

Meade L. T.

Girls New and Old



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CHAPTER I. A FIRST NIGHT

IT was an autumn evening when Molly Lavender first arrived at Redgarth. This large school for girls was situated in a certain well-known district in the north of England. It adjoined a cathedral town of great beauty, and was in the neighborhood of those wide downs and far-reaching moors for which this part of the country is justly famed. The school itself was inclosed in spacious gardens, occupying several acres of land. The houses of residence surrounded the great hall and lecture rooms, where the work of education was carried on. There were eight houses of residence, and from forty to fifty girls lived in each.

It had been the dream of Molly Lavender's life to go to Redgarth. Her education hitherto had been conducted partly at home, and partly in a small school; she longed to enter a wider world, and looked forward with much enthusiasm to the comradeship and *esprit de corps* which would form part of the education of her new life. A vacancy had been offered her at St. Dorothy's, one of the most popular of the houses, and when her cab drew up there on this lovely evening, a very eager and excited young face peeped out.

Molly was fifteen, just the age when girls can be shy. She had lived in a whirl of excited feeling during all her long journey from London; but now that she had really arrived at Redgarth, a sense of unexpected timidity assailed her, and although she was not such a coward as to wish to run away, she heartily desired the first evening to be well over.

When she appeared, a group of girls were standing idly chatting in the beautiful entrance-hall. No one spoke for a moment; but before there was time for real embarrassment, the principal of the house, a tall, good-looking, dignified woman of about thirty, came out of a room at one side of the hall. She gave Molly a cordial welcome, introduced her to one or two of her companions, and then took her upstairs, to show her her own little room.

"I hope you will be thoroughly happy at Redgarth, my dear," said Miss Leicester, in her brisk, energetic voice. "You are very fortunate in finding a vacancy in this house. We are all very happy here, and I think I can promise that you will have a good time. Our motto is, Plenty of work, and plenty of play; the life is as healthy and full of pleasure as life can be. For my part, I envy girls who, like yourself, come to a great school like this with all their future fresh before them. By the way, what is your Christian name? It is the custom at St. Dorothy's to call the girls who are in residence by their Christian names."

"My name is Molly," replied Molly Lavender, looking, with her clear brown eyes full at Miss Leicester.

Miss Leicester could not help smiling at the sweet, frank face. "Molly is a very good name," she said; "there is something lovable about it. I hope you will have a happy time here, Molly. And now tell me how you like your room."

"Am I to have this room all to myself?" asked Molly.

"Certainly; how do you like it?"

"I think it lovely – only – is it my sitting room?"

"Sitting room and bedroom in one. Oh, you don't see your bed! Let me show it to you."

Miss Leicester walked across the little room, to where a luxurious-looking sofa stood: she pulled aside a pretty covering, and showed underneath a properly made-up bed, small, certainly, but looking most inviting, with its snowy sheets and white frilled pillows.

"There, Molly," she said, "I hope you will sleep soundly in that little bed. Your washing apparatus is cleverly hidden away behind this screen. This pretty bureau contains a bookcase on the top, a writing table and desk at one side, a set of drawers for your linen at the other. Behind this curtain you will hang up your dresses. Now, my dear, I must leave you; but we shall meet, I hope, at supper time."

Miss Leicester nodded brightly, and the next moment the tired girl was alone.

"If only Cecil were here!" thought Molly to herself. "I wonder if there is any chance of Cecil coming. Oh, yes, this is a sweet little room, but I feel shy just now. I feel quite stupidly shy, and like a fish out of water. Still, I'm determined not to remain in that uncomfortable position an hour longer than I can help. Grannie has sent me here, she sent me rather against her own inclination, and I'm determined to prove to her that she has done the right and only thing to satisfy me. I could not live if I didn't make something of my life. Grannie objects to Girton and Newnham, but she has consented to my finishing my education at Redgarth. Now, then, for a good tussle with the fates; I shall win, I feel convinced. If only Cecil were here, I should feel certain on the subject."

Molly took off her hat, brushed the dust carefully from her dress, rearranged her smooth brown hair, and washed her face and hands. Then she went over to the window, threw it open, and looked out. Redgarth is one of the most beautiful towns in northern England. It boasts of a lovely cathedral, and from where Molly stood she could see its four slender spires, and its gray turrets, hoary with age. The next moment the hour struck, and a chime of bells rang beautifully out on the evening air.

"It is lovely," thought the girl, clasping her hands. "I know I shall adore that old cathedral. How joyous those chimes sound! how beautiful the evening sky looks at the back of the spires! Yes, this lovely sunset on my first arrival is a good omen. I hope, with all my heart, that I shall do well here."

There came a knock at the door. Molly said "Come in," and a girl with dark eyes and hair entered the room.

"My name is Hester Temple," she said. "As you are quite new, I thought perhaps you would like to come down to supper with me."

"You are very kind," said Molly, with some timidity in her voice.

"I hope you like your room," said Hester.

"Yes; I think it charming."

Miss Temple went and stood by the bureau; she tapped her fingers on its polished surface somewhat impatiently.

"They all make that sort of remark at first," she said; "they all call their rooms charming until they find out their defects."

"Whom do you mean by they?" asked Molly.

"The girls at St. Dorothy's. You belong to 'they.'"

"Do I?" said Molly. The color flooded her cheeks.

Miss Temple regarded her with a fixed and critical stare.

"I wish you would come here, just for a moment," she said. "Please stand so, facing the light."

"Why?" asked Molly.

"Won't you oblige me?"

"Yes, certainly; here I am. Now, what do you want?"

"To take a good look at you, of course; do you know you are quite good-looking?"

Molly laughed.

"I wish you would not flatter me, Miss Temple," she said.

"It is not flattery – I abhor flattery – I never flatter anyone; I am remarked all over the school for my brusqueness. I simply state a fact – a very patent fact; others will tell it to you in more glowing

language. You are good-looking; you have a clear complexion; not much color, but that doesn't really matter; your hair is thick and abundant, awfully prim and old-fashioned in the way it is arranged, but that can be altered. I can quite imagine that, if anything excites you, your face will wake up into real beauty. Now pray don't begin the usual thing; don't say, 'Oh, Miss Temple!' or anything commonplace of that sort. In the first place, I am not Miss Temple to you – I am Hester. We're all Hester, and Jane, and Anne, and Mary, or whatever our Christian names happen to be, to each other. What is your name? Desdemona, I should think; or perhaps Ophelia – you've got something of the martyr droop."

"Oh, what a horrid thing to say!" replied Molly, brisking up and laughing. "I am not so fortunate as to be distinguished by the name of either Desdemona or Ophelia: I am simply Molly."

Hester Temple dropped a mock courtesy.

"Simply Molly," she repeated; "what a dear little rustic English sound! Well, Molly, I can read your character already. I see you intend to go in for the whole thing. You will take up the life with zest. You will enthuse – yes, I know you will. Now, I never do; I don't think it good form."

"Well, I think it is," said Molly stoutly.

"Didn't I say as much. I knew you had lots of spirit. How your eyes flash! Oh, you will find no inconveniences in your room. Everything will be *colour de rose* with you. You are just the sort of girl whom Miss Forester will adore."

"I am longing to see Miss Forester," said Molly. "She must be a splendid woman."

Hester shrugged her shoulders.

"*Chacun à son goût*. Well, if you are ready, we had better go downstairs."

"I am quite ready," replied Molly.

The girls left the pretty little room together. They went down the broad, polished stairs, and stood for a moment or two in the hall. Molly, who was not accustomed to the beautiful parquetry which covered the floor, found herself slipping about as if on ice. Hester looked at her and laughed.

"Your first lesson at St. Dorothy's," she said, "is to get your footing; it is like being on board ship – you must get, not your sea legs, but your parquetry legs. Now, don't be afraid; don't attempt to walk on your toes – tread firmly, and the deed will be accomplished. I see some of my friends; I will introduce you. This is Annie Sinclair, and here, here is the romp of the house, Kate O'Connor. Come here, Kate, and let me present you to Molly Lavender; Molly is the new girl we have been expecting, you know; yes, I quite see that you two will be chums.

"Kate, Kate O'Connor,
Oh, how I love her!"

Hester sang the couplet in a gay, clear voice. Kate's splendid black eyes danced with mirth.

"I wish you wouldn't be such a ridiculous creature, Hester," she said, "you would prejudice anyone against me. Is your name Molly?" she continued, looking full at the newcomer. "What a pretty name! I heartily hope you will have a good time here."

"It is so like you, Kate, to say the word 'heartily,'" exclaimed Hester. "That's because she is Irish, you know, Molly. Irish girls always exaggerate. I should consider it quite sufficient to say, 'I hope you will have a good time,' but the Irish girl has to put in the word 'heartily.'"

"I heartily hope you will have a good time, Molly Lavender," repeated Kate, in a stout voice.

"It will be her own fault if she hasn't," said Hester. "What do you say, Annie? What opinion would you form of a girl who found St. Dorothy's dull?"

"That she was unworthy of our privileges," replied Annie.

"I am most anxious to like everything," said Molly.

She laughed slightly as she spoke.

The fact is, she was feeling more nervous than she dared to own. The girls rattled off their conversation in brisk, brusque voices; all the faces were new, all the voices strange; there was a great deal of badinage and repartee – a sort of ceaseless chaff was going on. Molly felt bewildered.

A great gong sounded at this moment through the house.

"Come and sit near me at supper," said Kate, noticing the faint alarm which lurked in Molly's brown eyes. "I will promise to steer you through the shoals this first evening. You will get on your own feet in no time."

"No, she won't; she's slipping now," said Hester, with a laugh.

"Take my arm," said Kate. "This horrible parquetry! I nearly brained myself during the first fortnight. Now, here we are; this table to the left is mine. You must sit here at my right. I can't talk to you for the first few minutes, for I have to carve. Oh, I forgot – I had better introduce you before I begin. Girls, this is the new girl – Molly Lavender. I'll introduce you all in correct style presently."

There were five or six tables in the large dining-hall. All the tables were surrounded by eager girlish figures. Most of the girls wore demi-evening dress. Pretty blouses of different colors were the rage. The principal, Miss Leicester, looked very handsome in black velvet, slightly open at the neck. The meal which was set before the hungry girls was plain but abundant. Molly, who had not eaten anything for hours, was glad to turn her attention to the well-filled plate which Kate placed before her.

"You were lucky not to sit at this table when Kate O'Connor first took the head of it," said a laughing girl of the name of Amy Frost.

"Amy, you're surely not going to tell tales?" cried Kate.

"Yes, I am! yes, I am!"

"Tell, Amy! do tell!" exclaimed several voices. "Kate deserves to be shown up in her true colors."

Molly watched the girls as they spoke. Several pairs of eyes were turned on Kate's laughing, beaming face. Notwithstanding the badinage in their tones, the glances which Kate received were full of affection.

"Oh, she's the wildest, naughtiest, most daring, most forgetful, wild Irish girl in existence," said Amy. "Being Irish, she is full of presumption; she has the utmost confidence in herself, and she dearly loves to take the lead. She never rested until she had persuaded Miss Leicester to make her head of a table. You perceive, Molly, that being head means responsibility. The head has to feed all the hungry members. Well, when Kate O'Connor first took this honorable position, she used to indulge in a little peculiarity of her own. This can only be spoken of as retiring into her castle in Spain. Kate lives in her own special castle in Spain most of her time. Oh, how happy she was in her castle, and how we suffered! It is not considered correct at St. Dorothy's to ask the head to feed the members. The head must think of that for itself. Well, this head being high up in its castle, forgot all about us and our hunger, and oh, didn't we starve, and didn't we growl! It is all over now: we took her out of her castle in private; we won't tell you how we did that. Kate, my dear, you needn't blush; we have forgiven you."

