands with Annie. Fancy her turning against our Annie in that way!”

Chapter Five

The Head-Mistress

Annie Forest had scarcely left the room before Miss Danesbury appeared with a message for Hester, who was to come with her directly to see Mrs Willis. The poor shy girl felt only too glad to leave behind her the cruel, staring, and now by no means approving eyes of her school-mates. She had overheard several of their whispers, and felt rather alarmed at her own act. But Hester, shy as she was, could be very tenacious of an idea. She had taken a dislike to Annie Forest, and she was quite determined to be true to what she considered her convictions – namely, that Annie was underbred and common, and not at all the kind of girl whom her mother would have cared for her to know. The little girl followed Miss Danesbury in silence. They crossed the stone hall together, and now passing through another baize door, found themselves once more in the handsome entrance-hall. They walked across this hall to a door carefully protected from all draughts by rich plush curtains, and Miss Danesbury, turning the handle, and going a step or two into the room, said in her gentle voice —

“I have brought Hester Thornton to see you, Mrs Willis, according to your wish.”

Miss Danesbury then withdrew, and Hester ventured to raise her eyes and to look timidly at the head-mistress.

A tall woman, with a beautiful face and silvery white hair, came instantly to meet her, laid her two hands on the girl’s shoulders, and then, raising her shy little face, imprinted a kiss on her forehead.

“Your mother was one of my earliest pupils, Hester,” she said, “and you are – no – ” after a pause, “you are not very like her. You are her child, however, my dear, and as such you have a warm welcome from me. Now, come and sit by the fire, and let us talk.”

Hester did not feel nearly so constrained with this graceful and gracious lady as she had done with her school-mates. The atmosphere of the room recalled her beloved mother’s boudoir at home. The rich, dove-coloured satin dress, the cap made of Mechlin lace which softened and shaded Mrs Willis’s silvery hair, appeared homelike to the little girl, who had grown up accustomed to all the luxuries of wealth. Above all, the head-mistress’s mention of her mother drew her heart toward the beautiful face, and attracted her toward the rich, full tones of a voice which could be powerful and commanding at will. Mrs Willis, notwithstanding her white hair, had a youthful face, and Hester made the comment which came first to her lips —

“I did not think you were old enough to have taught my mother.”

“I am sixty, dear, and I have kept this school for thirty years. Your mother was not the only pupil who sent her children to be taught by me when the time came. Now, you can sit on this stool by the fire and tell me about your home. Your mother – ah, poor child, you would rather not talk about her just yet. Helen’s daughter must have strong feelings – ah, yes; I see, I see. Another time, darling, when you know me better. Now tell me about your little sister, and your father. You do not know, perhaps, that I am Nan’s godmother?”

After this the head-mistress and the new pupil had a long conversation. Hester forgot her shyness; her whole heart had gone out instantly to this beautiful woman who had known, and loved, and taught her mother.

“I will try to be good at school,” she said at last; “but, oh, please, Mrs Willis, it does not seem to me to-night as if school-life could be happy.”

“It has its trials, Hester; but the brave and the noble girls often find this time of discipline one of the best in their lives – good at the time, very good to look back on by-and-by. You will find a miniature world around you; you will be surrounded by temptations; and you will have rare chances of proving whether your character can be strong and great and true. I think, as a rule, my girls are happy, and as a rule they turn out well. The great motto of life here, Hester, is earnestness. We are

earnest in our work, we are earnest in our play. A half-hearted girl has no chance at Lavender House. In play-time, laugh with the merriest, my child: in school-hours, study with the most studious. Do you understand me?"

"I try to, a little," said Hester, "but it seems all very strange just now."

"No doubt it does, and at first you will have to encounter many perplexities and to fight many battles. Never mind, if you have the right spirit within you, you will come out on the winning side. Now, tell me, have you made any acquaintances as yet among the girls?"

"Yes – Cecil Temple has been kind to me."

"Cecil is one of my dearest pupils; cultivate her friendship, Hester – she is honourable, she is sympathising. I am not afraid to say that Cecil has a great heart."

"There is another girl," continued Hester, "who has spoken to me. I need not make her my friend, need I?"

"Who is she, dear?"

"Miss Forest – I don't like her."

"What! our school favourite. You will change your mind, I expect – but that is the gong for prayers. You shall come with me to chapel, to-night, and I will introduce you to Mr Everard."

Chapter Six

“I Am Unhappy.”

Between forty and fifty young girls assembled night and morning for prayers in the pretty chapel which adjoined Lavender House. This chapel had been reconstructed from the ruins of an ancient priory, on the site of which the house was built. The walls, and even the beautiful eastern window, belonged to a far-off date. The roof had been carefully reared in accordance with the style of the east window, and the whole effect was beautiful and impressive. Mrs Willis was particularly fond of her own chapel. Here she hoped the girls' best lessons might be learned, and here she had even once or twice brought a refractory pupil, and tried what a gentle word or two spoken in these old and sacred walls might effect. Here, on wet Sundays the girls assembled for service; and here, every evening at nine o'clock, came the vicar of the large parish to which Lavender House belonged, to conduct evening prayers. He was an old man, and a great friend of Mrs Willis's, and he often told her that he considered these young girls some of the most important members of his flock.

Here Hester knelt to-night. It is to be doubted whether in her confusion, and in the strange loneliness which even Mrs Willis had scarcely removed, she prayed much. It is certain she did not join in the evening hymn, which, with the aid of an organ and some sweet girl-voices, was beautifully and almost pathetically rendered. After evening prayers had come to an end, Mrs Willis took Hester's hand and led her up to the old, white-headed vicar.

“This is my new pupil, Mr Everard, or rather I should say, our new pupil. Her education depends as much on you as on me.”

The vicar held out his hands, and took Hester's within them, and then drew her forward to the light.

“This little face does not seem quite strange to me,” he said. “Have I ever seen you before, my dear?”

“No, sir,” replied Hester.

“You have seen her mother,” said Mrs Willis – “Do you remember your favourite pupil, Helen Anstey, of long ago?”

“Ah! indeed – indeed! I shall never forget Helen. And are you her child, little one?”

But Hester's face had grown white. The solemn service in the chapel, joined to all the excitement and anxieties of the day, had strung up her sensitive nerves to a pitch higher than she could endure. Suddenly, as the vicar spoke to her, and Mrs Willis looked kindly down at her new pupil, the chapel seemed to reel round, the pupils one by one disappeared, and the tired girl only saved herself from fainting by a sudden burst of tears.

“Oh, I am unhappy,” she sobbed, “without my mother! Please, please, don't talk to me about my mother.”

She could scarcely take in the gentle words which her two friends said to her, and she hardly noticed when Mrs Willis did such a wonderful thing as to stoop down and kiss a second time the lips of a new pupil.

Finally she found herself consigned to Miss Danesbury's care, who hurried her off to her room, and helped her to undress and tucked her into her little bed.

“Now, love, you shall have some hot gruel. No, not a word. You ate little or no tea, to-night – I watched you from my distant table. Half your loneliness is caused by want of food – I know it, my love; I am a very practical person. Now, eat your gruel, and then shut your eyes and go to sleep.”

