COUSIN ETHEL'S SCHOOLDAYS

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A Magnificent Story dealing with the Adventures of Tom Merry & Co. of St. Jim's and their Girl Chum.

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A Magnificent Story, dealing with the Adventures of Tom Merry & Co. of St. Jim's, and Their Girl Chum.

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1.

Off to School.

ETHEL CLEVELAND stood in the open doorway, looking out.

There was a touch of frost in the air; the wind was crisp and keen. It brought the colour into Ethel's cheeks. She made a charming picture as she stood there, framed in the doorway, though she was quite unaware of the fact—a picture of bright English girlhood, with bright eyes, soft round cheeks, and lithe graceful figure.

But there was a shade of seriousness upon the young girl's brow. Ethel was leaving home—leaving for school. She was waiting there for the vehicle that was to convey her to the station.

She looked as she felt, serious and thoughtful. Her lines had hitherto fallen in cheerful places—her young life had been a happy one—not that she had been wholly without troubles. Her father's death—she could faintly remember that—and of late her mother's ill-health, had cast a shadow upon the house. But, happy or not, the old life was ending now—ending to-day. Her mother had been ordered abroad for her health, and Ethel was going to a boarding-school.

A new life, full of possibilities, lay before her. What would St. Freda's be like? What would the girls be like, and Miss Penfold, the principal? Would she be anything like little Miss Prynne, the governess who had hitherto had the charge of Ethel's education? If so, the girl thought, with a smile, she would get on very well at St. Freda's. For little Miss Prynne was Ethel's devoted slave, and everything that Ethel did was right in her eyes, and had not Ethel been really a sensible and willing pupil, her education would have been in a parlous state.

Mrs. Cleveland was gone—she had left for the South the day before. There was nothing now to hold Ethel to her home, and she was anxious to leave for St. Freda's. Miss Prynne was to take her there—or, rather, as a matter of fact, Ethel would take Miss Prynne there, for Ethel was always the guiding mind of the two.

What would St. Freda's be like?

Ethel knew girls who were at boarding-school, but she had only a vague idea what they were like, and at St. Freda's she did not know a soul. As a matter of fact, Ethel knew more of boys' schools than of girls' schools for she had a cousin at a public school in Sussex, and had often visited St. Jim's for the cricket and football matches—when Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, her cousin, had very proudly walked his pretty cousin round the old school, and shown her off to the admiring and envious eyes of the other fellows. Ethel was "Cousin Ethel" to a great many boy chums at St. Jim's. If St. Freda's were like St. Jim's, she would like it immensely; but——

A

What would it be like?

"Ethel!"

Ethel, absorbed in her thoughts, did not hear the small, piping voice. She was looking out into the garden, deep in a reverie.

"Ethel!"

Little Miss Prynne came along the hall, and Ethel started, and looked round. Miss Prynne was fair and forty, if not fat, and she was about the size of her pupil. Miss Prynne looked very prim and neat and orderly. She had a little bag in her hand, and a carefully-rolled umbrella hooked on her arm. There was a sound of wheels outside just as Miss Prynne came to the door.

"Are you quite ready, Ethel?"

The girl nodded.

"Quite ready, dear."

"Here is the trap. James, pray be very careful with these boxes—especially with the hat-box."

Two minutes more, and the trap was bowling down the lane, and the wind was blowing Cousin Ethel's fair curls back from her face, and bringing the scarlet into her cheeks.

The girl's eyes sparkled.

But her spirits were not high. There was a slight cloud on the fair brow, a slight drooping of the pretty little mouth.

Ethel was feeling lonely.

She was going out into a new world—alone. If only she had had some companion—someone with whom to exchange conjectures and confidences! There was Miss Prynne, but Miss Pryne, although kindness itself, was not exactly the confidante that Ethel wanted. Miss Prynne's conversational abilities extended very little beyond "Yes, dear," and "No, dear."

Ethel thought of her cousin Arthur. He had told her that he would get leave from St. Jim's if he could, and see her on the journey to St. Freda's. But evidently he had not been able to come.

Ethel sat very silent.

Miss Prynne, who was in a state of mental perturbation, wondering whether her hat-pins were fastened securely enough to resist the strong wind, was not in a mood for conversation, either.

In the lane, a lad in uniform was plodding along slowly towards Cleveland Lodge. He stopped at sight of the trap, and began waving his arms frantically.

It was the telegraph-boy from the village. The trap stopped at once.

The lad came up to the side of the vehicle, touching his cap. He had a telegram in his hand.

"For Miss Cleveland, mum."

Cousin Ethel took the telegram.

The colour wavered in her cheek for a moment. The thought was in her mind that it might be from her mother—that it might mean that something was wrong.

She opened it hastily.

Then, as her eye ran quickly over the message on the strip of paper within, she smiled. Miss Prynne was looking at her anxiously.

"What is it, Ethel dear?"

Ethel laughed.

"It's from Arthur—the dear boy!"

She handed the telegram to Miss Prynne. The little governess adjusted her black-rimmed glasses, and read:

"Dear Ethel,—I've got leave, and I shall be at Wayland Junction to meet you. Look out for me.—ARTHUR."

It was from Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's.

Miss Prynne smiled.

"It is very kind and thoughtful of him, Ethel dear."

"Yes, isn't it?"

The trap bowled on again.

Cousin Ethel's face was brighter now, and her eyes were sparkling. She looked very cheerful when she took her seat in the train, with Miss Prynne opposite.

And as the train approached Wayland Junction, needless to say, Cousin Ethel was looking out of the window, and as soon as the train entered the station, she caught sight of a group of juniors standing on the platform.

CHAPTER 2.

Cousin Arthur.

"BAI Jove!"

"Hallo!"

"That's the twain!"

It was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy who spoke. Arthur Augustus, the swell of the Fourth Form of St. Jim's, was looking a perfect picture. Nothing could have exceeded the elegance of the cut of his Etons, unless it was the beautiful pattern of his waistcoat, or the glossiness of his silk hat. From his natty boots to his gold-rimmed eyeglass, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was elegance itself. The two other fellows wore school caps, which showed off D'Arcy's glossy topper to the best advantage.

The two were Tom Merry of the Shell Form and Figgins of the Fourth.

There were many juniors at St. Jim's who had been eager to come, and Arthur Augustus, to do him justice, was willing to bring them. But only two had been able to obtain leave, and those two were Tom Merry and Figgins.

Tom Merry looked very handsome and tidy, as he usually did; but Figgins was more than usually elegant. Figgins was, as a rule, careless in his dress, and his neckties had always offended the vision of Arthur Augustus. But on an occasion like this, Figgins could come out strong. Figgins was in his Sunday best, and his necktie was only a little on one side, and his boots shone with a polish almost as aggressive as that of D'Arcy's silk hat.

Figgins had hesitated long between a cap and a topper, and finally, the others being impatient, had rushed off in a cap. He pleaded in answer to D'Arcy's remarks on the subject, that it was more comfortable, and that Miss Cleveland would not be in the least likely to notice what he was wearing. An argument at which Arthur Augustus took the liberty of sniffing.

As the train came into the station, Figgins turned pink, and then crimson. He caught Tom Merry by the shoulder, and the Shell fellow turned and looked at him, with considerable surprise as he noted the changing hues of Figgins' countenance.

"Hallo! Anything up?" he asked.

"I was going to—to ask you——"

"Go ahead!"

"Is my necktie quite straight?"

Tom Merry grinned.

"Well, about as straight as it always is," he replied.

"Oh, come," said Figgins warmly, "you might tell a chap how it looks! Is it on one side?"

"Yes; I'm afraid it is, a little," said Tom Merry, cocking his eye thoughtfully at the necktie.

"Well, which side? Quick, the train's coming in!"

"Left."

Figgins put up his hand to his necktie, and gave it a drag to the right.

"Is that all right?" he asked hastily.

"Ha, ha! Yes."

"Bai Jove, it's all wight, and no mistake," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, turning his gold-rimmed monocle upon the necktie. "Wathah too much wight, I should say."

"Too much to the right?" asked Figgins anxiously.

"Yaas, wathah!"

Figgins gave the troublesome necktie a drag back to the left, and it came undone, and the ends streamed out in his hand.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Figgins glared.

"You cackling duffers——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Look here——"

"Sowwy! I've got to look aftah my cousin," said D'Arcy.

And he stepped towards the train, which had now stopped alongside the platform.

Cousin Ethel was waiving her hand from the window.

The three juniors lifted hat and caps, and ran towards the carriage. Figgins made a hasty effort to clutch his necktie into place, but naturally without success. Tom Merry tore open the door of the carriage, but it was Arthur Augustus who extended a graceful hand to assist the ladies to alight.

Cousin Ethel smiled brightly at the juniors.

"I am so glad to meet you here!" she said softly. "I was feeling very lonely."

"The pleasuah is on our side, deah boy—I mean, deah girl," said Arthur Augustus. "With your permish, we are goin' to see you as far as St. Fweda's."

"Have you leave for so long?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Then I shall be delighted, of course!"

"It will be ripping," said Figgins eagerly, as Cousin Ethel's glance turned upon him.

Then he coloured to the hue of a beetroot. His necktie was streaming over his waistcoat, and Cousin Ethel's eye had involuntarily rested upon it.

"A—a slight accident," murmured Figgins. "I—I——"

"It was so kind of you to come and meet me," said Cousin Ethel, apparently not noticing Figgins' confusion, and thereby putting him once more at his ease. "I think my boxes ought to be taken out of the luggage-van."

"I'll see to it!" exclaimed Figgins eagerly.

And he rushed off.

The boxes were already on the platform, and the train was about to move on. Figgins paused where the boxes lay to tie his necktie. In the looking-glass of an automatic machine he got it straight at last.

Cousin Ethel had to change trains at Wayland, and she had to wait ten minutes. Figgins saw the boxes placed upon a trolley and trundled off

to another platform for the St. Freda's train, and then he returned to the group.

Tom Merry had lifted a little bag out of the carriage, and an umbrella neatly folded. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy stretched out his hand for them.

"Thank you, Tom Mewwy!"

"Nothing to thank me for," said Tom Merry blandly.

"I am goin' to cawwy them."

"Rats!" said Tom in an undertone, Cousin Ethel being for a moment occupied in helping Miss Prynne to adjust her veil, and having no eye for the juniors.

Arthur Augustus jammed his monocle into his eye, and stared frigidly at his companion.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"More rats!"

"I am goin' to cawwy my cousin's bag and umbwella!"

"You're jolly well not!"

"I insist——"

"You can jolly well insist until you're black in the face!" said Tom Merry warmly. "But I'm jolly well going to carry them, so there!"

"Look here, Tom Mewwy——"

"Scat!"

"I wefuse to do anythin' of the sort! I'm goin' to cawwy that bag, and I insist upon your immediate handin' it ovah to me!"

"Rubbish!"

"I decline to have any wemarks chawactewised as wubbish. I should be sawwy to have to thwash you in the pwesence of a lady, but——"

"You'd be jolly sorry for yourself if you began!"

"Look here, you boundah——"

"Look here, you ass——"

"Give me that bag!"

"Rats!"

Arthur Augustus took hold of the bag. Tom Merry did not let go. It looked like a tug-of-war for a moment.

"I twust, Tom Mewwy, that you will not attwact Ethel's attention by a scene of unseemly dispute," said Arthur Augustus.

"I'm going to carry this bag."

"Pway don't be an obstinate ass!"

Arthur Augustus gave a jerk. Tom Merry gave a jerk, too, and jerked the bag away from the grasp of Arthur Augustus. The swell of St. Jim's gave him a wrathful glare through his eyeglass.

"You uttah wottah——"

"Cave!"

Cousin Ethel was looking round.

Perhaps she had caught a tone of the suppressed but wrathful voices. The train was gliding out of the station, and Miss Prynne gave a sudden cry.

"My bag!"

"Your bag, dear?" said Ethel.

"Yes. Oh dear! I have left it in the carriage—and my umbrella!"

"Oh, no, you haven't!" exclaimed Cousin Ethel. "Tom has them—see?"

Miss Prynne gave a little gasp of relief.

"Oh, thank you so much, my dear boy! You shall carry them, if you like. How very thoughtful of you to take them out of the carriage!"

Tom Merry looked at Miss Prynne, and then at the bag and umbrella he had burdened himself with. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy smiled into space.

"You can have them if you like," murmured Tom Merry, sotto voce.

D'Arcy shook his head.

"Not at all, deah boy. "I wouldn't wob you for anythin'!"

"Look here——"

"I wouldn't depwive you of the pleasuah of cawwyin' Miss Pwynne's bag and umbwella for worlds, deah boy!" Arthur Augustus assured him.

And he smilingly escorted the two ladies along the platform, while Tom Merry followed with the bag and the umbrella.

CHAPTER 3.

The Escort.

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY looked at his watch.

"There's anothah seven minutes before your twain goes, Ethel," he remarked, "and it's not in the station yet. I wathah think that the buffet is the cowwect capah."

"Yes, rather!" said Figgins, joining them. "Miss Cleveland must be awfully hungry. I remember the time I first went to school. I was awfully downhearted till I had a feed at the buffet, and then I felt all right."

Cousin Ethel smiled.

"Perhaps I could eat a bun," she said meditatively.

"This way, deah boy—I mean, deah gal!" said D'Arcy.

And he led the way.

In a minute more Cousin Ethel and Miss Prynne were sitting at a little table, upon which a grinning waiter deposited pile after pile of pastry of the most indigestible appearance.

In the innocence of their hearts the juniors wanted to comfort Ethel as they themselves might have been comforted.

If Ethel had eaten a tenth part of what was affectionately pressed upon her, Miss Penfold would certainly have received an invalid at St. Freda's that day.

But Ethel didn't.

She smilingly accepted cake and tart, and nibbled, thus pleasing the juniors without incurring any serious consequences to herself.

Miss Prynne accepted a little dry toast, astounding the boys thereby. How anybody could eat dry toast when there were jam-trats in abundance was a problem that Tom Merry and Co. did not attempt to solve.

"Another tart, Miss Ethel?" said Figgins.

Ethel laughed.

"No, thank you, Figgins!"

"A cream-puff?"

"Oh, no!"

"Bettah twy these cweam-tarts," said D'Arcy. "I can assure you that they are weally wippin'."

"Thank you, no!"

"Then I'll tell the waitah to bwing some ices."

"Just one ice," said Tom Merry.

And Cousin Ethel assented.

"Well, just one."

The ices were disposed of, and there was a clatter in the station as the train came in.

Figgins took a last surreptitious look into a mirror to ascertain that his tie was still straight, and the party left the buffet.

Tom Merry found corner seats in a first-class carriage for Cousin Ethel

and Miss Prynne, and they were safely disposed there, and the famous bag and umbrella were restored to the little governess.

The three juniors entered the carriage, and Figgins closed the door and stood against it with the amiable intention of keeping all other passengers out.

A passenger or two tried the door, and found it fast, and passed on to the next carriage. Then a somewhat stately-looking dame, dressed very quietly in dark grey, put up her hand to the door, and Figgins hesitated. It was a "lark" to keep men out of the carriage, perhaps, but with a lady it was different.

Cousin Ethel touched Figgins on the sleeve.

It was enough.

Figgins pushed open the door, and stepped back for the lady to enter.

The lady in grey stepped in, and glanced at the girl and the juniors with a most kindly expression upon her kind face.

"Thank you!" she said, in a very pleasant voice.

She sat down in the farther corner of the carriage.

Figgins closed the door again, and the train rolled out of the station. Except for the lady in grey, the party had the carriage to themselves.

"Well, this is wather jollay!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "If I wemembah cowwectly, we have a half-hour's wun to St. Fweda's. It will be wippin' havin' you for a neighbah at school, Ethel!"

"Yes, won't it?" said the girl brightly.

"We ought to get up a footah match, or somethin," Arthur Augustus remarked. "I suppose we shall see you pwetty often, you know. Do you know what the pwincipal is like?"

"Miss Penfold? No; I have never seen her," said Ethel thoughtfully. "But I have heard that she is very kind and good."

"Good! I suppose she will wegard it as the pwopah capah for your cousin to come oah and see you pwetty often?"

Cousin Ethel laughed.

"I don't know."

"I shall wegard it as my dutay to keep an eye on you, you see," explained Arthur Augustus, in the most fatherly manner. "As the eldah——"

"But you are only a few weeks older than I am, Arthur."

"That is a twiflin' mattah. You must wemembah that boys have so much more expewience and knowledge of the world than gals," said D'Arcy. "I don't want to blow my own twumpet, of course, but I am genewally considahed a fellah of tact and judgment. I look aftah all these chaps at St. Jim's."

"My hat!" said Tom Merry.

"Weally, Mewwy——"

"It's a little weakness of Gussy's to imagine that he looks after people," explained Figgins. "As a matter of fact, he's a trial to us!"

"Weally, Figgins——"

Cousin Ethel smiled. She knew the little ways of her elegant cousin very well. As a matter of fact, Ethel was far more capable of looking after Arthur Augustus than the swell of St. Jim's was of looking after her. But Ethel was far too tactful to ever allow D'Arcy to discover the fact. Arthur Augustus was a nice boy, and Ethel wouldn't have wounded him for worlds.

"As your eldah," resumed D'Arcy, "I should wegard it as my dutay to look aftah you. And as your matah is now abwoad, I think it doubly my

dutay to keep an eye an you, you know. In any time of stwess and twouble, I twust you will come to me for advice."

"Oh, of course!"

"I should always be happay to place my expewience at your service," said D'Arcy. "I know a lot of dodges, too, about school, that I can put you up to. I wondah if you gals evah go in for japes?"

"For w-w-what?"

"Japes—jokes, you know—pwactical jokes. Now, if Miss Penfold turns out to be a boundah—I mean, if you don't like her, you know, and she is down on you—I should wecommend you to give her a high old time."

The lady in grey in the farther corner of the carriage looked curiously at Arthur Augustus, as if greatly interested in his remark, but the swell of St. Jim's did not observe it.

"You could put jumpin' cwackahs in her desk," said D'Arcy thoughtfully, "or it would be a good ideah to put some wats in her hatbox!"

"Arthur!"

"Yaas; that would be jollay good. Of course, I shouldn't play a twick like that on a lady, as it would be unchivalwous in a gentleman to do anythin' of the sort, but I suppose you wegard a mistwess as we wegard a mastah—as an object to be japed as much as poss."

"Ha, ha!"

"You see, Ethel——"

"I don't think I shall indulge in many japes at school, as you call them," said Ethel demurely. "I think, perhaps, jokes of that kind are more suitable for boys' school. I cannot imagine myself putting rats in a hatbox, for instance."

"It's wathah a good ideah, though, if the pwincipal is a boundah!"

"I am sure Miss Penfold will not be a bounder."

The lady in grey smiled, and was about to speak apparently, for she moved her lips, but she changed her mind and remained silent.

The conversation turned to other subjects, and the juniors chatted cheerily with Cousin Ethel as the train swept on towards King's Burford, the station for St. Freda's.

It seemed to the party a very short time before the station was reached.

The train stopped at last.

Arthur Augustus assisted his cousin to alight, and Figgins—who was always more useful than ornamental—rushed off to see to the luggage.

The lady in grey descended, too, and disappeared while the juniors were placing Ethel and Miss Prynne and their various belongings in the station hack.

"Everythin' on board!" said Arthur Augustus. "All wight, Ethel?"

"Yes; all right, I think!" said Ethel cheerily.

"Then I suppose it's good-bye. We shall see you on the first half-holiday, Ethel!"

"Oh, yes, do!"

"Nothin' you want to ask my advice about before you go?"

"No, I think not," smiled Ethel.

"Vewy well."

And Ethel shook hands with the juniors one after another, and then the three lads stood in a row, hat or cap in hand, as the hack drove off to St. Freda's.

Cousin Ethel looked back, and waved her hand, till the hack passed a curve in the road, and the station and the three juniors disappeared from sight.

Arthur Augustus heaved a sigh.

"It's wuff on Ethel goin' to a new school alone," he remarked. "I wemembah the time I first came to St. Jim's. You fellahs chipped me wottenly. Tom Mewwy wasn't there then, but the othah boundahs were vewy chippin'."

"But you go about asking for it," said Figgins. "Now, anybody but an idiot would like Cousin Ethel at once, at first sight."

"Yes, rather!" said Tom Merry heartily.

Arthur Augustus nodded.

"Yaas, wathah! I suppose you're wight as wegards Cousin Ethel."