"Beware, Amy; don't add another word," interrupted Kate. "Think of the water-jug and the wet sponge. Remember that you are sleeping in the dormitory at present, and that my cubicle is only two doors away from yours. Oh, I say nothing, but I mean a good deal."

The rest of the meal passed with much mirth and hilarity. Kate's table was certainly the merriest in the room. Hester Temple did not belong to it. Molly did not know if she were glad or sorry. Hester puzzled her – she was not quite certain whether she liked her or not, but her whole heart had gone out to Kate O'Connor on the spot.

When supper came to an end – and the meal did not last very long – the girls all trooped into the great drawing room. Here a beautiful square of Indian carpet was hastily rolled up and an impromptu dance began. Kate opened a piano and began to play waltzes. The girls quickly found partners, and were soon revolving round and round. The barn-dance followed, and others. Molly could dance beautifully, and Amy Frost begged to be her partner.

When the dance came to an end a few girls still lingered in the room, but most went away to their private studies. Miss Leicester returned to the drawing room about ten o'clock. She then led the way into the dining hall, where all the members of the house, including servants, stood in rows.

The principal read a psalm, which was followed by a collect; she then bade her assembled pupils a hearty "good-night."

"Come along, Molly. I was your first friend, so I will take you back to your room," said Hester Temple. "By the way, you are lucky to have a room to yourself. I also have a room, but it is a very small one. Kate O'Connor, Amy Frost, Annie Sinclair, and several others sleep in the big dormitory at the top of the house. I see you have taken to Kate. Let me give you a hint as to the way in which you can oblige her."

"I should love to oblige her."

Hester laughed.

"Didn't I say you would enthuse?" she answered. "You might be Irish yourself, by the way you go on, and by the emphasis you put upon certain words. You'd love to oblige a girl you never saw before in the whole course of your life! Well, poor Kate is ambitious and clever – indeed, I may add that in some respects she is brilliant. She takes up life here from a serious point of view. There are scholarships given at Redgarth, and she is studying very hard to obtain one. The Ford Scholarship is to be competed for before Christmas. She finds it hard to prepare for such a serious examination in the room with a lot of other girls. You might ask her to be your chum, and to share this dear little study every evening with you. She'd love you forever if you did. Kate would rather die than ask you, but if you will, I'll run up at once and tell her."

"Oh, I would with pleasure," said Molly, "only – only for Cecil."

"Who, in the name of fortune, is Cecil?"

"My greatest, best friend. She is coming here, I trust and hope, in a week or two."

"Your greatest, best friend!" repeated Hester. "I give you up, Molly Lavender; your enthusiasm quite crushes me."

CHAPTER II. THE PRINCIPAL

IT seemed to Molly that she had only just dropped off to sleep when she was awakened by a booming, crashing sound, which seemed to get upon her head and half crush her. She rubbed her sleepy eyes, wondered whether a thunder-storm or earthquake were taking place, and then suddenly awoke to the fact that she was a member of Redgarth School, that she had just spent her first night at St. Dorothy's, and that this unearthly, inhuman sound must be the noise made by the gong, which was telling the girls to arise. She jumped out of bed, and looked around her with a momentary sense of dismay. The arrangements of her complex bedroom puzzled her not a little. She was just preparing to attack her washing apparatus, when a low knock came at her door, and Kate's roguish, laughing face peeped in.

"Are you up? That's right," she said; "you are sure to long for a nice hot bath after your journey. Hurry as fast as ever you can to the bathroom; there is no one in it now. Lock the door, and have a good splash. Never mind if the girls come in dozens to turn the handle: first come, first served, is the motto here. I got up at six, and had a glorious cold dip. Now it is your turn."

"Thank you very much," said Molly, with a beaming face.

"When you are dressed," continued Kate, "I'll come and take you down to breakfast. You don't know any of our daily routine yet, of course; you shall be under my wing to-day."

Molly gave Kate a beaming look of gratitude. She then hurried off to the bathroom, had a good wash, and afterward dressed herself quickly. As she did so, she could not help rejoicing that Kate had taken her up.

"I begin to fall in love with her," thought Molly; "it must be that Irish way of hers. She is so frank, and her eyes have such a delicious sparkle in them; then her voice – it has so many notes in it. It can be daring, and mischievous, and mirthful, and tender, and solemn almost in the same sentence. Yes, I am quite certain that I shall love Kate very dearly. If Cecil should not come – if anything prevents my father doing what I have begged of him to do, then, perhaps Kate will be my friend; but oh, of course, I can never put anyone before Cecil."

Molly was dressed and had put her little room in order before the second gong, which was to summon the inmates of St. Dorothy's to breakfast, sounded through the house. Before the last boom had quite died away, Kate appeared.

"Let us come down at once," she said. "Miss Leicester has very short prayers in the hall, then breakfast immediately follows. After breakfast, those of us who are preparing for lectures are generally glad to get away by ourselves until it is time to go to school."

"Please remember that I don't know anything about anything," answered Molly.

"Well, you will after to-day. Now, here we are in the dining hall. Good-morning, Miss Leicester!"

"Good-morning, my dear Kate!" replied Miss Leicester. "Molly Lavender, dear, I hope you slept well?"

"Yes, Miss Leicester, I slept beautifully," answered Molly.

"Take your stand near Kate. Now, I am going to begin."

The hall was filled with from forty to fifty girls of ages varying from seventeen to fourteen. Miss Leicester stood at the head of the hall. A troop of servants appeared. The principal read a psalm; the collect for the day followed; then the hungry girls marched straight into the breakfast room.

Molly found herself once again at Kate's table.

"If you like, you can sit here always," said Kate to her.

"I should like it very much," answered Molly.

"All right; I will speak to Miss Leicester. Miss Leicester, Molly Lavender would like to have a seat at my table."

"Is there a vacant place?" asked Miss Leicester.

"Yes, here to my right."

"Very well, Molly can sit there for the present."

At this moment Molly met the quizzical eyes of Hester Temple. Hester's eyes seemed to say, as plainly as if she spoke the words, "How disgraceful it is of you to enthuse in that open manner! I knew you would do it – I read your character from the first."

Molly found herself blushing; then a slight sense of irritation took possession of her heart.

Breakfast was a meal quickly got over. The girls were all more or less preoccupied with the thoughts of the lectures which they were to attend that morning. Amy Frost, who sat next to Molly, was quite disconsolate.

"I don't know half my French," she said, appealing to Kate. "Mlle. Lebrun is so frightfully strict, and she does gabble so when she gets excited, that I can't take in half she says. She was awfully dissatisfied with my last *résumé* of her lecture – she held me up to ridicule before the other girls. I blush to think of it even yet."

"Well, Amy, know your French, and you won't be ridiculed," replied Kate, in a somewhat tart voice.

She was busy pouring out coffee, attending to the wants of everyone, and giving herself no thought at all.

"You haven't touched anything," said Molly at last.

Kate gave her one of her quick, brilliant smiles.

"It is all right," she answered; her smile was followed by a sigh. "I am only at the other end of the pivot," she continued. "I thought of no one but myself a fortnight ago, and now I think of everybody except myself. It is just the reaction, nothing more whatever. You will soon deplore my selfishness."

"That I'm sure I never shall," answered Molly, but she felt worried.

"I do wish the girls here would sometimes talk downright sensible English," she said to herself. "I suppose the sort of sharp repartee which goes on all over the place is very clever, but it certainly puzzles a newcomer like myself. I wonder how Cecil will like it when she comes. The girls are not a bit in her style, but they can't help loving her for all that. She will be a sort of revelation to them. She is so quaint – so unlike anybody else. I wonder when I shall hear from father. Surely father must say yes. I think the Indian mails came to London yesterday; if so, they will be delivered at Redgarth to-day. Oh, I certainly ought to hear from father to-day. I wonder what he will have to tell me."

"A penny for your thoughts, Molly Lavender," said Amy, giving Molly's wrist a pinch.

Molly started and blushed.

"I was thinking," she began.

"Anyone could see that. About what?" Amy asked.

"About my dearest friend."

"For goodness' sake don't answer her when she says 'a penny for your thoughts,'" interrupted Kate. "It is shabby of you, Amy, to try to probe a newcomer. I am head of this table, and I insist on being obeyed. Girls, will you stand up, please? I see Miss Leicester is just about to say grace."

A moment later Molly found herself alone in the hall. The girls had all rushed off to their work in different parts of the house. Miss Leicester, who was passing through the hall in a hurry, saw Molly standing near the fire. She paused to speak to her.

"My dear," she said, "prayers are at the school at a quarter to nine. Don't forget to ask Kate to introduce you, immediately after prayers, to Miss Forester."

Molly promised to obey, and then went up to her room. She found it in the hands of one of the housemaids. She put on her hat and jacket, and ran downstairs again. It was a crisp and beautiful

autumn day. Not a leaf stirred on the trees; the sky was of a clear, pale blue; there was just a faint touch of frost in the air.

"Everything is lovely," she said, under her breath. "I mean to have a splendid time here. I mean to show grannie and father of what stuff I am made."

Her meditations were cut short by a troop of girls who were seen passing St. Dorothy's.

They stopped abruptly when they saw Molly. One of them – a girl with a plain, freckled face – came close up to the paling which divided St. Dorothy's from the rest of the school.

"Say – are you a newcomer?" she called to her.

"I don't understand you," answered Molly, with a little haughtiness.

"But do say – are you a new-comer?"

When the girl spoke a second time, two or three of her companions giggled. Molly's face grew crimson.

"I have just come to St. Dorothy's," she replied, in a low voice.

"Oh, dear!" The girl with the freckled face dropped a mock courtesy. "Oh, dear, what a privilege for St. Dorothy's! I say, girls, isn't it a prim little darling? Good-by, dearie! we'll meet very soon in the presence of the great Miss Forester. *Au revoir*, love, *au revoir*."

The girl, with the rest of her companions, hurried across the grounds, and Molly returned to her station in the hall. The rest of the St. Dorothy girls now appeared, dressed in hats and jackets.

"Come," said Katie, "we are late; we must make a rush for it. I promise to steer you through the shoals. Why, what's the matter? You look worried."

"I ought not to be," answered Molly, "but I'm afraid I am. A girl who was passing the house called out to me in a very disagreeable voice. Oh, of course I ought not to mind. Is she a Redgarth girl?"

"Has she sandy hair and a freckled face?" inquired Kate.

"Yes; she is a plain girl."

"I know her – her name is Matilda Matthews. If I were you, Molly, I wouldn't take the least notice of her. She doesn't belong to our house, and is never likely to. You'll have little or nothing to do with her, unless by chance you happen to attend the same lectures; she can make herself very disagreeable – none more so. I don't believe she is a high-principled girl, and I should recommend no friend of mine to have anything to do with her. Of course, you won't, and she isn't worth a thought. Now, come on; we must run, or we'll be late."