“You are very kind to me,” said Hester, “and so is Mrs Willis, and so is Mr Everard, and I like Cecil Temple – but, oh. I wish Annie Forest was not in the school!”

“Hush, my dear, I implore of you. You pain me by these words. I am quite confident that Annie will be your best friend yet.”

Hester’s lips said nothing, but her eyes answered “Never” as plainly as eyes could speak.

Chapter Seven

A Day At School

If Hester Thornton went to sleep that night under a sort of dreamy, hazy impression that school was a place without a great deal of order, with many kind and sympathising faces, and with some not so agreeable; if she went to sleep under the impression that she had dropped into a sort of medley, that she had found herself in a vast new world where certain personages exercised undoubtedly a strong moral influence, but where on the whole a number of other people did pretty much what they pleased – she awoke in the morning to find her preconceived ideas scattered to the four winds.

There was nothing of apparent liberty about the Lavender House arrangements in the early morning hours. In the first, place, it seemed quite the middle of the night when Hester was awakened by a loud gong, which clanged through the house and caused her to sit up in bed in a considerable state of fright and perplexity. A moment or two later a neatly-dressed maid-servant came into the room with a can of hot water; she lit a pair of candles on the mantelpiece, and, with the remark that the second gong would sound in half an hour, and that all the young ladies would be expected to assemble in the chapel at seven o'clock precisely, she left the room.

Hester pulled her pretty little gold watch from under her pillow, and saw with a sigh that it was now half-past six.

“What odious hours they keep in this horrid place!” she said to herself. “Well, well, I always did know that school would be unendurable.”

She waited for five minutes before she got up, and then she dressed herself languidly, and, if the truth must be told, in a very untidy fashion. She managed to be dressed by the time the second gong sounded, but she had only one moment to give to her private prayers. She reflected, however, that this did not greatly matter as she was going down to prayers immediately in the chapel.

The service in the chapel the night before had impressed her more deeply than she cared to own, and she followed her companions downstairs with a certain feeling of pleasure at the thought of again seeing Mr Everard and Mrs Willis. She wondered if they would take much notice of her this morning, and she thought it just possible that Mr Everard, who had looked at her so compassionately the night before, might be induced, for the sake of his old friendship with her mother, to take her home with him to spend the day. She thought she would rather like to spend a day with Mr Everard, and she fancied he was the sort of person who would influence her and help her to be good. Hester fancied that if some very interesting and quite out of the common person took her in hand, she might be formed into something extremely noble – noble enough even to forgive Annie Forest.

The girls all filed into the chapel, which was lighted as brightly and cheerily as the night before; but Hester found herself placed on a bench far down in the building. She was no longer in the place of honour by Mrs Willis's side. She was one of a number, and no one looked particularly at her or noticed her in any way. A shy young curate read the morning prayers; Mr Everard was not present, and Mrs Willis, who was, walked out of the chapel when prayers were over without even glancing in Hester's direction. This was bad enough for the poor little dreamer of dreams, but worse was to follow.

Mrs Willis did not speak to Hester, but she did stop for an instant beside Annie Forest. Hester saw her lay her white hand on the young girl's shoulder and whisper for an instant in her ear. Annie's lovely gipsy face flushed a vivid crimson.

“For your sake, darling,” she whispered back; but Hester caught the words, and was consumed by a fierce jealousy.

The girls went into the school-room, where Mdlle. Perier gave a French lesson to the upper class. Hester belonged to no class at present, and could look around her, and have plenty of time

to reflect on her own miseries, and particularly on what she now considered the favouritism shown by Mrs Willis.

“Mr Everard at least will read through that girl,” she said to herself; “he could not possibly endure any one so loud. Yes, I am sure that my only friend at home, Cecilia Day, would call Annie very loud. I wonder Mrs Willis can endure her. Mrs Willis seems so ladylike herself, but – Oh, I beg your pardon, what’s the matter?”

A very sharp voice had addressed itself to the idle Hester.

“But, mademoiselle, you are doing nothing! This cannot for a moment be permitted. Pardonnez-moi, you know not the French? Here is a little easy lesson. Study it, mademoiselle, and don’t let your eyes wander a moment from the page.”

Hester favoured Mdlle. Perier with a look of lofty contempt, but she received the well-thumbed lesson-book in absolute silence.

At eight o’clock came breakfast, which was nicely served, and was very good and abundant. Hester was thoroughly hungry this morning, and did not feel so shy as the night before. She found herself seated between two strange girls, who talked to her a little and would have made themselves friendly had she at all encouraged them to do so. After breakfast came half an hour’s recreation, when, the weather being very bad, the girls again assembled in the cosy play-room. Hester looked round eagerly for Cecil Temple, who greeted her with a kind smile, but did not ask her into her inclosure. Annie Forest was not present, and Hester breathed a sigh of relief at her absence. The half-hour devoted to recreation proved rather dull to the newcomer. Hester could not understand her present world. To the girl who had been brought up practically as an only child in the warm shelter of a home, the ways and doings of school-girl life were an absolute enigma.

Hester had no idea of unbending or of making herself agreeable. The girls voted her to one another stiff and tiresome, and quickly left her to her own devices. She looked longingly at Cecil Temple; but Cecil, who could never be knowingly unkind to any one, was seizing the precious moments to write a letter to her father, and Hester presently wandered down the room and tried to take an interest in the little ones. From twelve to fifteen quite little children were in the school, and Hester wondered with a sort of vague half-pain if she might see any child among the group the least like Nan.

“They will like to have me with them,” she said to herself. “Poor little dots, they always like big girls to notice them, and didn’t they make a fuss about Miss Forest last night! Well, Nan is fond enough of me, and little children find out so quickly what one is really like.”

Hester walked boldly into the group. The little dots were all as busy as bees, were not the least lonely, or the least shy, and very plainly gave the intruder to understand that they would prefer her room to her company. Hester was not proud with little children – she loved them dearly. Some of the smaller ones in question were beautiful little creatures, and her heart warmed to them for Nan’s sake. She could not stoop to conciliate the older girls, but she could make an effort with the babies. She knelt on the floor and took up a headless doll.

“I know a little girl who had a doll like that,” she said.

Here she paused and several pairs of eyes were fixed on her.

“Poor dolly’s b’oke,” said the owner of the headless one in a tone of deep commiseration.

“You *are* such a breaker, you know, Annie,” said Annie’s little five-year-old sister.

“Please tell us about the little girl what had the doll wifout the head,” she proceeded, glancing at Hester.

“Oh, it was taken to a hospital, and got back its head,” said Hester quite cheerfully; “it became quite well again, and was a more beautiful doll than ever.”

This announcement caused intense wonder and was certainly carrying the interest of all the little ones. Hester was deciding that the child who possessed the headless doll *had* a look of Nan about her dark brown eyes, when suddenly there was a diversion – the play-room door was opened noisily, banged-to with a very loud report, and a gay voice sang out —

“The fairy queen has just paid me a visit. Who wants sweets from the fairy queen?”

