

Speed Nell

Back at School with the Tucker Twins



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CHAPTER I

THE GETAWAY

Could it be possible that only one year had passed since I started to boarding school? So much had happened in that time, I had met so many persons, made so many friends, and my horizon had broadened so that it seemed more like ten years.

There I was once more on the train headed for Richmond, having arisen at the unearthly hour of five. Dear old Mammy Susan had as usual warmed up my bath water and prepared a bountiful breakfast. Father had been unable to accompany me to Richmond to put me on the Gresham train as we had planned, all because poor Sally Winn had made a desperate effort to depart this life in the night.

It was all so exactly as it had been the year before, I had to pinch myself to realize it was not just a dream of what had happened. My new mail order suit was a little different cut from the last year's, as Cousin Sue Lee, in planning my wardrobe, insisted upon up-to-date style, and my suit case did not look so shiny new. That was about the only difference that I could see. The colt had had a year to settle down in, but he was quite as lively as ever. My last hug with Mammy Susan was cut short by his refusing to stand still another minute, and as I piled into the buggy with Father, the spirited horse whirled us around on one wheel and we covered the six miles to Milton in such a short time that I had half an hour to wait for my train.

Sitting in the station at Richmond awaiting the arrival of my dear Tuckers and Annie Pore, I thought that if the first part of my journey had been a repetition of last year, now, at least, some variation was in order. Here I was waiting for friends I had already made, instead of wondering if I should meet any one on the train going to Gresham.

Annie Pore came first, her boat, from Price's Landing, having arrived early. Could this be the same Annie? This young lady had a suit on rather too much like mine for my taste, as I simply hate to look like everybody else! But a mail order house does not profess to sell only one of a kind, and I myself had introduced Annie to the mysteries of ordering by catalogue, so I really had no kick coming; but I couldn't help wishing that our tastes and pocketbooks had not coincided so exactly. When I thought of the Annie of last September and the Annie of this, I hated myself for caring.

My mind still retained the picture of the forlorn little English girl with her tear-stained face and crumpled hat, her ill-fitting clothes and bulging telescope. Now she looked like other girls, except that she was a great deal more beautiful. In place of the battered old telescope, she carried a brand new suit case; and a neat little hand bag held her ticket and trunk check, also a reservation in the parlor car. She was still timid but when she spied me a look of intense joy and relief came over her face, and in a moment we were locked in each other's arms. How school girls can hug!

"Oh, Page, I'm glad to see you! I had a terrible feeling I had missed my train, but of course if you are here, I couldn't have."

"Still the anxious traveler, aren't you, dear? We've at least twenty minutes."

"Harvie Price was to meet me at the boat landing and bring me up here, but I was afraid to wait for him. He believes in just catching a train and it makes me extremely nervous not to be ahead of time. I am afraid he will think it very rude of me."

"Maybe it will teach him a lesson and he will learn from the early bird how better to conduct himself," I comforted her. "Now the Tuckers say it is much better to have a train wait for you than wait for a train. – Speaking of angels, – here they are!"

In they trooped, Mr. Tucker laden with suit cases and umbrellas, and Dum carrying gingerly in both hands a box about a foot square which contained something very precious, it was evident, as she most carefully deposited it on a bench before she gave me her accustomed bear hug. Dee had Brindle, her beloved bull dog, in her arms and she dispensed with the ceremony of putting him down before she embraced Annie and me, so we both got a good licking in the left ear from that affectionate canine.

"Zebedee is mad with me for bringing him, as it means he will have to keep him in the newspaper office until luncheon time, but somehow I could not part with him before it was absolutely necessary. It hurt his feelings terribly when I went last year and did not let him see me off," and Dee wept a little Tucker tear on the wrinkled and rolling neck of her dog. To one who did not know Brindle, he seemed to be choking with emotion, but Brindle's make-up was such that every intaken breath was a snuffle and every outgoing one a snort.

Mr. Tucker's handsome and speaking countenance beamed with delight as he waited his turn to give Annie and me the warm handshake that was as much a part of the Tuckers as anything else about that delightful trio.

"What a place this station would be to have the Lobster Quadrille!" he exclaimed. "I am so glad to see you, little Page, and you, Miss Annie, that I feel as though I must dance, but that might get us in bad with that dignified-looking porter over there and so maybe we had better refrain – Besides, I could not dance on this day when my Tweedles are leaving me," and instead of dancing as he had threatened, this youngest of all the Tuckers, in spite of being the parent, began to show decided signs of shedding tears.

"Now, Zebedee, this is ridiculous! You act worse than you did last year," admonished Dum.

"Well, it is worse than it was last year," and Zebedee drew his girls to him while Brindle choked and chortled and tried to lick all three of them at once. "You see, last year we did not know just how bad it would be, and this year we know."

"That's so!" tweedled the twins. "If you could only go with us to Gresham, it wouldn't be so bad."

"If we had just been triplets instead of twins and a father!" said Zebedee, and then we all of us laughed.

Just then Harvie Price arrived in a state of breathless excitement, having missed Annie at the pier and, aware of her timidity, fearing something dire had befallen her.

Harvie had a great tenderness for his one-time playmate and usually assumed the big brother air with her, but the large box of candy he produced for the journey, and which he handed to her with very much a "Sweets to the sweet" expression, was not so very big brotherish to my way of thinking. Brothers have to be very big brothers indeed and sisters very little sisters for the former to remember that the latter might be pleased by some little attention in the way of candy on a trip. I don't mean to criticise brothers, as I'd rather have one than anything in all the world. I'd excuse him from all gallant attentions if he would only just exist.

"If you had not brought Brindle, I believe I would go half way with you girls, and come back on the train we strike at the Junction," said Zebedee.

"If you go, I will, too," chimed in Harvie.

"Now, Virginia Tucker! Just see what you have done! You put that dog before your own flesh and blood!" exclaimed Dum.

"No such thing! He is my own flesh and blood, Caroline Tucker," and Dee held the ugly bull dog close in her arms.

"Tut! Tut! Don't have a row for Heaven's sake," begged their father. When Dum and Dee Tucker called one another by their Christian names, no one knew so well as their devoted parent how

close they were to a breach that could only be healed by *trial de combat*. It was almost as serious a state of affairs as when they addressed him as Father or Mr. Tucker. "Do you know, I believe with a little strategy we can take Brindle, too, and not in the baggage car either. I know how he hates that."

"Oh, Zebedee, how? Dum, I'm sorry I called you Caroline," and Dee gave her twin an affectionate pat.

"Forget it! Forget it! Besides, I called you Virginia first."

"Well, stop making up now. Sometimes you Tweedles make up with more racket than you do fighting it out. Now listen! We can dress Brindle up like a baby if you girls can dive in your grips for suitable apparel – anything white and fluffy will do. Take off that veil you've got twisted 'round your neck, Dum, and here is a cap all ready for baby," and he fashioned a wonderful little Dutch cap out of his large linen handkerchief and tied it under the unresisting and flabby chin of Brindle.

We were so convulsed we could hardly contain our merriment, but contain it we were forced to do, because of the exceedingly dignified and easily shocked porter who stood at the door of the elevator like a uniformed bronze statue.