A moment later, and the girls entered the wide quadrangle of the school. They entered the enormous hall, where four hundred girls were assembled for prayers. Molly, to her joy, found her place by Kate's side, and after a moment of dazed wonder, had courage to raise her brown eyes to look around her. Hundreds of other eyes seemed to meet hers. In multitudes, however, is safety. Molly could not be afraid of all the eyes. Soon a voice at the other end of the hall arrested her attention. She saw a solitary figure standing on a platform. The figure was that of a tall and noble-looking woman in the prime of life. There was a look about the whole face which immediately arrested the attention of those who gazed at it. The eyes had a kindling light in them, the mouth was shrewd as well as kindly, the brow was very full, broad, and of noble proportion; but it was the voice which awoke that quick enthusiasm with which Molly herself was full.

"That is Miss Forester, the principal of the school," whispered Kate to her companion.

Molly nodded; she could scarcely take her eyes from Miss Forester's face.

The principal gave out the first line of a hymn. A few bars were played on an organ, and then the whole of the great hall became full of the sweetest and most trained melody. The girls sang in parts: the music was simple, but beautifully rendered.

"At thy feet, O Lord, we lay,
Thine own gift of this new day,"

sang the four hundred girls.

Molly found herself entering into the spirit of the well-known words. Toward the end of the hymn tears very nearly choked her voice. She was just the sort of girl to be easily influenced by her present surroundings. The hymn was followed by a psalm, which Miss Forester read aloud in her deep and beautiful tones. A second hymn followed; then there came a short prayer, followed by the benediction.

Immediately afterward all was bustle and movement. Miss Forester held up her hand. The girls and teachers stood still, as if by magic.

"I will take the class for Scripture in the north room in five minutes," said the principal. "Now, file out in order, please; every girl to her class."

The girls and teachers began to move up the hall.

"Stay behind one moment, Molly," said Kate; "I will take you to Miss Forester."

As she spoke Kate led Molly to the upper end of the hall. Miss Forester stood erect and dignified on the platform. It was very evident that her dark eyes took in each particular of the whole scene. Mistresses and pupils alike were all under her domination. Suddenly her eyes fell upon Kate.

With an imperious wave of her hand she beckoned the young girl to her side.

"Tell me why you are not going to your class, Kate O'Connor?" was her query.

"If you please, Miss Forester, I have brought Molly Lavender here."

"And who is Molly Lavender?"

"She is the new girl at St. Dorothy's."

"Yes, of course, I remember. Tell her to come here."

Kate beckoned to Molly, who came up at once.

"How do you do?" said Miss Forester, looking at the young girl as if she would read her through.

Molly raised her eyes to the principal's face. Something in their earnest gaze kindled an answering light in Miss Forester's eyes.

"I hope, Molly Lavender," she said, "you have come to this school imbued with an earnest spirit, and a desire to avail yourself of the great advantages which will be offered you?"

"I trust I have, madam," replied Molly, lowering her eyes.

There was something in the expression of the sweet face which touched the principal. She laid her firm hand for a brief instant on Molly's shoulder.

"If that is the case, my child, you will do well," she replied, in a gentle but thrilling voice.

"Thank you, Kate, you can now attend to your own work. Molly, you have found no niche as yet. You can come with me to the north room; afterward I will take you to see the different professors, in order to ascertain what classes you are best fitted to join."

CHAPTER III. PROFESSORS AND PUPILS

MOLLY was destined all her life long to remember the lecture which the principal of Redgarth delivered to her class that morning. The simplicity of the words, the noble thought which pervaded each utterance, penetrated straight to her sensitive nature. Molly was in just the mood to be uplifted. She was the sort of girl to take things seriously. She regarded her arrival at Redgarth as a great step in her career. When Miss Forester spoke to her as she did, she struck the right chord, and whatever the future might bring forth, Molly became strongly attached to the principal from the first.

Miss Forester, who was quick at reading character, could not but be interested in those speaking and pathetic brown eyes. Now and then she gave her new pupil a full and direct glance. Molly bore this without shrinking; she was no longer shy; she was so completely interested that she forgot herself.

The lecture was on "The Value of Personal Influence." Miss Forester spoke much about the direct influence which each girl, however young, or slight, or commonplace, exercised over her companions; she touched on the all-important subject of environment, and said that those girls who had the privilege of being educated at a school like Redgarth would have much to answer for in the future. Molly made many brave resolves as she listened to the spirited words.

When the class was over Miss Forester took her new pupil through the school, introduced her to many of the professors, and showed, by her manner, that she already took a marked and special interest in her.

"I will enter your name for my Scripture class at once," she said. "I saw you were interested in what I said this morning."

"Yes, madam," answered Molly.

"I have not time to talk to you much now; you must come to my study some evening for a long chat; but just tell me what special branch of study you wish to take up. Is it your intention to go from here to Girton or Newnham?"

"I should like to, but I shall not be able," answered Molly.

"Why not?"

"My father does not wish it; he wants me to join him in India when I am eighteen."

"I see – I see! Then we must make you a specially useful and practical girl. Is your mother living?"

"No." Molly lowered her eyes, a faint pink color stole into her cheeks.

"Then you are a motherless girl," said Miss Forester kindly. "I always have a special leaning toward such. I was motherless myself when very young. If your mother was a good woman, as I am sure she was, you must try to live up to what she would expect from you, could she speak to you from the home where she now is. There is a great deal to be done in life: I must not enter on this subject now. May I ask you a question? Is your father well off?"

"Yes," answered Molly; "he is an Indian judge. He tells me that when I go to him I shall have to look after a very large establishment."

"Precisely; then you must learn how to rule. You must also know how to use your hands in the most efficient and thorough way possible. I approve of a course of training in cookery, and also in all branches of housework. Know something of the work that you try to correct in your household staff. You must also learn to rule your spirit. All this knowledge is a great and wonderful possession. Now I must talk no more. I am going to ask Miss Shaw to take you in hand for English. Here she is – let me introduce you to her."

Miss Shaw, a tall, somewhat gaunt woman, with an enormous brow, and clear but light blue eyes, came up to Miss Forester at this moment.

"Let me introduce Molly Lavender," said Miss Forester. "She has only just arrived at Redgarth, and is one of the new residents at St. Dorothy's. Will you kindly examine her in her English studies some time this afternoon? I know nothing with regard to her attainments, but at least she can think. I wish Molly to have every possible advantage, Miss Shaw; and if you think she is capable of understanding your lectures, will you take her as one of your pupils?"

"With pleasure," replied Miss Shaw. "Come with me now, Molly; I am giving a course of lectures at this hour on 'Moral Science.' Here is a notebook for you; you can make any notes you like. If the subject is new to you, you will find it a little difficult at first, but just note down anything you understand. Immediately afterward I shall lecture on Charles I., which will probably be a more interesting subject. Will you return this afternoon at two o'clock? We can then have a quarter of an hour together, and I will find out what you really know, and what you don't know. Now, this is your seat, my dear."

Molly seated herself in front of a small desk: the desk contained ink, pen, and blotting-pad. Her new, clean, little notebook lay before her. The professor immediately resumed her place on a small platform, and continued her lecture. The subject was decidedly over Molly's head, but she made valiant efforts to attend and understand. She was getting some faint ideas with regard to one of the primary rules of the subject of the lecture, when a sudden and severe dig in her elbow caused her to turn her head abruptly. The sandy-haired girl was seated next to her. She gave Molly a particularly intelligent glance, accompanied by a knowing wink. Molly turned away; her irritation and dislike were quite apparent.

The lecture lasted for half an hour. Immediately afterward those girls who were attending the English History class followed Miss Shaw into another room.

"Molly Lavender, will you come with the rest?" said Miss Shaw, giving her new pupil a kind smile.

"Say, is Molly Lavender the little name?" whispered the sandy-haired girl. "Ha, ha! Miss Prim, didn't I tell you we'd soon meet again? Your little secret is divulged. Molly *Lavender*, forsooth! Dear me, I wonder if it smells sweetly." She caught one of Molly's hands as she spoke, and raised it to her nostrils.

Remembering Kate O'Connor's advice, Molly resolved to take no notice. There were certain forms of ridicule, however, which affected her painfully, and she had some difficulty in keeping back a strong sense of anger. Without making any reply, she hurried after the rest of her companions to the English History classroom. To her great relief, she found that Matilda Matthews was not one of the number. With Charles I. and his pathetic story Molly found herself quite at home. Miss Shaw was a splendid lecturer, and she threw many fresh, lights on that time of struggle and adversity. Molly listened so hard that she scarcely put down any notes. The girl who was seated next to her spoke to her on the subject.

"You will forgive me, won't you?" she said. "You are a stranger here, are you not?"

"Yes; this is my first day at school. Why did you ask?"

"In the first place, your face is new, and in the next, you hardly took any notes. You ought to take plenty of notes. You will be expected to show a perfect *résumé* of this lecture to-morrow morning to Miss Shaw."

"I can easily do that," answered Molly. "I remember almost every word."

"You think so," said the girl, "but you will find, when you begin to write, that that is not the case. Please take my advice, and make plenty of notes in future. You will find that the most salient facts have slipped your memory. Miss Shaw wants accuracy beyond everything. Your writing, your spelling, your grammar, must all be perfect. Miss Shaw will be down on you like a sledge-hammer if you make a mistake. Then Miss Forester reads almost all the *résumés* of the lectures in the course of the week. I never knew anyone so strict as Miss Forester. She aims at perfection herself, and woe

betide any of us, if we try to fall short of her ideal! Now this morning's work is over, and we are all going to your different houses for dinner. Where do you live?"

"At St. Dorothy's."

"Lucky you! there isn't a house in the place like St. Dorothy's. I'm at Orchard House. Oh, yes, it's very nice, and we have a splendid garden, but St. Dorothy's is *the* place of residence. Have you a room to yourself?"

"Yes; a tiny one."

"Lucky you again! I have the fourth of a room; the room is divided by curtains; all the furniture is the same color, – Miss Marsden is the name of our principal – that is her special fad. I am in the golden room. It is so pretty: wall-paper, chintzes, bed hangings, curtains, all of a pale shade of gold. The blue room is next to that; then we have the green room; then the red room; then the violet room. I must say they are all sweet, but a room to one's self is something to be coveted. What is your name?"

"Molly Lavender."

"How pretty! I once had a sister called Molly; she died; you've a certain look that reminds me of her. My name is Constance Moore; I'm studying awfully hard; I've got to live by it some day. I'm so glad we are going to sit next to each other at history. Now, be sure to take notes this afternoon. Good-by, Molly! Ah, there is Kate O'Connor; she is calling you to walk home with her."

In the afternoon Molly had an interview with Miss Shaw, and one or two other professors, who wished to ascertain what her abilities and acquirements were. Molly's intellectual powers belonged essentially to the average order. Her force of character, however, and intensely warm heart, gave her a marked individuality wherever she went. She spent an afternoon of hard work, and returned to tea at St. Dorothy's, feeling tired and overexcited. Kate O'Connor, who was standing in the entrance hall, slipped her hand through Molly's arm, and they walked together to the tea-room.

"Well," she said, in a sympathetic tone, "how did you get on? You had an ordeal to go through, had you not?"

"I got on pretty well," answered Molly; "I am not a bit clever, you know."

Kate glanced at her with a smile.

"Perhaps not," she replied. "What does that matter? You are going to be a very sweet woman by and by; you are going to be womanly in the best sense of the word. Miss Forester has taken quite a fancy to you – that in itself is something to be proud of; she scarcely ever shows preference. When she does, that person is in rare luck, as we say in old Ireland. But what have you done? Whose lectures are you to attend?"