Instantly all the little feet had scrambled to the perpendicular, each pair of hands was clapped noisily, each little throat shouted a joyful —

“Here comes Annie!”

Annie Forest was surrounded, and Hester knelt alone on the hearth-rug.

She felt herself colouring painfully – she did not fail to observe that two laughing eyes had fixed themselves with a momentary triumph on her face; then, snatching up a book, which happened to lie close, she seated herself with her back to all the girls, and her head bent over the page. It is quite doubtful whether she saw any of the words, but she was at least determined not to cry.

The half-hour so wearisome to poor Hester came to an end, and the girls, conducted by Miss Danesbury, filed into the school-room and took their places in the different classes.

Work had now begun in serious earnest. The school-room presented an animated and busy scene. The young faces with their varying expressions betokened on the whole the preponderance of an earnest spirit. Discipline, not too severe, reigned triumphant.

Hester was not yet appointed to any place among these busy workers, but while she stood wondering, a little confused, and half intending to drop into an empty seat which happened to be close, Miss Danesbury came up to her.

“Follow me, Miss Thornton,” she said, and she conducted the young girl up the whole length of the great school-room, and pushed aside some baize curtains which concealed a second smaller room, where Mrs Willis sat before a desk.

The head-mistress was no longer dressed in soft pearl-grey and Mechlin lace. She wore a black silk dress, and her white cap seemed to Hester to add a severe tone to her features. She neither shook hands with the new pupil nor kissed her, but said instantly in a bright though authoritative tone —

“I must now find out as quickly as possible what you know, Hester, in order to place you in the most suitable class.” Hester was a clever girl, and passed through the ordeal of a rather stiff examination with considerable ability. Mrs Willis pronounced her English and general information quite up to the usual standard for girls of her age – her French was deficient, but she showed some talent for German.

“On the whole I am pleased with your general intelligence, and I think you have good capacities, Hester,” she said in conclusion. “I shall ask Miss Good, our very accomplished English teacher, to place you in the third-class. You will have to work very hard, however, at your French, to maintain your place there. But Mdlle. Perier is kind and painstaking, and it rests with yourself to quickly acquire a conversational acquaintance with the language. You are aware that, except during recreation, you are never allowed to speak in any other tongue. Now, go back to the school-room, my dear.”

As Mrs Willis spoke she laid her finger on a little silver gong which stood by her side.

“One moment, please,” said Hester, colouring crimson, “I want to ask you a question, please.”

“Is it about your lessons?”

“No – oh, no; it is – ”

“Then pardon me, my dear,” uttered the governess, “I sit in my room every evening from eight to half-past, and I am then at liberty to see a pupil on any subject which is not trifling. Nothing but lessons are spoken of in lesson hours, Hester. Ah, here comes Miss Good. Miss Good, I should wish you to place Hester Thornton in the third-class. Her English is up to the average. I will see Mdlle. Perier about her at twelve o’clock.”

Hester followed the English teacher into the great school-room, took her place in the third-class, at the desk which was pointed out to her, was given a pile of new books, and was asked to attend to the history lesson which was then going on.

Notwithstanding her confusion, a certain sense of soreness, and some indignation at what she considered Mrs Willis’s altered manner, she acquitted herself with considerable spirit, and was pleased to see that her class companions regarded her with some respect.

An English literature lecture followed the history, and here again Hester acquitted herself with *éclat*. The subject to-day was “Julius Caesar,” and Hester had read Shakespeare’s play over many times with her mother.

But when the hour came for foreign languages, her brief triumph ceased. Lower and lower did she fall in her school-fellows’ estimation, as she stumbled through her truly English-French. Mdlle. Perier, who was a very fiery little woman, almost screamed at her – the girls coloured and nearly tittered. Hester hoped to recover her lost laurels in German, but by this time her head ached, and she did very little better in the German which she loved than in the French which she detested. At twelve o’clock she was relieved to find that school was over for the present, and she heard the English teacher’s voice desiring the girls to go quickly to their rooms, and to assemble in five minutes’ time in the great stone hall, equipped for their walk.

The walk lasted for a little over an hour, and was a very dreary penance to poor Hester, as she was neither allowed to run, race, nor talk a word of English. She sighed heavily once or twice, and several of the girls who looked at her curiously agreed with Annie Forest that she was decidedly sulky. The walk was followed by dinner; then came half an hour of recreation in the delightful play-room, and eager chattering in the English tongue.

At three o’clock the school assembled once more; but now the studies were of a less severe character, and Hester spent one of her first happy half-hours over a drawing lesson. She had a great love for drawing, and felt some pride in the really beautiful copy which she was making of the stump of an old gnarled oak-tree. Her dismay, however, was proportionately great when the drawing-master drew his pencil right across her copy.

“I particularly requested you not to sketch in any of the shadows, Miss Thornton. Did you not hear me say that my lesson to-day was in outline? I gave you a shaded piece to copy in outline – did you not understand?”

“This is my first day at school,” whispered back poor Hester, speaking in English in her distress. Whereupon the master smiled, and even forgot to report her for her transgression of the French tongue.

Hester spent the rest of that afternoon over her music lesson. The music-master was an irascible little German, but Hester played with some taste, and was therefore not too severely rapped over the knuckles.

Then came tea and another half-hour of recreation, which was followed by two silent hours in the school-room, each girl bent busily over her books in preparation for the next day’s work. Hester studied hard, for she had made up her mind to be the intellectual prodigy of the school. Even on this first day, miserable as it was, she had won a few plaudits for her quickness and powers of observation. How much better could she work when she had really fallen into the tone of the school, and understood the lessons which she was now so carefully preparing! During her busy day she had failed to notice one thing: namely, the absence of Annie Forest. Annie had not been in the school-room, had not been in the play-room; but now, as the clock struck eight, she entered the school-room with a listless expression, and took her place in the same class with Hester. Her eyes were heavy, as if she had been crying, and when a companion touched her, and gave her a sympathising glance, she shook her head with a sorrowful gesture, but did not speak. Glasses of milk and slices of bread and butter were now handed round to the girls, and Miss Danesbury asked if any one would like to see Mrs Willis before prayers. Hester half sprang to her feet, but then sat down again. Mrs Willis had annoyed her by refusing to break her rules and answer her question during lesson hours. No, the silly child resolved that she would not trouble Mrs Willis now.

“No one to-night, then?” said Miss Danesbury, who had noticed Hester’s movement.

Suddenly Annie Forest sprang to her feet.

“I’m going, Miss Danesbury,” she said. “You need not show me the way; I can find it alone.”

With her short, curly hair falling about her face, she ran out of the room.

Chapter Eight

“You Have Woken Me Too Soon.”

When Hester reached her bedroom after prayers on that second evening, she was dismayed to find that she no longer could consider the pretty little bedroom her own. It had not only an occupant, but an occupant who had left untidy traces of her presence on the floor, for a stocking lay in one direction and a muddy boot sprawled in another. The newcomer had herself got into bed, where she lay with a quantity of red hair tossed about on the pillow, and a heavy freckled face turned upward, with the eyes shut and the mouth slightly open.