"Gather 'round me, girls," begged Dee, "so we can have a suitable dressing room for Brindle. He is very modest."

Brindle was so accustomed to being dressed up by Dee, who had played with him as though he were a doll ever since he had been a tiny soft puppy, that he submitted with great docility to the rôle he was forced to play. We all wanted Zebedee and Harvie to go with us to the Junction if it could be managed, but the cast-iron rules of the railroads forbade the carrying of dogs into the coaches. Brindle was there and there was nothing to do with him but take him, and take him we did. Annie had a short petticoat made of soft sheer material with lace whipped on the bottom and little hand tucks and hemstitching. This she took out of her new suitcase, proud to be the one to have the proper dress for baby. Dee tied the skirt around Brindle's neck and pulled it down over his passive legs.

"Yes, my baby has never worn anything but handmade clothes," said Dee with all the airs of a young mother.

Then Dum's automobile veil, the pride of her heart because of its wonderful blue colour, covered the sniffing, snuffling nose of our baby. The transformation was completed just as our train was called, and with preternaturally solemn countenances we trooped through the gate, the handmade dress of the baby hanging over Dee's arm in a most life-like manner.

The man who punched the tickets at the gate looked rather earnestly at the very young girl with the rather large bunched baby, and of course just as Dee passed him, Brindle had to let forth one of his especially loud snorts. Dee turned pale but Zebedee came to the rescue with:

"My dear, I am afraid poor little Jo Jo has taken an awful cold. I have some sweet spirits of nitre in my case which I will administer as soon as we are settled in the Pullman."

Dee looked gratefully at her thoughtful father and whispered:

"Gather around me closely, girls."

We gathered, while Harvie and Zebedee brought up the rear.

We passed the solicitous Pullman porter, who even offered to take the baby, and we sank finally into our seats in a state of collapse. I had long ago found out that she who followed the Tuckers, father and daughters, would get into more or less scrapes; but she would have a mighty good time doing it and would always get out with no loss of life or honour.

"Zebedee!" gasped Dee. "Why did you call Brindle, Jo Jo?"

"Why, Jo Jo, the dog-faced boy! He was one of the marvels of my youth. No side show was complete without him. If the worst comes to the worst we can be a freak show traveling West, on our way to the fair in Kalamazoo."

"What will you be?" I laughed.

"Oh, I'll be 'Eat-'em-alive' and Miss Annie will have to be the lion tamer. They are always beautiful blondes. Dum and Dee of course will be the Siamese Twins disconnected for the convenience of travel."

"And me – what will I be?"

"Oh, you will have to be the little white rabbit I'm going to eat alive," and he made a horribly big mouth that I know would have made poor Jo Jo bark if he could have seen it through his thick blue veil, but the conductor appeared at this crucial moment and Zebedee had to sit up and behave.

CHAPTER II

THE BIRTHDAY PARTY

"Tickets, please!" this from the Pullman conductor, a tall, soldierly looking person with a very grim mouth.

He punched all of us in sober silence. Harvie and Zebedee had not had time to buy Pullman seats, as they had been so taken up with the robing of Brindle. At the last minute Harvie had rushed to the ticket window and secured their tickets but they had to pay for their seats on the train. In making the change the conductor dropped some silver, and in stooping for it he and Zebedee bumped heads. Then the official was thrown by a lurching of the train against our precious baby's feet. This was too much for the patient Brindle and he emitted a low and ominous growl. The conductor looked much startled. We sat electrified. The ever tactful Dee arose to the occasion.

"Why, honey, Mother didn't tell you to go like a bow wow. I thought my precious was asleep." Turning to the mystified conductor she continued, "He has so many cunning little tricks and we never know when he is going to get them off. He can go moo like a cow, and mew like a kitty, and can grunt just like a piggy wiggy," and what should that dog, with human intelligence, do but give a most astounding lifelike grunt. The conductor's grim mouth broke into a grin and we went off into such shouts of laughter that if Brindle had not been a very well-behaved person he would certainly have barked with us.

Zebedee followed the man to the end of the car and with the aid of one of his very good and ever ready cigars, and a little extra payment of fare, persuaded him to let our whole crowd move into the drawing-room, explaining that we were to lunch on the train. When we were once settled in the drawing-room with a little table ready for the spread to which all of us were prepared to contribute (remembering from the year before the meagre bill of fare the buffet on that train offered), Dum disclosed the contents of the precious big box which she carried. It was a wonderful Lady Baltimore cake. A single pink candle was tucked in the side of the box and this was stuck in the centre of the delectable confection.

"Whose birthday is it? I didn't know it was anybody's," I said.

"Why, this is the birthday of our friendship, yours and Annie's and the Tuckers'," tweedled the twins.

"We felt like commemorating it somehow," explained Zebedee. "You see, it is one of the best things that ever happened to us."

"Me, too!" chimed in Annie and I. And so it was.

When, the year before, Annie and I had been sitting in the station waiting for the train to Gresham, Annie was as forlorn a specimen of little English girl as could be found in America, I am sure; and while I was not forlorn, just because I never am forlorn as my interest in people is so intense that I am always sure something exciting is going to happen in a moment, no doubt I looked almost as forlorn as Annie, alone and friendless. The Tuckers, ever charming and delightful, came bounding into our presence, and they have been doing it ever since. They always come with some scheme for fun and frolic and their ever ready wit and good humour has an effect on all with whom they come in contact. Annie was certainly made over by a year's friendship with them. Some of the teachers at Gresham thought I had worked the change in Annie, but I just know it was the twins.

As for Mr. Tucker – Zebedee – he was next to my father in my regard, and so different from my father that they could go along abreast without taking from each other. There was never such a man as Mr. Tucker. Thirty-seven himself and the father of twins of sixteen, he seemed to have bathed in the fountain of eternal youth, – and yet I have seen him, when occasion demanded it, assume the dignity of a George Washington.

Occasion did not demand it at that birthday party and so he "frisked and he frolicked" very like the little rabs in the Uncle Remus story. One could never tell where he would be next. I knew a great deal of his glee was assumed to keep up the spirits of his dear Tweedles as the time for the arrival at the fateful junction was slowly but surely approaching.

It was very early for luncheon but have it we must before Harvie and Zebedee left us. Mammy Susan had as usual put up enough food for a regiment in my lunch box. But enough food for a regiment seems to vanish before a mere squad if it happens to be as good food as my dear old Mammy Susan was sure to provide.

What fun we had! The little table groaned with good things to eat. Even the baby's blue veil was carefully removed and he was allowed a large slice of Lady Baltimore, which he gobbled up in most unseemly haste. The little pink candle burned merrily and the toasts were most sincere: that there would be many, many happy returns of the day, as many, in fact, as there were to be days. Our friendship, now only a year old, was to live as long as we did, and we determined then and there to celebrate every year that we could. September fifteenth was to be a red letter day with us wherever we might be.

The Junction was imminent and it meant telling good-bye to Zebedee, Harvie and Brindle. Dum grumbled a little about the loss of her veil but Brindle had to make his return trip in the same rôle of baby, and Annie's petticoat and Dum's veil had to be sacrificed. Zebedee promised to return them in short order. The pain of parting was much lessened by the amusement caused by the appearance of man and baby. He held the infant with great and loving care and Brindle chortled and gurgled with satisfaction.