"Miss Shaw is going to take me for English, Mlle. Lebrun for French, then I am to join Professor Franklin's class for drawing, and Fräulein Goldschmidt will undertake my music."

"I think you have done very well," replied Kate; "but don't you want to take up something special? Are you only going in for an all-round education?"

"Miss Forester spoke to me about that," answered Molly, blushing slightly. "She says my attainments are quite average; I am neither beyond nor behind the ordinary girl of my age. She recommends me strongly to give a year to general education. At the end of that time she will counsel me with regard to any of the special subjects which I am likely to wish to take up. My father is devoted to music, but I don't think I have it in me to make a first-rate musician, although my late mistress said that my voice was true."

"If it is, you had better take singing lessons, Molly. A sweet, true voice can give a great deal of pleasure."

"Yes, I know it makes other people happy, which is a great deal to be said in its favor," replied Molly; "but, really, I can do very little in that way."

"You shall sing to me; Hester Temple has a piano in her room. You shall sing to me there."

"I could not sing before her."

"Forgive me, that is silly of you. Hester is a most excellent creature, although I grant she is a trifle quizzical. Rest assured, however, that she has plenty of heart beneath it all. I hope, Molly, you are not going to be too modest; that is a great mistake. Now, I am not going to lecture you any more. By the way, there is a letter for you. It came by the midday post. It was lying on this slab, where all the letters are put, and I said to myself, 'Molly Lavender shall not be quizzed.' You know some of the girls quiz a newcomer shamefully. I put the letter in your room; you will be able to read it in peace now."

"Thank you a thousand times," replied Molly, the color spreading all over her delicate face. "Did you, Kate, happen to notice if the letter had a foreign stamp upon it?"

"I'm afraid I didn't. Now we must really go into the tea-room. Miss Leicester likes us to be punctual."

After tea, the girls strolled about the grounds in pairs, chatting, and eagerly recounting the different events of the day. The girls of Redgarth formed a little world of their own, and Molly began already to see that, notwithstanding the really splendid life of the place, their views were somewhat narrow, and seldom extended beyond the surroundings of the school. On this occasion, she had little leisure to give to them; her one desire was to get away to her room, in order to be able to read her earnestly expected letter.

Kate helped her in this.

"You can't have half unpacked," she said. "You will have nice time to put all your things in order between now and supper; run off and do it, and pray remember this is your last evening of leisure. You will have to write *résumés* of all your lectures to-morrow night, and won't, for the next week or fortnight, have time or thoughts to give to anything but your studies."

"And will it be better after the first week or fortnight?" asked Molly.

Kate laughed.

"It may take longer than that," she replied; "the whole thing depends upon yourself. If you are quick and adaptable, you will soon get into the ways of the place. You will begin to understand the professors, and to know that mademoiselle wishes to have one thing remembered, *fräulein* another, Miss Shaw another. You will begin, in short, to classify, and to make the sort of notes which will be useful to you; but for the first fortnight or three weeks, I may as well tell you at once that you will be in hopeless hot water over your notes."

"Oh, Kate, you quite frighten me!" exclaimed Molly.

"I am sorry, but I must tell you the truth. Isn't it so, Hester?" she called out.

Hester, who was passing through the hall, came up to Kate's side.

"Is what true?" she said, with a laugh.

"Isn't it true that poor Molly will be in hot water over her notes?"

"Hotter than hot – scalding, I should say," replied Hester.

"Now I am sure you are not in earnest," answered Molly.

"Oh, am I not? I never more fully and absolutely spoke the words of sober wisdom. May I ask if you attended a lecture to-day?"

"I listened to two of Miss Shaw's lectures – one on 'Moral Science,' which I did not understand."

"I should rather think not, poor chicken! What has a baby like you to do with moral science?"

"I didn't understand it a bit," answered Molly; "but afterward Miss Shaw lectured on Charles I., and what she said was quite splendidly interesting."

"So interesting that you enthused —*n'est ce pas?*"

"Please don't quiz me, Hester; I was deeply interested in that lecture."

"You took notes, of course?"

"I didn't – at least very few."

"And you are to write a *résumé* of the lecture to-night?"

"I am; but it really won't be difficult."

"All right. Now, Kate, do let me speak! Molly, my dear, there is no teacher like experience. Write your notes by all means, then tell me to-morrow evening what Miss Shaw thought of the *résumé*. Now, I see you are dying to put your things in order. Be off with you!"

Molly ran upstairs; she was excited, her new life was full of the deepest pleasure, but there were a few qualms lying near her heart. Suppose, after all, she failed to grasp the full meaning of this beautiful home of learning. Suppose she didn't avail herself of the advantages held out to her. She had struggled so hard to come to Redgarth: suppose it was a mistake, after all. She knew well that she was not specially clever or brilliant in any way.

"I don't want to fail," thought Molly. "Oh, how I wish Cecil were here! she would help me so much. Yes, here is father's letter at last. Now, I wonder what he has said. Am I to be made happy? Is Cecil's life to be a grand success, or the reverse? Oh, dear! I quite tremble at the thought of what the next few minutes may bring forth."

CHAPTER IV. DWELLERS IN CUBICLES

"MY dear Molly," wrote her father, "when this reaches you, you will have begun your new life as a student at Redgarth. From what your grandmother tells me, I am sure the place will suit you, and I trust you will derive all possible benefit from the sound education which you are receiving. I may as well, however, say frankly that, for my own part, I don't especially care for learned women. I like a girl to be thoroughly well domesticated, and to think no household work beneath her knowledge. When you come to me, you will have a great deal to do in the way of superintending – you will be the mistress of a large staff of servants; you will have to contend against the prejudices of race, and the ignorance of the Hindu. I differ from most of my countrymen in disliking the style of cooking which goes on here. I have no passion for curries, and curry seems to be the sole thing which the Indian cook considers necessary to digestion. I hope, Molly, you have a taste for cooking. Does Miss Forester happen to have a class for the training of young girls in this important department? If so, I beseech you, my child, join it. I quite long for a few dishes in the old-fashioned English style."

"Oh, when will he come to the point?" thought poor Molly, as her eyes rushed over the page.

His honor, Judge Lavender, however, had by no means exhausted himself on the all-important subject of dinner.

"You know, of old, my love, that I am easily pleased," he continued. "A little clear soup nicely flavored, a cutlet done to a turn, with the correct sauce, – understand, Molly, that everything depends on the sauce, – a savory omelette, a *meringue* or a jelly, make up the simple dinner which more than satisfies your affectionate father. You will think of this trifling matter, my darling, when you are perusing your Latin and Greek, and those other abstruse subjects which are now considered essential to the feminine mind."

"What would father think if he saw me puzzling my brains over 'Moral Science'?" thought Molly, knitting her dark brows. "Oh, dear, dear! I'm afraid he's got this cooking craze so strong on him at the present moment that he will forget all about my darling Cecil."

She bent her head and continued to read her letter.

"Yes, I am enjoying excellent health; all the delicacy from which I suffered some years ago has passed away. I am a hale and strong man, and do not feel any inconvenience from this climate. I shall be able to place you in a very nice position when you take the head of my house, my dear little girl. Prepare for this time now by all the means in your power; work hard, eat plenty, take abundance of exercise, and come out to me in two years' time a fresh and beautiful specimen of young English girlhood. I shall look forward to your first impressions of Redgarth with much interest. From what your grandmother tells me, Miss Forester must be a remarkable woman. I only trust she is not too mannish. Whatever you do, Molly, strive to retain all the gentle privileges of your sex. Endeavor to polish yourself in every way, my love, and to acquire those nice accomplishments which are essential to the comfort of man. I want you to be particular about your dress. Your dear mother was. I would not have married her if this had not been the case."

"Oh, I wish he wouldn't drag darling mother's name in," thought Molly, her lips quivering. "Why do his letters, although I long so for them, always set my teeth on edge?"

"I want you to learn grace and deportment, my darling," continued Judge Lavender; "in particular, how to enter and leave a room nicely. A little light repartee, not *too* clever, in conversation, gives sparkle, and is by no means amiss. For Heaven's sake, don't ever consider that it is your duty to argue with men: just let them see that you understand them; they like to be appreciated. Above all, learn the art of making tea gracefully, and without any *contretemps*. Deportment is fearfully

overlooked, in these later days of our century. Struggle for a dignified deportment, Molly, as you love me. Now I must stop, my dear, or I shall miss the post.

*"Your affectionate father,
"Charles Lavender."*

"Oh, good gracious! not a single word about Cecil," thought poor Molly. "Yes, yes, here's a postscript; her name does come in – now, what does he say?"

"As to your erratic and eccentric young friend, Cecil Ross, I own that I feel a certain difficulty with regard to the request which you have made. I am quite rich enough to oblige you in the matter as far as mere money is concerned; my difficulty is on quite another head. The fact is, I dread the influence this exceedingly brusque young person may bring to bear on your own character, and hesitate, therefore, at the thought of placing her at the same school."

"Oh, father! how can you!" thought Molly, quick tears filling her eyes. "Oh, my darling, noble, brave Cecil! How little you know her!"

"I don't absolutely refuse your request, my dear," continued the judge, "but before granting it, I have written to your grandmother to consult her on the subject. She will give me an unprejudiced report with regard to Cecil Ross. When I hear from her I will reply to you. Now, once again, adieu. Your affectionate father."

After finishing her letter, Molly became oppressed by a strange sense of limpness. The strength and go which her vigorous day had imparted seemed suddenly to forsake her. She clasped her hands on her lap and gazed straight before her. She had been indulging in a daydream, and the letter which she had just received from the one whom she loved best in the world, gave her a sense of chill which almost amounted to shock. Tears rose slowly to her eyes; she slipped the letter into her pocket, and going over to her little writing-table, took a sheet out of her portfolio, and wrote a few hasty lines to her grandmother.

"I have scarcely time for more than a word," wrote Molly. "I have just heard from father, who wants to consult you about Cecil. Please, darling grannie, tell him what you really think of Cecil. Oh, I know she will be quite safe in your hands. Please do not lose a mail in writing to father, for the whole thing is so important.

*"Your loving and anxious
"Molly."*

Having finished the letter, Molly addressed it; she then ran quickly downstairs, to discover by what means she could get it into the post. Miss Leicester met, her in the hall.

"Well, Molly," she said, in a cheerful tone, "I hope you have by this time got all your things nicely unpacked and in perfect order, so as to be able to get into a good routine of work to-morrow."

"I am ever so sorry," answered Molly, "but the fact is – "

"What, my dear; why do you hesitate?"

"My things are not unpacked, Miss Leicester. I had a long letter from father by this afternoon's post; I have been reading it; there was a good deal in the letter to make me think; then it was absolutely necessary for me to write this. Please tell me where I am to put this letter in order that it may be posted."

"In the box just above your head which is marked 'Letters.' I am sorry to say you are late for this evening's departure."

"Am I really? Oh, what a pity! When will the letter go?"

"This box will be cleared the last thing to-night, and the letter will reach London, if London is its destination, some time to-morrow afternoon. I am sorry your things are not unpacked; all your time after supper ought to be taken up preparing for to-morrow's work. Miss Shaw tells me that you are to write notes on two lectures which she delivered this morning. Let me tell you, Molly, that Miss

Shaw is extremely particular. Well, I suppose I must excuse you this time, but now run off, my love; don't waste a moment."