And the three juniors went back into the station to catch their train back.

Cousin Ethel's face was very bright as the rickety old vehicle rattled along the leafy lane towards St. Freda's.

The meeting with the junior of St. Jim's had cheered her greatly.

She did not know what St. Freda's would be like, and she was a little uncertain how she would like it—but, at all events, she had kind friends not far away—and that was a comfort.

The hack drove up to the great stone gateway of St. Freda's, and up the drive to the great stone house, and stopped.

Cousin Ethel had arrived at her new home.

CHAPTER 4.

A Surprise.

MISS TYRRELL, the second mistress at St. Freda's, received Ethel Cleveland. Morning classes were still going on, and Ethel caught a hum of voices from the big school-room as she came in. Miss Tyrrell was a slim, dark-complexioned lady, with a keen eye, and a clear, incisive voice, but her look was kindly as she greeted the new pupil. She explained to Ethel that Miss Penfold, the principal, had been out for some time, had only just returned, and would come down shortly. Then she returned to her duties, leaving Ethel and Miss Prynne to wait till Miss Penfold came down. It was Miss Prynne's duty to deliver Ethel safe and sound into the principal's hands before she left her. And Ethel was glad for her to stay as long as possible—the only familiar face amid strange surroundings.

Ethel sat by a window, looking out into a garden fresh and bright even in winter. St. Freda's was a handsome building of grey stone, standing in wide and sweeping grounds. Ethel caught sight of a tennis lawn in the distance, with noble elms growing beyond. A gravel path ran under the French windows of Miss Penfold's drawing-room, and along it, as Ethel looked out, came a girlish figure.

It was that of a girl of about Ethel's own age, but as dark as Ethel was fair, with large dark eyes and red, pouting lips. The lips were pouting very much just now, and there was a wrinkle of anger in the youthful forehead, and the eyes were very bright.

The girl passed under the windows, unconscious of the glance upon her from within, and disappeared round a curve of the building.

Ethel wondered who she was. It was evidently one of the pupils of St. Freda's, and equally evident one who was not exactly equable in temper.

Ethel was still thinking of the pretty, passionate dark face, when the door opened, and she turned from the window.

A lady in grey entered the room.

Ethel gave a little start of surprise.

It was the lady in grey of the railway-carriage—her travelling companion from Wayland Junction.

It did not occur to Ethel for a moment who she was, the thought coming into her mind that this was doubtless the relative of some pupil of St. Freda's.

The lady in grey came directly towards her, a slight smile upon her calm, clear-cut face.

"Miss Cleveland," she said, "and Miss Prynne?"

"Yes," said Ethel wonderingly.

"I am Miss Penfold."

Ethel blushed.

"Dear me!" said Miss Prynne.

"I hope you will like St Freda's," went on Miss Penfold. "It was your cousin, I think, who was giving you good advice in the train?"

"Yes," stammered Ethel.

"He seemed to have some apprehension that the principal of St. Freda's would turn out to be what he calls a bounder!"

"Oh!"

"I think we shall get along very well," said Miss Penfold, with a smile.

"I—I am sure of it!" stammered Ethel. "I—I am sorry——"

"Not at all! Master D'Arcy is more accustomed to boys' schools than to girls' schools, naturally, and he is not aware that jumping crackers in a hatbox would be a little out of place at St. Freda's."

"Dear me!" said Miss Prynne.

"But you have had a long journey," said Miss Penfold. "You must have a little refreshment, and then go to your room to rest until dinner. The pupils dine at one o'clock here, and then you will have an opportunity of seeing something of your new companions."

Ten minutes later Miss Prynne had taken her leave, with a little tear on either cheek as she parted with her charge, and Ethel threw her arms round the little governess's neck, and hugged her affectionately ere she went.

Then she was left alone in her new home.

The quiet-voiced, neatly dressed maid showed her up to her room.

The dormitory at St. Freda's was divided into a series of cubicles, small but very cosy, so that each girl had an apartment to herself, but the whole of them were open to the glance of anyone passing along the dormitory.

Ethel was a little tired, but more excited. Miss Penfold had recommended her to lie down until dinner, but she did not feel inclined to do so. After removing the signs of travel, she walked along the row of neat little cubicles to the large window at the end of the great room, and looked out into the grounds. She was thinking of the dark, passionate face of the girl she had seen in the garden, and wondering who she was.

A footstep behind her made her turn her head.

Ethel uttered a little exclamation.

It was the girl she was thinking about who stood before her, regarding her with an attentive and interested gaze.

"So you are the new girl?"

The stranger spoke abruptly.

Although she was certainly not more than fifteen years old, she had already assumed a manner towards Ethel as if she were ten years older than the new girl.

Ethel nodded.

"Yes," she said a little timidly.

"You are Ethel Cleveland?"

"Yes."

"You will get on here," said the dark girl abruptly.

And there was something like a sneer on the red lips.

"I hope so," said Ethel.

"Oh, you are sure to! You are the kind of girl that Miss Penfold will like. You will like the school and Miss Penfold. Bah!" The girl made a passionate gesture. "I hate it!"

CHAPTER 5.

A Strange Schoolmate.

ETHEL started.

"Why do you hate it?" she said.

"Oh, it is dull here, and the girls—— I don't like them, either, and they don't like me! I shall not like you, for that matter!" replied Dolores.

Ethel could not help smiling. The dark girl was certainly not wanting in candour.

The other looked at her quickly.

"Why are you laughing?"

"I—— You see——"

"I thought you might be a girl I could like," said the other. "That is why I came to see you—to see what you were like. But you are the same as all the others. You have no esprit, any more than they have!"

"But——"

"You will be like all the rest. You will say, 'Yes, Miss Penfold,' and 'No, Miss Penfold,' and 'Good gracious, Miss Penfold!' and the rest."

"But——"

"Oh, don't interrupt me! I suppose you are joining the classes this afternoon? You will find them deadly dull, of course; but I have no doubt you will like it all."

"I shall like St. Freda's if I can, of course," said Ethel. "But are you unhappy here?"

"Do I look happy?" said the girl. "Besides, I am in disgrace now."

"Oh, I am sorry!"

"I don't see why you should be sorry, as I am a stranger to you. You do not know my name. I am Dolores Pelham."

"Dolores?"

"Yes. It is a Spanish name; my mother was Spanish," said the girl proudly.

"It is a pretty name."

There was a sound of a voice calling in the passage. It was a thin, piping voice, which Ethel did not like.

"Dolores! Dolores!"

The owner of the name did not even turn her head. She must have heard, but she took no notice whatever of the call.

"I am in disgrace," she resumed, taking a seat in the window beside Ethel, and leaning her dark head on her hand. "But I am always in disgrace, so it does not matter."

"And what is wrong?" asked Ethel, feeling that she ought to show some interest in the matter, and indeed feeling some, for the dark, wayward girl strangely interested her.

Dolores gave a slight shrug.

"I was impertinent to Miss Tyrrell."

"Oh, dear!"

"I told her I hated lessons!" said Dolores. "She told me I had better take a walk in the garden. I have been walking in the garden, and I am sick of it!"

"I saw you there," said Ethel.

"Oh, you saw me! Where were you?"

"In the drawing-room, waiting for Miss Penfold to come down."

"Oh! Do you know, I have been very curious, ever since I heard that a new girl was coming to St. Freda's, to see you?"

"I hope you are not disappointed?"

"Frankly, I am! I don't think I shall like you, as I said!"

"Well, never mind," said Ethel calmly. "Perhaps you will grow to like me better, and if you don't, there will be no need for you to speak to me, will there?"

Dolores looked a little puzzled at the matter-of-fact remark.

There was a moment's silence, and the piping voice was heard from the passage again:

"Dolores!"

"Someone is calling you, I think," ventured Ethel.

The Spanish girl nodded.

"Oh, it is only Enid!"

"Enid?"

"Yes; Enid Craven. I suppose Miss Tyrrell has sent her to look for me, as I have not returned to the school-room."

"Had you not better go?"

"Are you tired of my company, then?"

"No," said Ethel, puzzled to know quite what to say to the wayward girl; "but surely Miss Tyrrell will be angry if you do not return."

"Oh, she is always angry with me!"

"But you give her cause, if you are disobedient."

Dolores shrugged her shoulders in her curious foreign way.

"Oh, I see! I was quite right. You are one of those thoroughly English girls who never do anything that is not quite correct. I shall dislike you!"

"Oh, please don't! But——"

"Dolores!"

A girl came into the corridor by the row of cubicles, and came along towards the window, catching sight of the two girls in the window-seat. Dolores made a gesture of repugnance; and indeed Ethel did not like the look of the girl. It was evidently the Enid Craven Dolores had spoken of. She was a short, pale-complexioned girl, with eyes that had a quick, bird-like look in them and a mincing and affected manner.

"Oh, Dolores, I have been looking for you everywhere!" she exclaimed.

"You need not have taken the trouble!" said Dolores.

"Miss Tyrrell sent me for you."

"Well, now you can tell her you have found me!"

"But you are to return to the class," said Enid. "You are to return at once, and I am to take you back with me."

Ethel looked keenly at Enid.

There was no mistaking the girl's tone. It would have pleased her if the Spanish girl had refused to obey, and she had put the matter in precisely the words that were most likely to provoke Dolores to disobedience.

Dolores's dark eyes flashed.

"Well, I won't come with you!" she said.

"You must!"

"Must!"

"Yes. I am to take you back. Come at once!"

"I will not!"

"Then I shall have to tell Miss Tyrrell that you refuse to return to the class," said Enid Craven spitefully.

"Tell her what you like!"

Enid walked away.

Dolores looked out of the window with a moody brow. Ethel touched her gently on the arm, and Dolores looked round.

"Well?"

"Had you not better return to the class?" said Ethel softly.

"What does it matter to you?"

"Nothing; but you ought to go. It is not right to disobey your mistress, for one thing, and it will lead to trouble, for another."

"Oh, Enid is always making trouble for me! She dislikes me as much as I dislike her," said Dolores. "Enid Craven is a sneak!"

"But why let her make trouble for you? Better go!"

Dolores hesitated.

"Do go," said Ethel. "It will be better."

Dolores nodded, and rose. She walked away, and Ethel was left alone. The new girl at St. Freda's fell into a fit of musing.

So far, she had made two acquaintances at St. Freda's. One of them she liked, and one she did not like. But it was not Enid, with her thin voice and sly eyes, whom she liked—it was the half-foreign girl, who had certainly been the reverse of courteous to her, but in whom Ethel found herself taking a great interest.

And what would the other girls be like?

There were about forty altogether, as Ethel knew—and a dozen or more, at least, would be in her own class.

What would they be like? What would life be like at St. Freda's? Dolores was not happy there.

The sound of a bell and of footsteps in the passages roused Ethel Cleveland from her musing.

A bright, cheery face looked into the dormitory.

"Dinner!" called out a cheery voice.

"Thank you!" said Ethel.

And she rose to go down.

CHAPTER 6.

Dolores in Disgrace.

THE dining-room at St. Freda's was a long, lofty, oak-panelled apartment, with high windows in a row looking out on well-kept gardens and stately trees. It had been a refectory in old days, when St. Freda's had been a very different kind of establishment. Now in the old stone passages where the feet of the old monks had trod, sounded the merry patter of girlish steps. When Ethel Cleveland entered the long, lofty room, the tables were already surrounded by the girls of St. Freda's. There were three long tables, with Miss Penfold at the head of one, Miss Tyrrell at another, and a lady Ethel did not know at the third. She was an undermistress at St. Freda's, and her name, as Ethel afterwards learned, was Braye. Miss Braye was thin and angular, with hair tightly drawn back from a bony forehead, and a far from amiable expression of countenance. She had round eyes like a parrot, which seemed to be glittering here, there, and everywhere at once. Her round eyes glittered at Ethel as the latter came in, last of the girls. She raised a thin finger to beckon to the new girl.

"Ethel Cleveland!"

Ethel came towards her, with her light, graceful step.

"You will sit at this table for the present," said the teacher, in an acid voice. "Pray take your chair."

"Thank you!"

Ethel sat down in the vacant chair.

She glanced round the hall several times, in a quiet way, during the meal.

Dolores Pelham and Enid Craven were at Miss Tyrrell's table, and so was the bright-looking girl who had called Ethel to dinner. Dolores was sitting with her eyes on her plate, and with a dusky flush in her olive cheeks. It was clear that Dolores was still in an annoyed mood.

After the meal was over, and Miss Penfold gave the signal for retiring, Cousin Ethel went out with the other girls. The bright-faced girl who was sitting beside Dolores joined her in the doorway. She gave Ethel a gentle touch on the arm, and smiled at her.

"You are the new girl, of course?" she said.

"Yes," said Ethel, smiling back.

"And your name——"

"Ethel Cleveland."

"Mine is Dolly Carew. Of course, my name isn't really Dolly, but that's what I am called," said the girl, laughing. "You don't know anybody here yet, of course?"

"I have met Dolores Pelham."

"Oh, Dolores! How do you like her?"

Ethel hesitated a little.

"I think I shall like her very much," she said at last.

Dolly Carew gave an expressive little shrug of her shoulders.

"Then you will be alone in your taste," she said. "Dolores isn't popular. She is awfully clever, you know, but she is bad-tempered, and one never knows how to take her, and we don't bother. Do you see?"

"Yes, I see."

"She is always in some trouble or other," said Dolly. "She was in disgrace this morning. She is to apologise to Miss Tyrrell before the class, or——"

"Or what?"

"Or something dreadful will happen," said Dolly, laughing. "I don't know what—something lingering, with boiling oil in it, perhaps."

Ethel smiled.

"But what did she do?"

"She told Miss Tyrrell she hated lessons, and wanted to be anywhere but at St. Freda's."

Ethel glanced at Miss Tyrrell, who had just come out of the dining-room. The second mistress of St. Freda's had a kindly, though somewhat severe, face.

"Yes, she looks kind enough," said Dolly, interpreting Ethel's thought. "But Dolores was discontented. And she won't apologise."

"Then——"

"She will be punished."

"I am sorry!"

"Oh, we're all sorry!" said Dolly carelessly. "But Dolores is always in hot water, you know. Are you coming out?"

"I should like to."

"Come, then!"

Dolly Carew ran out into the Close, and Ethel followed her. Ethel was looking serious. She was interested in Dolores, and sorry for her.

Ethel was immediately surrounded by a group of girls, who were curious to know her name, where she came from, what class she was going into, whether she had been at school before, and so forth.

Ethel was answering these questions to the best of her ability, when she was called into Miss Penfold's room, and the head-mistress of St. Freda's occupied the next quarter of an hour with questions of a different sort.

"You will go into Miss Tyrrell's class," she said finally; and Ethel was dismissed a few minutes before the bell rang for afternoon classes.

Ethel entered the big school-room with a crowd of other girls.

Dolly Carew pulled her down on a form beside her, with a cheerful smile.

"So you are with us?" she said.

"Yes," said Ethel.

"I'm glad!"

"So am I. I hoped I should be with you," said Ethel frankly.

"My cubicle is next to yours in the dormitory," said Dolly. "Dolores's is on the other side. But, mum——"

"What is it?"

"Miss Tyrrell is looking awfully serious. She is going for Dolores."

"Poor Dolores!"

"Yes, she has been looking for trouble, and has found it," said Dolly.

Miss Tyrrell glanced at the class, and the whispering voices died away. The mistress's face was very grave.

She stood before them quietly, and her large, serious eyes fixed themselves upon Dolores Pelham. Dolores sat with her eyes on the floor, but the colour was deepening in her dusky cheeks.

"Dolores Pelham!"

Miss Tyrrell's voice was very quiet, but very ominous.

Dolores did not speak.

"Dolores Pelham!"

Dolores looked up.

"You must apologise before the class for your impertinence," said Miss Tyrrell quietly. "I am waiting, Dolores."

Dolores's lips set in a thin red line, and she did not speak.

"I am waiting."

Silence.

The whole class looked at Dolores, and there was sympathy in many of the glances; and the girls waited breathlessly for the denouement.

"Have you nothing to say, Dolores?"

The girl's lips opened at last.

"Nothing."

"Then I shall have no alternative but to punish you," said Miss Tyrrell "Stand out here, Dolores!"

Dolores hesitated a moment, and then rose, and stepped out before the class. Miss Tyrrell looked at her gravely.

"You are disobedient and disrespectful, Dolores," she said. "I have been very patient with you. Will you not say that you are sorry?"

Dolores' lips quivered.

"I am not sorry," she said.

"Very well. You will take this note to Miss Penfold."

Miss Tyrrell wrote a little note, folded it, and handed it to Dolores. The girl took it and walked out of the school-room with a firm step, and with her head held proudly erect. Ethel whispered to her neighbour:

"What does that mean? Will she be caned?"

Dolly nodded.

"Yes. There isn't much caning here, and only Miss Penfold inflicts it—and Dolores is the chief sufferer."

"Oh, she likes it!" said Enid Craven, with a little snigger, "Dolores is always looking for trouble."

"Oh, bosh!" said Dolly brusquely.

Enid looked spiteful.

"You don't like her any more than I do," she said. "What do you want to stand up for her for, Dolly?"

"Rubbish!" said Dolly.

"Silence in the class!" exclaimed Miss Tyrrell.

And the afternoon's work began.

In the work of the class, Dolores was soon forgotten—by all but Ethel. The Spanish girl did not return to the class; but Ethel could not help thinking of her. There was something about the most unpopular girl at St. Freda's that appealed to her strangely, and when classes were dismissed at half-past four, Ethel looked for Dolores.

CHAPTER 7.

Dolores' Resolve.

DOLORES was not to be found.

Cousin Ethel looked for her in the Close, and in the passages and in the library, but the Spanish girl was not to be seen. Her cubicle was vacant, too. Ethel wandered out into the Close again, and Dolly Carew called to her to come and play rounders; but Ethel shook her head. She was anxious about Dolores, and determined to find her. She came upon her at last, sitting alone on a wooden seat under the thick old elms in a corner of the Close. The Spanish girl was sitting quite still her hands clasped in her lap, looking straight before her, and she did not make a movement or look up as Ethel came.

The new girl looked at her quietly.

"Dolores!"

Dolores did not speak or move.

Ethel sat down beside her.

Then the Spanish girl's big black eyes turned upon her, full of slumbering fire.

"Why do you seek me out?" she said.

"I could not help thinking of you," said Ethel, in her frank way. "I am so sorry you are in trouble. I wish I could help you."

Dolores looked at her hard.

"You really mean that?" she said.

"Of course!"

"You will help me?"

"Yes," said Ethel. "If there were anything I could do, I should be glad. How can I help you?"

"You can—if you choose."

"How?"

"I am going to leave this place," said Dolores, in low, quick tones.

Ethel started.

"You are leaving St. Freda's?"

"Yes."

"I am sorry. I hoped we should be friends."

"I cannot stay longer," said the Spanish girl passionately. "I hate the place. Nobody here cares for me. The teachers dislike me, because I am different from the others. It is not a place for me. I am going away."

Ethel looked very grave. Dolores' meaning began to dawn upon her mind.

"You do not mean that your parents are taking you away, then, Dolores?" she asked.

Dolores smiled scornfully.

"My parents are not in England; I hear from them twice a term, that is all."

"Then how——"

"Don't you understand? I am going to leave St. Freda's of my own accord."

"You cannot!"

"I can, and will! I am sick to death of the place! I shall not stay here," said Dolores, in low, passionate tones. "I am going away."

Ethel sat dumb.

She had said that she would help the girl; but she had not dreamed of anything of this sort. She did not know what to say.

"You will help me?" went on Dolores eagerly. "I shall go to-night. You will help me to get out of the house?"

"Impossible!"

"You said——"

"My dear, you cannot do this!" exclaimed Ethel. "What is to become of you? Where will you go? You cannot—you must not!"

"I shall!"

"Then——"

Ethel paused. What was she to say?

Dolores gave her a dark look.

"You will not betray me?" she said, in a low voice. "Even if you do not help me, you cannot betray me. I trusted you in speaking."

Ethel shook her head.

"I shall not repeat what you have said to me. But—but you must think better of it, Dolores. It would be madness. However much you dislike St. Freda's, it is better to remain here than to go among strangers. Besides, I am sure that Miss Penfold and Miss Tyrrell mean to be kind, if you only understood them better. Dolores, do think better of it!"

The Spanish girl remained silent.