As Hester entered the room, from these parted lips came unmistakable and loud snores. She stood still dismayed.

“How terrible!” she said to herself – “oh, what a girl! and I cannot sleep in the room with any one who snores – I really cannot!”

She stood perfectly still, with her hands clasped before her, and her eyes fixed with almost ludicrous dismay on this unexpected trial. As she gazed, a fresh discovery caused her to utter an exclamation of horror aloud.

The newcomer had curled herself up comfortably in *her* bed. Suddenly, to her surprise, a voice said very quietly, without a flicker of expression coming over the calm face, or the eyes even making an effort to open —

“Are you my new school-mate?”

“Yes,” said Hester, “I am sorry to say I am.”

“Oh, don’t be sorry, there’s a good creature; there’s nothing to be sorry about. I’ll stop snoring when I turn on my side – it’s all right. I always snore for half an hour to rest my back, and the time is nearly up. Don’t trouble me to open my eyes, I am not the least curious to see you. You have a cross voice, but you’ll get used to me after a bit.”

“But you’re in my bed,” said Hester. “Will you please to get into your own?”

“Oh, no, don’t ask me; I like your bed best. I slept in it the whole of last term. I changed the sheets myself, so it does not matter. Do you mind putting my muddy boots outside the door, and folding up my stockings? I forgot them, and I shall have a bad mark if Danesbury comes in. Good-night – I’m turning on my side – I won’t snore any more.”

The heavy face was now only seen in profile, and Hester, knowing that Miss Danesbury would soon appear to put out the candle, had to hurry into the other bed as fast as she could; something impelled her, however, to take up the muddy boots with two very gingerly fingers, and place them outside the door.

She slept better this second night, and was not quite so startled the next morning when the remorseless gong aroused her from slumber. The maid-servant came in as usual to light the candles, and to place two cans of hot water by the two wash-handstands.

“You are awake, miss?” she said to Hester.

“Oh, yes,” replied Hester almost cheerfully.

“Well, that’s all right,” said the servant. “Now I must try and rouse Miss Drummond, and she always takes a deal of waking; and if you don’t mind, miss, it will be an act of kindness to call out to her in the middle of your own dressing – that is, if I don’t wake her effectual.”

With these words, the housemaid approached the bed where the red-haired girl lay again on her back, and again snoring loudly.

“Miss Drummond, wake, miss; it’s half-past six. Wake up, miss – I have brought your hot water.”

“Eh? – what?” said the voice in the bed sleepily; “don’t bother me, Hannah – I – I’ve determined not to ride this morning; go away – ” then more sleepily, and in a lower key, “Tell Percy he can’t bring the dogs in here.”

“I ain’t neither your Hannah, nor your Percy, nor one of the dogs,” replied the rather irate Alice – “There, get up, miss, do. I never see such a young lady for sleeping, never.”

“I won’t be bothered,” said the occupant of the bed, and now she turned deliberately on her side and snored more loudly than ever.

“There’s no help for it,” said Alice: “I have to do it nearly every morning, so don’t you be startled, miss. Poor thing, she would never have a good conduct mark but for me. Now then, here goes. You needn’t be frightened, miss – she don’t mind it the least bit in the world.”

Here Alice seized a rough Turkish towel, placed it under the sleepy head with its shock of red hair, and, dipping a sponge in a basin of icy cold water, dashed it on the white face.

This remedy proved effectual; two large pale blue eyes opened wide, a voice said in a tranquil and unmoved tone —

“Oh, thank you, Alice. So I’m back at this horrid, detestable school again?”

“Get your feet well on the carpet, Miss Drummond, before you falls off again,” said the servant. “Now then, you’d better get dressed as fast as possible, miss – you have lost five minutes already.”

Hester, who had laughed immoderately during this little scene, was already up and going through the processes of her toilet. Miss Drummond, seated on the edge of her bed, regarded her with sleepy eyes.

“So you are my new room-mate?” she said – “What’s your name?”

“Hester Thornton,” replied Hetty with dignity.

“Oh – I’m Susy Drummond – you may call me Susy if you like.”

Hester made no response to this gracious invitation.

Miss Drummond sat motionless, gazing down at her toes.

“Had not you better get dressed?” said Hester after a long pause, for she really feared the young lady would fall asleep where she was sitting.

Miss Drummond started.

“Dressed! So I will, dear creature. Have the sweet goodness to hand me my clothes.”

“Where are they?” asked Hester rather crossly, for she did not care to act as lady’s-maid.

“They are over there, on a chair, in that lovely heap with a shawl flung over them. There, toss them this way – I’ll get into them somehow.”

Miss Drummond did manage to get into her garments; but her whole appearance was so heavy and untidy when she was dressed, that Hester by the very force of contrast felt obliged to take extra pains with her own toilet.

“Now, that’s a comfort,” said Susan, “I’m in my clothes. How bitter it is! There’s one comfort, the chapel will be warm. I often catch forty winks in chapel – that is, if I’m lucky enough to get behind one of the tall girls, where Mrs Willis won’t see me. It does seem to me,” continued Susan in a meditative tone, “the strangest thing why girls are not allowed sleep enough.”

Hester was pinning a clean collar round her neck when Miss Drummond came up close, leaned over the dressing-table, and regarded her with languid curiosity.

“A penny for your thoughts. Miss Prunes and Prism.”

“Why do you call me that?” said Hester angrily.

“Because you look like it, sweet. Now, don’t be cross, little pet – no one ever yet was cross with sleepy Susy Drummond. Now, tell me, love, what had you for breakfast yesterday?”

“I’m sure I forget,” said Hester.

“You *forget*? – how extraordinary! You’re sure that it was not buttered scones? We have them sometimes, and I tell you they are enough even to keep a girl awake. Well, at least you can let me

know if the eggs were very stale, and the coffee very weak, and whether the butter was second-rate Dorset, or good and fresh. Come now – my breakfast is of immense importance to me, I assure you.”

“I dare say,” answered Hester. “You can see for yourself this morning what is on the table – I can only inform you that it was good enough for me, and that I don’t remember what it was.”

“Oh, dear!” exclaimed Susan Drummond, “I’m afraid she has a little temper of her own – poor little room-mate. I wonder if chocolate-creams would sweeten that little temper?”

“Please don’t talk – I’m going to say my prayers,” said Hester.

She did kneel down, and made a slight effort to ask God to help her through the day’s work and the day’s play. In consequence, she rose from her knees with a feeling of strength and sweetness which even the feeblest prayer when uttered in earnest can always give.

The prayer-gong now sounded, and all the girls assembled in the chapel. Miss Drummond was greeted by many appreciative nods, and more than one pair of longing eyes gazed in the direction of her pockets, which stuck out in the most ungainly fashion.

Hester was relieved to find that her room-mate did not share her class in school, nor sit anywhere near her at table.

When the half-hour’s recreation after breakfast arrived, Hester, determined to be beholden to none of her school-mates for companionship, seated herself comfortably in an easy chair, with a new book. Presently she was startled by a little stream of lollipops falling in a shower over her head, down her neck, and into her lap. She started up with an expression of disgust. Instantly Miss Drummond sank into the vacated chair.