Molly ran upstairs; the cloud which her father's letter brought over her spirit seemed to grow a little thicker.

"No one quite understands me except Cecil," she muttered. "How I wish Cecil were here!"

She stooped over her trunks and began unpacking them. The occupation did her good, and brought back some of her cheerfulness. She had nearly come to the end of her task when the great gong for supper sounded through the house. She found that she had no time to change her dress; Miss Leicester always insisted upon punctuality at meals, and Molly would be forced to appear in her thick morning dress. She hastily smoothed her hair, and went downstairs feeling hot and uncomfortable. Every other girl at Kate O'Connor's table looked cool and fresh.

"Come and sit near me, Molly," said Kate, in her kind voice. "After supper," she whispered, as Molly sank down into the vacant chair, "I have a little plan to talk over with you and Amy Frost. You must both come and see me in my dormitory."

"Yes," replied Molly.

"I am not fortunate like you," answered Kate; "I can only receive you in my share of the dormitory. Oh, I don't complain of my little cubicle, but a cubicle is very different from a room."

"Yes," answered Molly, in a reflective tone. She thought that Kate's eyes were fixed upon her with an expectant and wistful glance.

She longed to ask her to chum with her in her own pretty room, but the thought of Cecil restrained her.

"Do you find the room very hot?" asked Amy Frost's voice at her elbow.

Molly, who was flushed already, grew redder than ever.

"I suppose I look very hot," she replied; "I forgot all about changing my dress, I was so busy unpacking."

"Unpacking from tea to supper time!" responded Amy. "What a lot of dresses you must have brought!"

"Don't be impertinent, Amy," said Kate.

"My dear Kitty, that is the last thing I wish to be, but patent facts must draw forth certain conclusions. If Molly has not come here with a supply of luggage resembling a trousseau, why should she take from half-past four to seven o'clock to get her things in order?"

"I didn't," said Molly; "I was reading a letter and writing one."

She spoke defiantly. Her manner irritated Amy, who had not the best temper in the world. She didn't speak at all for a moment; then, bending forward, she said, in a semi-whisper:

"I hope you will forgive the remark I am going to make. I do it as a matter of duty. It is the duty of old girls to give newcomers all possible hints with regard to deportment, the rules of the place, etc. Now, Miss Leicester is an angel, but she is an angel who likes us all to observe the unspoken rules of the house. One of these is that we should look nice and fresh at supper time. Those who do not carry out her wishes are likely to get into her black books. Now, there is a difference, a subtle difference, between the white and black books even of an angel. Take the hint, Miss Lavender. I have spoken."

"I don't think you have spoken at all nicely, Amy," said Kate. "Why do you persecute poor Molly? Of course she'll come downstairs properly dressed to-morrow night."

"Have I made you angry?" asked Amy, looking hard at her.

"No, no!" replied Molly. She felt tears near her eyes, but made an effort to recover herself. "The fact is," she said, making an effort to speak pleasantly, "I knew perfectly well that I ought to dress for supper. Hester was kind enough to tell me all about it last night, but I had a long letter from father. This letter interested me very much. I was obliged, in consequence of it, to write a hasty line to my grandmother in London. The rest of my time was spent unpacking my things, and I found, when

the supper gong sounded, that I was still in my morning dress. That is the whole story. If, on account of this omission, I am likely to displease Miss Leicester, I had better go and apologize after supper."

"Oh, for goodness' sake, don't do anything of the kind!" said Amy. "Twenty to one Miss Leicester has never noticed you. Molly, your generous explanation forces me to confess my fault. I am the soul of mischief – in short, I am the Puck of St. Dorothy's. Your hot face, and a certain little air of discomfort which it expressed, tempted me to quiz you. Now, do forgive me, and think no more of the matter."

"I am glad you have said that, Amy," exclaimed Kate, in a pleased tone. "Don't forget that you are to come up to the dormitory with Molly after supper."

The meal had come to an end, and as no one seemed inclined to dance that night, Molly soon found herself an inmate of Kate's pretty cubicle. The dormitory consisted of a long, lofty room, with cubicles at each side and a passage down the middle. The cubicles were divided by wooden partitions, and were railed off in front by pretty curtains. The whole arrangement was pleasant, bright, and convenient; the drawback being that sounds could be distinctly heard from one cubicle to another. With this one disadvantage, the cubicles possessed all the comforts of small private rooms. In her own cubicle, each girl could indulge her individual taste, and thus give a certain indication of her character. Kate O'Connor's was decidedly of the chaotic order. As she entered it now, followed by her two companions, she made a dash at her hat, scarf, and gloves, which lay sprawling across her bed.

"Oh, dear!" she exclaimed, "how my Irish nature does burst forth! Do stay near the door for a moment, girls, or rather, I should say, near the curtains. I'll set this room right in a jiffy. Now, then, here goes!"

She pulled open a drawer, thrust her hat and scarf out of sight, kicked a box under the bed, pulled open the lid of her desk, swept a quantity of papers into it, then faced her two companions with her hands to her sides.

"*Voilà!*" she exclaimed; "now tell me, you two, is there a more perfect room in the world? The fact is this, I like a certain degree of order on the surface and disorder beneath. I couldn't live with tidy drawers; they'd drive me mad in a week. I like a hay-stack in my drawers; there's something exciting about never knowing where to find your things. You pitchfork your hay-stack up and down, and there's no knowing what may unexpectedly turn up. There are advantages in not being too well acquainted with one's property. The other night, for instance, I was in despair how to make myself look smart to meet our beloved Leicester's angelic eye. I suddenly came across two yards of pale green ribbon buried under a lot of *débris* in the hay-stack. I twisted half in my hair, and made a knot of the remaining half for the neck of my blouse. Leicester, the darling, looked at me with much approval. Have I shocked you, girls?"

"Not me," said Amy. "I know you far too well."

"You have astonished me," said Molly. "I certainly never thought you were untidy. You don't look it a bit in your dress or hair. I rather think I like you for it. I'm glad, at least, that you are not perfect."

"You dear little quaint piece of goods!" said Kate. "How ridiculous it does sound to hear you speak of me as perfect! Did you really think so, even for a minute?"

"I did. Oh, now we can meet on common ground. Kate, what are you laughing at?"

"I must have my laugh out," replied Kate. "Amy, did you hear – did you hear what she said? She thought me perfect! I, the dreamy, the untidy, the reckless, the incorrigible! Bless you, Molly! I have not laughed so heartily for many a day."

"But you don't want to be the incorrigible?" said Molly anxiously.

"Child, you'll kill me, if you look so solemn. Can't you take a joke? Oh, what a trial it is for an Irish girl to live in England! you English are so painfully prosaic. Do believe one thing about Kate O'Connor, my dear little Molly: it is her fashion to talk at random. She would not be Irish if she were not always propounding the most impossible theories, and saying the most impossible things. But

when she does the queer things and says the queer words, just make up your mind that she is in fun, and doesn't mean them to be taken seriously. Of course, when she says sensible things she means them, and that reminds me that we are here on a very sensible matter. Now to business."

As Kate spoke, she leaped lightly into the center of her bed, and sat there, tailor fashion, with her legs tucked under her. She immediately invited Molly and Amy to follow her example.

"I don't think there is anyone in the next cubicle," she said, "but I must find out. Hi, Julia, are you there?"

As no answer came from Julia, Kate nodded her head brightly.

"Empty on that side – so far, so good; now, then, for the other. Mary Jane, love, are you at home?"

Mary Jane being also silent, Kate clapped her hands, and looked demurely at her companions.

"Now, then," she said, "this delicious little plan wants explaining. Are you all attention, girls?"

"I am," said Amy. "The fact is, I'm more than attention – I'm devoured by curiosity."

Molly nodded, but did not speak.

"Well," said Kate, "my plan is this – I want to form a society to eject selfishness from St. Dorothy's."

Amy sighed deeply.

"Oh, Kate!" she cried; "I did think you had got something sensible in your head at last. What is the use of taking up wild, abstruse ideas of that sort?"

"My idea is neither abstruse nor wild," replied Kate. "Do listen, Amy; you can speak and argue as much as you like when you know what I mean. You and I, my dear, belong to the afflicted tribe – we live in cubicles. We are the Dwellers in Cubicles – that is our name. There are times, Amy, when Mary Jane and Julia make my cubicle anything but an abode of peace. I've not the least doubt that Harriet and Pussy give you headache also at odd intervals. It is not easy to write good epitomes of our lectures when we are sitting between two fires of idle badinage, chaff, silly stories, and sometimes even – I'll just whisper the word – quarrelings.

"Now, in this house there are a certain number of rooms which fortunate students hold undisputed sway over. Some of these students are obliging, and during the hours of study, share their rooms with their less fortunate friends; but others are selfish, perhaps from thoughtlessness, and keep their rooms to themselves. I have been racking my brains over a careful calculation, and I find that, supposing St. Dorothy's to be quite full, every student in the place could be accommodated with a quiet corner for study, if each girl who has a room to herself would share it with one chum between supper and prayer time. Of course, such a state of things can't be enforced by any rules or any order, but it is my belief that moral suasion can do a good deal. I want to bring morality to bear in the matter. I want to form a club, and I want to force the girls to become members of it; those who refuse can be sent to a sort of moral Coventry. The object of the club will be to wage war against selfishness, and particularly against that awful form of selfishness which sports its oak, to borrow an Oxford phrase, against the suffering Dwellers in Cubicles. What do you say, Amy, to my darling scheme?"

"Oh, my dear, I should love it, of course," replied Amy; "but unfortunately I belong to the Dwellers in Cubicles. Molly's opinion is worth having, for she belongs to the opposite side."

"I brought Molly here on purpose," said Kate. "Molly is just in the position to give a perfectly candid and unbiased opinion. She is a privileged member of the Single-room Fraternity. She has made no special friends as yet. Now, Molly, you can tell me frankly what you think of the scheme. How, for instance, would you like to share your room with an outsider?"

Molly thought for a moment.

"You speak frankly to me," she said, "and I must reply in the same spirit. I have a great friend. I am hoping against hope that she may come to St. Dorothy's. My friend is poor, and I know that she will be obliged to come here in the least expensive way. She will not have a room to herself, and

I look forward with great pleasure to giving her any little privilege I can. I hope that she and I may study together in my room."

"Well, Molly, then you are in favor of the plan?" said Kate, looking at her a little anxiously.

"Yes; but then I am not unselfish, for it would be delightful for me to have Cecil in my room."

Kate gave a faint sigh.

"No one knows the difficulties under which the Dwellers in Cubicles labor," she exclaimed. "I, for instance, have a passion for certain kinds of work, but I'm afraid, although I manage to please my lecturers, that I am something of the scatter-brain order of human beings. When I hear Julia and Mary Jane chatting and quarreling, and calling across to each other over my head, and sometimes rushing to meet each other just outside my curtain, to exchange either blows or kisses, I must own that my poetic ideas or my thoughtful phrases are apt to melt into a sort of Irish frenzy. The fact is, under the existing condition of things, I indulge in Irish frenzy every night of my life, and it is bad for me in every way; it is simply ruining my character. I get into a furious passion, then I repent, and I get into bed really quite weak, it is so fearfully exhausting."

"Oh, Kate, I can't help it!" exclaimed Molly. "You must be my chum until Cecil comes. Perhaps Cecil won't come at all. Oh, I fear as much as I hope about that. If you will be satisfied to be my chum, *only* until Cecil comes, you are heartily welcome, Kate."