The Pullman conductor said nothing as Zebedee disembarked but his eyes had an unwonted twinkle and his grim mouth was twitching at the corners. I believe he knew all the time but could not bear to break up our pleasant party by consigning Brindle to the baggage car. The train conductor was in a broad grin and the porter looked dazed.

"Is you partin' from yo' baby, lady?" he said to Dee.

"Yes!" wept Dee with real Tucker tears, "he has to go back with his grandfather."

"Grandpaw? That there ain't no grandpaw, that young gent."

"Yes, he is," sobbed Dee. "He is just as much Jo Jo's grandfather as I am his mother, and I am certainly all the mother he has, poor lamb," and the kindly coloured man looked very sorry for the grieving young mother.

"Is you fo'ced by circumstantialians over which you ain't got controlment to abandon yo' offspring?" he questioned.

"Yes," blundered Dee, something rare with her, "I have to go to boarding school and they don't allow do – babies there."

"Well, well, too bad! Too bad! It pears like a pity you couldn't a got studyin' off'n yo mind befo' you indulged in matrimonial venturesomes. When a young lady gits married, she – "

"Oh, I'm not married!" The porter's eyes turned white, he rolled them up so far. Dee saw her break and hastened to her own rescue. The rest of us were petrified with suppressed merriment. "That is, I'm not to say much married; you see, my husband is dead."

"Oh! Sorrow is indeed visited you early. But grieve not. One so young as you is kin git many husbands, perhaps, befo' the day of recognition arrives."

We were glad when his duties called him off because the laugh in us was obliged to come out. Our train backed up to get on the other track and the last we saw of Zebedee and Harvie they were standing in dejected attitudes, Zebedee grasping a squirming Brindle firmly in his arms while Harvie, acting as train-bearer, gracefully held aloft the trailing petticoat. Brindle had espied through the blue veil a possible canine acquaintance and was struggling with all his might to get down and make either a friend or enemy as the case might prove.

Dee simply had to stop crying; in fact, she had stopped long before she felt that she should. She was forced to squeeze tears out to keep up the deception she had begun.

"Oh, what a tangled web we weave,
When first we practice to deceive."

"You came mighty near making yourself your own grandmother, you got so mixed up," laughed Dum. "Brindle is so pedigreed I don't believe he would thank you for the bar sinister you put on him."

CHAPTER III

GRESHAM AGAIN

How strange it was to be back at school and to belong there, greeting old girls and being greeted as an old girl! We piled into the same bus, this time not getting separated as we had the first year, and who should be there saving seats for us but dear old Mary Flannagan, her head redder than ever and her good, fine face beaming with joy at our appearance. Our bus filled up with Juniors, all of us happy and gay and glad to see one another. Miss Sayre, a pupil teacher of last year and a full teacher for the present, got in with us. She was very popular with our class and not very much older than we were, so we talked before her without the least restraint.

"I'm glad to see you, Page," she said, finding a place between Mary and me that Mary's bunchy skirt had successfully filled before.

"You girls look so well and rosy I know you have had a good summer."

"Splendid!" I exclaimed. "You know Tweedles had a house party down at Willoughby, and there was a boys' camp near us, and the fun we had with them! I never had such a good time in my life!"

"Guess who came on the train with me!" broke in Mary. "Shorty Hawkins! He said –"

"Well, who do you think came down to see us off and brought Annie a big box of candy and rode as far as the Junction and went back with Zebedee? Harvie Price, and he said –"

But Dum interrupted Dee to inform the crowd that Stephen White, Wink, had taken them to the Lyric on his way to the University when he had come through Richmond. Before she could tell us what he said, which she was clamoring to do, Annie Pore spoke up to say that Harvie Price was going to the University to-morrow. What he said about going was cut short by Mary Flannagan who blurted out:

"Shorty says that he hears that George Massie is so stuck on Annie that he is getting thin – He has waked up and has fallen off a whole pound." George Massie's nickname was Sleepy and he weighed about two hundred, so this set us off into peals of laughter.

"Rags wrote me that Sleepy was drinking no water with his meals and eating no potatoes, trying to fall off," I ventured when I could get a word in edgewise. "I can't fancy Sleepy thin, but I think he is just as sweet as he can be, fat or thin." I caught a very amused look on Margaret Sayre's face. "What is it?" I asked.

"Oh, nothing! I can't help wondering where the Sophomores go and the Juniors come from. You are the same girls who a year ago said you would bite out your tongues before you would spend your time talking about boys all the time, and since we got in the bus there has not been one word about anything but boys, boys, boys."

"Oh, Miss Sayre, how silly you must think we are!" I whispered.

"Not a bit of it! I just had to tease you a little. It is a phase girls usually go through and I knew it would hit you and your friends this year. If it doesn't hit you too hard it does not hurt you at all, just so none of you gets beau-crazy."

"Well, I hope to gracious we will have too much sense for that," and I quietly determined to put a bridle on my tongue when boys were the subject of conversation. Here I was acting like a crazy Junior, that from the Sophomore standpoint of the year before I had so heartily condemned. I remembered the pranks of the class ahead of us and was amazed when a bus filled with rather sober girls came abreast of us and I recognized in them last year's Juniors, this year's Seniors. They were so much quieter and more dignified than the rollicking busload of which I made one.

"Do you know Miss Peyton is ill and may have to take the whole year to get well?" asked Miss Sayre.

"Oh, oh! How sorry we are!" came from the whole load of girls.

Miss Peyton, the principal of Gresham, was much beloved by all the pupils. She was a person of infinite tact and charm and her understanding of the genus, girl, was little short of uncanny.

"Who on earth is to take her place at Gresham?" I asked. "One of the teachers?"

"There was no teacher to call on to fill the place, now that Miss Cox is married, so a principal from North Carolina has been engaged. She is a B.A., an M.A., a Ph. D., and every other combination of letters in the alphabet, from big Eastern colleges. I hope we will all pull together as we have under Miss Peyton's kindly hand. Her name is Miss Plympton. I have not met her yet," and Margaret Sayre looked very sad. She had been under Miss Peyton for many years, as a pupil first, then a pupil teacher and now she had hoped to have her first year of real teaching under the careful and understanding guidance of her beloved friend.

All of us felt depressed, but it takes nothing short of an overwhelming calamity to keep down the spirits of girls of sixteen for any length of time. By the time our straining horses had pulled their load up to the top of Gresham hill we were bubbling over again, and I must say that now my attention had been called to it, there were certainly a great many "he said's" and "I told him's" to be distinguished in the hubbub.

Miss Sayre and I stopped a minute before going into the building to look at the mountains. They were out in full force to greet us. Sometimes mountains behave so badly; just when you need them most they disappear and will not show their countenances for days and days. Gresham was looking very lovely, and in spite of the little empty feeling I always had about being away from Father and my beloved home, Bracken, I was glad to be there. It meant seeing my old friends and, no doubt, making many more new ones, and making friends was still the uppermost desire of my heart.

"117 Carter Hall is still ours, so let's go up and shed our wraps and leave our grips and come down later to see the new principal," and Dum hooked her arm in one of mine and Dee took possession of my other side.