“Thank you, love,” she said, in a cosy, purring voice. “Eat your lollipops, and look at me; I’m going to sleep. Please pull my toe when Danesbury comes in. Oh, fie! Prunes and Prisms – not so cross – eat your lollipops; they will sweeten the expression of that – little – face.”

The last words came out drowsily. As she said “face,” Miss Drummond’s languid eyes were closed – she was fast asleep.

Chapter Nine

Work And Play

In a few days Hester was accustomed to her new life. She fell into its routine, and in a certain measure won the respect of her fellow-pupils. She worked hard, and kept her place in class, and her French became a little more like the French tongue and a little less like the English. She showed marked ability in many of her other studies, and the mistresses and masters spoke well of her. After a fortnight spent at Lavender House, Hester had to acknowledge that the little Misses Bruce were right, and that school might be a really enjoyable place for some girls. She would not yet admit that it could be enjoyable for her. Hester was too shy, too proud, too exacting to be popular with her school-fellows. She knew nothing of school-girl life – she had never learned the great secret of success in all life's perplexities, the power to give and take. It never occurred to Hester to look over a hasty word, to take no notice of an envious or insolent look. As far as her lessons were concerned she was doing well; but the hardest lesson of all, the training of mind and character, which the daily companionship of her school-fellows alone could give her, in this lesson she was making no way. Each day she was shutting herself up more and more from all kindly advances, and the only one in the school whom she sincerely and cordially liked was gentle Cecil Temple.

Mrs Willis had some ideas with regard to the training of her young people which were peculiarly her own. She had found them successful, and, during her thirty years' experience, had never seen reason to alter them. She was determined to give her girls a great deal more liberty than was accorded in most of the boarding-schools of her day. She never made what she called impossible rules; she allowed the girls full liberty to chatter in their bedrooms; she did not watch them during play-hours; she never read the letters they received, and only superintended the specimen home letter which each girl was required to write once a month. Other head-mistresses wondered at the latitude she allowed her girls, but she invariably replied —

“I always find it works best to trust them. If a girl is found to be utterly untrustworthy. I don't expel her, but I request her parents to remove her to a more strict school.”

Mrs Willis also believed much in that quiet half-hour each evening, when the girls who cared to come could talk to her alone. On these occasions she always dropped the school-mistress and adopted the *rôle* of the mother. With a very refractory pupil she spoke in the tenderest tones of remonstrance and affection at these times. If her words failed – if the discipline of the day and the gentle sympathy of these moments at night did not effect their purpose, she had yet another expedient – the vicar was asked to see the girl who would not yield to this motherly influence.

Mr Everard had very seldom taken Mrs Willis's place. As he said to her, “Your influence must be the mainspring. At supreme moments I will help you with personal influence, but otherwise, except for my nightly prayers with your girls, and my weekly class, and the teachings which they with others hear from my lips Sunday after Sunday, they had better look to you.”

The girls knew this rule well, and the one or two rare instances in the school history where the vicar had stepped in to interfere, were spoken of with bated breath and with intense awe.

Mrs Willis had a great idea of bringing as much happiness as possible into young lives. It was with this idea that she had the quaint little compartments railed off in the play-room.

“For the elder girls,” she would say, “there is no pleasure so great as having, however small the spot, a little liberty hall of their own. In her compartment each girl is absolute monarch. No one can enter inside the little curtained rail without her permission. Here she can show her individual taste, her individual ideas. Here she can keep her most-prized possessions. In short, her compartment in the play-room is a little home to her.”

The play-room, large as it was, admitted of only twenty compartments; these compartments were not easily won. No amount of cleverness attained them; they were altogether dependent on conduct. No girl could be the honourable owner of her own little drawing-room until she had distinguished herself by some special act of kindness and self-denial. Mrs Willis had no fixed rule on this subject. She alone gave away the compartments, and she often made choice of girls on whom she conferred this honour in a way which rather puzzled and surprised their fellows.

When the compartment was won it was not a secure possession. To retain it depended also on conduct; and here again Mrs Willis was absolute in her sway. More than once the girls had entered the room in the morning to find some favourite's furniture removed and her little possessions taken carefully down from the walls, the girl herself alone knowing the reason for this sudden change. Annie Forest, who had been at Lavender House for four years, had once, for a solitary month of her existence, owned her own special drawing-room. She had obtained it as a reward for an act of heroism. One of the little pupils had set her pinafore on fire. There was no teacher present at the moment – the other girls had screamed and run for help, but Annie, very pale, had caught the little one in her arms and had crushed out the flames with her own hands. The child's life was spared, the child was not even hurt, but Annie was in the hospital for a week. At the end of a week she returned to the school-room and play-room as the heroine of the hour. Mrs Willis herself kissed her brow, and presented her in the midst of the approving smiles of her companions with the prettiest drawing-room of the sets. Annie retained her honourable post for one month.

Never did the girls of Lavender House forget the delights of that month. The fantastic arrangements of the little drawing-room filled them with ecstasies. Annie was truly Japanese in her style – she was also intensely liberal in all her arrangements. In the tiny space of this little inclosure wild pranks were perpetrated, ceaseless jokes made up. From Annie's drawing-room issued peals of exquisite mirth. She gave afternoon tea from a Japanese set of tea-things. Outside her drawing-room always collected a crowd of girls, who tried to peep over the rail or to draw aside the curtains. Inside the sacred spot certainly reigned chaos, and one day Miss Danesbury had to fly to the rescue, for in a fit of mad mirth Annie herself had knocked down the little Japanese tea-table, the tea-pot and tea-things were in fragments on the floor, and the tea and milk poured in streams outside the curtains. Mrs Willis sent for Annie that evening, and Miss Forest retired from her interview with red eyes and a meek expression.

"Girls," she said, in confidence that night, "good-bye to Japan. I gave her leave to do it – the care of an empire is more than I can manage."

The next day the Japanese drawing-room had been handed over to another possessor, and Annie reigned as queen over her empire no more.

Mrs Willis, anxious at all times that her girls should be happy, made special arrangements for their benefit on Sunday. Sunday was by no means dull at Lavender House – Sunday was totally unlike the six days which followed it. Even the stupidest girl could scarcely complain of the severity of Sunday lessons – even the merriest girl could scarcely speak of the day as dull. Mrs Willis made an invariable rule of spending all Sunday with her pupils. On this day she really unbent – on this day she was all during the long hours, what she was during the short half-hour on each evening in the week. On Sunday she neither reproved nor corrected. If punishment or correction were necessary, she deputed Miss Good or Miss Danesbury to take her place. On Sunday she sat with the little children round her knee, and the older girls clustering about her. Her gracious and motherly face was like a sun shining in the midst of these young girls. In short, she was like the personified form of Goodness in their midst. It was necessary, therefore, that all those who wished to do right should be happy on Sunday, and only those few who deliberately preferred evil should shrink from the brightness of this day.