"You are a duck, and I accept heartily," said Kate, in her frank way; "but because I have reached an ark of shelter, that is no reason why I should not extend a vigorous hand to a drowning sister."

"Mary Jane, for instance," exclaimed Amy. "Who is the unfortunate victim who is to admit that Dweller in Cubicles into her inner sanctuary?"

"Twenty to one Mary Jane won't wish to go," replied Kate. "Anyhow, the nice, honest, hard-working, white sheep can't be crushed on account of the black. I am going to draw up rules for the new club to-morrow. I shall quote Molly Lavender as a noble example of unselfishness. I shall have an interview with Miss Leicester, and get her to give her sanction to my scheme. Oh, I'm certain she will, when she recognizes the terrible position of the studiously minded Dwellers in Cubicles."

CHAPTER V. CECIL AND THE BOYS

FOUR boys were seated round the break fast table. They ranged in age from fourteen to ten. One glance at their faces was sufficient to show that they belonged to the average healthy-minded, hearty, English schoolboy. A girl was pouring out coffee for the quartet. She was standing to her work. Her age might have been sixteen: in some respects she looked older, in some respects younger. She was a tall, slim girl, with a somewhat long face of a pale but clear olive. Her eyes were dark, large, and well cut; her brow was particularly noble. She had quantities of straight, thick, black hair, which was swept off her forehead and fastened in a thick knot at the nape of her neck. The girl's name was Cecil Ross. She was Molly Lavender's dearest friend, the one around whom Molly's warmest thoughts, hopes, and affections were centered. The boys were eating their breakfast with the voracious appetite of the British schoolboy. The eldest had a look of his sister.

"I say, Ceci," he exclaimed, "how white you are! You've been fagging last night; I know you have, and I call it a beastly shame."

"Oh, never mind me, Maurice," said Cecil; "I have to study, you know, and really you four do want such a lot of mending and making and seeing to generally, that if I don't sit up a little bit at night, I simply get no study at all. Jimmy, darling, is it necessary to put six lumps of sugar into that cup of coffee?"

"There's no sweetening in this sugar," said Jimmy, aged eleven; "I can't make it out. What ails it? I put ten lumps in last night, Ceci, when you were out, and the coffee only tasted like mud."

"Like treacle, you mean," said Maurice. "Don't you think it's a shame to waste good food? You're a greedy youngster, and I'll punch your head if you don't look out."

Jimmy bobbed his curly fair head, for Maurice had extended one strong young hand as he uttered his threat.

"It's time for us all to be off now," he said, rising from the table and shaking the crumbs from his Norfolk suit.

"Like dear boys, do go out quietly," said Cecil; "Mrs. Rogers has spent a very suffering night, and I don't want to wake her."

"Oh, bother!" exclaimed Jimmy; "what with no sugar, and having to keep as still as mice, how is a fellow to have a chance? I say, Maurice – Oh, I say, I didn't mean it; no, I didn't, Ceci, not really."

The boys clattered off; Cecil heard them tumbling and scrambling downstairs; she uttered a faint sigh for Mrs. Rogers' chance of sleep, and then walked to the window to watch them as they ran down the street. They attended the Grammar School – the far-famed Grammar School of the little town of Hazlewick; the school was at the corner of the street.

"How Maurice grows!" thought Cecil, as she watched them. "Of course, I know this sort of thing can't go on. There's not money enough; it can't be done, and how are they to be educated? I wouldn't tell dear old Maurice what brought the black lines under my eyes last night. No, it wasn't study, – not study in the ordinary sense, – it was that other awful thing which takes more out of one than the hardest of hard work. It was worry. Try as I would, I could not stretch my cloth to cover the space allotted to it. In short, at the end of the year, if something is not done, I, Cecil Ross, will be in debt. Now, I'm not going into debt for anyone. I promised mother six months ago, when she died, that somehow or other I'd keep out of debt, and I'll do it. Oh, dear, dear! what is to be done? I suppose I must give up that delightful scheme of Molly's, that I should go to Redgarth for two or three years, and perfect myself in all sorts of learning, and then take a good post as head-mistress of some high school. I don't see how it's to be done – no, I really don't. What would the boys do without me?"

At this point in Cecil's meditations, there came a knock, very firm and decided, at the sitting-room door.

"Come in," she said, and Miss Marshall, her landlady, entered the room.

"Now, Miss Ross," she said, "I've come to say some plain words. You know I'm a very frank body, and I'm afraid I can't keep you and those boys any longer in the house. There's poor Mrs. Rogers woke up out of the first sleep she's had the entire night. Oh, I don't blame 'em, – the young rascals, – but they simply can't keep quiet. What are they but four schoolboys? and all the world knows what it means when there are four schoolboys in a house."

"I promise that they shall behave better in future," said Cecil; "they must take off their outdoor shoes in the hall and –"

Miss Marshall raised her hand; she was a large-limbed, bony woman of fifty. She had a thin red face, small but kindly eyes, and a firm mouth. She would not be cruel to anybody; neither would she be inordinately kind. She was shrewd and matter-of-fact. She had to earn her living, and she considered it her duty to put this fact before all other considerations. Cecil's white young face touched her, but she was not going on that account to give way.

"It isn't that I don't love the lads," she said, "and you too, Miss Ross, but the thing can't be done. I make my living out of this house, and Mrs. Rogers has sent for me to say she'll leave at the end of the week if I don't find another place for you and your brothers, my dear. Mrs. Rogers is the drawing-room lodger, and, what with her being ill, and one thing and another, I make a lot of extrys out of her. Now, I don't mind letting you know, Miss Ross, that it's from extrys we poor lodging-house keepers make our profit. There's never an extry to put into your account, my dear, and, besides, I *could* get ten shillings a week more for these rooms, only I promised your poor, dear ma that I wouldn't raise the rent on you. The fact is, Miss Ross, Mr. Chandler would gladly take the parlor and the upstairs rooms for himself and his lady for the whole winter, and I think I ought to put it to you, my dear young lady."

"Of course," said Cecil.

She stood upright like a young reed. Her brows were slightly knit; she did not glance at Miss Marshall. She was looking straight before her.

"I understand," she said, turning her gaze full upon her landlady's red face, "that you wish us to go?"

"Oh, my dear, it's sorry I am to have to say it, but that's the plain fact."

"How long can you give us?"

"Do sit down, Miss Cecil; I declare you're whiter than a sheet; you'll fade off like your dear ma if you're not careful. There, my dear, there, you shan't be hurried; you take your time – you take your time."

"It's a dreadful position," said Cecil; "it is fearfully inconvenient; there's not another house where we can be so comfortable; there's no one else will bear with us as you have borne with us."

"Oh, for mercy's sake, my dear, don't you begin that, or I'll yield – I declare I will! and how am I to live if I don't raise my rent, and seek lodgers that go in for extrys. Look here, Miss Cecil, why do you burden yourself with those young gentlemen; why don't you put them to school?"

"What do you mean?" said Cecil; "they are at school."

"Why don't you put 'em to boarding school; it would be a sight better, and cost less – and there, I forgot to tell you, Miss Pinchin's English teacher left her only yesterday; there is a vacancy in that first class school for a good English teacher; why shouldn't you try for it, Miss Ross?"

"I don't know – I'm greatly obliged," said Cecil. "I'll see what I can do, Miss Marshall, and let you know to-night; perhaps you can give us at least a week."

"That I can, and a fortnight too," said Miss Marshall. "Dear, dear, it's a hateful job altogether, and me that loved your ma so much. I wouldn't do it, not for any Chandlers, but when Mrs. Rogers, whose extras mount up wonderful, threatens to leave, there seems no help for it. Duty is duty, aint

it, Miss Ross? and the best thing for a poor woman like me to see to, is that she keeps her head well above water, and lays by for her old age."

"Of course," said Cecil abstractedly. She was scarcely listening to Miss Marshall. She was thinking of the vacancy at Miss Pinchin's school.

The landlady reached the door and half opened it, then came back a step or two into the room.

"You might as well order dinner now, my dear, while I'm here. What'll you have?"

"The cold mutton and potatoes," said Cecil.

"Bless you, child! there's only the bone downstairs. Master Jimmy was mad with hunger last night, and he stole down to the kitchen about nine o'clock. That boy has the impudence – 'Fork out that cold mutton,' says he, 'I can't sleep with a hollow inside of me. You bring the cold mutton in here, and let me have a slice or two.' I brought the joint and some bread, and left him standing in the kitchen. When I came back, why, 'twas nothing but the bone. That child grows wonderful fast; you can't blame him, poor lad."

"I do blame him for not speaking to me," said Cecil; "but that is not your fault, Miss Marshall."

"Well, my dear, what'll you have for dinner?"

"Please put the bone down, and make a little soup."

"That soup won't be ready for early dinner, Miss Ross."

"The soup will do for to-morrow's dinner. I am going out in a few moments, and I'll bring something fresh in from the butcher's. And please make a very large rice pudding, Miss Marshall, and let's have cabbage and plenty of potatoes. I'll bring the cabbage in when I come. I suppose there are plenty of potatoes left?"

"Never a one at all, my dear; you finished the last supply yesterday."

Cecil sighed.

"Well, I'll bring potatoes too," she said.

The landlady closed the door at last, and Cecil gave a sigh of relief.

"She's gone, and I can think," she said to herself. "I'm glad she mentioned about the vacancy at Miss Pinchin's school. Dear, dear! I'd better put down what I'm to get when I go out. I do wish Jimmy wasn't such a greedy boy. Think of Maurice polishing off all the cold mutton! Maurice is my blessing, the joy of my life. Poor dear Jimmy is my perplexity – no, I won't call him my cross. Charlie follows in Maurice's footsteps; Teddy is inclined to think Jimmy a hero. Oh, well, they are all four dear boys, and I don't suppose I'd have them different. Jimmy has no thought, and Maurice has too much. Oh, my boy, how I love you! what would I not do for you? You are so clever, so manly, you could do anything if only you had a fair chance. You shall have your heart's desire; I'll manage it somehow. I'm four years older than you; by the time you're fit to go to Oxford or Cambridge, I'll have enough money to send you there. Yes, yes, it shall be done."

Cecil's fine eyes began to shine, her beautiful lips took a firm curve, the color crept slowly into her pale cheeks. She sat down by her little writing-table, pushed a Greek lexicon and other books out of sight, and entered in a tiny notebook the marketing which was necessary to be done that day. "Beefsteak, potatoes, cabbage, rice, sugar," she wrote, in her neat, small, upright hand. She slipped the book into her pocket, and then went out.

As she was leaving the house, the postman came up the steps and gave her a letter. She glanced at the writing, and the color rushed into her cheeks.

"It's from Molly," she said to herself. "Oh, what nonsense all this Redgarth scheme is! How can I possibly leave those four boys, to go to Redgarth? Of course I'd love it beyond words, but it isn't to be done. Here, let me see what Molly says."