"Annie and Mary Flannagan are to be right next to us. Isn't that great? I feel terribly larky, somehow. I reckon it's being a Junior that is getting in on me," and Dum let out a "Junior! Junior! Rah! Rah! Rah!"

117 was as bare as it had been when first we took possession of it, as all of our doo-dads had to come down when we left in June. One of the rules of the institution was that no furnishings could be left from year to year.

"I wish our trunks would come so we could cover up this bareness. The nakedness of these walls is positively indecent," sighed Dee. "Wink is going to send me some pennants from the University. I just adore pennants."

I could see the finish of our room. Last year there had been very little wall space showing and this year there was to be none. It was against the rules to tack things on the wall and everything had to hang from the picture railing, so the consequence was most of the rooms looked like some kind of telephone system gone crazy, wires long and short crossing and recrossing. Sometimes a tiny little kodak picture that some girl wanted to hang by her dresser would have to suspend from yards of wire. Sometimes an ingenious one would bunch many small pictures from one wire and that would remind me of country telephones and a party line where your bell rang at every one's house and every one's bell rang at yours.

We stopped in 115, where Annie and Mary were to live, and found them very much pleased with their room, happy to be together and to be next to us.

"Won't we have larks, though?" exclaimed Mary. "I feel terribly like I'm going to be one big demerit. I hear the new principal is awfully strict. A girl who knew a girl whose brother married a girl who went to the school Miss Plympton used to boss in North Carolina told me she heard she was a real Tartar. They say she makes you toe the mark."

When I saw Miss Plympton I could well believe the girl that Mary knew, who knew a girl, whose brother married a girl who knew Miss Plympton, was quite truthful in her statement that Miss

Plympton was something of a disciplinarian. She was mannish in her attire and quite soldierly in her bearing. Her tight tailored clothes fitted like the paper on the wall. She gave one the impression of having been poured into them, melted first. But above her high linen collar, her chin and neck seemed to have retained the fluid state that the rest of her must have been reduced to to get her so smoothly into her clothes. Her neck fell over her collar in soft folds and her chin – I should say chins – were as changing in form as a bank of clouds on a summer day. We never could agree how many she had, and Dum and Dee Tucker actually had to resort to their boxing gloves, something they seldom did in those days, to settle the matter. Dee declared she had never been able to count but four but Dum asserted that she had distinctly seen five, in fact that she usually had five. Be that as it may, she certainly had more than her share, and what interested me in her chins was whether or not the changing was voluntary or involuntary. I never could decide, although I made a close study of the matter. Her face was intelligent but very stern, and I had a feeling from the beginning that it was going to be difficult, perhaps impossible, to make a friend of her.

"She is as hard as a bag of nails!" exclaimed Dee, when we compared impressions later on.

"I'd just as soon weep on her back as her bosom," wailed Dum. "I don't believe there is one bit of difference. She's got about as much heart as Mrs. Shem, Ham, and Japheth in a Noah's ark."

"She almost scared me to death," shivered poor Annie Pore. "Just think of the contrast between her and Miss Peyton."

"I was real proud of you, the way you spunked up to her, Annie," broke in Mary Flannagan. "Wasn't she terrifying when she decided I was too young to be a Junior? I don't know what I should have done if you had not told her I led my class in at least one subject. I hope it is not the one she teaches or it will be up to me to hustle."

"Well, girls," I said, "I see breakers ahead for all of us unless we can find a soft side to Miss Plumpton, I mean Plympton, and keep on it." A roar from the girls stopped me.

"What a good name for her – Plumpton – " tweedled the twins. "Plumpton! Plumpton! Rah, rah, rah!"

No great dignity was possible after that. No matter how stiff and military Miss Plympton could be, and she could out-stiffen a poker, we knew her name was Plumpton and were ahead of her. I had a feeling during our whole interview with her that she did not approve of us for some reason. I don't know what it was. It almost looked as though some one had got us in bad before we ever met her; but some of the other girls told me they had the same feeling, so no doubt it was just her unfortunate manner that made you think she looked upon you as a suspicious character.

Looking back soberly and sanely on that year at school, I can understand now that the substitute principal was not quite as impossible as we thought she was, but the keynote of her character was that she lacked all sense of humour. A joke book meant no more to her than a grocery book. She was nothing but a bundle of facts. She thought in dates and eras (History being her subject) and if you could not begin at the creation and divide time up into infinitesimal bits and pigeon hole every incident, you were nothing but a numskull. Any one who had to learn a verse of poetry to remember the kings of England had softening of the brain in her eyes. She did not even think it permissible to say:

"Thirty days hath September,
April, June, and November."

"Facts are much simpler to master than fancies," she would lecture, and my private opinion was that she could not learn poetry any more than some of us could learn dates. The calendar to her was just another month marked with black figures to be torn off. I usually resorted to some form of poetry to take the taste of her classes out of my mouth. I remember once when the lesson had been

the making and remaking of the calendar by the arbitrary parties who took upon themselves that task, I got so bored and sleepy that all I could do was to keep on saying to myself:

"January brings the snow,
Makes our feet and fingers glow.

February brings the rain,
Thaws the frozen lake again.

March brings breezes, loud and shrill,
To stir the dancing daffodil.

April brings the primrose sweet,
Scatters daisies at our feet.

May brings flocks of pretty lambs
Skipping by their fleecy dams.

June brings tulips, lilies, roses,
Fills the children's hands with posies.

Hot July brings cooling showers,
Apricots and gillyflowers.

August brings the sheaves of corn;
Then the harvest home is borne.

Fresh October brings the pheasant;
Then to gather nuts is pleasant.

Dull November brings the blast;
Then the leaves are whirling fast.

Chill December brings the sleet,
Blazing fire and Christmas treat."

CHAPTER IV

RULES AND RESULTS

The strangest thing about Miss Plympton was that she never was able to tell the Tucker Twins apart. This was an unforgivable offense in their eyes and in the eyes of their friends. They were as alike as two peas in some ways and the antipodes in others. They might mystify you from the back but once you got a good look in their eyes, the mirrors of their souls, you were pretty apt to get them straight and keep them straight. Then their colouring was so different. Dee's hair was black with blue lights and Dum's was black with red lights; Dee's eyes were grey and Dum's hazel; Dee had a dimple in her chin, while Dum's chin had an uncompromising squareness to it that gave you to understand that her character was quite as fixed as Gibraltar, and she had no more idea of changing her mind than Miss Plympton had of toying with unalterable facts, such as 1066 or 1492.

From the very beginning I scented trouble between the new principal and the Tuckers. Miss Plympton called them Miss Tucker indiscriminately, and sometimes both of them answered and sometimes neither of them. Either way irritated Miss Plympton. She seemed to think they should know by instinct which one she meant. She finally grasped the fact that they had separate names but was more than apt to call Dee, Virginia, and Dum, Caroline, which was quite as unpardonable as saying Columbus discovered America in 1066 would have been to her.

"The very next time she calls me Caroline, I'm going to call her Plumpton," declared Dum. "I don't mean that Dee ain't as good as I am and a heap better, but I'm me – "

"Yes, and in the same vernacular Dee's her," I teased. We had a compact to correct the grammar of our roommates.