It is astonishing how much a sympathising and guiding spirit can effect. The girls at Lavender House thought Sunday the shortest day in the week. There were no unoccupied or dull moments – school toil was forgotten – school punishment ceased, to be resumed again if necessary on Monday

morning. The girls in their best dresses could chatter freely in English – they could read their favourite books – they could wander about the house as they pleased: for on Sunday the two baize doors were always wide-open, and Mrs Willis’s own private suite of rooms was ready to receive them. If the day was fine they walked to church, each choosing her own companion for the pleasant walk; if the day was wet there was service in the chapel, Mr Everard always conducting either morning or evening prayers. In the afternoon the girls were allowed to do pretty much as they pleased, but after tea there always came a delightful hour, when the elder girls retired with their mistress into her own special boudoir, and she either told them stories or sang to them as only she could sing. At sixty years of age Mrs Willis still possessed the most sympathetic and touching voice those girls had ever listened to. Hester Thornton broke down completely on her first Sunday at Lavender House when she heard her school-mistress sing “The Better Land.” No one remarked on her tears, but two people saw them; for her mistress kissed her tenderly that night, and said a few strong words of help and encouragement, and Annie Forest, who made no comment, had also seen them, and wondered vaguely if this new and disagreeable pupil had a heart after all.

On Sunday night Mrs Willis herself went round to each little bed and gave a mother-kiss to each of her pupils – a mother-kiss and a murmured blessing; and in many breasts resolves were then formed which were to help the girls through the coming week. Some of these resolves, made not in their own strength, bore fruit in long after-years. There is no doubt that very few girls who lived long enough at Lavender House ever in after-days found their Sundays dull.

Chapter Ten

Varieties

Without any doubt, wild, naughty, impulsive Annie Forest was the most popular girl in the school. She was always in scrapes – she was scarcely ever out of hot water – her promises of amendment were truly like the proverbial pie-crust: but she was so lovable, so kind-hearted, so saucy and piquant and pretty, that very few could resist the nameless charm which she possessed. The little ones adored Annie, who was kindness itself to them; the bigger girls could not help admiring her fearlessness and courage; the best and noblest girls in the school tried to influence her for good. She was more or less an object of interest to every one; her courage was of just the sort to captivate school-girls, and her moral weakness was not observed by these inexperienced young eyes.

Hester alone, of all the girls who for a long time had come to Lavender House, failed to see any charm in Annie. She began by considering her ill-bred, and when she found she was the school favourite, she tossed her proud little head and determined that she for one would never be subjugated by such a naughty girl. Hester could read character with tolerable clearness; she was an observant child – very observant, and very thoughtful for her twelve years; and as the little witch Annie had failed to throw any spell over her, she saw her faults far more clearly than did her companions. There is no doubt that this brilliant, charming, and naughty Annie had heaps of faults; she had no perseverance; she was all passion and impulse; she could be the kindest of the kind, but from sheer thoughtlessness and wildness she often inflicted severe pain, even on those she loved best. Annie very nearly worshipped Mrs Willis, she had the most intense adoration for her, she respected her beyond any other human being. There were moments when the impulsive and hot-headed child felt that she could gladly lay down her life for her school-mistress. Once the mistress was ill, and Annie curled herself up all night outside her door, thereby breaking rules, and giving herself a severe cold; but her passion and agony were so great that she could only be soothed by at last stealing into the darkened room and kissing the face she loved.

“Prove your love to me, Annie, by going downstairs and keeping the school rules as perfectly as possible,” whispered the teacher.

“I will – I will never break a rule again as long as I live, if you get better, Mrs Willis,” responded the child.

She ran downstairs with her resolves strong within her, and yet in half an hour she was reprimanded for wilful and desperate disobedience.

One day Cecil Temple had invited a select number of friends to afternoon tea in her little drawing-room. It was the Wednesday half-holiday, and Cecil’s tea, poured into the tiniest cups and accompanied by thin wafer biscuits, was of the most *recherché* quality. Cecil had invited Hester Thornton, and a tall girl who belonged to the first-class and whose name was Dora Russell, to partake of this dainty beverage. They were sitting round the tiny tea-table, on little red stools with groups of flowers artistically painted on them, and were all three conducting themselves in a most ladylike and refined manner, when Annie Forest’s curly head and saucy face popped over the inclosure, and her voice said eagerly —

“Oh, may I be permitted to enter the shrine?”

“Certainly, Annie,” said Cecil, in her most cordial tones. “I have got another cup and saucer, and there is a little tea left in the tea-pot.”

Annie came in, and ensconced herself cosily on the floor. It did not matter in the least to her that Hester Thornton’s brow grew dark, and that Miss Russell suddenly froze into complete indifference to all her surroundings. Annie was full of a subject which excited her very much; she had suddenly

discovered that she wanted to give Mrs Willis a present, and she wished to know if any of the girls would like to join her.

“I will give her the present this day week,” said excitable Annie. “I have quite made up my mind. Will any one join me?”

“But there is nothing special about this day week, Annie,” said Miss Temple. “It will neither be Mrs Willis’s birthday, nor Christmas Day, nor New Year’s Day, nor Easter Day. Next Wednesday will be just like any other Wednesday. Why should we make Mrs Willis a present?”

“Oh, because she looks as if she wanted one, poor dear. I thought she looked sad this morning; her eyes drooped and her mouth was down at the corners. I am sure she’s wanting something from us all by now, just to show that we love her, you know.”

“Pshaw!” here burst from Hester’s lips.

“Why do you say that?” said Annie, turning round with her bright eyes flashing. “You’ve no right to be so contemptuous when I speak about our – our head-mistress. Oh, Cecil,” she continued, “do let us give her a little surprise – some spring flowers, or something just to show her that we love her.”

“But *you* don’t love her,” said Hester, stoutly.

Here was throwing down the gauntlet with a vengeance! Annie sprang to her feet and confronted Hester with a whole torrent of angry words. Hester firmly maintained her position. She said over and over again that love proved itself by deeds, not by words; that if Annie learned her lessons, and obeyed the school rules, she would prove her affection for Mrs Willis far more than by empty protestations. Hester’s words were true, but they were uttered in an unkind spirit, and the very flavour of truth which they possessed caused them to enter Annie’s heart and to wound her deeply. She turned, not red, but very white, and her large and lovely eyes grew misty with unshed tears.

“You are cruel,” she gasped, rather than spoke, and then she pushed aside the curtains of Cecil’s compartment and walked out of the play-room.

There was a dead silence among the three girls when she left them. Hester’s heart was still hot, and she was still inclined to maintain her own position, and to believe she had done right in speaking in so severe a tone to Annie. But even she had been made a little uneasy by the look of deep suffering which had suddenly transformed Annie’s charming childish face into that of a troubled and pained woman. She sat down meekly on her little three-legged stool and, taking up her tiny cup and saucer, sipped some of the cold tea.

Cecil Temple was the first to speak.

“How could you?” she said, in an indignant voice for her. “Annie is not the girl to be driven, and, in any case, it is not for you to correct her. Oh, Mrs Willis would have been so pained had she heard you – you were not *kind*, Miss Thornton. There, I don’t wish to be rude, but I fear I must leave you and Miss Russell – I must try and find Annie.”