Molly Lavender's letter was very short:

Darling Cecil:

I have only just time to write a line. I have heard from father on the subject of your joining me, but he shifts the whole question on to dear grannie's shoulders. The

fact is, Cecil, father is old-fashioned, and just because you are the bravest girl in the world, he fancies that you must be mannish. You mannish, you dear old feminine thing! I comfort myself with the thought that he has never seen you, Cecil. Oh, yes, it will be all right in the end. Grannie knows you, and if she gives you a good character, – which of course she will, quite the best in the world, – you are to come. I write now, however, to say that, with all these delays, I don't see how you can come to St. Dorothy's before the half term. Make up your mind to be with us then. Oh, how I look forward to your arrival! I think you will like the place, – you will be in your native atmosphere, – the very air seems solemn with the weight of learning; the college is splendid; as to the great hall, where we have prayers, it almost takes your breath away the first time you see it. Miss Forester is about the grandest woman I ever came across. Oh, Cecil, how you will worship her! St. Dorothy's is perfectly charming, only you've to get your parquet legs, or you'll have many a great fall. The girls are full of character. I like one of them immensely; her name is Kate O'Connor – she's Irish, and such fun! She is chumming with me in my room until you come. You will want to know what that means. It means that she and I share my room, for purposes of study, from after supper until prayers. Oh, Cecil, what good the life will do you! you will expand in it like a beautiful flower. You shan't have a care or sorrow when you come here. How are the boys? Give my love to Maurice.

*Your affectionate friend,
Molly Lavender.*

Cecil crushed the letter into her pocket, and walked down the little High Street of the small town.

"I don't see how I am to go to Redgarth," she said to herself. "I don't suppose Judge Lavender will lend the money, and even if he should think of such a thing, how can I possibly go and leave the four boys? Dear Molly was full of it when we were together in the summer, and it did seem so tempting, and I had a kind of hope that perhaps Miss Marshall would look after the boys, and Maurice would be a sort of father to them. But I see now it can't be done. Jimmy is too much for Maurice, and why should my boy, while he is so young, have this burden thrust upon him? Oh, if I only could get that post as English teacher at Miss Pinchin's school, why, we'd be quite well off! I'd be able to save a little, perhaps, and instead of going into lodgings, I might take a tiny house, and have one servant. I wonder which would be really cheapest? It's impossible to keep four boys as mum as mutes. Oh, of course, I'm sorry for Mrs. Rogers, but boys will be boys. Now, everything depends on what Miss Pinchin says. Miss Pinchin used to be very kind to me when mother was alive, and I don't see why she shouldn't give me the first chance. Oh, I do sincerely hope I get the post! I know Miss Edgar had eighty pounds a year. Add eighty to one hundred and fifty, and it makes two hundred and thirty. How rich we should be with that! I certainly could manage a little tiny cottage, and I expect I should save in many ways. Yes, Molly dear, Redgarth is certainly not to be thought of. If I can only secure this unexpected post, which seems put in my way!"

Cecil walked quickly as these thoughts rushed through her mind. She had long left the little High Street behind her, and had gone out into the suburbs of the small town. There was a beautiful country round Hazlewick, and the autumn tints were now rendering the scenery perfect. Miss Pinchin's "Seminary for Ladies" was an imposing-looking house, standing alone in grounds. There were large white gates and a carriage drive, and wide gardens stretching to right and left and to the front and back of the heavy stone building. Cecil opened the white gates, walked up the avenue, and sounded the bell at the front door. Her summons was quickly attended to by a neatly dressed parlor-maid.

"Is Miss Pinchin in? Can I see her?" asked Cecil.

"I'm afraid Miss Pinchin is particularly engaged," answered the servant.

Cecil hesitated a moment: she knew, however, that such posts as Miss Edgar's were quickly snatched up; desperation gave her courage.

"Please take Miss Pinchin my name," she said; "Miss Ross – Miss Cecil Ross. Have the goodness to say that I have come to see her on very special business."

The maid withdrew, and Cecil waited on the steps. Three or four minutes went by, then the servant reappeared.

"Miss Pinchin can see you for a moment or two, miss," she said. "Come this way, please."

She led the girl down two or three passages, and entered a very small, prettily decorated boudoir, where an elderly lady with iron-gray hair, a sharp face, and a nose beaked like that of an eagle, sat in front of a desk.

"How do you do, Miss Ross?" said Miss Pinchin. "Pray take a seat. Can I do anything for you? Are your brothers well?"

"Yes, thank you, the boys are well," answered Cecil. She had to swallow a lump in her throat.

"I have come," she said, "to offer myself for the post of English teacher in your school. I heard about an hour ago that Miss Edgar had left you."

Cecil's boldness – the sudden direct glance of her eyes – alone prevented Miss Pinchin laughing aloud. Her remark astonished the good lady so much, however, that she was silent for nearly a minute. At last, looking full at the girl, she began to question her.

"I have a great respect for you, Miss Ross," she said; "your mother's daughter would naturally have that from me; but – I scarcely think you know what you are talking about."

"I assure you I do. I used to teach all the English subjects at the last school where I was. I was successful with the girls. They were fond of me; they learned quickly."

"What are your attainments?"

"I know the ordinary branches of English education; I have been thoroughly well grounded. I know several languages also."

"Excuse me, Miss Ross, pray keep yourself to English."

Cecil began to enumerate her different attainments in this branch of study.

"I can give you good references," she said. "I had first prize in English history on several occasions, and my compositions – they were always above the average."

"I have heard that you are a clever girl," said Miss Pinchin; "in fact, anyone to look at your face could see that. You certainly do make the most extraordinary request. Miss Edgar was thirty – how old are you?"

"I shall be eighteen in a week. Oh, please, Miss Pinchin, don't let that interfere! I can't help being young; that fact does not prevent my having the care of four brothers."

"Poor girl! yes, yours is a heavy burden. You might perhaps come to me for a time if – By the way, of course you have different certificates. You have at least passed the Cambridge Junior and Senior?"

Cecil colored, then her face became deadly pale.

"No," she faltered, "but –"

"No?" said Miss Pinchin, rising. "You mean to tell me you have no certificate of any kind?"

"No; but –"

"My dear Miss Ross, I am sorry, but that puts a stop to the entire thing. What would the parents of my pupils say if my English teacher were not thoroughly certificated! I am sorry. Young as you are, I should have been prepared to help you, for your mother's sake, had you been in any way qualified. As it is, it is hopeless. Good-morning, Miss Ross! Good-morning!"

CHAPTER VI.

MRS. LAVENDER'S PLAN

WHEN Cecil found herself outside the gates of Miss Pinchin's school, she felt exactly like someone on whom the gates of Paradise had been closed. She had had a moment of strong and vigorous hope; this had been changed as quickly to despair. Miss Pinchin would have given her the coveted post, had she been certificated. A girl without certificates was nowhere now in the world of learning. No matter how intelligent she was, no matter how really well informed, she had no chance whatever against the cut-and-dry acquirements which the certificated girl was supposed to possess. Cecil metaphorically wrung her hands.

"What am I to do?" she said to herself. "I know I can teach those girls just splendidly, and because I have not passed the Cambridge Junior and Senior, I am shut away from all chance of getting a really good post. Oh, if I could only go to Redgarth, if only for a year; but there, I fear I must put that completely out of my head. Molly's letter was scarcely reassuring, and even if her father is willing to lend me the money, how am I to manage matters for those dear, troublesome, good-humored, noisy boys of mine?"

Cecil was walking back quickly to the town as these thoughts coursed through her busy brain. She was accustomed to utilize every moment of her time, and anxious and miserable as she felt this morning, these facts did not prevent her accomplishing several little items of necessary housekeeping with directness and dispatch. She returned home in time to hand over materials for a good dinner to Miss Marshall's tender mercies, and then entered her little parlor, sighing more than once as the reflection came to her, that, in all probability, this little home, this poor little haven of refuge, would not long be hers.

The first thing her eyes lighted on as she came into the room was a letter addressed to herself.

"The postman has just brought it, Miss Ross," said the landlady, whisking out of the room as she spoke, and shutting the door after her.

Cecil took up the letter languidly. It bore the London postmark, the writing on the cover was stiff and slanting, and had the tremulous appearance which generally characterizes the writing of the very old. Notwithstanding this, however, it was a careful and well-formed hand. Cecil hastily tore it open, and read the following words:

My Dear Cecil:

It is important that I should see you without delay. Can your brothers spare you for one night? I have made inquiries, and find that you will receive this before noon to-morrow. A train leaves Hazlewick for London at two o'clock. If you take it, you will arrive at Paddington a little before five. Do not lose that train, and come prepared to sleep the night here. I will promise not to deprive your young brothers of your company for more than one night.

*Your affectionate old friend,
Mary Lavender.*

P.S. – I inclose a postal order for traveling expenses. First-class fare; don't forget.

A great flood of color mounted into Cecil's pale cheeks as she read this unlooked-for letter. She thought deeply for a moment, then resolved not to lose a moment in going to see Mrs. Lavender.

"The old lady, in all probability, wants to ask me some questions before writing to Molly's father," she said to herself. "Oh, I must put Redgarth out of my head, but how splendid if I only

could go! If it were not for the boys, now; but there, the boys exist, and they are the treasures and joy of my life."

Cecil rushed up to her room to make preparations. When Maurice and his three brothers arrived for dinner, they were surprised to see their sister in "her best bib and tucker," as Jimmy expressed it.

"Now what's up, old girl?" asked that incorrigible small boy.

"Nothing so dreadful, Jimmy," she answered. "I am going to London by the next train, that's all; expect me back, all of you, to-morrow. Now I do hope you will try to be good boys."

"Oh, crikey!" said Jimmy, cracking his fingers.

"And not wake Mrs. Rogers," pursued Cecil, fixing her eyes steadily on the eager faces of the three younger ones; "and, Jimmy, pray don't go down again to the kitchen to eat food on the quiet; you know that if you're hungry you've only to tell me; we have not come to that pass yet, that I would let any of my boys go hungry."

"I won't do it again," said Jimmy, turning away from a look which Maurice gave him; he did not want to meet Maurice's grave eyes. Maurice used to tell him in private that he was a beastly cad when he did mean things of that sort.

"Now, look here," said Maurice, coming to the front, as he always did when he noticed a look of distress on Cecil's face, "I'm going to take care of these youngsters. I promise, on my honor, that they shall be as good as gold, and not do one single thing you don't wish them to. Now, sit down and eat a good dinner, Cecil. Why, you look as white and tired as can be. No nonsense; you're not going to help us. I'll manage the dinner after you're gone. Sit down and have a nice piece of steak. Let me be the head of the house just for once."

"Oh, Maurice, what a comfort you are!" exclaimed Cecil. "I wonder if you'd be such a darling as to –"

"Nonsense! I'm going to be the darling now," said Teddy. "What do you want done, Ceci? Maurice isn't the only one who has got a pair of legs, please remember, nor the only one who has got a head on his shoulders, for the matter of that."

"You'll do nicely, Teddy, thank you," answered Cecil. "Here's this postal order, – I have filled my name in, – take it to the post office, and bring me back the money. Now be very careful and steady."

Teddy started off immediately on his errand. In ten minutes' time he brought back the necessary fare for Cecil's journey. She bade "good-by" to her brothers, promised to be back in time for early dinner on the following day, and started off to the railway station with considerable interest and excitement. All her low spirits had vanished; life was once more rosy with hope. It was very nice to get away from home worries, even for twenty-four hours; to travel first-class was in itself a pleasing variety. When Cecil really found herself rushing away in this comfortable style toward London, she almost laughed aloud with girlish glee.