"I stand corrected about ain't but I still stick to 'I'm me.' It is more forceful and means more than 'I'm I.' Of course I'm I, but in Miss Plumpton's mind there seems to be strong doubt whether I'm me. I is a kind of ladylike, sissy outside of a person, but me is the inmost, inward, soul self – I'm me – me – me!"

"Well, you certainly are and there is no one quite like you. I don't see why Miss Plympton can't see it, too."

"I know why! It's because she doesn't understand people. She thinks of us as being human beings of the female sex, who weigh a certain amount, are just so tall and so wide, have lived a certain time and come from such and such a city. Why, the only difference she sees between you and Mary Flannagan is that you are in 117 and Mary is in 115, and you have brown hair and Mary has red, and Mary is better on dates than you are. The real true Page Allison is a closed book to that fat head. I believe Miss Peyton knew our souls as well as she did our bodies."

We missed Miss Peyton every hour of the day. Her reign had been wise and gentle and always just. We never forgot her kindness to us the time Dee kept the kitten in her room all night. She won us over for life then and there. Miss Plympton had retained all of Miss Peyton's rules and added to them. She fenced us around with so many rules that the honour system was abolished.

Study hall was a very different place from what it had been in Miss Peyton's time. Then order had ruled because we were on our honour not to communicate with one another by word or sign. Of course some girls do not regard honour as a very precious thing and they broke their word, but most girls, I am glad to say, have as keen a sense of honour as the best of men. Miss Plympton's attitude toward us was one of doubt and suspicion and, the honour system being abolished, we naturally felt that the most serious fault we could commit would be breaking the eleventh commandment: "Thou shalt not be found out." We developed astonishing agility in evading the authorities and getting out of scrapes. From having been five law-abiding citizens, we turned into extremely slick outlaws. Even

Annie Pore would sometimes suggest escapades that no one would dream could find harbour behind that calm, sweet brow.

The same unrest pervaded the whole school. A day never passed that some group of girls was not called to the office to have a serious reprimand. We got so hardened that it meant no more to us than the ordinary routine of the day, while the year before to be called to the office to have Miss Peyton censure you about something was a calamity that every one earnestly prayed to avoid. Miss Peyton never talked to you like a Dutch Uncle unless you needed it, while Miss Plympton never talked to you any other way.

"She makes me feel like an inmate of a detention home or some place where the criminally insane are sent," stormed Dee. "She makes out I have done things I never even thought of doing and has not got sense enough to know I never lie."

"What was it this time?" I asked.

"She said I changed the record on the Victrola Sunday night from 'Lead, Kindly Light,' sung by Louise Homer, to 'A-Roaming in the Gloaming,' by Harry Lauder. You see all that bunch of preachers was here, and, of course, only sacred music was permissible under the circumstances."

"Why, I did that!" exclaimed Dum, "and didn't the preachers like it, though! Well, I reckon it is up to me to go 'fess up."

"Not a bit of it!" declared Dee. "She never asked who did it – that's not her way. She works with a spy system, so let her work that way. I bet we can outwit any spy she can get."

It seems strange when I look back on it that this spirit of mischief had entered into our crowd to such an extent, but we were not the same girls we had been the year before, all because of this head of the school who did not understand girls. If she had trusted us, we would have been trustworthy, I am sure.

There was a printed list of don'ts a yard long tacked up in every available spot, and I can safely declare that during the year we did every single thing we were told not to do. If we missed one of them it was an accident. They were such silly don'ts. "No food must be kept in the rooms." Now, what school girl is going to keep such a rule as that? "No talking in the halls or corridors." That would be impossible except in a deaf and dumb institution. "No washing of clothes of any sort in the rooms or bath rooms." Then what is the use of having little crêpe de chine handkerchiefs and waists if they must be sent in the laundry and come back starched and all the nice crinkle ironed out of them? Who would put her best silk stockings in wash to have them come back minus a foot? "No ink to be taken to rooms." We would just as soon have written with pencils except that the rule made us long to break it. Of course, break it we did. "No talking after lights are out." Now what nonsense was that? When lights are out is the very time to talk to your roommate. I verily believe that there was not one single rule on that list that was necessary. There were lots more of them and all of them equally silly. The worst one of all was: "Absolutely no visiting in rooms." That meant no social life at all.

We had looked forward to having Annie and Mary next to us, but if there was to be no visiting it would not do us much good. Annie thought up a scheme that surprised and delighted us.

"Let's have telephonic communication. Our closets adjoin."

"Good! So they do," tweedled the Tuckers. "We'll get Zebedee to send us the things to make it." Of course Zebedee sent them the required things as he always aided and abetted us in every scheme to have a good time. He bought one of the toy telephones that has a tiny battery attached and is really excellent as a house telephone. We installed it quite easily with the aid of an auger that Zebedee had the forethought to send with the toy. The things came disguised as shoes. That telephone was a great source of pleasure to us and at times proved to be a real friend. It was concealed behind Dum's Sunday dress and it would have been a clever detective who could have discovered it.

"Let's not tell a soul about it," said Mary, "because you know how things spread. You know," holding up one finger, "and I know," holding up another, "and that makes eleven."

We kept our secret faithfully and often mystified the other girls by communicating things to our neighbours when they knew we had not been to their room and had not spoken to them in the halls. Of course we did not have a bell as that would have been a dangerous method of attracting attention, but three knocks on the wall was a signal that you were wanted at the phone.

Annie was the originator of another scheme that saved us many a demerit. Every one of us had a dummy that could be made in a few moments, and these we always carefully put in our beds when we went off on the spreads or what not that took us out of our rooms when we were supposed to be in them.

"How on earth did you ever think of such a thing, Annie?" asked the admiring Mary.

"I am ashamed to say the Katzenjammer Kids in the comic supplement put it in my head," blushed Annie. "I know it is not very refined but I always read it."

It was rather incongruous to think of Annie Pore, the timid, shy, very ladylike English girl, who a little more than a year ago looked as though she had not a friend in the world and had never read anything more recent than Tennyson's "Maud," not only reading the funny paper but learning mischief from it and imparting the same to the Tucker Twins, past masters in the art of getting into scrapes. These dummies were topped by boudoir caps with combings carefully saved and stitched in the edge of the caps, giving a most life like look when stuffed out with anything that came to hand. A sofa cushion dressed up in a night gown, tucked carefully under the cover with the boudoir cap reposing on the pillow, would fool any teacher who came creeping into our room after lights out to see if we were in any mischief.

Mary's hair, being that strong healthy kind of red hair, never came out, so she had no combings, never had had any. We ravelled out Dum's old red sweater sleeve and made a wonderful wig, some redder than Mary's, but in the subdued light in which it was to be viewed it did very well.

"Sleep that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care," Mary would quote as she tucked her counterfeit self up in her warm bed preparatory to some midnight escapade.