“I’m going back to my own drawing-room,” said Miss Russell, rising to her feet. “Perhaps,” she added, turning round with a very gracious smile to Hester, “you will come and see me there, after tea, this evening.”

Miss Russell drew aside the curtains of Cecil Temple’s little room, and disappeared. Hester, with her eyes full of tears, now turned eagerly to Cecil.

“Forgive me, Cecil,” she exclaimed. “I did not mean to be unkind, but it is really quite ridiculous the way you all spoil that girl – you know as well as I do that she is a very naughty girl. I suppose it is because of her pretty face,” continued Hester, “that you are all so unjust, and so blind to her faults.”

“You are prejudiced the other way, Hester,” said Cecil in a more gentle tone. “You have disliked Annie from the first. There, don’t keep me – I must go to her now. There is no knowing what harm your words may have done. Annie is not like other girls. If you knew her story, you would perhaps be kinder to her.”

Cecil then ran out of her drawing-room, leaving Hester in sole possession of the little tea-things and the three-legged stools. She sat and thought for some time; she was a girl with a great deal of

obstinacy in her nature, and she was not disposed to yield her own point, even to Cecil Temple; but Cecil's words had, nevertheless, made some impression on her.

At tea-time that night, Annie and Cecil entered the room together. Annie's eyes were as bright as stars, and her usually pale cheeks glowed with a deep colour. She had never looked prettier – she had never looked so defiant, so mischievous, so utterly reckless. Mdlle. Perier fired indignant French at her across the table. Annie answered respectfully, and became demure in a moment; but even in the short instant in which the governess was obliged to lower her eyes to her plate, she had thrown a look so irresistibly comic at her companions, that several of them had tittered aloud. Not once did she glance at Hester although she occasionally looked boldly in her direction; but when she did so, her versatile face assumed a blank expression, as if she were seeing nothing. When tea was over, Dora Russell surprised the members of her own class by walking straight up to Hester, putting her hand inside her arm, and leading her off to her own very refined-looking little drawing-room.

"I want to tell you," she said, when the two girls found themselves inside the small inclosure, "that I quite agree with you in your opinion of Miss Forest. I think you were very brave to speak to her as you did to-day. As a rule, I never trouble myself with what the little girls in the third-class do, and of course Annie seldom comes under my notice; but I think she is a decidedly spoiled child, and your rebuff will doubtless do her a great deal of good."

These words of commendation, coming from tall and dignified Miss Russell, completely turned poor Hester's head.

"Oh, I am so glad you think so!" she stammered, colouring high with pleasure. "You see," she added, assuming a little tone of extra refinement, "at home I always associated with girls who were perfect ladies."

"Yes, any one can see that," remarked Miss Russell approvingly.

"And I do think Annie underbred," continued Hester. "I cannot understand," she added, "why Miss Temple likes her so much."

"Oh, Cecil is so amiable; she sees good in every one," answered Miss Russell. "Annie is evidently not a lady, and I am glad at last to find some one of the girls who belong to the middle school capable of discerning this fact. Of course, we of the first-class have nothing whatever to say to Miss Forest, but I really think Mrs Willis is not acting quite fairly by the other girls when she allows a young person of that description into the school. I wish to assure you, Miss Thornton, that you have at least my sympathy, and I shall be very pleased to see you in my drawing-room now and then."

As these last words were uttered, both girls were conscious of a little rustling sound not far away. Miss Russell drew back her curtain, and asked very sharply, "Who is there?" but no one replied, nor was there any one in sight, for the girls who did not possess compartments were congregated at the other end of the long play-room, listening to stories which Emma Marshall, a clever elder girl, was relating for their benefit.

Miss Russell talked on indifferent subjects to Hester, and at the end of the half-hour the two entered the class-room side by side, Hester's little head a good deal turned by this notice from one of the oldest girls in the school.

As the two walked together into the school-room, Susan Drummond, who, tall as she was, was only in the fourth class, rushed up to Miss Forest, and whispered something in her ear.

"It is just as I told you," she said, and her sleepy voice was quite wide awake and animated. Annie Forest rewarded her by a playful pinch on her cheek; then she returned to her own class, with a severe reprimand from the class teacher, and silence reigned in the long room, as the girls began to prepare their lessons as usual for the next day.

Miss Russell took her place at her desk in her usual dignified manner. She was a clever girl, and was going to leave school at the end of next term. Hers was a particularly fastidious, but by no means great nature – she was the child of wealthy parents, she was also well-born, and because of her money, and a certain dignity and style which had come to her as nature's gifts, she held an influence,

though by no means a large one, in the school. No one particularly disliked her, but no one, again, ardently loved her. The girls in her own class thought it well to be friendly with Dora Russell, and Dora accepted their homage with more or less indifference. She did not greatly care for either their praise or blame. Dora possessed in a strong degree that baneful quality, which more than anything else precludes the love of others – she was essentially selfish.

She sat now before her desk, little guessing how she had caused Hester's small heart to beat by her patronage, and little suspecting the mischief she had done to the girl by her injudicious words. Had she known, it is to be doubted whether she would have greatly cared. She looked through the books which contained her tasks for the next day's work, and, finding they did not require a great deal of preparation, put them aside, and amused herself during the rest of preparation time with a story-book, which she artfully concealed behind the leaves of some exercises. She knew she was breaking the rules, but this fact did not trouble her, for her moral nature was, after all, no better than poor Annie's, and she had not a tenth of her lovable qualities.

Dora Russell was the soul of neatness and order. To look inside her school-desk was a positive pleasure; to glance at her own neat and trim figure was more or less of a delight. Hers were the whitest hands in the school, and hers the most perfectly kept and glossy hair. As the preparation hour drew to a close, she replaced her exercises and books in exquisite order in her school-desk and shut down the lid.

Hester's eyes followed her as she walked out of the school-room, for the head class never had supper with the younger girls. Hester wondered if she would glance in her direction; but Miss Russell had gratified a very passing whim when she condescended to notice and praise Hester, and she had already almost forgotten her existence.

At bed-time that night Susan Drummond's behaviour was at the least extraordinary. In the first place, instead of being almost overpoweringly friendly with Hester, she scarcely noticed her; in the next place, she made some very peculiar preparations.

"What *are* you doing on the floor, Susan?" inquired Hetty in an innocent tone.

"That's nothing to you," replied Miss Drummond, turning a dusky red, and looking annoyed at being discovered. "I do wish," she added, "that you would go round to your side of the room and leave me alone; I sha'n't have done what I want to do before Danesbury comes in to put out the candle."

Hester was not going to put herself out with any of Susan Drummond's vagaries; she looked upon sleepy Susan as a girl quite beneath her notice, but even she could not help observing her, when she saw her sit up in bed a quarter of an hour after the candles had been put out, and in the flickering firelight which shone conveniently bright for her purpose, fasten a piece of string first round one of her toes, and then to the end of the bed-post.

"What *are* you doing?" said Hester again, half laughing.