Ethel sat in deep distress. She was in a difficult position. If the Spanish girl really intended to run away from school, surely Miss Penfold ought to be warned—but all Ethel's nature rebelled against the idea of anything like tale-bearing. Besides, she hoped that this was only a passionate outburst that would not be followed by a reckless action.

The Spanish girl gave her a scornful glance.

"So that is what your offer of help is worth?" she said.

"I did not suspect——"

"Pooh! It is nothing—so long as you keep silent!"

"I shall do that."

"That is enough."

"Then you really mean——"

"Yes."

"It is madness!"

Dolores shrugged her shoulders in her curious foreign way.

"All the same, I shall go!"

And she rose to her feet. Ethel would have detained her, but the Spanish girl shook off her hand impatiently, and walked quickly away. Ethel was left alone, with a troubled face and a troubled heart. What was she to do? It was a strange and difficult position in which she found herself upon this, her first day at St. Freda's.

CHAPTER 8.

Tea at St. Freda's.

DOLLY CAREW came to look for Ethel, to take her in to tea. Tea at St. Freda's was served in the dining-room, at the long tables. Cousin Ethel thought of the cosy little tea-parties in the juniors' studies at St. Jim's, where her cousin was, a little regretfully. There was great fun in getting one's own tea in one's own room, she thought. But manners and customs were different at St. Freda's. Dolly explained things to the new girl as she walked her off across the Close.

"We have bread-and-butter for tea," she explained, "but all the girls are allowed to take in anything extra they like, you see. If you want to do so, there's time—and it is only a few steps to the shop."

Ethel smiled. She had a good, healthy appetite, and after an afternoon in the school-room she was inclined to eat something more substantial than bread-and-butter.

"I should certainly like to!" she exclaimed.

"Then come this way!"

Dolly led the way through the elm-trees, and through a little gate. On the other side, in a trim garden, was a little cottage, in the window of which were several ginger-beer bottles and some superannuated tarts.

"This is Dame Phipps' cottage," said Dolly. "She does all the trade with St. Freda's because the village is so far off. Come in!"

Ethel followed her volatile new friend into the cottage, and found a motherly old woman there, who greeted the girls with a smile and put on her spectacles to serve them.

"This is Ethel Cleveland, the new girl, Mrs. Phipps," said Dolly. "Now, I must run off—I have to find Dolores. Mrs. Phipps will give you all you want."

"Thank you!"

Dolly ran out of the little shop, and Ethel was left alone.

"What can I get you, my dear?" asked Dame Phipps, looking kindly through her spectacles at the sweet, frank young face of the new girl.

Ethel hesitated a moment.

While she was hesitating, another girl came into the shop, with a sort of bouncing run, and stopped breathlessly at the counter.

She was a short, stout girl, with a freckled face, and very fat cheeks, and a round, plump figure, and dancing eyes. She stopped breathlessly at the counter. She nodded and smiled to Dame Phipps, who did not, Ethel thought, seem wholly glad to see her, and then turned to the new girl.

"I have been going to speak to you all day!" she exclaimed. "I suppose you noticed me? I was sitting behind you in class this afternoon."

"I did not look behind me," said Ethel, with a smile.

"Quite so—of course not!" agreed the other at once. "Well, I am Milly Pratt. I suppose you have come round here to get something for tea?"

"Yes."

"We are simply starved at tea-time," said Milly Pratt, in a confidential tone. "We don't have too much at dinner, but at tea-time we're famished!"

Ethel could not help thinking, as she looked at the plump girl, that she did not look as if she were starved or famished, but she did not say so.

"Now, I have a good appetite," said Milly. "I always like enough to eat—not a lot, you know, but enough. I'm not one of the girls who go about pretending to have a fairy appetite. I think it's silly!"

"So it is," agreed Ethel.

"Quite so! I'm glad you agree with me. Dame Phipps, I'll have some of the ham and the patties, and a cake, and——"

"Yes, miss, but——"

"And I am in a hurry."

"Yes, miss, but——"

"That is so like Dame Phipps!" exclaimed Miss Milly. "When one is in a dreadful hurry, she says nothing but 'but.' Do be quick, Mrs. Phipps!"

"Yes, miss, but——"

"Now, Mrs. Phipps, you have said that often enough. Do be quick and serve me, or I shall be late for tea."

"Yes, miss, but——"

"I will pay you to-morrow," said Milly, in a rather hurried way. "I have left my purse somewhere. I suppose that is all right?"

An expression of firmness came over Mrs. Phipps' motherly face.

"I am afraid, miss— "

Milly made a pettish gesture.

"Now, isn't this most annoying?" she exclaimed. "I have left my purse somewhere, and there is no time to look for it, and we shall be scolded if we are late for tea!"

Cousin Ethel smiled.

"Perhaps you will let me help you out of the difficulty?" she said.

Milly turned to her quickly.

"Oh, thanks so much! I only want a couple of shillings!"

Ethel opened her little purse.

Milly's eyes glistened in her round, fat face as she saw the glimmer of gold and silver in the open purse.

"My goodness!" she exclaimed. "You must be rich!"

Ethel laughed.

"Not at all, but I have spent nothing here yet, you know."

"Perhaps you had better lend me five shillings," said Milly meditatively. "I will repay it when I find my purse."

"Certainly!"

A very peculiar expression appeared upon Mrs. Phipps' face, and she seemed about to speak, but she did not.

Ethel counted the five shillings in Milly Pratt's willing palm, and the plump girl turned to the counter again.

"Now, dame, do be quick; we shall be late for tea! And Miss Cleveland wants to be served, too! You are so slow! I will have a whole cake, I think, and a dozen buns, and a dozen jam-tarts, and——"

"Yes, miss."

The five shillings were soon expended to the last penny. Then Ethel made some more modest purchases under the advice of Miss Milly, who evidently knew what she was about when it came to purchasing provisions.

"Don't have any of the pork-pies," she said; "they are rather 'wangy."

"Rather what?" asked Ethel.

"'Wangy—a little high, you know."

Ethel could not help laughing. Mrs. Phipps looked annoyed.

"Oh, Miss Milly——"

"Well, they are, you know," said Milly Pratt practically. "Buy just what I tell you, Ethel, and you will be all right."

"Thank you!"

Ethel's purchases were soon completed, and she accompanied the plump girl of St. Freda's from the little shop.

They crossed the Close to the School House, and joined a crowd of girls going into the dining-room.

Tea was a less formal meal than dinner, and the girls collected in groups at the big tables, and a continual buzz of conversation went on.

Dolly Carew joined Ethel as she came in, and they sat down together.

Dolly looked in surprise at the extensive provender with which Milly was laden.

"Have you come into a fortune, Milly?" she asked.

Milly coloured.

"Oh, nonsense!" she said.

"But you were stony to-day," said Dolly. "You tried to borrow of Enid Craven, and she wouldn't lend you anything!"

"I asked Enid to lend me a shilling because I had left my purse somewhere," said Milly Pratt warmly.

Dolly laughed.

"Yes. Have you found it?"

"No."

"Then how——"

"Ethel Cleveland has lent me something till I find my purse."

"Good! Perhaps you will find it by the time she is quite, quite an old lady!" said Dolly laughing.

"Oh, don't be silly, Dolly!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Ethel looked a little puzzled. But Dolores came in at that moment, and drew her thoughts elsewhere.

Ethel signed to Dolores to come and sit beside her. The Spanish girl did not seem to see the gesture, and passed on, and sat down by herself. Ethel coloured a little. She could see that Dolores was angry with her, and did not wish to speak. Dolores had her tea quite alone. No one addressed a word to her. But she was used to that.

Enid Craven came to sit down beside Cousin Ethel. Her manner was as agreeable as she could make it, but Ethel was very cold. She did not like the girl—partly, perhaps, because she had seen that Dolores did not like her.

"What was Dolores saying to you in the Close?" Enid asked.

Ethel started.

She had not known that her talk with Dolores in the Close had been observed; but it was evident that Enid's eyes were everywhere.

"Dolores?" she repeated.

"Yes."

"Why——" Ethel paused.

Enid's little, round eyes were fastened upon her face.

"Was she telling you a secret?"

"Really——"

"You might tell me!" said Enid curiously.

"You should not ask questions," said Ethel coldly. "Why should I tell you what Dolores said to me? It could not interest you."

Enid coloured.

"Then it was a secret?"

Ethel turned to her tea again, and did not reply.

Enid Craven gave her a far from pleasant look, and left her. But after that she was seldom very far from Ethel, and if Ethel noticed her much, she would have guessed that the girl meant to discover what that secret was.

CHAPTER 9.

Enid's Difficulty.

"OH, Enid!"

"But, really——"

"I can't, you know."

"But——"

"Oh, don't bother!"

Cousin Ethel heard that dialogue as she came into the common-room a short time afterwards. Dolly Carew was sitting in the window-seat, reading, and Enid Craven was speaking to her, with a flush in her cheeks. Enid was holding a paper in her hand, which looked like a bill. She crushed it in her fingers as Ethel came into the room.

"Dolly, you might help me," she said, in a lower voice.

Dolly made an impatient gesture.

"I can't! I haven't the money!"

"I shall get into trouble."

"Well, it's your own fault, isn't it?"

"Don't be annoying! Look here, dear——"

Dolly laid down her book upon her knees, and deliberately extracted a a little purse from some recess and opened it, and showed two pennies and a farthing within.

"Now, look there!" she exclaimed.

Enid looked.

"Well?"

"That's all I have," said Dolly. "You know I never have any money. My dear kid, you know I'm always as stony as Milly Pratt!"

"Nonsense! You have lots of money!" said Enid.

"Not lots," said Dolly. "I have a good deal, but I spend it. I'm nearly stony now. I have twopence farthing, and you can have that, if you like."

"You know I want two pounds."

"Don't be absurd, Enid! Where could I possibly get two pounds from? How could you be silly enough to run into such a debt?" said Dolly.

"It was for a dress for the garden-party, and——"

"How horribly extravagant!"

"I thought my aunt would pay for it," said Enid.

"And she went?"

"No."

Cousin Ethel would gladly have withdrawn, but Dolly was making her signs to stay all the time, and as Enid did not seem to mind speaking before her, Ethel hesitated. Enid glanced at her several times under her eyelashes while she was speaking.

"Well, you'd better send the dress back," said Dolly.

Enid made an angry gesture.

"I can't! I've worn it! They wouldn't take it! Besides, it was the making as much as the material."

"Well, it's rotten!" said Dolly, who was rather given to using slangy expressions. "Rough on you! What would you advise, Ethel Cleveland?"

Ethel coloured.

"I—I don't know anything about the matter," she said.

"Oh, Enid will tell you; she'd tell anybody," said Dolly cheerfully. "Enid isn't proud—are you, Enid?"

"I don't mind telling Miss Cleveland, if she could advise me," said Enid. "Of course, it's a secret."

"Oh, of course!"

"I should not mention the matter to anyone, of course," said Ethel.

"It would get Enid into a row with Miss Penfold," said Dolly, in explanation. "She has run up a bill of two pounds with a dressmaker in the village, you know. She wanted to put us all in the shade at the garden-party."

"Oh, Dolly!"

"Well, you know you did!" said Dolly coolly. "That was your idea, though it didn't work, as a matter of fact."

Enid flushed.

"Look here, Dolly——"

"But that isn't bizney," said Dolly. "Enid is in debt for two pounds, and the dressmaker seems to be getting troublesome."

"She says she will send the bill in to Miss Penfold," said Enid, the colour dying out of her cheeks.

"That would be rotten!"

"I should get into trouble."

"And you cannot pay her?" asked Ethel.

"No."

"Cannot you ask her to give you time?"

"I have asked her."

"And she won't?"

"No. She has, you know, and she won't give me any more. I—I thought I should get the money from my aunt, but I can't."

Ethel looked very grave.

Although it was not a predicament she would ever have fallen into herself, she could feel sorry for the girl who was in it.

Enid was watching her out of the corners of her eyes.

"Suppose you paid her a part of it?" suggested Ethel. "Then she might be willing to wait for the rest."

"Possibly; but——"

"But Enid is stony," said Dolly Carew, "and I have only twopence farthing to lend her, and Mrs. Scrutton wouldn't take that on account."

"Don't be silly, Dolly!"

"My dear Enid, I'm only stating a fact."

"If she would take half-a-sovereign, I would lend it to you," said Cousin Ethel hesitatingly.

Dolly uttered an exclamation.

"That reminds me of an old proverb," she remarked. "Something about fools and their money."

"Oh, really——"

But Enid's eyes were dancing.

"Oh, thank you so much!" she exclaimed. "I'd—I'd do anything for you. I think Mrs. Scruton will wait if I give her that, and—and I may get the rest later from my people."

Ethel took the piece of gold from her little purse.

Enid received it eagerly.

"Thank you so much!" she exclaimed.

And with that she ran off, and was gone in a moment. Dolly Carew passed her arm round Ethel, and drew her down into the window-seat.

"You are a goose!" she remarked.

Cousin Ethel laughed.

"Yes, you are—a goose! You have given away ten shillings. Enid will never return it. Of course she won't."

Ethel was silent.

"And she is always extravagant," said Dolly, "and she owes several girls money. Look here, I won't let you do that again!"

"I couldn't do it again," said Ethel, smiling. "My resources are limited, you know."

"All the better for you, then. Still, I hope that Mrs. Scruton will be easy with Enid. She ought not to have allowed her to run into debt, I suppose——"

"She certainly ought not," said Ethel. "Not without Miss Penfold's knowledge, at all events."

"But Enid may have told her Miss Penfold knew all about it."

"But—but that would have been—untrue!"

Dolly laughed.

"What a little goose it is!" she exclaimed. "Hasn't it occurred to you that Enid might possibly say things that were untrue?"

"I should not like to think it of anybody."

"Well, nobody likes to think of anybody as a story-teller; but there are story-tellers all the same," said Dolly, in her practical way, "and you will learn that Enid is one of them. But never mind Enid. I hope she'll get out of her scrape, anyway. Will you read this book with me?"

"With pleasure, dear! Have you seen Dolores?"

"Not since tea."

Cousin Ethel's face clouded a little.

Was it possible that the passionate Spanish girl had already carried out her intention of leaving St. Freda's?

Dolly looked at her curiously.

"What do you take such an interest in Dolores for?" she asked.

"I like her."

Dolly gave a little shrug.

"Really?"

"Yes. And she seems lonely here."

"Well, she is so queer. She won't be chummy, you know."

"Because she is partly foreign, perhaps. But I like her," said Ethel. "I should like to see her more happy here. But let us read."

And they read.

CHAPTER 10.

The One Who Heard.

IT was some time later that Ethel met Dolores. She was looking out into the Close, dusky now under the old elms, with a star or two twinkling in the sky. Ethel stood looking into the dusk of the evening alone, thinking of home and friends, but not in a sad mood. She felt that St. Freda's would be a happy home for her. A touch on her arm startled her from her reverie, and she turned her head to see the deep black eyes of Dolores looking into her face.

"Dolores!" she exclaimed.

The Spanish girl laughed slightly.

"Did I startle you?"

"A—a little."

"I am sorry. But I want to speak to you. You—you remember what I said to you this afternoon?"

"I remember. You have changed your mind?"

Ethel spoke eagerly.

A dark look came over the olive face of the Spanish girl.

"Changed my mind?"

"I hope you have."

"Listen! I am going to leave St. Freda's."

"But——"

"To-night!"

"Dolores——"

"Will you help me? I do not know if I can escape without help. Will you help me? It will mean nothing to you, and no one will know."

Ethel shook her head.

"I cannot."

"Why not? You spoke to me to-day as if you would wish to be my friend," said the Spanish girl passionately. "Why will you not help me?"

"It is wrong," said Cousin Ethel quietly. "You would know, if you were calm enough to think, Dolores, that you ought not to go."

"I will go."

"It is wrong, and——"

"Listen!" said Dolores, in a low and concentrated tone. "I am to be caned."

"I—I thought——"

The Spanish girl laughed scornfully.

"You thought I had been punished already? No: Miss Penfold has given me another chance. She talked to me for a long time, and gave me until this evening to consider. Then I am to be caned before I go to bed."

"Unless you apologise to Miss Tyrrel?"

"Si, si! Yes."

"But why not do so?" said Ethel earnestly. "You were in the wrong, Dolores——"

"Never!"

"But——"

"So you have no help but to preach to me?" said Dolores bitterly. "I might have expected it. Well, keep your aid; I will not ask it again."

"Dolores——"

"But you will keep the secret? That is all I ask. You won't betray me?"

"I shall say nothing. But——"

"That is enough. But—— Oh!"

The Spanish girl broke off abruptly.

Her big black eyes were fixed upon the shadows close by the steps of the School House. Suddenly she left Ethel's side, and darted into the shadows.

There was a sharp cry.

"What is it?" cried Ethel, in alarm.

A passionate expression from Dolores Pelham answered her. The Spanish girl reappeared, her hand tightly grasping a girl's arm—and the girl was Enid Craven. Enid's face was deathly pale.

"Dolores, you are hurting me!" she muttered.

"You spy!"

"I—I——"

"You were listening."

"No! I——"

"You heard what I was saying?"

"I—I——"

Dolores released the girl. Enid shrank back against the wall, evidently terrified. Ethel gave her a look of scorn.

"Were you listening?" she asked.

"I—I was just coming in," said Ethel. "I—I have been down to the village to see Mrs. Scruton, you know. I was just coming in, and I heard you talking——"

"And you listened?"

"I did not mean to——"

"But you heard what Dolores said?"

Enid's lips trembled.

A falsehood was trembling there, but, under the fierce, angry eyes of the Spanish girl, she dared not utter it.

"Yes," she said faintly.

Dolores made a passionate gesture.

"Now all is lost," she muttered. "She will tell!"

"I—I——"

"You wretched girl, promise me that you will not tell!" exclaimed Dolores, catching Enid by the arm with a grasp so unconsciously hard that it made her cry out with the pain. "Promise me."

"I—I——"

"Promise!" exclaimed Dolores, shaking her.

"I promise."

"Honour, mind."

"Honour."

Dolores released her.

"Go!" she said scornfully.

Enid tottered into the house.

Cousin Ethel laid her hand gently upon Dolores's arm.

"Will you not give it up?" she said. "You cannot trust her to keep the secret, as you know. Give up the plan."

Dolores gave her one look, and turned into the house, leaving her without a word.

Ethel remained alone.

Her thoughts were sad and troubled now.

In spite of the discovery of Enid Craven, it was evident that Dolores meant to carry out her reckless scheme.

She was going to run away from St. Freda's.

Ethel was deeply troubled.

Into what troubles would the reckless girl be plunging herself?

She ought to be stopped; there was no doubt about that.

But——

Ethel had promised secrecy. Could she possibly warn Miss Penfold of what was intended after that—break her plighted word?

She felt that it was impossible.

But to stand by quietly while the girl fled! Of course, she would be found and brought back, but what dangers she might run into——

It was a terrible position for Ethel.

She could not break her word, and yet to say nothing was not right, either. No wonder there was a deep wrinkle in her girlish brow!

What was she to do?

To remain awake that night, and to persuade Dolores at the last moment to give up her wild scheme—if she could!

Other plan there seemed none.

Dolly's gentle hand on her arm woke Ethel from her gloomy thoughts at last. Dolly peered into her face.

"Why, you look ever so worried!" she exclaimed. "What are you thinking about, looking at the stars? Composing poetry?"

Ethel laughed.

"No, dear. But I've had quite enough of my own thoughts. Let's go in."

"Good egg!" said Dolly, in the slangy way that came so charmingly from her. "We're getting up a game in the common-room. Come on!"

And they went in. The common-room was bright and cheerful, crowded with laughing girls, and Ethel brightened up wonderfully. But neither Dolores nor Enid Craven was present.

CHAPTER 11.

Not Sorry.

MISS PENFOLD sat in her private room—a large and tastefully decorated apartment, with wide windows on the garden. The blinds were drawn now, and Miss Penfold was seated in an armchair by the fire, waiting.

There was a cloud upon the face of the principal of St. Freda's.

She was thinking of Dolores.

If the Spanish girl had known the deep concern the Head of St. Freda's felt for her, it might have made some difference to her wayward and wilful nature.

But she did not know.

To her Miss Penfold was a taskmistress, to be regarded with distrust; and Miss Penfold, who was usually succesful in gaining the confidence of a young girl, had to admit to herself that she had failed with Dolores.

She did not fully understand the girl; as a matter of fact, Dolores did not fully understand hereself.