CHAPTER V

SOME LETTERS

*From Virginia Tucker to Mr. Jeffry Tucker.
Gresham, Oct. 15, 19 —*

Dearest Zebedee:

It gets worse and worse – We've had a whole month of it now and my demerits are much more numerous than my merits. I see no way of getting out of the hole I am in. Everything I do or don't do means just another black mark for me. Now who can help sneezing when a sneeze is crying out to be sneezed? And who can help making a face when a sneeze is imminent? Not a Tucker! You know yourself what a terrific noise you make when you sneeze and how you jump up and crack your heels together just as you explode. If you were in church and a sneeze came you could not contain yourself within yourself without the risk of breaking yourself up into infinitesimal bits. I inherit my sneeze as directly from my paternal parent as I do my chin and my so-called stubbornness (we call it character, don't we, Zebedeedlums?). I do think it is hard to be kept in bounds a week for an inherited weakness – or shall we say strength? Our Tucker sneeze certainly should not be put down as a weakness.

Another thing about this new principal is that she can't tell me from Dee or Dee from me. She seems to think both of us are me, lately, although at first she thought both of us were Dee. I kicked over the first condition, but Heaven knows the last is much more trying, as I get all of Dee's demerits; not that Dee does not behave like a perfect gentleman and insist on her share of blame and even more than her share. There is no use in arguing with Miss Plympton. She won't believe you if you say you didn't do a thing, and she won't believe you when you say you did. She just sits there and marks in her book and has the expression of:

"The Moving Finger writes; and having writ,
Moves on: nor all your Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line
Nor all your tears wash out a Word of it."

The other day I sneezed, in fact I out-sneezed all the dead and gone Tuckers. I couldn't help it. I don't like to sew on hooks any more than Miss Plympton herself would and that sneeze popped off two. She looked up from the chronological page of dates she had been hammering into us and said sternly: "Caro-ginia Tucker, that unseemly noise must stop." "Yessum!" I gasped, holding my nose about as Dee does Brindle when he tries to get away from her to eat some little dog up. I held on with all my might, but every one knows that sneezes never come singly. The other one is as sure to come out as murder. When the next one came, it was worse than the first because of my efforts to hold it in, just as it makes more noise to shoot down a well than to shoot up in the air. (Don't you think my language sounds rather Homeric? I do.) Well, when the second report sounded, Miss Plympton put down her pencil and sat looking at me. She said nothing, but kept on making chins. As fast as she made one, another one disappeared, but nothing daunted, she just made another. I kept thinking: "I wish every time she made a chin something would go bang! and then

maybe she would sympathize with me. I certainly can't help making sneezes any more than she can making chins." What do you think happened at this psychological moment? Why, Dee sneezed! As a rule, Dee is not quite so eruptive as you and I are; in fact, sometimes she irritates me by giving cat sneezes, but this time, whew! The Great Sneezeks himself would have envied her. And do you know what that old stick-in-the-mud did? She looked square at me and said: "Violine, ten demerits, a page of dictionary and two hymns." That isn't as bad as it sounds, as I know so many hymns I can get one up in no time, and I got even with her by saying the page of the dictionary beginning with chin. It goes Chin, China, Chinaman, Chincapin, Chinch, Chinchilla, Chin-cough, Chine, Chinese, Chink, etc. I took especial pains to accent the first syllable too. Of course Dee stood up and clamored to be heard and to claim the sneeze. It was certainly one to be proud of. Miss Plympton changed her expression from the Moving Finger to

"That inverted Bowl they call the Sky,
Whereunder crawling cooped we live and die,
Lift not your hands to *It* for help – for *It*
As impotently moves as you or I."

You know yourself, Zebedee, how hard it is to keep in the straight and narrow path when you are blamed whether you are there or not. I feel that I might as well be "killed for an old sheep as a lamb," so I do get into lots of scrapes. The school is not the same with Miss Peyton ill and Miss Cox married. Dee and Page and I are real blue sometimes, but not all the time. We do have lots of fun breaking rules and keeping the eleventh commandment. Now don't get preachy! You would stand Miss Plympton just about one minute and then you would pack your doll rags and go home.

We like the new teacher in English a lot. She is much more interesting than last year's and seems to have some outlook. Miss Ball is her name.

Zebedee, since Miss Plympton seems to have such a feeling against me, don't you think it would be well for me to stop history and take up china painting? I don't think much of the art course here, but it would be real fun to do china painting and I could paint you a cup and saucer to drink your coffee out of when we get to housekeeping. I am crazy to do some modelling and think another year you better let me go to New York and study at the art school. Dee and Page think so, too, and they want to specialize in something.

We are nearly dead to see you. What say you to coming up here for Thanksgiving? You would miss the football game in Richmond, but we are certainly honing for you, honey. Dee will write soon. Page is just the same. She cheers us up a lot. She is awfully game – there is no prank going that she stays out of, but she kind of holds us down if our idea of a good time is too wild. Thanks for the little 'phone. It works splendidly.

Good by,
Your own
DUMDEEDLEDUMS.

*From Page Allison to Dr. James Allison.
Gresham,
October 15, 19 —*

My dearest Father:

We are having the most interesting course in English and I feel that I am really going to learn a whole lot about writing. I am glad I have read all my life, but I find that I have not half taken in what I have read. Miss Ball is teaching me to analyze the things I like best. She reads beautifully and gets meaning out of poetry without ruining the metre. She doesn't elocute (I hate that) but she has a full rich voice and her reading is just like music. She has us write a daily theme, any kind of snap-shot that suits us to write about – something we have seen or might have seen. It is awful funny what different things we choose. Dum always has descriptions of sunsets and moonrises and figures against the sky – how things look, in fact. Dee is great on animal stories, sick kittens and kindly beasts and abused horses and lame ducks. Mary usually gets a comic twist to her stories and has people falling off ladders and upsetting the ink and sitting down in the glue, etc. Annie is rather sentimental and wishy-washy in her compositions, willowy maidens in the moonlight with garlands of flowers. She is fond of using such expressions as: "Hark! From out the stillness," and "A dark and lonesome tarn." She is rather Laura Jean Libbyish I think. As for me, I always want to write about people, no difference what kind of people, old or young, black or white, rich or poor, – just so they are people. I made a real good little sketch of Christmas morning at Bracken. I described our going out with the colt and leaving Christmas cheer at the cabins, making an especial feature of Aunt Keziah, the "Tender." Miss Ball liked that a lot and wants me to do some more of our neighbours. I am dying to do Sally Winn, but somehow I am afraid she might know about it some day and it would hurt her feelings so. I think her character would be a very interesting one to write about. I may use her and put her in such a different environment that she would not know herself in broad day-light. Miss Ball is very complimentary about my efforts and I feel so encouraged. She is not a bit of a purist and thinks more of a good thought forcefully put than of a slip in the way of a split infinitive.