Cecil's face was naturally a grave one, but when pleased or specially interested about anything, it had a particularly eager and bright expression. A wideawake look filled her dark eyes; they seemed to take in at a glance all that went on around her; hope shone in their brown depths; smiles went and came round her happy lips; an enthusiastic ring would even come into the tones of her voice. Cecil's morning had been filled with difficulties, but this unexpected and delightful change altered the whole complexion of affairs. Cecil had gone through a terrible year. A year ago she was a schoolgirl, receiving an ordinary education, and looking forward to doing well for herself in the scholastic world by and by; but great trouble had come unexpectedly – the mother to whom she was devoted had died, and unlooked-for money losses had added to the difficulties of the brave girl's position.

She was now the sole guardian and care-taker of her four young brothers, and although she was possessed of splendid talents, and could have earned plenty of money as a first-class teacher, she had not the required certificates to enable her to take any high position in the educational world. Cecil was too proud to complain, but the feeling that for lack of certain technical knowledge she must always

keep in the background – that her gifts, however great, could by no possibility meet with recognition – had a terribly damping effect on her life. Miss Pinchin's remarks to her that very morning had seemed like the final extinguisher to every hope; now, however, she could afford to laugh at Miss Pinchin. After all, what did Mrs. Lavender want her for? Why did she ask her to go to her in such a hurry? Why did she pay her fare up to town? Oh, yes, hope was again in the ascendant; hope was sending Cecil's young spirits up to a high pitch. How delightful it was to be flying along at express speed in a first-class carriage! how luxurious those padded cushions felt! how lovely the autumn tints on the trees looked! There was Windsor Castle in the distance; now she caught a peep of the river Thames. How beautiful the world was, after all!

"Oh, I shall succeed!" said Cecil to herself. "After all, I shall succeed! Maurice shall have the wish of his heart, and the three other boys shall start in the world as gentlemen. I will do all this for them. Yes, yes! Oh, I promised mother when she was dying! I vowed to succeed, and I will; I must, I shall. I am young, and the world is before me, I feel the ball at my feet. Won't I give it a good kick when I get the chance? Oh, if only mother had lived, what an old age of happiness I could have given her! But there, I dare not think of that; but I will succeed for the boys' sakes, and for the sake of her sweet memory – oh, yes, oh, yes!"

The train arrived in due course at Paddington. Cecil did not know London well, and she had difficulty for a moment or two in keeping her head in the midst of the whirl in which she found herself. At last, however, aided by an intelligent porter, she threaded her way in safety to a hansom, gave the man Mrs. Lavender's address, and was soon whirling away into a fresh world. The distance from Paddington to Bayswater was accomplished in a little over ten minutes. The hansom drew up abruptly before the deep portico of a tall house, and Cecil, feeling once more nervous and strange, ran up the steps. The door was opened to her by a neat parlor-maid, who told her that she was expected, and took her immediately up a low flight of stairs into a beautiful drawing room.

"Will you take a seat, miss," she said, "while I go and tell my mistress that you have arrived?"

Cecil sank into a deep armchair, and looked about her. She had never been in Mrs. Lavender's house before, although she had often been regaled with descriptions of it from Molly. Molly's holidays were spent in these rooms. Yes, the drawing room was very pretty – handsome, perhaps, was a better word. There were a great lot of gimcracks, as Maurice would term them, about: heaps of little tables, lots of chairs of every description, pictures, photographs, a stand of lovely ferns, a tall palm in one corner, and just behind the palm, what? Cecil, who was beginning to feel lonely and a little strange, jumped up suddenly, pushed the palm slightly aside, and gazed with delight at a water-color drawing of Molly – it represented Molly's sweet, frank face at its best. The eyes smiled into Cecil's now, assured her of Molly's faithful love, and cheered her inexpressibly.

The door opened behind. Cecil turned eagerly; the parlor-maid had again entered the room; she carried a little tea tray in her hands.

"Will you please help yourself to some tea, miss?" she said. "Mrs. Lavender begs that you will do so. When you have quite finished, will you kindly ring this bell, and I will come and take you to your room? My mistress says she will be glad to see you in her own boudoir at six o'clock, miss."

"Thank you," replied Cecil.

The maid left the room, closing the door softly behind her.

"What a quiet, hushed sort of feeling I have!" thought Cecil to herself. "At home, doors bang everywhere; don't the boys make a clatter, even when they move! Even Miss Marshall is not the quietest of souls. Yes, everything is restless at home, and here there is peace. I believe I could study here – or no, perhaps instead of studying I should go to sleep. I might become a lotos-eater, there's no saying. Well, there is no chance of my lot falling to me in this quiet place, and perhaps I am glad; but, at any rate, a little rest is delightful, and this tea looks delicious."

Cecil helped herself, pouring the tea into the dainty china, dropping in tiny lumps of sugar, and pouring cream out of a little embossed jug of old silver. She was very thirsty, and ended by drinking

all the tea which the little teapot contained, and finishing the wafer-like bread and butter, which was scarcely a sufficient meal for her healthy young appetite.

When she had finished, the maid reappeared to take her to a pretty little room, which, she told her with a smile, belonged to Miss Lavender.

Cecil hastily washed her hands and smoothed her hair, and punctual to the hour returned to the drawing room. A moment or two later she was ushered into Mrs. Lavender's presence.

The boudoir, as it was called, adjoined the drawing room. It was a quaint little room, furnished in the early French style. Everything about it was extremely delicate. Most of the chairs had high backs, the many small tables were of finished workmanship, and there was a great deal of old china about. There was a very thick carpet on the floor, and heavy velvet curtains hung from the windows and covered the entrance door. There was a hushed sort of feel in the room, which made Cecil inclined to speak in a whisper the very moment she entered. Mrs. Lavender sat in a high-backed chair by the fire. She was a tiny woman, dressed in the period of sixty years ago. She wore lace mittens on her little hands; her dress was of dull black silk, a white muslin kerchief was crossed over her bosom, and a cap of the finest white lace adorned her snow-white hair.

"How do you do, my dear?" she said, when Cecil came in. "Sit down, pray sit down. Anne," – here Mrs. Lavender turned to the servant, – "please be careful to shut the door quietly, and don't come in on any pretext until I ring for you. Now, my dear Cecil, you will wonder why I have sent for you in this hurry. I have done so because an idea has come to me, and suspense at my age is bad and disquieting. I have an idea about you, Cecil. Before I tell it to you, however, I want to know if you are willing to be a sensible girl, and to do exactly, and without any fuss, what I tell you?"

"Yes, I will do anything," replied Cecil. A flush of color rushed into her pale face. "Your letter has excited me dreadfully," she said, looking full at the old lady as she spoke.

Mrs. Lavender sighed. She had a delicate sort of complexion, which belongs to certain temperaments. Her face resembled old china, it was transparently pink and white; her eyes were bright blue. She looked old, but very pretty. All her surroundings seemed in touch with her fragile and *chic* appearance. As Cecil looked at her, she felt suddenly quite out of harmony with everything which surrounded her.

"How big I am!" thought poor Cecil. "I hardly dare to rest on this chair; I am certain if I lean back it will break. As to my hands, they look quite enormous. I dread touching anything. The fact is, there is not room for me in this boudoir. I feel just like a bull in a china shop. Oh, dear, dear! This is not the first time I have seen dear Mrs. Lavender. Why do I feel so nervous before her now?"

The pretty little old lady sat very still while these thoughts were rushing through Cecil's mind.

"There is not the least hurry, my love," she said. "I have long passed the stage of being excited about things. I can give you from six to seven for this little interview. At seven I dine alone. At eight o'clock we will meet in the drawing room, where, perhaps, you will be kind enough to read some of the *Times* articles for me. At nine o'clock I go to bed. You can sit up as long as you like. You will find novels, and improving books, if you prefer them, in one of the bookcases in the drawing room. I lead a very precise life, but I do not require anyone else to follow it. When Molly is here, she always does exactly as she likes, and I never interfere with her. You must copy Molly while you are in this house, my dear. Now, are you feeling composed, and is your excitement dying down? I will tell you why I have sent for you, if you can assure me this is the case."

"I am quite composed now, Mrs. Lavender," said Cecil. Then she added, with an irrepressible sort of eagerness: "But you don't know how good it is to be excited; how it lifts one out of one's self, at least when one is young, as I am. I was feeling very bad this morning, and now I am full of hope. I am very grateful to you, very, very grateful, for giving me such an exciting, joyous day."

Mrs. Lavender raised one of her fragile little hands. Her manner was deprecatory.

"Don't, my love!" she said. "Believe me, I can quite understand your gratitude, but I really would prefer your not expressing it. I suffer from a weak heart, and the least emotion is bad for me."

It is quite possible that the plan which I am about to divulge to you will excite you, as you are of an excitable temperament. If this be the case, Cecil, I must beg of you to leave the room. Express your excitement in any way in the drawing room. There are such thick curtains between this room and that that I shall not hear you, whatever you do. You may dance, if you like, in there, provided you don't knock anything over. Now, can you promise to be calm in my presence?"

"Yes, Mrs. Lavender."

Cecil locked her hands tightly together. She wondered that anyone could live, that any heart could continue to beat, in such a death-in-life sort of state as Mrs. Lavender's.

The old lady gave her a fixed stare.

"The girl I am fondest of in all the world," she said, "is my granddaughter, Molly. Molly is very fond of you."

"She is my dearest friend," interrupted Cecil.

"I beg of you, Cecil, to hear me out without remark."

"Yes," answered Cecil.

"I had a letter from Molly, in which she entreats me to write to my son, who is, as you know, a judge in the Rampoor Settlement. She entreats me to write to him describing you as a sensible, respectable, well-brought-up girl – a girl who does not in any sense of the word belong to those odious creatures who call themselves 'new women'; in short, a girl who would put no silly thoughts into his daughter's head. You are doubtless aware, Cecil, of the reason why Molly wants me to write this letter?"

"Yes; I know all about it," replied Cecil. Her face was crimson. "Molly wants her father to lend me money to enable me to join her at Redgarth. Her father fears I am not womanly enough. Perhaps you don't think I am womanly enough, Mrs. Lavender. Oh, if that is so, I beg of you –"

"Hush, my dear, hush! Exclaim presently in the drawing room, but do keep down your emotion while you are with me. I shall have a spasm if you don't; I really shall."

"I will try hard to be quiet," answered Cecil.

A great sigh rose to her lips, but she managed to suppress it.

"Mrs. Lavender is a dear old lady," she said to herself, "but I really fear she will soon ask me not to breathe in her presence. I never felt so horribly restrained in my life. I must make a rush for that drawing room if she doesn't soon unburden her mind."

"I have not yet written to my son," continued the old lady.

"Oh, dear, and the Indian mail has gone!" answered Cecil.

"May I ask you, Cecil Ross," continued Mrs. Lavender, "if you have the pleasure of knowing my son, Judge Lavender?"

"No, madam, of course not. I did not get to know Molly until years after her father had left England."

"I thought as much," said Mrs. Lavender, nodding her head sagely. "Now, may I ask if the idea has ever occurred to you, that by borrowing money from a total stranger you are putting yourself under a rather unpleasant obligation to him?"

"But not to Molly's father – and I can pay it back," replied Cecil anxiously.

"Allow me to finish what I was going to say, my love. You want that money very badly?"

"In one sense, dreadfully; although, if I had it, I don't know that I could use it."

"Pray don't get confused, Cecil, or my heart will never stand the strain of having to talk to you. In replying to my questions, confine yourself as much as possible to 'yes' and 'no.' Do you want this money badly?"

"Yes, yes, yes!"

"Why repeat it three times? Is not one 'yes' sufficient? You want the money. Why?"

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