But the paesionate Southern nature was a new thing to Miss Penfold's experience; and while most of her pupils loved her, and all respected her, she had to realise the fact that it was different with Dolores.

To the other girls punishment came rarely or never; and if it came it usually had the expected effect.

But it was not so with Dolores.

It seemed to make her more stubborn and self-willed.

Yet it was necessary to maintain discipline in the school, and in the last resort seeverity is always necessary for that.

Tap!

It was a knock at the door.

Miss Penfold drew a deep breath.

"Come in!" she said quietly.

Dolores entered.

She walked into the room with her head held erect, and a slumbering fire in her dark eyes.

Miss Penfold signed to her to close the door and approach, and the Spanish girl obeyed quietly, and without a word.

She stood before the mistress, her eyes on the rug.

She looked very beautiful as she stood there, her hands clasped before her, a slight flush in her olive cheeks.

Miss Penfold thought so, and she sighed. If only she could govern this wayward nature, she could make much of Dolores Pelham.

There was a moment or two's silence.

"Dolores," said Miss Penfold, at last.

"Yes."

"I told you to come to me——"

"I have come."

"You know what for?"

Dolores smiled bitterly.

"Yes. To be punished."

"I do not want to punish you, Dolores. But you cannot go on as you have been doing. You must realise that yourself."

Dolores was silent.

"Are you not sorry?"

Dolores compressed her lips.

"No."

"You expect me to cane you?"

"Yes."

"And you do not mind?"

Dolores did not speak.

Miss Penfold looked at her in silence for a full minute. She read the hard, determined rebellion in the flushed cheeks and the set lips. Of what use was a caning to a girl in Dolores's mood? And Miss Penfold disliked punishment.

"Well, I shall not cane you, Dolores," she said at last abruptly.

The girl started.

"You will remain in the punishment-room by yourself to-morrow, Dolores, instead; and I hope you will think over your conduct, and decide to do better."

A slight smile played over the dusky face.

Miss Penfold was puzzled.

"You hear me, Dolores?"

"Yes."

"Well, you may go."

The girl crossed to the door without a word.

"Good-night, Dolores!"

"Good-night, Miss Penfold!"

The words seemed extracted by some force superior to her own from the girl. Her brow darkened as she spoke. Then she went out quietly and closed the door.

Miss Penfold sighed.

Dolores walked away with quick steps. She passed the open door of the common-room, and caught the sound of merry laughter within.

Her lip curled.

She was not in a mood for society of any sort, or for merriment. She went to the stairs, and ascended to the dormitory.

The cubicles occupied by the girls of the Lower School opened upon an inner passage, which communicated with the outer corridor by several doors.

Dolores opened one, and went into the dormitory.

All was dark there.

Dolores entered her own cubicle.

As she did so she started a little.

From the darkness of the dormitory came a sound—a strange sound to her ears—the sound of a sob.

Dolores listened.

The sob came from a cubicle a little further down the row.

Dolores stepped out and looked along the row. Each cubicle was open at the end of the inner passage, so that although each girl had a room, there was little privacy. The teachers passing up and down the passage had a full view of each cubicle, and could see whether the girls were all in bed at the proper time, and whether there were any absentees.

Dolores listened, with a strange expression on her face, in the gloom. She had not yet touched the switch of the electric light.

The sound was repeated.

"Enid Craven!" murmured Dolores.

She went quickly down the passage.

She disliked the girl, yet the sound of her sobbing there in the gloom touched the Spanish girl's heart strangely.

"Enid!"

She switched on the light.

Enid Craven was sitting on the edge of her bed, her face buried in her hands.

She started, blinking in the sudden light, and Dolores saw that her eyes were full of tears. Her face was deadly white.

Dolores looked at the startled, tear-stained face in pity mingled with contempt.

"What is it?" she asked. "Did I frighten you—I mean, this evening, when you were listening?"

Enid shook her head.

"It is not that?"

"No."

"You have been punished?"

"No."

"What is the matter, then?"

Enid gave her a bitter look.

"What do you care?"

Dolores paused. The bitter words checked the warm impulse of her heart, and she smiled coldly and derisively.

"You are right," she said; "I care nothing."

And she went back to her own cubicle.

Enid sat a few minutes in silence.

Then she went out of the dormitory and down the stairs. An expression of sudden determination was in her face.

Dolores heard the girl go, and gave her little further thought. Enid was not a girl whose tears might be supposed to indicate any great suffering either of mind or of body.

And Dolores had much to do.

Before the other girls came up to bed, all her preparations for her flight must be made. For Dolores was resolved.

Her resolve had not faltered once since she had first spoken to Ethel Cleveland upon the subject.

That night was to be her last at St. Freda's.

What was to follow she did not know—and she did not think. All she thought or cared about was to get away from the school she hated.

She selected the things she was to take with her, and packed them carefully into a little bag, which she hid in the cubicle.

Then she went to bed.

When the others came up they would find her there, apparently sleeping, and so would Miss Tyrrell when she made her rounds for the night.

And when the house was silent, when all were asleep, Dolores intended to rise and steal out, unaided, alone, into the world she hardly knew, but which she preferred to the world she did know, and which she disliked.

CHAPTER 12.

Enid Craven Does Not Speak.

ENID CRAVEN descended the stairs slowly, the determined expression upon her face fading away visibly at each step. She had left the dormitory full of resolve, but it did not last long. As she drew near to Miss Penfold's door she halted irresolutely.

She looked at the door, and stood still.

The impulse had come upon her to go to Miss Penfold, to be quite frank with her—to tell her of the trouble that had come upon her through her own folly.

But what would Miss Penfold say?

Enid could imagine the stern look, the raised eyebrows, the severe words. She would be punished—yes; but it might be worse than that. What if Miss Penfold wrote to her parents? In fact, she was sure to! She might have to leave St. Freda's—in disgrace!

And Enid cowered at the thought.

But to go on as she was going on now, it was just as bad. Mrs. Scruton was hard—as hard as Miss Penfold could possibly be.

Whichever way she looked, there was no escape.

Was it not better to have it over at once?

She approached the door again.

Her hand was raised to tap, and she paused. Then, with a sudden fierce resolve, she knocked, and opened the door without waiting for Miss Penfold to say "Come in."

The principal of St. Freda's was seated at her table.

She had a book and a little pile of papers before her, and a little heap of money and a banknote.

She glanced at Enid.

The girl's heart beat hard.

She saw that there was money enough lying on Miss Penfold's table at that moment to pay ten times over the debt that was weighing on her mind.

Miss Penfold was making up her accounts; she had not expected to be interrupted again that night. It was nearly bed-time, and it was Miss Tyrrell's duty to see the girls disposed of for the night.

But she looked graciously enough at Enid.

She saw the stains of tears on the girl's face, and the white look of suffering, and her heart was tender at once.

She rose from her seat.

"What is the matter, my dear child?"

Enid tore her eyes away from the money.

The thought was singing and ringing in her brain—if it were mine! If I could take it! She tried not to think of it.

Her eyes fell before Miss Penfold's.

She could not say what she had come there to say.

Once in Miss Penfold's presence, she realised that she had been foolish to think for a moment that she would ever find courage to confess to the principal.

She did not speak.

She stood before Miss Penfold, the colour coming and going in her face, and her hands clasping and unclasping.

The principal gazed at her in astonishment.

She could see that the girl was labouring under some deep emotion, but what it was she could not fathom.

"Enid, come and sit down, my dear," said Miss Penfold, leading the girl to a seat. "What is the matter with you?"

Enid's heart was thumping hard.

She dared not confess to Miss Penfold about her debts—about her dun. That was impossible. But what excuse was she to give for having come? How was she to explain her visit to the principal's room?

And Miss Penfold was looking at her sympathetically, but inquiringly. What was she to say?

"Well, Enid?"

"If—if you please," stammered Enid, to gain time.

"Yes, my dear."

"I—I——"

"What is it, my child? You look very upset. You are not ill?"

"No," muttered Enid.

"Then what is it?"

"I—I——"

She paused and stammered again. Miss Penfold's glance showed growing amazement.

"Yes, my dear?"

Enid's brain was working quickly. The thought of Dolores flashed into it, and there was an excuse for her visit ready-made—and it might help her into Miss Penfold's favour, too, and stand her in good stead when her own fall came—as come it must if Mrs. Scruton were not settled with.

"If you please, Miss Penfold, I—I hardly know whether I should tell you," she faltered.

"What is it?"

"Dolores."

"Dolores Pelham! Do you mean that you have had some dispute with her?" said Miss Penfold less gently.

"Oh, no, no!"

"You know that I do not encourage tale-bearing, Enid. If you have come here to tell me something about Dolores Pelham, think twice before you tell me."

Enid bit her lips spitefully.

It was upon her tongue's tips to tell Miss Penfold all—to break her promise to Dolores, and betray the intended flight.

Should she do so?

As if to decide her in that dubious moment, she caught the glimmer of the money on the table in the electric light.

It seemed to dazzle her.

It was at that moment that a thought—a dark and terrible thought—flashed into the girl's mind, and caused the colour to waver in her cheeks.

Miss Penfold looked at her impatiently.

"Well, Enid, have you anything to say?" she asked.

"I—I——"

"Come, come, you are wasting my time!"

"I promised Dolores——" said Enid slowly.

"You promised her not to tell me—that which you have come to tell!"

"Yes."

"Then I cannot listen to you."

Enid rose.

"I—I did not know what to do—whether I ought to keep the promise or not," she faltered.

Miss Penfold's face softened again.

"It may be a question whether you ought to have made the promise," she said. "But, having made it, I think there can be little doubt that you should keep it."

"Very well, Miss Penfold."

"Good-night, Enid.

And the girl left the principal's room.

The thought that had flashed into her mind there was still working in her brain, and it seemed to dazzle her, and she could think of nothing else.

CHAPTER 13.

In the Dead of Night.

THE school clock chimed out, and Dolly Carew pitched her thimble into her work-basket. That work-basket was in a wonderful state, and Ethel thought the chances were against Dolly ever finding her thimble again. But Dolly did not seem to mind. She never could find anything when she wanted it, and she was used to that.

"Bed-time," she said.

Ethel glanced at the clock over the mantelpiece in the common-room.

"Half-past nine," she said.

Dolly nodded.

"That's it. Half-past nine is bed-time for the Lower School," she explained. "We're the Lower School. The senior girls stay up till ten. They're awfully select in many ways, and have lots of privileges we don't have."

Ethel smiled.

"Well, I'm quite tired enough to go to bed," she remarked.

"Of course you are, dear," said Dolly cheerfully. "You've had a long journey to-day, and the first day at school is always exciting, too. You'll sleep like a top. I'm glad your cubicle is next to mine. We shall be able to tap good-night to one another on the partition. See?"

"Yes."

"Dolores is on the other side of your cubicle. By the way, where is she? I haven't seen her for a long time."

"I don't know."

"Sulking somewhere, perhaps," said Milly Pratt. "I asked her if she could lend me a shilling a little while ago, and she didn't even answer me. She is a very bad-tempered girl. Don't you think so?"

"Ha, ha! She might refuse to lend you a shilling without being bad-tempered," said Dolly, laughing. "You see——"

"Well, I had left my purse upstairs——"

"Ha, ha!"

Cousin Ethel smiled, too. She was beginning to learn that having left her purse somewhere was Milly's usual preliminary to borrowing.

"I don't see what you're laughing at, Dolly," said Milly, with a pettish shake of the head. "You will give Ethel the impression that I never pay my debts."

"That would be too bad."

"It would, because I'm so careful in these matters," said Milly, turning to Cousin Ethel. "I always believe in the old proverb that short reckonings make long friends, don't you?"

"Yes," smiled Ethel.

"I shall settle up with you, and settle some other accounts when my Aunt Caroline comes to see me," said Milly. "She's awfully rich, you know."

Dolly laughed again.

Miss Tyrrell came into the room.

"Now, my dears," she said.

And the girls of the Lower School ceased their various occupations, and trooped up to the dormitory.

Miss Tyrrell glanced into Dolores Pelham's cubicle.

The Spanish girl was in bed.

She lay with her olive cheek on the white pillow, her eyes were closed, and her long dark eyelashes drooped over the dusky skin.

"Dolores," said Miss Tyrrell softly.
The girl did not stir.
"Dolores."

CHAPTER 14.

Night!

THERE was no response but the regular breathing.

Miss Tyrrell moved away softly. No doubt crossed her mind for a moment but that the Spanish girl was asleep.

Dolores did not stir when she was gone.

She lay quite silent while the girls, with much talking through the partitions of the cubicles, went to bed.

Miss Tyrrell switched off the light and retired.

The door closed.

Then Dolores's eyes opened wide in the darkness.

There was a bitter smile upon her face as she lay staring up into the darkness, wide awake, her heart beating with suppressed excitement.

All was well so far. She had only to wait for the rest of the Lower School girls to be asleep, and then——

She waited.

There was a tap, tap, through the silence of the dormitory. It was Dolly Carew tapping good-night to Ethel Cleveland.

Then silence settled down.

The girls dropped off to sleep.

But three of them remained wide awake.

One of them was Dolores Pelham, lying with her big black eyes wide open, staring through the darkness, listening impatiently to the school clock every time it chimed.

Another was Cousin Ethel.

Fatigued as she was by the experience of the day, Ethel did not think of going to sleep. She was thinking of Dolores.

She kept her eyes open with difficulty.

There was another who was awake, and felt no desire to sleep, whose heart was beating as excitedly as Dolores Pelham's. It was Enid Craven. She sat up in bed, with the clothes huddled round her, not daring to think of sleep. She was wondering if Dolores would carry out her plan of flight.

But she made no sound to hint that she was awake. She was far from wishing to interfere with the movements of the Spanish girl now.

The night grew older.

At ten o'clock the girls of the Upper School had gone to their dormitory, and shortly after that, other doors closed softly in the silence of the school.

At eleven o'clock only one light was gleaming in the great building, and it shone from the window of Miss Penfold's room. And as the school clock rang out the hour, it was extinguished.

Dolores's heart beat almost painfully as she heard the eleven strokes following one another heavily through the silent night.

Eleven o'clock.

At that hour, she knew, all St. Freda's were gone to bed. At that hour a light seldom remained in the school.

A half-hour more, for perfect safety, and then she could go. She set herself to wait, with grim patience.

The half-hour seemed terribly long.

How dark and silent was the night! To Dolores, who believed herself the only wakeful one in the long, lofty dormitory, the silence seemed uncanny

and eerie. But she did not falter. She did not obey the impulse to close her eyes and forget her troubles in sleep. She waited for the clock to strike again.

The quarter chimed out. Would that last half-hour never pass? she wondered fiercely. It seemed ages before it struck at last.

But it did chime.

Half-past eleven.

Dolores listened, and then listened again in the silence that followed. It was a deathly silence, as of the tomb, and she shivered a little.

There was no sound—no one was stirring.

The girl slipped quietly from the bed.

Quickly, silently she dressed.

Then she stepped to the doorway of her cubicle—a doorway to which there was no door—and looked up and down the dormitory passage.

Silence as of the dead.

She took up the little bag she had packed, and stepped out of the cubicle.

Her hand was on the door leading out into the corridor, when a voice came through the gloom, and caused her heart to leap and thump wildly.

"Dolores!"

The girl paused, suffocating.

"Who is it?" she breathed.

"It is I—Ethel."

"Go back to bed," said Dolores, in a shrill whisper. "Go back to bed. Do you think you can stop me now?"

"Dolores, come back!"

"I will not!"

"I tell you——"

"I will not! Betray me if you like!"

And Dolores opened the heavy door, stepped out into the corridor, and pulled it shut after her. Cousin Ethel stood in the darkness, shivering in the draught that came down past the row of cubicles, and hesitated. What should she do?"

It did not take her long to decide. Dolores should never commit this mad action if she could prevent her. She hastily put her feet into a pair of slippers, and drew a cloak round her, and followed the Spanish girl from the dormitory.

As she left the dormitory, she thought she heard a sound as of someone rising from bed. She paused a second, but all was silent, and she hurried on her way.

CHAPTER 15.

Cousin Ethel Means Business.

COUSIN ETHEL paused at the top of the great staircase.

Where was Dolores?

By what means did the rash girl intend to leave the house? As she had no one to aid her, as she had only herself to rely upon, she could not leave by a window. And the doors were all locked and bolted at night. Even if she could have obtained a key, the noise of withdrawing the bolts would have betrayed her.

Where was she gone?

"Dolores!" breathed Ethel, in the silence of the staircase.

But only the faint echo of her own voice answered her.

"Dolores!"

Silence.

The girl must have descended the stairs. Cousin Ethel went slowly down, feeling her way in the darkness by the banisters. She dared not think of a light—even as it was, she was in terror of discovery. If one of the mistresses should be alarmed!

But Ethel would not think of that. She was there to save Dolores, and she knew that she was doing what was right.

But where was Dolores?

Ethel caught a glimmer of light as she trod the linoleum of the lower passage—the faint pale light of the stars through an open doorway.

She hurried on.

She did not know the interior of St. Freda's very well as yet, but she knew that that was the doorway of the principal's room.

That door would naturally be closed, and the fact that it was standing open was a clue to Ethel.

She paused at the doorway, and looked in, straining her eyes in the gloom.

Opposite her was a window, and the glimmer of the stars came in from without, showing that the blind had been raised.

A dim form showed up against the white muslin curtain of the window.

It was that of Dolores.

Cousin Ethel drew a quick, deep breath. It was the Spanish girl; she had found her again. She hurried into the room, and stopped as she caught her foot on a chair. At the same moment the sash of the window was thrown up, and a keen gust of night air blew into the room.

Ethel paused with a suppressed cry.

She had hurt her foot, and in that moment's pause the Spanish girl was gone.

Ethel ran to the window.

She leaned out and looked below.

"Dolores!"

"Go back!"

Dolores had dropped softly upon the flower-bed beneath Miss Penfold's study window. She had chosen Miss Penfold's room as the easiest mode of egress. The window had been fastened by a simple catch.

The starlight was clearer in the Close.

Cousin Ethel saw the Spanish girl, fully dressed, in a cloak, and with a bag in her hand. The stars caught Dolores's eyes as she looked up, and made them glint strangely.

"Good-bye, Ethel Cleveland!"

"You are not going?"

"I am going!"

"Stop! Stop!"

"Good-bye!"

The Spanish girl turned away. In a moment more Ethel had dropped, too, from the window-sell to the flower-bed. She almost fell, but she recovered herself and ran towards Dolores.

"Dolores, you must stop!"

Her hand fastened firmly upon the Spanish girl's arm.

Dolores tried to tear herself away. But she was not so strong as the active, lithe English girl.

"Let me go!" she breathed.

"I will not."

Dolores' white teeth came hard together.

"How dare you—how dare you interfere with me!"

"To save you," said Cousin Ethel resolutely. "I will not let you go. You are mad to-night, Dolores; you would not act so foolishly if you were calm. You must come back."

"I will not—I will not!"

"You must!"

"Let me go!"

"I cannot!"

Dolores struggled for a moment. But she could not release herself. Her voice was choking with passion as she went on.

"Leave me alone! How dare you! Listen! I shall strike you if you do not release me! Take care!"

"Dolores, you will come back, or I shall call out."

"Call out!"

"Yes, and awaken Miss Penfold."

Dolores stood turned to stone.

"You will betray me?"

"Rather than let you do this mad thing—yes."

"Oh!"

"Come back with me."

Dolores seemed to shake with passion. Her clenched hand rose, but Cousin Ethel did not shrink. In the starlight her clear eyes looked into the black, fierce ones of the Spanish girl, and Dolores's arm dropped to her side.

"Oh, I hate you!" she murmured.

"I am sorry for that; but I cannot let you go. Come in!"

"I have no choice now," said Dolores passionately. "But I hate you—I hate you!"

Cousin Ethel did not reply.

There was no doubt that Dolores was in deadly earnest, while she was speaking, at all events, though probably enough the time would come when she would know that Ethel was right, that the English girl was acting the part of a true friend.

"I hate you!"

"Come!"

They turned back towards the window. Dolores made no further resistance. It was useless, for if Cousin Ethel had called out she would have had no chance of escape.

Suddenly she stopped.

"Look!" she breathed.

Her hand rose to point to the study window.

"We are discovered, then!"

A light was glimmering from Miss Penfold's window.

It was a wavering, flickering light, such as might have been given by a match, and even as the two girls looked it was extinguished.