We are having a right strenuous time getting out of scrapes. I have never been so unruly in my life, but somehow our new principal makes you want to break rules. I believe it is because she doesn't trust girls, and the consequence is we all of us feel like giving her something to cry about since she is going to raise a rumpus whether we do or don't. She is a mighty poor judge of human nature if she thinks any of our quintette could lie; but she doesn't believe us on oath. We argue that if she thinks we do things when we don't, we might just as well do them, since they are, after all, not really wicked things. There is nothing very bad about creeping out of your warm bed at midnight and flying down a cold hall to a class room, where you will meet other girls just out of their warm beds and when there you will, through smothered giggles, eat burnt fudge made on a fire surreptitiously kindled behind the barn, when you were supposed to be piously engaged in darning stockings in the mending class. I don't know just what the fun is, but it certainly is fun. The best fun is scaring the night watchman, who is an Irishman and horribly superstitious. He is afraid of ghosts and when he spies a flitting white figure down the end of a long corridor while he is making his rounds, he jumps to the conclusion it is a "hant" and not a naughty pupil. He never reports it to the principal, but adds it to his already interminable

list of ghost stories. He makes his rounds as noisily as possible, so if anything is there it will hear him and depart. He is a little fat man with a military carriage, just as pompous in the back as the front. He has been told he looks like Napoleon, so he always wears very tight trousers and a long cape which he throws over one shoulder. One night I peeped out the window and saw him marching up and down in front of the building in the bright moonlight. The heavy cane he always carries he was holding like a musket and the poor little conceited thing actually had his hat on sideways, which gave him very much the look of the Emperor keeping guard for the sleeping sentry. I gave three taps on the wall, although it was the middle of the night, and got Mary Flannagan to the 'phone and told her to poke her head out of the window and go like a screech owl. You remember I told you how fine Mary was as an impersonator. Of course, Mary did as she was bid and poor Napoleon ran like a rabbit. It was kind of mean of me, but it was awfully funny.

We are planning a party for Hallowe'en. Tell Mammy Susan to try to get me a box of goodies here in time for it. Don't send it to the school, but wait until I tell you where you can send it. They open everything and dig out all the contraband, and since everything is contraband but crackers and simple candy, they usually dig out everything of importance.

I miss you and Mammy Susan mighty bad. Please give the dogs an extra pat for me and tell them not to forget me.

Your devoted daughter,

PAGE.

CHAPTER VI

THE HALLOWE'EN PARTY

"Girls! Miss Plympton has actually given her consent to a Hallowe'en party in the Gym. We have to start at eight and stop at ten, though," called Mary through the concealed 'phone.

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Dee, who had the receiver at her ear, although Dum and I were both crowding into the closet to get the news that Mary was giving so loudly that you could really hear it through the walls without the aid of the toy telephone. "That's no good. Witches don't walk so early in the night."

"Well, it's better than nothing," answered Mary. "It can be a masquerade. We are thinking of having a sheet and pillow case party. The Seniors want all of our quintette to serve on the committee of entertainment. You see, the Seniors are really getting this up. That's why old Lady Plumpton will let us do it. She lets the Seniors do lots of things, but she certainly has got it in for the poor Juniors."

Then there was a confused sound of Annie's trying to talk through the 'phone with Mary, and Dum decided Dee had had a long enough turn. Some mixup ensued in the two closets with the result that Dum's best dress, that served as a portiere for the batteries, had to be sent to the presser, and I got possession of our end of the line and found Annie on the other.

"Page, Harvie Price writes me from the University that he is going to be at Hill Top, visiting Shorty Hawkins for a day or so soon, and he wants to come see me. Do you think Miss Plympton will permit it?"

"Can't you work the cousin racket on her?"

"No, she knows I have no relatives in the States."

"Well, then, he may be allowed to sit in the same church with you if he should happen to be here over Sunday and his voice can mingle with yours in praise and thanksgiving," I teased. "You know how Miss Plympton sat on Jean Rice when her third cousin once removed from Georgia came to call. She refused positively to let her see him until his kinship was proved and then she only let him call fifteen minutes. If he had been a plain third cousin she would have permitted half an hour; second once removed an hour; plain second two hours; first once removed four hours; plain first eight hours – "

"Page! This is not a problem in arithmetical progression. Please tell me how he can manage."

"Bless you if I know – unless he can come to the sheet and pillow case party. You might let him know one is in prospect." A giggle from Annie answered me and a shout of joy from Mary as her roommate imparted this suggestion to her.

"Of course it would never do," Annie said to me later on in the day when no wall divided us, "but wouldn't it be a joke on Miss Plympton and the faculty if some of the boys would come?"

"Yes, quite like Tennyson's Princess, but if we got mixed up in it, it would be a serious misdemeanor." I was willing to go pretty far in fun, but I had no intention of being imprudent and giving Miss Plympton any real cause for the suspicion she seemed to entertain for our crowd. "I tell you, Annie, if I were you I'd go and ask Miss Plympton if Harvie can call and if she will not consent, just write and tell him so."

Miss Plympton refused to grant permission for the call unless Harvie could obtain a request from Annie's father, and as that was seemingly impossible the matter had to be dropped. Annie wrote to the youth and told him the state of affairs and that was all she had to do with it.

The Gresham girls and the Hill Top boys usually met at football games at Hill Top, and basketball games at Gresham; they sat across the church from each other on Sunday and prayer meeting night. As is the way with boys and girls and has been the way since the world began, I fancy, there were a few inevitable flirtations going on. Some of them, under the cloak of great piety, kept

up a lively conversation with their eyes during the longest prayers, or sang hymns at each other with the greatest fervor. One ingenious boy actually wrote a love letter (at least that is what we loved to designate it) and sent it to his innamorata on the collection plate. With meaning glances he placed it on the plate together with his mite. The deacon, all unconscious of the important mission with which he was intrusted, proceeded with slow dignity to pass the plate to pew after pew of boys and then up the aisle on the girls' side. Every boy and girl in that church knew what was going on, but there was not a flicker of an eyelash as the exceedingly pretty and rosy Junior, for whom the note was intended, put out her daintily gloved hand, dropped in her nickel and quickly closed her fingers over the billet-doux and slipped it into her muff. There was a noiseless noise of a sigh, a sigh of extreme relief, that went over all the expectant pupils, boys and girls. Then with what vim and spirit did we rise and sing the appointed hymn: "A charge to keep I have"! The old gentleman who took up the collection was ever after known to us as "Deacon Cupid."

Hallowe'en arrived. It was a splendid crisp, cold day, which put us in high spirits. Even Miss Plympton was in a frisky humour and actually cracked a joke, at least she almost did. She stopped herself in time and made another chin instead, but by almost cracking it she had shown herself to be almost human, which was in itself encouraging. Our quintette was out of bounds. We had worked off all of our demerits and were in good standing with the faculty.

"Now if we can just stay good a while!" wailed Mary. "I, for one, am tired of getting into scrapes and mean to be a little tin angel for at least a week. I wouldn't think of putting a greater task on my sub-conscious self."

I wasn't so sure of myself, as that minute I had under my mattress a box from Mammy Susan, filled to the brim with contraband food that would put me in durance vile for at least a month if I should be caught with the goods.

The committee on arrangements for the sheet and pillow case party had determined that ice cream and cake should be the refreshments for the evening. The ice cream was usually cut in very slim slices and the cake was served in mere sample sizes, so I thought when the big ball was over I could gather a few chosen spirits and we could dispose of Mammy Susan's box in short order. I had not divulged to the others that this box had arrived, knowing it would be such a delightful surprise for them.

Mammy Susan had sent it in care of a coloured laundress who did up our best shirt waists and collars, things we did not dare trust to the catch-as-catch-can method of the school laundry. Shades of my honourable ancestors! She had brought the box to the school concealed beneath the folds of fine linen.