"Oh, what a spy you are!" said Susan. "I want to wake, that's all; and whenever I turn in bed that string will tug at my toe, and, of course, I'll rouse up. If you were more good-natured, I'd give the other end of the string to you; but, of course, that plan would never answer."

"No, indeed," replied Hester; "I am not going to trouble myself to wake you. You must trust to your sponge of cold water in the morning, unless your own admirable device succeeds."

"I'm going to sleep now, at any rate," answered Susan; "I'm on my back, and I'm beginning to snore; good-night."

Once or twice during the night Hester heard groans from the self-sacrificing Susan, who, doubtless, found the string attached to her foot very inconvenient.

Hester, however, slept on when it might have been better for the peace of many in the school that she should have awakened. She heard no sound when, long before day, sleepy Susan stepped softly out of bed, and wrapping a thick shawl about her, glided out of the room. She was away for over half an hour, but she returned to her chamber and got into bed without in the least disturbing

Hester. In the morning she was found so soundly asleep that even the sponge of cold water could not arouse her.

“Pull the string at the foot of the bed, Alice,” said Hester: “she fastened a string to her toe, and twisted the other end round the bed-post, last night – pull it, Alice, it may effect its purpose.”

But there was no string now round Susan Drummond’s foot, nor was it found hanging to the bed-post.

Chapter Eleven

What Was Found In The School-Desk

The next morning, when the whole school were assembled, and all the classes were getting ready for the real work of the day, Miss Good, the English teacher, stepped to the head of the room, and, holding a neatly bound volume of “Jane Eyre” in her hand, begged to know to whom it belonged. There was a hush of astonishment when she held up the little book, for all the girls knew well that this special volume was not allowed for school literature.

“The house maid who dusts the school-room found this book on the floor,” continued the teacher. “It lay beside a desk near the top of the room. I see the name has been torn out, so I cannot tell who is the owner. I must request her, however, to step forward and take possession of her property. If there is the slightest attempt at concealment, the whole matter will be laid before Mrs Willis at noon to-day.”

When Miss Good had finished her little speech, she held up the book in its green binding and looked down the room.

Hester did not know why her heart beat – no one glanced at her, no one regarded her; all eyes were fixed on Miss Good, who stood with a severe, unsmiling, but expectant face.

“Come, young ladies,” she said, “the owner has surely no difficulty in recognising her own property. I give you exactly thirty seconds more; then, if no one claims the book, I place the affair in Mrs Willis’s hands.”

Just then there was a stir among the girls in the head class. A tall girl in dove-coloured cashmere, with a smooth head of golden hair, and a fair face which was a good deal flushed at this moment, stepped to the front, and said in a clear and perfectly modulated voice —

“I had no idea of concealing the fact that ‘Jane Eyre’ belongs to me. I was only puzzled for a moment to know how it got on the floor. I placed it carefully in my desk last night. I think this circumstance ought to be inquired into.”

“Oh! oh!” came from several suppressed voices here and there through the room; “whoever would have supposed that Dora Russell would be obliged to humble herself in this way?”

“Attention, young ladies!” said Miss Good; “no talking, if you please. Do I understand, Miss Russell, that ‘Jane Eyre’ is yours?”

“Yes, Miss Good.”

“Why did you keep it in your desk – were you reading it during preparation?”

“On, yes, certainly.”

“You are, of course, aware that you were breaking two very stringent rules of the school. In the first place, no story-books are allowed to be concealed in a school-desk, or to be read during preparation. In the second place, this special book is not allowed to be read at any time in Lavender House. You know these rules, Miss Russell?”

“Yes, Miss Good.”

“I must retain the book – you can return now to your place in class.”

Miss Russell bowed sedately, and with an apparently unmoved face, except for the slightly deepened glow on her smooth cheek, resumed her interrupted work.

Lessons went off as usual, but during recreation the mystery of the discovered book was largely discussed by the girls. As is the custom of school-girls, they took violent sides in the matter – some rejoicing in Dora’s downfall, some pitying her intensely. Hester was, of course, one of Miss Russell’s champions, and she looked at her with tender sympathy when she came with her haughty and graceful manner into the school-room, and her little heart beat with a vague hope that Dora might turn to her for sympathy.

Dora, however, did nothing of the kind. She refused to discuss the affair with her companions, and none of them quite knew what Mrs Willis said to her, or what special punishment was inflicted on the proud girl. Several of her school-fellows expected that Dora's drawing-room would be taken away from her, but she still retained it; and after a few days the affair of the book was almost forgotten.

There was, however, an uncomfortable and an uneasy spirit abroad in the school. Susan Drummond, who was certainly one of the most uninteresting girls in Lavender House, was often seen walking with and talking to Miss Forest. Sometimes Annie shook her pretty head over Susan's remarks; sometimes she listened to her; sometimes she laughed and spoke eagerly for a moment or two, and appeared to acquiesce in suggestions which her companion urged.

Annie had always been the soul of disorder – of wild pranks, of naughty and disobedient deeds – but, hitherto, in all her wildness she had never intentionally hurt any one but herself. Hers was a giddy and thoughtless, but by no means a bitter tongue – she thought well of all her school-fellows – and on occasions she could be self-sacrificing and good-natured to a remarkable extent. The girls of the head class took very little notice of Annie, but her other school-companions, as a rule, succumbed to her sunny, bright, and witty ways. She offended them a hundred times a day, and a hundred times a day was forgiven. Hester was the first girl in the third-class who had ever persistently disliked Annie and Annie, after making one or two overtures of friendship, began to return Miss Thornton's aversion; but she had never cordially hated her until the day they met in Cecil Temple's drawing-room and Hester had wounded Annie in her tenderest part by doubting her affection for Mrs Willis.

Since that day there was a change very noticeable in Annie Forest – she was not so gay as formerly, but she was a great deal more mischievous – she was not nearly so daring, but she was capable now of little actions slight in themselves, which yet were calculated to cause mischief and real unhappiness. Her sudden friendship with Susan Drummond did her no good, and she persistently avoided all intercourse with Cecil Temple, who hitherto had influenced her in the right direction.

The incident of the green book had passed with no apparent result of grave importance, but the spirit of mischief which had caused this book to be found was by no means asleep in the school. Pranks were played in a most mysterious fashion with the girls' properties.

Hester herself was the very next victim. She too was a neat and orderly child – she was clever and thoroughly enjoyed her school work. She was annoyed, therefore, and dreadfully puzzled, by discovering one morning that her neat French exercise-book was disgracefully blotted, and one page torn across. She was severely reprimanded by Mdlle. Perier for such gross untidiness and carelessness, and when she assured the governess that she knew nothing whatever of the circumstance, that she was never guilty of blots, and had left the book in perfect order the night before, the French lady only shrugged her shoulders, made an expressive gesture with her eyebrows, and plainly showed Hester that she thought the less she said on that subject the better.

Hester was required to write out her exercise again, and she fancied she saw a triumphant look in Annie Forest's eyes as she left the school-room, where poor Hester was obliged to remain to undergo her unmerited punishment.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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