Darkness rushed upon their eyes again.

They looked at each other in consternation.

"Miss Penfold!" exclaimed Dolores.

Ethel nodded in dismay.

"I—I suppose so."

"We shall be found out."

"Yes."

"I don't care! Do you?"

"Yes," said Ethel quietly. "I care very much. But it cannot be helped. Let us go in."

"As you like. You have only yourself to blame Why did you interfere with me?" said Dolores sullenly.

Ethel did not reply to that question. They approached the window, and looked in. There was no light, and no sound within.

Both the girls were puzzled. It was borne in upon them that it could not have been Miss Penfold who had struck that match. She would have made her presence known before this.

"What does it mean?" muttered Dolores.

Ethel shook her head.

"I don't understand."

"There was a light—you saw it as well as I?"

"Certainly."

"It cannot have been Miss Penfold," said Dolores, in a hurried whisper. "If she came down, she would have turned on the electric light. Why should she strike a match?"

"I cannot understand it."

"It was someone else—one of the girls spying on us," said Dolores. "Enid Craven, very likely."

Ethel nodded. It seemed to her very probable. But whoever had been in the room it was certain that the person was no longer there.

The two girls entered the window, and Ethel closed it and fastened it. Then she led the way back to the Lower School dormitory.

Dolores followed her without a word.

All resistance seemed to be gone from the Spanish girl now. It was as if the English girl's firm resolve had conquered her in spite of herself.

They reached the dormitory, and entered. All was dark and silent within. Ethel closed the heavy door.

"You will go back to bed, Dolores?"

"Yes."

"And will not leave it again?"

"I promise you nothing."

"But——"

"Enough!"

Dolores drew herself quickly away. She stepped to Enid Craven's cubicle and struck a match and peered in.

Enid was in bed and breathing regularly.

But Dolores remembered how she had deceived Miss Tyrrell, and Enid's apparent slumber did not convince her.

The match went out, and she returned to her own cubicle.

Ethel heard her lie down, and then returned to bed. Ethel's mind was in a whirl of doubt and anxiety. Surely Dolores would not make a second attempt that night—yet——

Ethel resolved to remain awake.

An hour passed.

She heard midnight strike.

Her eyelids were weighed down with heaviness. Dolores had not made a movement. There was little doubt that she was fast asleep.

Ethel listened for the clock to strike again. She allowed her eyes to close for a moment to rest them. They did not open again.

CHAPTER 16.

Gone!

"ETHEL!"

"Ethel!"

Cousin Ethel opened her eyes.

A ray of light danced in them, and she sat up in bed, for the moment trying in vain to recall where she was.

The cubicle, the grey wall of the passage that ran past the end of it, the laughing voices close at hand, seemed like part of a dream for the moment.

But Dolly Carew was shaking her, and Dolly's cheery, laughing face recalled her to recollection of her surroundings.

"Dolly!" ejaculated Ethel.

Dolly laughed merrily.

"Don't you hear the bell?" she exclaimed.

Ethel could indeed hear it.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

The sound of the bell came clearly enough through the keen, fresh morning air. The morning was bright and sunny, and the sunlight streamed in at the window at the end of the dormitory.

"That's the rising-bell," explained Dolly. "It's seven o'clock. The corporal is ringing it."

"The corporal!"

"Corporal Brick—he's the school porter," explained Dolly. "He's always bad tempered at getting up early; that's why he's making the bell go so loudly."

Cousin Ethel laughed. Her eyes were still a little heavy. She had had much less sleep than she needed the previous night. But she always woke up in a cheerful temper.

"Time to get up," continued Dolly. "Don't be a slacker, you know. I want you to come out for a run before breakfast."

"Yes. Is Dolores up?" asked Ethel, thinking at once of the Spanish girl, with a feeling of remorse for not having watched further into the night.

"Yes, she's up and out already."

Cousin Ethel felt a great sense of relief. Dolores had not carried out her wild scheme, then; she had not run away from St. Freda's.

Ethel was soon up and dressed, and she went downstairs with the cheerful Dolly and a crowd of talking, laughing girls. Milly Pratt slipped an arm through hers as she came out into the Close with Dolly Carew.

"Shall we go and say good-morning to Mrs. Phipps?" asked Milly affably.

"No," said Dolly decidedly. "We're going for a run. I suppose you've forgotten your purse as usual—eh?"

"My dear Dolly——"

"Rats!" said Dolly cheerfully. "Come on, Ethel!"

And she rushed Ethel away before Milly Pratt could raise any further objection. Ethel laughed; she knew well enough what saying good-morning to Mrs Phipps meant.

Milly Pratt looked after them and sighed. Milly paid a visit to Mrs. Phipps's little cottage whenever she was in funds, or whenever she could induce another girl to share funds with her. Milly was Mrs. Phipps's best customer—excepting in one respect, that she did not always settle the little accounts she was always ready to run up. But for that, no face at St. Freda's would have been more welcome to Mrs. Phipps.

Ethel looked round the Close for Dolores, but did not see her.

"Dolores must have been up early," she remarked.

"Oh, yes!" said Dolly carelessly. "She was up before any of us. Her bed was empty when I woke."

Ethel started.

"Then you haven't seen her this morning?"

"No."

"Has anyone else?"

Ethel asked the question quickly, breathlessly, and Dolly looked at her in surprise.

"I don't know," she said. "What does it matter?"

Ethel was alarmed.

Where was Dolores?

Had the wilful girl carried out her mad scheme after all? Had she risen a second time while Ethel slept, and left the precincts of St. Freda's?

"What is the matter, Ethel?" exclaimed Dolly, growing alarmed from Ethel's expression.

"I want to find Dolores."

"Why?"

"I am afraid something may have happened," faltered Ethel.

"Good gracious! What?"

"Let us look for her," said Ethel evasively.

"Certainly!"

They looked for Dolores.

But the Spanish girl was not to be found.

In the gardens, in the gymnasium, in the class-rooms, and the passages they looked for her; but the dark face and the deep black eyes were not to be seen.

Dolly questioned all the girls whom they met, but no one seemed to have seen anything of Dolores.

Ethel's face grew more and more anxious.

The conviction was forcing itself upon her mind that the Spanish girl was gone. She reproached herself bitterly for having slept.

While she had slumbered, Dolores had carried out her plan. What would become of her? Where was she now?

A little old man, with grey hair and beard and a wooden leg, was standing by the school wall near the gate, and Dolly led her friend towards him. She explained that it was Corporal Brick, who, with his wife, inhabited the lodge. He was an old soldier, and had lost the missing leg in South Africa. When he was in a talkative mood—which was often—he would tell them thrilling stories of the veldt and the karroo, and of desperate tussles with enemies whom he generally alluded to as "them Bores"—probably meaning the Boers.

The corporal was standing looking at the wall, which was covered thickly with great masses of ivy.

He was scratching the rim of grey hair that surrounded his bald head.

He turned and looked at the two girls.

"Mornin', Miss Dolly," he said. "Mornin', miss!"

"Good-morning, corporal! What is the matter?" asked Dolly.

The corporal pointed to the ivy.

"Look there, Miss Dolly!"

Dolly Carew looked.

"Well?" she said.

"Well," said the corporal, "don't you see it's broke down, Miss Dolly? Look 'ere—and 'ere! Somebody's been climbin' hover that hivy!"

Dolly gave a little cry. Cousin Ethel changed colour. It was a confirmation of her worst fears.

An active girl like Dolores could easily climb ovér the low wall by the aid of the ivy. And the tearing of some of the tendrils from the wall remained as a trace of her climb.

Ethel did not speak. She felt that it would be better for her to say nothing.

"A burglar!" exclaimed Dolly.

The corporal scratched his scanty hair again.

"Maybe," he said. "Somebody's been hover that wall, that's sartin."

"Perhaps it was the cat," Dolly suggested.

Corporal Brick gave her a pitying look.

"Which the cats have been hover that wall hoften enough, Miss Dolly, without pullin' down any of the hivy," he said. "Somebody's climbed hover that wall."

"Last night?"

"Sartin. It wasn't done when I made my rounds last night. I learned to keep watch, miss, and take my rounds reg'ler, when I was fightin' them Boers——"

"But who could it have been?" interrupted Dolly Carew, who had no curiosity to hear about the Boers just then, but was much more interested in the identity of the unknown who had clambered over the ivy in the night.

The corporal shook his head.

"I dunno, Miss Dolly," he replied; "but it's my dooty to go and report to Miss Penfold. It may 'ave been a thief, and I'll ask Miss Penfold if there's anything missing."

And the wooden-legged veteran stumped away towards the house.

Dolly Carew turned to Ethel with shining eyes.

"Isn't it exciting?" she exclaimed. "There must have been a burglar or somebody come over the wall while we were all asleep last night."

Ethel did not reply.

"Yes; it's curious," added Dolly.

"What's curious?"

"Corporal Brick's dog is always loose of a night, and he would surely bark if a stranger came in. The corporal did not hear him bark, I suppose. It's odd."

Ethel nodded. She thought she knew why the corporal's dog had not barked. The dog knew Dolores, of course.

The two girls returned slowly to the house. The bell was ringing for breakfast. Ethel cast one glance round the crowded room as she came in, in the hope of seeing Dolores Pelham there. But she was disappointed. Dolores was not to be seen.

CHAPTER 17.

Miss Penfold's Announcement.

BREAKFAST at St. Freda's was usually a quiet and sedate meal, but upon this particular morning there was a great deal of suppressed excitement in the room.

The girls spoke in whispers, or cast significant glances.

Something had happened.

They knew that, though they did not know precisely what it was.

Ethel had expected Dolores' absence to be remarked upon at once, but it was hardly mentioned. The general impression was that Dolores was taking her breakfast alone in the punishment-room.

Ethel knew differently, and Dolly Carew suspected now, infected by Ethel's uneasiness. But the others neither knew nor cared.

But that something had happened they knew.

In the first place, Corporal Brick's uneasiness with regard to the broken ivy had been seen and remarked upon. It was known that he had gone to Miss Penfold to ask her if anything was missing from the house.

The principal of St. Freda's had gone to her room, doubtless to see if the money in her desk there was safe.

"Miss Penfold keeps money in her desk," Milly Pratt confided to Ethel, in a whispor. "You see, she does her accounts on a regular day every week, and the day before the money is sent from the bank in Elmhurst."

Cousin Ethel smiled.

"How do you know?" she said.

"Oh, I know most things that go on!" said Milly. "There are very few things that go on without my knowing about them."

"Milly is our Peeping Tom," explained Dolly Carew.

"Oh, Dolly!"

"And that's how she knows," said Dolly coolly. "She could tell you what Miss Braye's father was, and how much money Miss Tyrrell has in the bank, and what Miss Penfold's nephew is going to be when he grows up, and——"

"Oh, my dear Dolly——"

"She knows everything except her lessons," concluded Dolly.

"Well, I keep my eyes open," said Milly Pratt. "I don't believe in going about with one's eyes closed. If anybody wanted to break into the school, last night was the time, while Miss Penfold's money was in her desk. It will be paid away to-day."

"I am sure there has been no robbery," said Ethel.

"I don't see how you can be sure; but I hope not, of course. Poor Miss Penfold could not afford to lose the money," said Milly. "But it would be awfully exciting, wouldn't it?"

Ethel laughed.

"I would rather be without excitement of that sort," she said.

"So would I," said Belle Hilton. "I should never dare to close my eyes again if there had been a burglary in the house."

"Rats!" said Dolly cheerfully.

"Oh, Dolly!"

"Please do not talk so much at the table!" said Miss Tyrrell gently.

And the buzz of conversation died away.

Miss Penfold did not make her appearance at breakfast.

After breakfast the girls had some little time free before morning prayers, which were usually followed immediately by morning classes.

During the interval they gathered in groups, and discussed the happenings—or the supposed happenings—of the night, with bated breath.

Milly Pratt inclined to the theory of a burglary, and indeed she was fully convinced by this time that a man in a black mask, and armed with a revolver, had burgled his way into St. Freda's the previous night. Milly Pratt had a vivid imagination, which she never suffered to rust for want of exercise.

When the school was assembled for prayers, Miss Penfold was still not present. This was more extraordinary still, as Miss Penfold always read the prayers.

The girls trooped into the big school-room in great excitement.

Miss Penfold was not there.

Her pupils were taken by Miss Tyrrell.

Dolly Carew screwed up her courage to ask Miss Tyrrell if Miss Penfold was well. Miss Tyrrell nodded.

"She is quite well," she replied; "but she will not take her class this morning."

"I—I hope nothing is wrong?" ventured Dolly.

"We shall see," replied Miss Tyrrell.

And that mysterious answer confirmed the impression of the girls that something was wrong, and very wrong.

Dolores did not appear in class.

But as all believed that she was in the punishment-room, her absence was not even remarked upon.

It was at eleven o'clock, when the pupils of St. Freda's left for a short recess in the morning lessons, that Miss Penfold made her appearance.

CHAPTER 18.

Dolores is Missing.

MISS PENFOLD came into the school-room in her hat and walking-dress, showing that she had been out that morning, which accounted for no one having caught a glimpse of her.

But it was her face that the pupils looked at.

Miss Penfold was usually so grave and calm and self-possessed that any emotion in her face was certain to attract attention.

And now she was evidently labouring under a deep emotion.

A thrill ran through the school.

They felt that there was to be an explanation of the strange mystery at last. They were to learn what had happened in the night.

Miss Penfold stood at her high desk, and made a sign for silence. Every eye was fixed upon her.

"I have a very strange and painful announcement to make, my dear girls," she said. "You are aware that your fellow-pupil, Dolores Pelham, has been in disgrace lately. Last night she left St. Freda's."

There was a general gasp.

"Left St. Freda's!" murmured Dolly Carew, aghast. "Run away!"

"Oh!"

"Run away!"

"Good gracious!"

"My hat!" said the slangy Dolly. "She's bolted!"

Ethel did not speak. She was watching Miss Penfold's white, worn face.

"I have been making inquiries all the morning," said Miss Penfold. "There is no doubt that the foolish girl took the earliest train to London, and I have wired there. She will be stopped, and brought back here, and will arrive this afternoon. That is all."

And Miss Penfold left the school-room.

The girls poured out into the Close amid a babel of tongues.

Dolores's action had taken all by surprise.

"Bolted!" said Dolly. "I never expected that."

"Oh, you never know what to expect of Dolores!" said Belle Hilton. "Fancy her running away at night! I should be afraid to."

"Oh, you're afraid of anything!" said Dolly scornfully. "I shouldn't be afraid to run away if I wanted to. But I shouldn't want to."

"She must have waited a long time for the train," Milly Pratt remarked. "How hungry she must have been!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Dolly Carew drew Cousin Ethel aside.

"Did you know?" she asked.

"I suspected."

"It was curious—we didn't! Dolores is a queer girl!" said Dolly. "But I am sorry for her. It was silly of her to think that she could get away. Of course, Miss Penfold would do everything to get her caught and brought back at once, to save a scandal. The silly girl! She had no chance of getting away."

"Thank goodness!" said Ethel fervently. "What would have happened to her if she had escaped?"

"I suppose she didn't think of that. Dolores is so hot-headed. I say, Enid, where are you going?" exclaimed Dolly, breaking off, as Enid Craven came down in the direction of the school gates.

Enid was looking very white.

"I'm going to the village," she said. "I have to see about my new hat."

"Always seeing about something new, aren't you?" said Dolly, laughing. "Have you settled with Mrs. Scruton about that dress yet?"

Enid flushed.

"She is going to wait," she said.

"You paid her the half-sovereign?"

"Yes."

"And she agreed to wait for the rest?"

"Yes!" said Enid impatiently. "I've told you so! Don't you believe me?"

"Yes," said Dolly, in surprise. "Why shouldn't I believe you? How strange you are this morning, Enid! Didn't you sleep well last night?"

"I never woke up once."

"You look awfully seedy."

"Nonsense!" said Enid brusquely.

And she hurried out of the gates.

Dolly glanced after her curiously, and shook her head.

"She looks cut up about something, doesn't she?" Dolly remarked.

"She may be worried about Dolores," Ethel suggested.

Dolly Carew laughed.

"Not likely! She didn't like Dolores; she was always down on her."

"That may make her all the sorrier now that poor Dolores is in trouble. It would some people," said Ethel.

"H'm—yes! But I don't think Enid is one of those people. Poor old Dolores! I suppose she will be expelled now?"

Ethel started.

"Expelled!"

"Yes, nothing else; after trying to run away from school. Why, it might have got the school into the papers! I really don't believe Miss Penfold would ever have got over it if it had."

Ethel's brow was clouded. She thought it very probable that Dolores would be expelled from St. Freda's, when she came to think of it, and her heart ached for the wayward girl.

CHAPTER 19.

Dolores' Return.

THE St. Freda's girls looked forward anxiously for the return of Dolores Pelham. Miss Penfold had spoken so assuredly that they had not the least doubt that her statement was correct, and that her runaway would arrive that afternoon.

Doubtless the police had been communicated with, and probably they had been ready for poor Dolores to alight when the train stopped in London. At all events, the girls had not the slightest doubt that Dolores would be brought back in the afternoon, as Miss Penfold had declared. And they were right.

It was near the end of the afternoon lessons, in which the girls took so little interest—as was natural under the circumstances—that the teachers were less even-tempered than usual.

The suppressed excitement did not make for calm work. As four o'clock struck, leaving only another half-hour of school work, the excitement was keen. Nothing had been seen of Dolores yet.

But a few minutes after the hour the sound of wheels was heard in the Close.

A thrill ran through the classes.

"It's Dolores!" murmured Dolly Carew.

"I know that rumble," whispered Milly Pratt. "It's the hack from the village."

Ethel smiled. But Milly was right—it was the village hack. The open door of the big school-room gave a view upon the hall, and as the great door was opened, every neck was turned, every eye was upon that part of the hall that could be seen from the school-room, and teachers and lessons were for the moment totally forgotten.

Two figures had entered—one that of a burly police-officer, the other that of a slim, pale girl in a cloak; and at the sight of her there was a murmur:

"Dolores!"

It was Dolores!

Miss Tyrrell closed the door upon the hall, but it was in vain to attempt to reduce the girls to attention again.

Buzzes of talk would break out again and again, and at last the school was dismissed, a few minutes early, to the equal relief of mistresses and pupils.

Meanwhile, Dolores had gone to Miss Penfold's room. The police-officer who had brought her to St. Freda was provided with refreshment, and departed just as the girls poured out of the big school-room.

They watched him with awed and interested eyes as he strode majestically across the Close and disappeared.

"Brought back by a policeman!" said Milly Pratt. "How awful! It was like being arrested! Terrible!"

"Perhaps Dolores was arrested," said Enid Craven.

Dolly stared at her.

"Why should Dolores be arrested?" she asked.

Enid turned away without replying.

Cousin Ethel would gladly have seen Dolores. But the girl was shut up in Miss Penfold's room with the principal of St. Freda's.

Little did the girls dream of what was passing. In that room Dolores was sitting bolt upright upon a chair, her hands clasped in her lap, when Miss Penfold entered. The headmistress's face was hard as granite; but Dolores did not look at her. Her own face was hard with defiance. She had been recaptured, but not conquered.

Dolores did not rise.

Miss Penfold stopped, and looked fixedly at the Spanish girl.

"Dolores!" she said quietly.

Half unwillingly Dolores rose to her feet. She meant to be defiant, but there was something in Miss Penfold's manner that impelled respect.

Her eyes met Miss Penfold's steadily enough, however.

"I am sorry for this, Dolores," said Miss Penfold quietly. "I should never have believed it of you. I could hardly credit it when I found it was the case. In spite of all your faults, I should never have deemed you capable of this."

Dolores's eyes flashed.

"I hate St. Freda's!" she said, in a low, firm voice. "I detest the place—and the people. I will not stay here. You have had me brought back, but I will not stay. If my people will not take me away, I will run away again!"

"There will be no necessity for that," said Miss Penfold quietly. "You will not be allowed to remain at St. Freda's now, whether you wish or not. There is no place for you in this school."

Dolores's lips curled.

"I am glad of it."

"You are glad to be expelled?"

Dolores winced.

"No, no—not that! But I want to go. I do not like the place. Nobody likes me here—nobody understands me, or wants to!"

"I have tried to understand you, Dolores. But I confess that I have failed. I regarded you as proud and headstrong and wilful, but never as—what you are!"