"Ef Miss Perlimpton ketch me she won't 'low me to set foot in this here place agin, but you young ladies is been so kin' an' ginerous to me that I's willin' to risk sompen fer yo' pleasure," the old woman had said as she lifted out the carefully ironed shirt waists and then the large flat box that had come by parcels post from Bracken. I had warned Mammy Susan to send things in flat boxes as they were so much easier to conceal than square ones. This one fitted nicely under my mattress. It gave the bed a rather hiked up look in the middle, but making beds was not the long suit of the Greshamites, so I hoped it would pass inspection, knowing that other beds that were innocent were much lumpier than mine.

If you have never been to a sheet and pillow case party, go your first chance, and if no one else gets up one, get it up yourself. Drape a sheet about you in folds as Greek as you can manage, pinning the folds at the shoulders, and then put on a pillow case like a hood. If the case is old, cut holes in it for eyes. If you don't possess an old one, make a cotton mask to tie around your face and pull the hood well over your forehead. The effect is gruesome, indeed, and that night we looked like a veritable Ku Klux Klan.

We wanted to mark ourselves in some way so that we could be told by one another, so we put on each back in black chalk a mystic V, standing for five, our quintette. Dum and Dee and Annie

and I were almost of the same height. I was a little shorter, but not enough to make much difference, but Mary was a perfect chunk of a girl and when we got her draped she looked like a snow ball.

The gymnasium, our ball room, was hung with paper pumpkin lanterns and papier-mâché skulls. "And in those holes where eyes did once inhabit" there shone forth lights giving a very weird effect indeed. The light was dim and the ghostly figures moving around would have frightened Mr. Ryan, the old night watchman, to death, I am sure. But he, good man, did not have to keep watch until eleven o'clock.

The girls came in singly and in groups, all bent on disguise. Some of them sat against the wall, afraid that their walks would give them away, and all were silent for the most part except for a few ghostly groans or wails. Some one was at the piano playing the "Goblins will git yer ef yer don't mind out." In a little while couples took the floor and began whirling around.

"Who is that tall girl dancing with the little chunky one?" whispered Dee to me. "I thought for a minute the chunky one was Mary, but I see she has no V on her back."

"I can't think who is that tall here in school. There are two or three pretty tall Seniors, and then you know there is a new Sophomore from Texas who is a perfect bean pole, but she doesn't dance."

"Well, this one dances all right and that little square girl she is dancing with seems lively enough. I believe I'll break in on them. You take the big one and I'll take the chunky one," and so we did.

Dee started off leading, but I noticed they soon changed, as the short girl seemed to prefer guiding. I always let any one guide me who will, so my partner, who was the taller, naturally took the man's part. She was singularly silent, although I did some occasional whispering in what I considered a disguised voice. Annie and Dum were dancing together and I saw Mary's square figure leading out a rather heavy-looking girl who had up to that time been seated against the wall. As part of the committee, we considered it our duty to dig up the wall flowers. This one was not much of a dancer and in a moment my partner and I came a cropper almost on top of them. We picked ourselves up and Mary, recognizing me by my V, whispered:

"Page, this girl can't dance a little bit. I tried to lead her and she has stepped all over me. For the love of Mike, see what you can do with her." So we changed partners and Mary went gaily off with my very good partner, who certainly danced better than any one I had before tried at Gresham, and I tripped off with the heavy-looking cast-off. It wasn't so bad. I let her guide and while she was not so very good, she was not so very bad.

"Are you accustomed to guiding?" I said, forgetting and using my natural voice.

"Ummm um!" came in a kind of grunt from my partner, and then in a high squeak, "Page!" The music stopped. My partner pressed my hand so affectionately that I wondered who she could be. I thought I could spot any of my intimates.

"Now you know me, I think you ought to tell me who you are," I pleaded, "and not wait for the unmasking."

"Unmasking!" she said in a strangely hoarse tone. "When?"

"Why, at nine! Didn't you hear Miss Plympton this morning at chapel?"

"Oh – Ah – Yes!" she muttered, and drew me to a seat in the corner.

I chatted away gaily. Since my partner had discovered my identity, I might just as well make myself agreeable and I hoped to discover hers before nine. I ran over in my mind all the big heavy girls in school, and even the teachers. Miss Ball was rather large and Miss Plympton – could it be Miss Plympton? I peered eagerly through the holes at the eyes gazing into mine. Whose eyes were they? They certainly looked very familiar. The music started again, one of the new tunes, and I jumped up to find a partner or even take the one I still had who was not so terribly bad, but she drew me down again in my seat, hoarsely whispering:

"Please sit it out with me." I seemed to be in a kind of dream. They say that one proof of transmigration of the soul is that we sometimes have a realization of doing the same thing we have done before perhaps æons and æons ago. I certainly held in my consciousness that once before some

one with eyes, brown just like the ones I could see through the slits (cut, by the way, in a perfectly new pillow case), had begged me in much the same tone if not so hoarse to "sit it out." I looked at the dancers. Dum and Dee were dancing together; Mary was tearing around with the little chunky person, who seemed to be a mate for her. I looked for the other distinctive black V and saw that Annie was gliding around in the arms of the tall girl with whom I had danced, who had proven such an excellent partner.

Annie's cowl had slipped back and above her mask her pretty hair, the colour of ripe wheat, showed plainly, making no doubt of her identity. I looked back at the mysterious eyes and an almost uncontrollable desire to go off into hysterics seized me. I suddenly remembered the hop at Willoughby and how I had sat out a dance with Wink White the night he proposed. The mystery was solved.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Stephen White!" I gasped. "I know you now and I know that that good dancer floating around with Annie Pore is Harvie Price, and that that little square figure with Mary Flannagan is no other than Shorty Hawkins. Don't you know that if Miss Plympton finds out about this that every last one of our crowd will get shipped without a character to stand on?"

I know Wink wanted to giggle when I talked about a character to stand on, but he was too much in awe of my anger to giggle or do anything but plead with me to forgive him.

"You see, dear Page – "

"I am not 'dear Page' and I don't see!" I ejaculated.

"But it was this way. I came over from the University with Harvie Price to see you, and when I got here, found out the old rules were so strict and ridiculous that I could not get near you in any other way – "

"Well, getting near me was not necessary," I stormed.

"You had better calm yourself or you will give the whole game away," admonished Wink; so I did try to compose myself and speak in a whisper.

"Well, you had better get a move on you and depart as rapidly as possible."

"Page, please don't be mad with me. I thought it would just be a lark and you, of all persons, would think it was a good joke," and the eyes through the holes looked very sad and pleading.

"Well, you don't know me. I like a joke as well as any one in the world, but to get in a mixup at boarding school because of a lot of boys is not in my line. It would be harder on Annie Pore than any of us because her father is so severe. He would never forgive her if she should get in a real scrape."

"But it isn't your fault. You were none of you aware of our intention of coming."

"That makes not a whit of difference to Miss Plympton. She never believes us, no matter what we say. It is twenty-three minutes to nine and you had better grab Harvie and Shorty and beat it. At nine sharp if you don't take your mask off some one will pull it off."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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