"What I am! What do you mean, Miss Penfold? I know you think it is wrong of me to do as I have done, but I don't think it wicked!" exclaimed Dolores passionately. "Girls and boys have run away from school before!"

"I was not now speaking of your leaving St. Freda's, though that was very, very wrong!"

"Then what——"

Miss Penfold made an impatient gesture.

"Why will you affect ignorance, Dolores? Brick called my attention to the broken ivy on the school wall this morning, asked me to see if there was anything missing in the house, as he feared that burglars had been here."

"And I was missing."

"Yes, you were missing, Dolores—and something else."

"Something else!"

Dolores's dark eyes were wide open now.

Miss Penfold made a weary gesture.

"Dolores, why will you prevaricate? You know what was missing."

"I do not."

"Nonsense! As soon as Brick made his statement, I remembered the money I had left in my desk, and I went there to see whether it was safe."

A strange paleness crept into Dolores's olive cheeks. She looked fixedly at the principal of St. Freda's.

"The—the money!" she faltered.

"Yes."

"But—but what has that to do with me?"

"It was taken—it went during the night," said Miss Penfold. "St. Freda's certainly was not entered from outside. Dolores, why do you not confess the truth?"

Dolores burst into a dry sob.

"I am telling the truth. I did not take it. I did not know it was missing. Oh, believe me!"

Miss Penfold shook her head.

"I cannot believe you," she said.

CHAPTER 20.

Guilty or Innocent?

THERE was a long silence in the room.

Miss Penfold sat cold and stern, her face very hard and pale. She did not believe Dolores; she could not believe her.

Dolores seemed to be stunned.

Her handsome, dusky face was pale and almost haggard. The terrible accusation had burst like a thunderbolt upon her.

She had been prepared to face her punishment for running away; she had expected that, and she was ready to be defiant, whatever was inflicted. But this——

This was disgrace—this was shame. The girl's brain seemed to reel as she thought of it.

She realised how she had placed herself under suspicion. Her flight, coinciding with the theft from the principal's desk, had made it inevitable that she should be suspected. And how was she to prove her innocence?

That was impossible.

She would be expelled from St. Freda's—as a thief!

And at the thought of it, the Spanish girl's stubborn pride broke down, and the tears came into her eyes and ran down her cheeks.

Miss Penfold watched her severely.

"Well, Dolores?" she said at length.

"I am innocent!"

"Come, come!"

"You will not believe me?"

"I cannot!"

"Oh, but I am innocent! You may search if you like; you will not find the money!" the Spanish girl exclaimed.

"You must be searched, Dolores, if you do not give up the money," said Miss Penfold. "Think, you foolish child! Even if you have parted with the money, it can be traced, and the theft brought home to you. I had, fortunately, not left any gold in the desk: there were two banknotes for five pounds each. One was taken. I suppose you are aware that banknotes are numbered? It will be quite easy for the police to trace the one you took, if you have parted with it."

"But I did not take it."

"Dolores!"

"I did not take it!"

The headmistress was silent.

Dolores sobbed, and then dashed her tears angrily away.

"I am innocent," she said. "I had no thought of taking money. I have money of my own, which I have saved—three or four pounds. You know my father sends me a great deal of money."

"I know it. But——"

"I did not need to take any. But I would have died rather than take it, if I had been starving!" exclaimed Dolores passionately. "Oh, it is wicked, wicked, to accuse me! You know that I did not take the money!"

Miss Penfold's cheeks burned.

"Dolores! How dare you speak to me like that!"

"How dare you accuse me of being a thief!" exclaimed Dolores. "I am not one; I would have died first! If the money is gone, someone else has taken it."

"It is impossible! I tell you there were two banknotes, and only one was taken. It is childish to suppose that a burglar would have taken one and not the other."

"He may not have seen the other," said Dolores.

"They were folded up together."

"I—I do not know what happened; I only know that I did not go to your desk."

"You went to my room."

"I had to go to the room, as it was the only window I could open."

"And you ask me to believe that you did not go to the desk? It is absurd, Dolores. You cannot expect me to believe you."

"I am speaking the truth."

Miss Penfold shook her head.

Dolores sobbed again. In the hard, unbelieving face before her now, she read what the rest would think of her. All St. Freda's would know—would believe—that she was a thief.

It was one thing to leave St. Freda's because she had too stubborn pride to bend to the restraints of discipline. It was quite another to g because she was a thief—because she was unfit for the other girls to speak to Dolores realised that.

The more she disliked St. Freda's, the more she despised the other girl there, the more bitterly humiliated she felt at the thought that they woul now despise her.

Despise her!

It made the blood flame in her cheeks to think of it. Dolly Carew woul despise her, and greedy little Milly Pratt, and even Enid Craven, the mea Enid, would be able to despise her now!

A dry sob shook Dolores.

With a sudden impulse she threw herself at Miss Penfold's feet, clasping the elder lady's dress with convulsive hands. Her white, tear-stained fac was turned up to the stern countenance of the St. Freda's Head.

"Oh, Miss Penfold, I am innocent—I am innocent!" she panted, her voic broken and husky. "Will you not believe me? It is the truth! Oh, it the truth! You have never known me to tell a lie, though I have been bu in other ways, Miss Penfold. I know I have done wrong, I can see it now but—but I am not a thief. Oh, believe me!"

The passionate outburst strangely moved Miss Penfold.

"If I could only believe you, Dolores!" she said, in a low voice.

"It is true—true!"

Miss Penfold hesitated.

In spite of herself, a feeling was growing within her that circumstance might have conspired to cast this black suspicion upon the Spanish girl.

She raised Dolores gently enough.

"Sit down, dear," she said quietly. "Let us talk this over. Cal yourself!"

"But you believe me?"

"I will try to believe you," said Miss Penfold, with a sigh. "Bu Dolores, the banknote was taken. That you no longer have it is nothing You may have passed it, or thrown it away after you were caught. Ca you give me any reason to suppose that someone else may have taken it Goodness knows, my only desire is to do justice in the matter!"

Dolores started.

"Ethel!"

Miss Penfold looked puzzled.

"Ethel! What do you mean?"

"Ethel Cleveland knows that I did not take it!" cried Dolores.

"What! How can Ethel Cleveland know anything about it!"

"Send for her; she will tell you," exclaimed Dolores triumphantly.

Miss Penfold looked very puzzled.

"Very well, I will send for her," he said. "But I really cannot se how a new girl at St. Freda's can throw any light upon the matter."

She touched a bell.

The maid who answered it was told to fetch Ethel, and in a couple o minutes Ethel Cleveland appeared at the door of Miss Penfold's study.

"Come in, my dear!" said Miss Penfold, as Cousin Ethel hesitated "You may sit down. Dolores thinks that your evidence may be of som use to her. It appears that you know something of her movements las night."

Cousin Ethel coloured.

"Yes," she said quietly.

Her glance rested upon Dolores a moment.. She had not expected th

Spanish girl to draw her into the matter. But she had no thought but to tell the exact truth. Dolores understood her look, and broke out passionately.

"You do not understand, Ethel—you don't understand yet! I am accused of stealing a banknote from Miss Penfold's desk when I ran away last night."

Ethel gave a start of horror

"Stealing a banknote?" she said faintly.

"Yes."

"Impossible!"

"I hope it is impossible," said Miss Penfold quietly. "That is what we are to find out. Tell me what you know about the matter, Ethel."

Cousin Ethel glanced at Dolores.

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed the Spanish girl eagerly. "Tell Miss Penfold all about the matter—everything as it happened!"

"Very well."

Cousin Ethel told what she knew, quietly and calmly.

"Dolores had told me that she was going to run away from the school. I tried to persuade her not to do so; and I stayed awake to stop her if she should go."

"Why did you not tell me?" said Miss Penfold gently.

"I had promised to say nothing."

"Stay a moment!" exclaimed Miss Penfold, remembering Enid Craven's visit to her the previous evening. "Did anyone else know of this?"

"Yes. Another girl heard us speaking of it."

"Was it Enid Craven?"

Ethel looked surprised.

"Yes, Miss Penfold."

"Very well. You may go on."

"I heard Dolores leaving the dormitory, and followed her," said Ethel. "She left the school by the window of this room, and I followed her into the grounds. I persuaded her to return, and we went back to bed. I fell asleep, and then—then Dolores must have left the dormitory again, and I did not hear her."

"I waited till you were asleep," said Dolores.

Ethel nodded.

"But what does this prove for you, Dolores?" asked Miss Penfold quietly.

"Do you not see?" exclaimed Dolores eagerly. "Ethel followed me into the grounds. Did I go to Miss Penfold's desk, Ethel?"

Ethel shook her head.

"Certainly not. You would not have had time before I saw you here. Besides, you had left the door of the room open all the time."

"And I had gone out, intending to leave then!" exclaimed Dolores hurriedly. "If I had wanted to go to the desk, Miss Penfold, I should have gone then, when I first tried to leave the school. I did not know that Ethel was following me."

Miss Penfold was silent.

Certainly there was a great deal in what the Spansh girl said.

If she had taken the banknote for the expenses of her flight, she would certainly have taken it when she left the house the first time. Yet it might have been an afterthought. Miss Penfold's mind wavered, but in spite of herself Dolores' earnestness was impressing her. She was no longer certain of the Spanish girl's guilt.

"Was anyone else awake at this time?" she asked slowly.

Dolores shook her head.

"I think not."

"But, my child, if you did not take the note from my desk someone el must have done so," said Miss Penfold. "Someone else must have be up last night."

Cousin Ethel gave a start.

"Dolores!" she exclaimed breathlessly. "You remember the light—t match that was struck in this room while we were in the grounds?"

Then Dolores clasped her hands.

"Yes, yes! I remember! Whoever struck that match was the thief!

CHAPTER 21.

On the Track.

MISS PENFOLD looked at the two girls in surprise. Her look demanded an explanation, and Ethel hastily explained.

The headmistress listened with deep attention.

"Then someone else was downstairs while you were in the garden?" she said.

"Yes."

"You did not see her?"

"No."

"Have you any idea who it was?"

"Not at all," said Cousin Ethel, with a shake of the head. "I saw nothing but the match burning for a few seconds."

Miss Penfold compressed her lips.

"This is a very strange story," she said. "I will not say that I believe Dolores to be innocent; that would be saying too much. But my belief in her guilt has been strongly shaken, and I shall not act hastily in the matter. Dolores, you will go to your cubicle, and remain there for the rest of the day, while I consider the matter. Ethel, you will say nothing of what has passed in this room. This is not a matter that I wish to have discussed in the school."

"I understand, Miss Penfold."

"I can rely upon your discretion, I am sure. You may go."

Cousin Ethel left the principal's study, with a smile of encouragement to the Spanish girl as she went.

Ethel went out, with her brain almost in a whirl. The happenings of the last two days had been very rapid and very strange. Little had she dreamed of finding herself in the midst of such a whirl of events when she came to St. Freda's. Of one thing she was quite sure—Dolores was innocent. Little as she knew of the Spanish girl, she was certain that Dolores was incapable of a despicable action, wild and wayward as she might be.

The other girls gathered round Ethel at once as she came out into the broad, flagged passage, curious to know why she had been sent for, and what had passed in Miss Penfold's study.

But Ethel would not satisfy their curiosity.

"Is Dolores going to be expelled?" asked Belle Hilton.

"I don't know."

"Was Miss Penfold very angry?"

"What did Dolores say?"

"Why did Miss Penfold send for you?"

"What did you say?"

Cousin Ethel laughed.

"I am so sorry, but I have nothing to say," she replied.

"Nonsense!" said Belle, in her decided way. "What are you keeping secrets for?"

"I am not keeping secrets, but——"

"Stuff!"

"Yes, stuff and rats!" said Dolly Carew. "Go ahead, Ethel!"

But Ethel shook her head.

The girls, though considerably surprised and somewhat exasperated, let her alone at last.

Cousin Ethel walked away under the elms, to think the matter over alone.. Enid Craven followed her there.

"Ethel Cleveland!" she said suddenly.

Ethel looked round. She had not seen Enid following her, and she was not pleased.

"Yes. What is it?" she said, curtly enough.

"I wish you would tell me what Miss Penfold wanted you for. What did Dolores say? Was Miss Penfold angry with her?"

"I suppose so."

"About her running away?"

"Probably."

"And—and anything else?"

Ethel looked at Enid quickly. The girl's face was very white, and there was an eagerness there was no mistaking in her look and tone. Did Enid know anything of that accusation which had been made in the seclusion of Miss Penfold's study? Had she been listening again? Ethel's lip curled.

"Anything else!" she repeated. "What else? What else was there for Miss Penfold to be angry about?"

Enid coloured.

"Oh, I—I don't know!" she stammered. "But——"

"You have been listening!" said Ethel.

"Then—then there is something else?" cried Enid.

"If you have listened, you know—but if you do not know, I shall not tell you," said Ethel. "It is mean to listen—contemptible!"

"I have not listened."

"Then how do you know—I mean, why do you ask me that question? What can you know about it?"

"Nothing, but——"

"Well, I have nothing to tell you," said Ethel. And she turned away.

Enid Craven did not follow her.

Ethel sat down upon a seat under the shadow of the elms. The sunset was bright on the grass in the Close. She could hear the merry girlish voices as she sat there, but she paid them no heed. She was thinking.

Dolores was in her cubicle now—a prisoner—waiting her doom. That she would have to leave St. Freda's seemed certain, but that she should leave in disgrace, expelled as a thief—that was the worst, and it might be possible to save her from that. Who was the thief? That it was not Dolores, Ethel felt certain. It was the unknown person who had struck the match in Miss Penfold's study the previous night, the flicker of which the two girls had seen from the darkness of the Close.

But who was that?

Ethel did not know much as yet of the girls of St. Freda's, but when she thought of the fresh, healthy faces, she found it hard to credit that there might be a thief among them. She started as a new thought came into her mind.

The theft had been so well-timed for suspicion to fall upon Dolores—it

looked as if the thief knew that the Spanish girl was about to leave t school, and laid plans accordingly. Who knew it besides herself?

Ethel compressed her lips as she thought of Enid Craven.

Enid had known it, and, contrary to Ethel's expectation, had not betraye the Spanish girl to the Head.

Enid was the one girl at St. Freda's whom Ethel would have been mo ready to doubt than any other.

And what did Enid's mysterious hints as to the "something else" Mi Penfold might be angry about mean? She knew that Dolores was charge with something more than merely running away from school.

Like a flash it came to Ethel.

In the agitation the thought brought to her she rose and began to wa up and down under the trees, her face pale and excited.

"Yes, yes!" she exclaimed, unconsciously speaking aloud. "It was she

"Ethel!"

Ethel turned her head. Dolly Carew was looking at her with wide-ope eyes of astonishment. Ethel coloured.

"What is the matter, Ethel?" exclaimed Dolly. "I came to look f you! We want you to play rounders! What is the matter?"

"Nothing!" said Ethel.

"Well, are you coming?"

"I would rather go for a walk," said Ethel, "if you will come. Wi you? I have not seen the village yet, and—and I want to go the particularly."

Dolly nodded.

"Certainly!" she said. "I'll call out to Belle."

And five minutes later the two girls were walking down the leafy la to Elmhurst.

Dolly kept up an incessant chatter all the way. She told Cousin Eth everything she knew about the locality, about the footpaths and the wood about the surroundings of St. Freda's, and was so interested in her ow conversation that she hardly noticed that Ethel said scarcely a word.

Ethel was busy with her own thoughts.

She felt that she possessed the clue to the mysterious happenings at S Freda's, and she alone. It was not pleasant to her to make any investig tion into the matter, but Dolores was accused—Dolores was in danger being branded as a thief. To bring the guilt home to the right person w Ethel's duty if she could do it.

"And this is the village," said Dolly at last.

Ethel, as a matter of fact, had hardly heard a word that the volati Dolly had been saying all the way, but she nodded, with a smile.

"Where does Mrs. Scruton live?" she asked.

"Mrs. Scruton!" ejaculated Dolly.

"Yes, the dressmaker, you know."

"Yes, but——"

"Where does she live?"

"Look here," said Dolly, "you're not going to Mrs. Scruton."

"Why not?"

"Because she's not a nice woman. She over-charges fearfully, for on thing, and then she encourages girls with money to run into debt, an piles all sorts of things on the bill," said Dolly. "Miss Penfold doesn like us to go to her. That is why Enid was so scared."

"I understand. But I am not going to her as a customer."

"Then why——"

"I want to see her."

Dolly looked puzzled.

"Blessed if I know why you should want to see her," she said. "She's not a nice person to see. She's treating Enid very shabbily, I think. Of course, she let Enid get into debt, thinking she would get the money from her people. It would be only what she deserves if she were never paid at all."

"But I want to see her."

"Oh, I suppose you have a message from Enid!" said Dolly. "This way! How dense of me not to think of that!"

"It is not that, but——"

"Oh, I won't ask any questions!" said Dolly, laughing. "I'm not interested in Enid's debts and difficulties. She is lucky to have a good-natured goose like you to help her out of them. This is Mrs. Scruton's house."

She stopped at the garden gate of a tasteless-looking, red-brick villa—one of the few modern houses in the village of Elmhurst. A brass plate on the door announced that it was the dwelling of Mrs. Scruton, and that Mrs. Scruton was a "modiste," and prepared to make up ladies own materials.

"I'll wait for you here," said Dolly. "I'll come in if you like."

"Oh, not at all! Wait here, there's a dear!"

"Right-ho!" said Dolly cheerfully.

And Cousin Ethel went up to the door alone.

CHAPTER 22.

Ethel's Suspicions Are Confirmed.

A SLATTERNLY-LOOKING servant answered her ring, and Cousin Ethel was admitted to a shabby hall. Her heart was beating fast now. She was undertaking this in the hope of clearing Dolores; but now that she was fairly embarked she began to feel a little afraid. But she did not allow her courage to sink.

"What name, please, miss?"

"Mrs. Scruton does not know my name," said Ethel, "but say it is someone from St. Freda's."

"Yes, miss."

Ethel was shown into a room in which the signs of dressmaking were pretty evident everywhere. The windows were tightly closed, so that the atmosphere was extremely stuffy, and that, added to the odour of cloth, made Ethel feel quite faint for a moment. There was a looking-glass over the mantelpiece in a hideous oak frame, and the furniture glistened with cheap varnish. In the bay window was a stand with an "art" pot of a colour that would have made an artist shudder, with a fern in it which seemed to be in the final stages of consumption.

Ethel sat down on one of the shiny, creaking chairs, and waited. She had not long to wait. A stout woman of uncertain age, with a red nose and very red cheeks, entered the room with a sort of sweeping motion. Ethel did not know that the redness of the nose was caused by drinking, of that of the cheeks by rouge; but she felt an instinctive dislike of the woman the moment she saw her. She felt that Miss Penfold was quite right in not wishing her girls to come into contact with Mrs. Scruton.

There was a very agreeable smile upon the disagreeable face now, however. Mrs. Scruton knew that Ethel must be a new girl, and she was very ready to welcome and make much of a new customer.

"Good-afternoon, my dear!" she said effusively. "I hope you have t
to stay for a cup of tea. Now——"

"No, thank you!" said Ethel hurriedly. "I—I am pressed for time
have not come on my own account really, but about—about a certain ma
in connection with Enid Craven."

Mrs. Scruton smiled.

"Ah, the change!" she said. "Quite right! But I told Miss Cra
that I should send her the change when I had placed the note in my ban

Ethel started.

She had come there to learn the truth, half afraid that she was de
wrong. She had remembered how Enid Craven had gone out immedia
after morning school, and how strangely white and how touchy she
been. The suspicion had forced itself into Ethel's mind that Enid's o
of half-a-sovereign on account had been refused by Mrs. Scruton, and t
the foolish girl had been driven to a desperate step to find the money,
had thrown the odium upon another.

But Ethel was startled at having her half-formed suspicion so sudde
and fully confirmed.

"The—the note!" she stammered.

"Yes. I do not keep so much money in the house," said Mrs. Scrut
with a smile; "but I shall place the note in the bank to-day, and will s
the change up to the school, unless Miss Craven prefers to call for it."

Ethel shivered.

"You have not yet placed the note in the bank, Mrs. Scruton?"

"I have not been out this afternoon yet," said Mrs. Scruton, "but th
is ample time before the bank closes. It is open till six in Elmhurst."

"You—you must not take the note there," said Ethel hastily.

Mrs. Scruton looked astonished.

"Why not?"

"Because—because—— Oh, did you not think it strange that E
should have so much money?" exclaimed Ethel.

The woman's face hardened.

"She told me her aunt had sent her the banknote," she replied. "
course, I believed her. Do you mean to say that the note did not bel
to her?"

"It did not."

"Then she stole it?"

Ethel flushed.

"Never mind that; but it would be better for you to take the note
Miss Penfold, and explain how you came by it. I know that Enid had
money last evening, and she was very much afraid of what you would
It is you who have caused her to do this wicked thing."

Mrs. Scruton threw open the door with a theatrical gesture.

"Leave my house!"

Ethel walked down the garden path and joined Dolly. Her heart
beating hard; she felt as if she had just left the den of an ogress.

Dolly looked at her flushed face.

"Had a row with Scruton?" she asked.

Ethel laughed.

"Not exactly, dear. Let us go away."

"Is she going to be easy with Enid?" asked Dolly. "Surely the h
sovereign will keep the Shylock quiet for a time, anyway."

Ethel did not reply. She did not wish to expose Enid's falsehoods to
companion.

That Enid had lied recklessly was certain; but her greatest folly was

verlooking the fact that a note, being numbered, could be traced if Miss Penfold chose to call in the aid of the police. But the foolish girl had been oo frightened and confused to even think of that, in all probability.

Ethel was very silent during the walk home to St. Freda's.

That did not matter to Dolly, however, who talked enough for two. When he arrived at the school, Ethel went as soon as she could to the dormitory, nd looked in at Dolores' cubicle. Dolores was not there, but Ethel caught ight of her in the window-seat at the end of the dormitory, and hastened o join her.

Dolores looked at her with a faint smile.

"You will still speak to me?" she exclaimed.

"Why not?"

"Then you do not believe that I am a thief?"

"I never believed it for a moment," said Ethel quietly.

Dolores threw her arms round the English girl and hugged her, and issed her upon both cheeks.

"How good and kind you are!" she exclaimed. "How unlike me! If I ad had you for a friend when I came here, I should have done much better han I have."

"Nonsense!" said Ethel, smiling.

"But it is true! I—I wish I were to stay at St. Freda's now," said Dolores. "I have been thinking, and this—this horrible thing that has appened has seemed to clear my brain. I wish—oh, I wish I had not run way last night, Ethel!"

"I wish you had not, dear."

"And you tried to stop me, and I said I hated you," said Dolores; "but don't hate you, Ethel, I love you."

Ethel kissed her.

"You shall stay at St. Freda's, and we shall be great friends," she xclaimed.

Dolores shook her head.

"I cannot stay. Even if Miss Penfold forgave me for running away, he thinks I am a thief—and I cannot prove that I am innocent."

"But I can!" exclaimed Ethel triumphantly.

"What! You!"

"Yes."

"But how?" exclaimed Dolores, in astonishment. "How can you? Do ou know who the thief is? Have you found out?"

"Yes, I have found out."

"And who is it?"

"Enid Craven."

"Oh!"

"Miss Penfold will know it soon," said Ethel softly. "You will be leared. But—but I hope Miss Penfold will not be very hard on Enid. The silly girl was frightened into it by a bad woman—though it was very, ery wicked of her to let it fall upon you."

"But—but you are sure?"

"Quite sure."

"Then you have saved me, Ethel!"

Ethel kissed her again. Dolores did not speak, but she sat with her rm about Ethel's neck, her head on Ethel's shoulders, and the proud, dark yes were dim with tears. Dolores was crying.

CHAPTER 23.

Light at Last.

MISS PENFOLD sat upright in the high-backed chair in her study, and the high back of the chair was not stiffer than Miss Penfold. Miss Penfold's face looked as hard as the oak of the table beside her. Her lips were in a thin, hard line. Miss Penfold was receiving a visitor, a person of whom she did not approve, which was the reason why Miss Penfold seemed to be suddenly turned into stone.

Mrs. Scruton looked very uneasy when she was shown in. She had intended to carry matters with a high hand, but the calm, cold stillness of Miss Penfold seemed to take the bravado out of the stout, stagey woman.

Mrs. Scruton hesitated, and was lost. Her manner was unintentionally humble as she entered. But for the artificial colouring on her cheeks she would have looked pale.

Miss Penfold rose to her feet, but she did not ask her visitor to be seated. Her glance met Mrs. Scruton's like a rapier.

"You weren't expecting me?" said Mrs. Scruton, with an uneasy laugh.

"No."

"You may be glad I came," said the visitor spitefully. "I've come to ask you if this banknote belongs to you."

And she laid a five-pound note upon the table.

Then Miss Penfold's calmness was disturbed a little. She could not avoid giving a slight start as she looked at the note.

Her eyes sought the number at once.

"Yes," she said, "that note belong to me. It was—was lost last night. Thank you very much for bringing it to me! Did you find it?"

Mrs. Scruton smiled unpleasantly.

"It was paid to me in the way of business," she said.

"Paid to you?"

"Yes."

"By whom?"

"By a girl belonging to this school."

"What was the girl's name?"

"Craven—Enid Craven."

Again Miss Penfold started. That was not the name she had expected to hear—though she could not imagine, either, that Dolores had paid the note to Mrs. Scruton.

"Miss Craven paid you this banknote?" she asked.

"Yes."

"When?"

"To-day—about half-past twelve."

"Why?"

"She owed me an account—for long enough, too; I had told her I should come to you for it," said Mrs. Scruton insolently. "If you don't teach your girls to pay their just debts, you can't expect——"

"We need not discuss that," said Miss Penfold. "I need not say that Miss Craven's debt to you was unknown to me. What was the amount?"

"Two pounds, and Enid Craven has my receipt for the money."

"Then you will be paid."

Mrs. Scruton was silent. She was glad to have the money, and yet she felt a sense of defeat. Miss Penfold laid two sovereigns upon the table and the visitor put them into her gaudy silver-chained purse.

"Why did you bring the note to me?" asked Miss Penfold abruptly.

"Because I had my doubts," said Mrs. Scruton. "If it was stolen——

"I did not say it was stolen," said Miss Penfold coldly. "Thank you very much for returning it. I don't think I need detain you longer."

"I——"

"Good-afternoon!"

And Mrs. Scruton, almost before she knew it, was being shown out by the trim maid. Mrs. Scruton had intended to simply crush Miss Penfold—to make sneering remarks on the conduct of a school where banknotes were stolen—to depart triumphant. Somehow, it had not worked out like that. She had a feeling of departing defeated; somehow or other, the victory was not to her.

And Mrs. Scruton shook the dust of St. Freda's from her feet in a very bad temper.

Miss Penfold looked at the note again, and locked it up in her desk. Then she rang the bell, and sent the maid for Dolores and Enid Craven.

Dolores was the first to arrive. She came in with a strange brightness in her face. Miss Penfold looked at her in surprise. It seemed as if the Spanish girl already knew what she was about to tell her.

"Dolores, I have discovered that it was not you who took the banknote from my desk," said Miss Penfold quietly.

"Yes, Miss Penfold."

"You look as if you knew it already, Dolores," said Miss Penfold, with a curious glance at the girl. "I need not say how glad I am that the discovery has been made, Dolores. I am very sorry that I suspected you."

Dolores looked down.

"It was my fault," she said, in a low voice. "If I had not run away, you would not have thought so."

"That is true."

"I—I did wrong," faltered Dolores. "I—I was very foolish and—and wicked. I—I am sorry that I ran away, Miss Penfold."

The headmistress of St. Freda's drew a deep breath.

This was a new line for Dolores to take. She had never expected those words of humble confession from the proud Spanish girl.

"You mean that, Dolores?"

"Yes, Miss Penfold. I—I did not see then as—as I do now," faltered Dolores. "Ethel has told me that—that—— Well, I am sorry."

"And I am very glad to hear you say so," said Miss Penfold. "Since your innocence is proved, Dolores, I am inclined to deal more gently with your escapade of last night—as you seem to realise yourself how serious it was. If I should allow you to remain at St. Freda's——"

"Oh, Miss Penfold——"

"Would you try to make a fresh start—to do better?"

Dolores clasped her hands.

"I will try—oh, I will try hard!"

Miss Penfold's face softened wonderfully.

"You will have the influence of a dear, goor girl to help you, Dolores," she said softly. "Make a friend of Ethel Cleveland, and you will never go far wrong."

"Yes—yes, I know it."

"Then——"

Miss Penfold paused as there was a tap at the door. Enid Craven came in, with a white, frightened face, her feet dragging unwillingly over the carpet.

She had seen Mrs. Scruton come and go, and she realised that she was lost. The wretched girl seemed hardly able to stand as she paused before the stern figure of the headmistress.

Miss Penfold's face was very stern.

"I have only a few words to say to you, Enid Craven," she said coldly. "Mrs. Scruton has returned to me the banknote you paid her. I know now who took it from my desk last night, and who tried to throw the blame of that wicked act upon Dolores!"

Enid gave a choked cry. Dolores's glance had been bitter and scornful, but it changed now to one of pity, and she threw her strong arm round Enid, who seemed to be about to sink to the floor. Enid hardly knew who was supporting her.

"You confess, Enid?" said Miss Penfold quietly.

"Yes," moaned Enid miserably. "I—I——"

"You knew that Dolores was going to run away, and you hoped that the blame of your action would fall upon her?"

"I—I thought it would not hurt her, as she was going away," said Enid, with dry lips. "I—I was afraid Mrs. Scruton would come to you, and—and I should be expelled. I—I was horribly afraid. Oh, I—I——"

"I shall not expel you," said Miss Penfold. "You will leave St. Freda's, of course, but I will spare you the disgrace. This matter need not be spoken of. Dolores, I am sure, will say nothing. You must pack your box to-night, Enid, and leave the school to-morrow morning. I will write to your parents and explain!"

Enid fell upon her knees.

"I—I dare not go home!" she moaned. "Oh, Miss Penfold, let me stay! I will never—never——"

"You cannot stay!"

Enid moaned again. Dolores's strong arm was round her. It was strange to see Dolores playing the protectress to the girl who had insulted and injured her. But that was the better and nobler side of the wayward nature.

"Miss Penfold, you have pardoned me," said Dolores hesitatingly. "Will you not give Enid a chance? She was frightened by that woman; she did not know how wicked she was. She will never do anything like it again—will you, Enid?"

"Oh, never, never—if Miss Penfold will let me stay."

The headmistress looked curiously at Dolores.

"Do you speak for Enid, Dolores?" she exclaimed. "You who were very nearly disgraced for life by her wicked action?"

"Yes," said Dolores.

Miss Penfold's face softened.

"Perhaps—perhaps I may forgive her," she said slowly. "If you can do so, I should. And if I believed that Enid really repented——"

"Oh, I do—I do!"

"I will take you at your word, Enid," said Miss Penfold. "I will give you another chance. And remember, too, that you owe it to the girl you have injured. You may go."

"Thank you, Miss Penfold," said Dolores quietly.

And Enid tottered from the room leaning upon the shoulder of the Spanish girl.

Ten minutes later Dolores rejoined Ethel Cleveland in the dormitory. Cousin Ethel looked up quickly.

"Is it all right?" she asked.

Dolores ran into her arms and hugged her.

"Yes, it is all right," she said; "and Miss Penfold has forgiven Enid, and we are to keep it a secret. I am sorry for Enid. She is such a coward. I don't like her, but I am glad she is to stay."

"And you?"

"I shall not leave St. Freda's. I don't want to leave St. Freda's now," said Dolores, with her arm round Ethel's waist, and looking fondly at the English girl. "We are going to be good friends, Ethel."

Ethel smiled brightly.

"Yes, indeed we are," she said. "Chums, Dolores."

And chums they were from that day.

CHAPTER 24.

Nothing to Say.

"TELL us all about it, Ethel."

"About what?"

"It!" said Milly Pratt.

Cousin Ethel smiled.

"I have nothing to tell you," she said.

"You should not keep secrets," said Milly, waving a fat forefinger at Ethel. "It is—er—secretive to keep secrets."

Ethel laughed.

"But I have nothing to tell you."

"But something has happened," urged Claire Pomfret.

"Yes; but——"

"But you don't want to tell us?" said Emily North.

Ethel coloured a little.

"Not exactly that," she said. "But there is no need to talk about it, is there? It is not my business."

"Which is a polite way of telling us that it is not ours, either," said Claire, laughing. "Well, perhaps it isn't. Don't ask questions, Milly."

"Nonsense!" said Milly.

"Let's ask Dolores," suggested Emily.

But there was a general pause.

The Spanish girl was not one to be questioned with ease. The almost haughty reserve of her nature had broken down to Ethel, but to no one else. But the curiosity of the St. Freda's girls to know what had passed in Miss Penfold's study was too great. A group of them surrounded Dolores as she came towards Cousin Ethel.

"Dolores!"

"What has happened?"

"Are you going to leave?"

"What is it about--Enid?"

"Won't you tell us, Dolores?"

Dolores's black eyes shone for a moment.

"No," she said.

"Oh, Dolores!"

"Don't bother!"

Even Milly Pratt could not ask questions after that. Cousin Ethel and Dolores were left to themselves. The girls went to look for Enid Craven. She, at least, could be depended upon to tell them what she knew—at least, so they thought. Enid was well known to be a lover of tattle.

It was not easy to find Enid. But she was discovered at last in her cubicle. She was lying on her bed, and she turned a red and tear-stained face to the girls when they came in. The rims of her eyelids were very red, and her face, never beautiful, was more unprepossessing than usual.

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Claire. "What is the matter, Enid.

"Nothing," said Enid.

"What are you crying about?"

"Nothing!"

"What has Miss Penfold said to you?"

"Nothing!"

And Enid turned her face to the wall.

The girls were amazed. Even Enid was silent; and Milly Pratt exclaimed:

"What are we to do about it?"

"Let us mind our own business," suggested Claire Pomfret, who was somewhat given to sarcasm, especially at Milly's expense.

Milly sniffed. But that was what had to be done. That Dolores had been under an accusation, and that she had been proved to be innocent, the girls knew from Miss Penfold. More they were not to know."

Dolores made a gesture of disdain as the girls left her with Ethel.

"They are very curious," said Ethel. "But it is natural."

"Oh, it is insufferable!" said Dolores, with a curl of her red lip. "But, there," she added, with a sudden change of tone, "I am not going to be impatient any more. I hope the wretched affair will be forgotten; but I suppose it will be a long time before they allow me to forget that I tried to run away from school. I am going to try and like Miss Penfold."

Ethel smiled.

"You will succeed if you try," she said. "Miss Penfold is very kind. Have you seen Enid lately?"

Dolores gave a shrug of her shapely shoulders.

"No; and I do not wish to. I cannot bear the sight of her."

"She must be feeling very unhappy."

"Let her!"

"Dolores!"

"Well, it is not more than she deserves," said Dolores. "What does it matter? You must not waste your thought upon her."

"I was just thinking of her," said Ethel quietly. "After all, she is very weak and foolish, and—and——"

Dolores laughed a little bitterly.

"And you are feeling concerned about her?" she exclaimed. "You want to make a fuss of her—that bad girl, and my enemy?"

"I want to see her, certainly."

"Don't see her. You should not speak to her again. You would not, if you were a true friend to me!" exclaimed Dolores passionately.

"Dolores!"

Ethel's tone was very quiet, but the colour had flushed into her cheeks. Dolores looked at her with flashing eyes for a moment, then the big black eyes softened, and the proud lip trembled.

"I am sorry, Ethel," she said, in a low voice. "I—I won't speak like that again. Let us go and look for Enid."

"I will," said Ethel. "But you——"

"I will come, too."

There was no denying Dolores.

After her passionate outburst she was all repentance. Nothing would satisfy her but finding Enid and ministering to her at once; and Cousin Ethel did not say her impulsive friend nay.

"I think she went to lie down," said Ethel. "Let us see."

They ascended to the dormitory. The crowd of inquirers came out of Enid's cubicle as they reached it.

"She won't tell you anything," said Milly Pratt.

Cousin Ethel smiled, and passed into Enid's room with Dolores. The

girls dispersed, with the exception of Milly. Milly was curious, and she had no great scruples in gratifying her curiosity. She slipped into the next cubicle, where it was quite easy to hear what was said in Enid's room, unless the voices were purposely lowered. The partitions between the rooms did not reach to the ceiling. But Milly was not destined to hear anything of great interest to her.

"Enid!" said Ethel softly.

Enid Craven did not move. She lay with her face to the wall, her hair all lose, one arm thrown over her head.

"Enid!"

She stirred at last, and turned her rimmed eyes upon the two girls.

"What have you come for?" she exclaimed angrily. "Miss Penfold has pardoned me, and you can let me alone!"

Ethel coloured.

"Did you think that either of us had come to reproach you, Enid?" she said.

Enid's look was resentful and uncompromising.

"What have you come for, then?" she exclaimed.

"Because we want to help you."

"I don't want to be helped," said Enid sullenly.

"Yes, you do," said Ethel brightly. "You have a headache, dear, and you would like your forehead bathed, for one thing. Then you would like to see that Dolores has no ill-will towards you."

Enid looked at them doubtfully for some moments, and burst into miserable tears.

"I'm the most wretched girl in the world!" she sobbed.

"Don't cry!" said Ethel softly. "It is all over now. Let me——"

Enid made no resistance. Her head was indeed throbbing, and her forehead was hot and dry. Her tears were shed, leaving her eyelids aching and hot. Cousin Ethel's gentle touch was like balm to her.

Dolores stood looking on. There was a disdainful look upon her dark, handsome face at first, and a puzzled expression, as if she never would understand Ethel. The Spanish girl could understand pardoning a defeated enemy. But this she could not understand.

But her expression softened as the minutes wore away—softened till the big tears stood in her eyes. There was a sound in the next cubicle. Milly Pratt had gone on her way in disgust. There was nothing for her to listen to here.

"Letter for you, Ethel!" said Milly Pratt.

It was a bright, fresh morning, and Cousin Ethel had come in from a walk in the grounds with Dolores before breakfast.

Milly Pratt always knew when there was a letter for anybody. She always knew when anybody wrote a letter, or received one, or expected one. She was especially well-informed about postcards, and knew what was written on them, as a rule, before the recipients did.

There was a rack for letters at the end of the dining-room, where the girls' correspondence was put, to be taken down themselves. Milly always spent some time there after a visit of the postman, when the letters were put up. Milly was interested in everybody's business but her own.

"Letter for you."

"Where is it, Milly?"

"In the rack," said Milly. "I would have brought it to you, but letters have to be opened in the presence of the Form-mistress. That's one of the rules."

Ethel went to take the letter. Miss Tyrrell was in the room, and the

maids were bringing in the breakfast. Miss Tyrrell responded very kindly to Ethel's "Good-morning!" She was beginning to like the new girl very much, as indeed most of the occupants of St. Freda's were.

The Form-mistress looked at all letters received by the girls, and they had to be opened in her presence, which was a precaution against clandestine correspondence of any sort.

But that did not always prevent unknown communication with the outside world, even at St. Freda's and under the careful eyes of Miss Penfold.

Ethel's eyes brightened as she took down the letter. It was in the small and elegant caligraphy of her cousin, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the Fourth Form of St. Jim's.

Dolores looked at her a little sadly.

"That is a letter from a relation?" she asked.

"Yes; from my cousin."

"Ah, you have a cousin?"

"More than one," said Ethel, smiling. "This is from Arthur, whom I have mentioned to you. Arthur is a tremendous swell, but one of the kindest fellows in the world. I hope you will see him, Dolores, and I am sure you will like him."

CHAPTER 25.

A Letter from D'Arcy.

DOLORES nodded without answering.

She seldom had letters herself; her parents were far away, and seldom wrote. She had no relatives in England. It gave her a wistful feeling to see that letter in Cousin Ethel's hands. She wondered what Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was like. She did not foresee then what exceedingly good acquaintances they were to become, or what curious results were to follow.

Ethel smiled as she read the letter:

"Study 6, School House, St. Jim's.

"Dear Ethel,—We are playing a match with the New House to-morrow (Saturday) afternoon. Would you care to come and see it? It will be rather a good match. I am playing for the School House.

"I am sure you will come, like a dear girl, and so I shall come over and fetch you in a trap. If I am not to come, send a wire, because I've got special early leave from Lathom, so as to get over to St. Freda's in time to catch you when you leave your lessons.

"It will be a good match, and I think you will enjoy seeing it.

"Your affectionate cousin,

"ARTHUR.

"P.S.—It will be a very good match.

"P.P.S.—Perhaps you might care to bring a friend."

Dolores looked at Cousin Ethel as she laughed.

Ethel looked up and met her eyes, her own sparkling with fun.

"Will you read the letter, Dolores?" she asked.

"May I?"

"I want you to."

Dolores read the letter, and smiled.

"Will you go?" she said.

"If Miss Penfold will give me leave, certainly," said Ethel; "and in that case, Dolores, will you come with me?"

"Oh, I should love to!"

Ethel squeezed her hand.

"I will go and ask Miss Penfold at once. It will be jolly at St. Jim's, Dolores; the boys are so good and kind. The football match will be worth watching, too, as I suppose Figgins will be playing for the New House—I mean," said Ethel, colouring a little, "it will be a junior match, but the play is very good indeed!"

And Cousin Ethel went to Miss Penfold's study at once. She found the headmistress of St. Freda's there, and Miss Penfold greeted her with a kindly smile.

Ethel showed her the letter.

"May I go, Miss Penfold?" she asked.

The principal read the letter.

"Certainly," she said. "But what friend would you wish to take?"

"Dolores."

Miss Penfold looked at her.

"Dolores Pelham?"

"Yes, please, Miss Penfold."

"I have no objection," said the head of St. Freda's, after a pause. "So you have made a special friend of Dolores, Ethel?"

"Yes," said Ethel.

"And you like her?"

"Very much."

"I am sure your friendship will be good for her, at all events," said Miss Penfold. "Yes, you may certainly go."

"Thank you, Miss Penfold!"

And Cousin Ethel left the study with a very happy face. Pleasant as she was finding her surroundings at St. Freda's, she was glad enough at the prospect of seeing again all her old friends at St. Jim's, and glad, too, to introduce Dolores to them. And during morning lessons in the big school-room, both Ethel and Dolores were looking forward keenly to the afternoon, and listening for the sound of wheels in the Close.

CHAPTER 26.

The Runaway.

THAT Ethel Cleveland's cousin was coming after morning lessons to take Ethel away to St. Jim's for the afternoon was known to St. Freda's. Naturally, the interest in the matter was great. Under cover of lessons, Ethel was asked all sorts of questions about Arthur Augustus—what he was like, whether he was nice, and so forth—and Ethel more than once drew a disapproving glance from Miss Tyrrell by speaking in class.

But she could hardly refuse to do so, when she was spoken to almost incessantly. She told all she could of Arthur Augustus; quite enough to increase the interest the girls felt in him.

D'Arcy of St. Jim's would have been flattered if he had known how his coming to St. Freda's was looked for.

As a rule, the girls' visitors were relatives, and generally ancient and respectable relatives; and however kind and affectionate uncles and aunts might be, they had not the same interest as a young and handsome cousin of course. Claire Pomfret had been a great heroine once when her brother a midshipman in the Navy, came to see her; but Arthur Augustus seemed likely to have a greater vogue than even Midshipman Pomfret.

When morning classes were dismissed, Ethel glanced out into the Close.

But there was no sign yet of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. The distance by road was considerable, and D'Arcy had said that he was coming in a trap.

But dinner was scarcely over in the big dining-room when there was a sound of wheels.

Ethel started a little.

"It is the little cousin," said Dolores, with a smile.

Ethel laughed.

"Arthur is not so little," she said. "Yes, I think it is he."

The girls filed out of the dining-room, and Ethel and Dolores stepped out of the great door. A trap with a handsome horse was standing outside, and beside the horse Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was standing.

He raised his hat in his graceful way to Ethel.

Then he came up the steps.

"You will be able to come, deah gal?" he exclaimed.

"Oh, yes!" said Ethel brightly.

"Good!"

There was a crowd of girls creeping round the door and from the hall window as D'Arcy was introduced to Dolores. Dolores' black eyes gleamed upon him, and then drooped. Whether she liked her cousin or not Ethel could not tell, but Dolores met him with a grave Spanish courtesy that was very like D'Arcy's own grand manner.

"He is handsome," murmured Claire Pomfret, from the edge of the door.

"I like his nose," said Emily North.

"He is beautifully dressed."

"And what a dandy!"

"Ethel is lucky!"

"I don't see what there is in Ethel Cleveland to make that nice boy come over to see her," Enid Craven said.

Quite unconscious of the remarks of the St. Freda's girls, D'Arcy chatted cheerfully to the two girls on the schoolhouse steps. He manifested great pleasure when he heard that Dolores was the friend Ethel had selected to accompany her to St. Jim's.

"It will be weally delightful," said D'Arcy, in his most gallant manner. "You are weally confewwin' a gweat honah upon us, Miss Pelham."

And a ripple of mirth ran through the girls behind the door at D'Arcy's beautiful accent.

"Isn't he nice?" murmured Emily.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hush! He will hear you!"

But D'Arcy was quite unconscious.

"Are you girls weady to start?" he asked. "It's a pwetty long dwive to St. Jim's, you know, and the kick-off is wathah early to-day."

"The what?" said Dolores.

"The kick-off, deah gal. We are playin' a footer match, you know. I suppose you know football?"

"I have never seen a match," said Dolores.

D'Arcy's eyes opened in surprise.

"Bai Jove!"

"It is played with a ball, like cricket, I think?" Dolores remarked, and so gravely that even Ethel could not tell whether she were making fun of D'Arcy or not.

"Yaas," said Arthur Augustus, a little puzzled. "It is certainly played with a ball, Miss Pelham, but—but not much like cwicket. It is a vewy diffewent ball. But you will see it at St. Jim's. If you are weady——"

"Five minutes," said Ethel.

"I will wait, with pleasure, deah gal."

Arthur Augustus settled down to wait for a quarter of an hour. But Ethel was as good as her word, and in five minutes she came down in her pretty coat and hat, which made her look more charming than ever. But it is to be feared that D'Arcy was not all eyes to look at his cousin, as usual. Dolores' dark, beautiful face contrasted with Ethel's fair skin and blue eyes, and Dolores looked very beautiful, and several times it seemed that Arthur Augustus could not take his eyes off her.

That was D'Arcy's way.

The number of times he had been in love his friends had given up counting. D'Arcy's love affairs, of course, were not of a serious character; he was a very nice boy, and there was nothing whatever precocious about him. His love-making consisted wholly of doleful looks, polite attentions, and blushes. Cousin Ethel, who knew the symptoms—having herself once been the cause of similar ones—smiled amusedly.

"Well, we are ready, Arthur," she said.

"Yaas, deah gal."

D'Arcy handed the two girls into the trap. Then he mounted himself, and gathered up the reins, and turned the horse under the fire of at least forty pairs of bright eyes, all of which he was quite unconscious of.

D'Arcy was a good driver.

He "tooled" the trap out of the gates of St. Freda's in fine style, and they went rattling down the broad, white country road.

It was a keen and fine afternoon, and the cheeks of the two girls were glowing with health and happiness.

D'Arcy beamed upon them with his most genial smiles when he was not attending to the horse, which was rather fresh.

"We shall soon be at St. Jim's at this wate," he remarked. "Would eithah of you care to dwive?"

Cousin Ethel, who understood what a mental sacrifice that question entailed, shook her head.

"Oh, no, Arthur!" she said.

D'Arcy turned his eyeglass upon Dolores.

"Would you, Miss Pelham?"

"Yes," said Dolores.

D'Arcy did not move a muscle of his face. When he made the offer he was prepared for the worst.

"Pway take my seat deah gal," he said.

Dolores took the reins.

Arthur Augustus settled down beside Cousin Ethel.

"Bai Jove, your fwiend can dwive!" he remarked.

"Yes, it appears so," said Ethel.

"I say," said Arthur Augustus, lowering his voice. "I—I say, what a stunnin' gal your fwiend is!"

Ethel smiled.

"She is indeed," she said.

"Have you known her long?"

"Only while I have been at St. Freda's—less than a fortnight."

"But you are gweat chums?"

"Oh, yes, great chums!" said Ethel.

"I suppose you will be often bwingin' her ovah to St. Jim's when you come?" D'Arcy asked, extremely diplomatically, as he thought.

Cousin Ethel laughed merrily.

"Ha, ha, ha! Oh, my poor Arthur!"

D'Arcy flushed crimson.

"Weally, Ethel, deah girl——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus took off his eyeglass and polished it. He could think of nothing else to do for the moment. He was quite surprised to see that Cousin Ethel was not a whit hoodwinked by his diplomacy.

"You see, deah girl——" he murmured feebly.

But Cousin Ethel only laughed, and D'Arcy's voice trailed away. His colour was of a very fine crimson by this time. The trap was bowling along, and the Spanish girl looked back to see what was the cause of the laughter. D'Arcy coloured yet more deeply under her glance.

"Bai Jove!" he exclaimed suddenly. "Look aftah that boundah of a horse, you know. If he gets the bit between his teeth——"

"Oh, I can manage him!" said Dolores.

"Yaas, wathah! But——"

D'Arcy half rose.

As a matter of fact, the horse was giving Dolores some trouble now. He was very fresh and skittish, and he had felt a weaker hand on the reins. The girl pulled hard to keep him in. From a turn in the road ahead of them came the toot-toot of an approaching motor.

"Hold him in!" cried D'Arcy.

Round the bend of the road, with a whirring of dust and petrol fumes, the car swept. It shot past the trap in a twinkling, and was gone with a hooting of the horn, leaving a cloud of smelly dust to mark its passage.

"The woad-hog!" muttered D'Arcy.

The startled horse gave a leap forward. Dolores clutched the reins tight. Too late! The toss of the startled head almost dragged them from her hands.

"Hold hard!" shrieked D'Arcy.

He flung himself forward and grasped the reins from Dolores' hands. But the horse had fairly bolted now. D'Arcy's grip on the ribbons was without effect, and the trap thundered along the road at a tremendous speed, rocking and swaying to and fro behind the galloping horse.

CHAPTER 27.

Figgins to the Rescue.

"GWEAT Scott!"

That one exclamation escaped D'Arcy; then his lips were set as hard as iron, and his hands were like iron on the ribbons.

He did not look at the girls; he looked at nothing but the horse, with his brows so deeply corrugated that his eyeglass almost disappeared.

"Oh!" murmured Ethel.

Then she, too, was silent.

She clasped Dolores' hand, and found it cold and firm. Dolores was not frightened. Only her big black eyes were wide open, and fastened upon the ribbon of road that unrolled before the tearing horse.

D'Arcy's grip was hard on the reins. But the horse was powerful, wildly excited, and he had fairly bolted now. D'Arcy dragged in vain.

On and on, at top speed, swaying till the trap threatened to overturn at every leap of the horse—jolting, rocking! Once the near wheel narrowly escaped the edge of a ditch. At another moment D'Arcy's iron grasp on the reins just turned the horse from a high hedge at a corner.

Clatter! Clatter! Clatter!

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus at last.

He knew the terrible danger all three of them were in, and thanked his stars that it was a lonely country road.

Suddenly, from a distance, came a loud ringing of bicycle bells.

Three cyclists loomed up in the distance ahead.

D'Arcy shouted.

"Get aside!"

The three riders dismounted, dragging their machines to the side of the road. The trap was almost upon them by that time, so great was the speed of the runaway.

A tall figure in Norfolk jacket and knickers sprang out into the road.

"Figgins!" gasped D'Arcy.

Figgins, the long-legged junior of the New Home at St. Jim's, stood ready, his eyes fastened upon the approaching trap.

He was evidently intending to spring.

"Oh, don't—don't!" cried Ethel, hardly conscious of what she was saying. But her voice did not reach Figgins; the rush of air past the tearing trap carried it far behind.

"Figgins! Bai Jove!"

Figgins had leaped at the horse's head as it came level.

The frantic animal shied from him, and if Figgins had missed, and gone down in the dust just then—Cousin Ethel cried aloud at the thought. But Figgins did not miss. On cricket-field and footer-field Figgins had learned to have a sure eye and a sure hand.

He was holding on, and the whole weight of him was upon the horse's head, and it was dragging the animal down.

The wild, tossing head sank and sank, yet still the frantic brute rushed on, and Figgins was dragged along in leaps and jerks, still holding desperately on.

D'Arcy dragged and dragged, and aided by Figgy's weight, he pulled in the unruly steed at last.

It stopped, shaking and trembling, and covered with sweat, the fire gone out of it, and shivering with the reaction now.

Figgins still held it at the head.

D'Arcy jumped into the road.

Figgins gave him a breathless grin.

"Lucky we came along, Gussy, old chap!" he gasped.

"Bai Jove! It was awf'ly bwave of you, Figgy, old boy!"

"Oh, rats!"

"Weally, Figgins——"

Cousin Ethel and Dolores descended. Both of them were white and trembling now that the danger was over.

"Oh!" said Cousin Ethel. "Yes, it was brave of you, Figgins. Perhaps you have saved our lives."

"Oh, I should have stopped the horse pwetty soon!" said D'Arcy. "But it was wemarkably bwave of Figgins!"

Figgins turned very red.

"Oh, don't pile it on!" he exclaimed. "Kerr and Wynn would have done the same, only I happened to be first. Cheese it, Gussy!"

"Weally, deah boy——"

Kerr and Wynn, the other two cyclists, came up. Figgins & Co. were introduced to Dolores, who gave Figgins an expressive glance from her black eyes. The long-limbed junior's courage had made more impression upon the Spanish girl than Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's elegant manners.

"I—I dare say you girls are too scared to drive any farther in the trap," Figgins remarked, looking away from Cousin Ethel. "We're not far from St. Jim's now, if you'd care to walk the rest of the distance."

"I should," said Dolores.

Cousin Ethel hesitated. She would have preferred to walk, perhaps, but it was cruel to desert Arthur Augustus in that way. She wished for a moment that Dolores had not answered Figgins.

"Oh, the horse is all wight now!" said Arthur Augustus, who never noticed undercurrents. "Look! He's as tame as a wabbit!"

"It was all my fault," said Dolores. "I let him run away."

"Oh, not at all, deah girl! It was weally my fault."

"Things generally are Gussy's fault," Kerr remarked. "Luckily there's no damage done. You had better walk the rest of the way."

"Weally, Kerr——"

"Figgy can put his bike in the trap," suggested Fatty Wynn. "It won't matter so much as a lady if you get it smashed up, Gussy."

"Weally, Wynn——"

"Good egg!" exclaimed Figgins. "I suppose you're going to walk?"

"Weally, Figgins——"

Cousin Ethel glanced at the horse. It could not be pretended that the animal was not quiet enough now. D'Arcy was quite distressed. He had not uttered a word of reproach at the mishap caused by Dolores, and it was rather hard that he should be deprived of his protegées in this way. But he never had disloyalty to fear from his cousin Ethel.

"The horse is quiet enough, I think," said Ethel. "I shall drive."

"No, you will walk with me," said Dolores.

"But——"

Dolores drew Ethel's arm within her own.

"I would rather walk," she said, "and you will walk with me, and your kind cousin will not object."

"Certainly not, if you would wathah," said D'Arcy, "though weally I assure you that the horse is all wight."

Dolores had said nothing on that point. She had simply said that she would walk. Whatever Dolores might be, she would never speak what was not true. Wayward and wilful she was, but nothing more than that.

Ethel was awkwardly placed. Dolores was bent upon walking, and she could hardly leave her friend to walk alone with boys she had never met before.

Her eyes met D'Arcy's.

"Pway walk, deah gal," said D'Arcy at once. "Aftah all, pewwaps the horse might get a bit skittish again."

"Very well," said Ethel very quietly.

Dolores knew that she had displeased her friend. She pressed Ethel's arm, but the pressure was not returned.

CHAPTER 28.

Chipping D'Arcy.

KERR, who was a loyal chum, if ever there was one, took Figgins's bicycle away, and while the talk had been going on he had dusted Figgins down.

Figgins walked off between Cousin Ethel and Dolores as proud as a prince in the direction of St. Jim's. The tower of the old school could be seen in the distance, rising over the trees.

"You can shove that machine into the twap if you like, Kerr," said D'Arcy a little glumly.

"Oh, it's all right! I'll ride and wheel it," said Kerr. "Have you had a pleasant ride from St. Freda's, Gussy?"

"Yaas, wathah—until the horse wan away."

"Whose fault was that?" grinned Fatty Wynn.

"Well, Miss Pelham was dwivin', but it was weally my fault, I suppose, for twustin' her with the weins. But——"

"Jolly lucky we happened to come along," said Kerr severely.

"Yaas, wathah! By the way, how did you happen to be on the woad here?" asked D'Arcy. "Aren't you playin' in the match this aftahnoon?"

The two New House juniors grinned.

"Yes. You see, we thought we'd come and meet you, that's all. It's a long time since we've seen Cousin Ethel, you know."

"You noticed Miss Pelham, of course?" D'Arcy remarked.

"Yes. Looks as if she's got a temper," Kerr remarked, in a tone of candid criticism.

"Weally, Kerr——"

"That's just how it is, Gussy."

"I wegard her as a stunning gal," said D'Arcy, with emphasis—"a weally stunnin' gal!"

"Go hon!"

"Did you notice her eyes?"

"Yes—pink, I think."

"You uttah ass! They are black, with a shade of blue in them. Weally wonderful eyes, and vewy Spanish," said D'Arcy. "Did you see her nose?"

"Well, I looked at her face, and I didn't notice that any nose was missing, so I must have seen it."

"You uttah ass! It is simply wippin——"

"Her nose is?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Well, let it rip," said Kerr; and Fatty Wynn chuckled.

"You duffah! It was a weal Gweek nose——"

"Oh, yes; I've heard of that—the genuine Graeco-boko," said Kerr solemnly. "Have you made any survey of her mouth?"

"It was a wemarkably pwetty mouth, like——"

"Like an opening rose," suggested Kerr, "or like a packing-case!"

"You wibald ass——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I wefuse to discuss that stunning young lady with you wottahs!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy disdainfully. "I wegard you as beasts!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, you cacklin' asses——"

"He's got it again!" shrieked Kerr. "Ha, ha, ha!"

"You uttah ass!"

D'Arcy climbed into the trap and dashed away, too indignant to speak. The wheels rattled down the road. Kerr and Wynn looked at one another and roared.

"Good old Gussy!" chuckled Kerr. "He's always doing it? Remember the time he got engaged to the vicar's daughter?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Fatty Wynn.

"Blessed if I like his selection this time, though!" said Kerr. "That girl's got a jolly temper, I can tell you, and I don't like the way she made Ethel walk off and leave Gussy stranded. It wasn't playing the game."

"Girls don't play the game," said Fatty.

Kerr sniffed.

"Yes, they do—nice girls."

"Then you think Cousin Ethel's friend isn't a nice girl?"

Kerr coloured.

"Oh, I don't want to say that! She must be nice in most ways, or Cousin Ethel wouldn't chum with her, of course. But I think she treated Gussy badly, and I think that Ethel feels it, too. But it's no business of ours; and, anyway, it's a rotten thing talking about girls. Let's jaw over the match."

And the subject of the afternoon's match lasted the chums of the New House all the way to St. Jim's.

. . . . . .

Figgins felt a slight compunction when he walked the two girls away, and left Arthur Augustus in the road with the trap. He had suggested walking, without thinking the matter out much, because he wanted to walk with Cousin Ethel. On reflection, he saw that it would have been better for the girls to remain with their escort, and he saw that Ethel had wished to show D'Arcy that amount of consideration.

It was Dolores who had arranged matters. But Figgins was far too generous and chivalrous a fellow to criticise a girl in his own thoughts, and he dismissed the matter from his mind as he walked towards the school.

Cousin Ethel was a little quiet and subdued. She was vaguely annoyed at the turn affairs had taken, and though she hated to appear to be finding fault with Dolores, she could not help admitting to herself that Dolores was to blame.

Naturally, she was very quiet to Figgins, and Figgins would have noticed it all the more if Dolores had not kept up an almost incessant talk.

Dolores seemed to be perfectly happy and contented.

Never had Ethel seen her in such spirits.

Whether it was the excursion, or the excitement of the mishap in the trap, or the effect of Figgins, was not to be seen, but certainly Dolores was very happy and animated now. Her eyes were sparkling, and her voice was seldom silent.

Figgins hardly listened to what she said.

One word from Cousin Ethel was worth more to him than dozens of sentences from Miss Pelham, though the latter's voice was very pleasant to listen to when she chose.

"And this is St. Jim's?" Dolores exclaimed, as they entered the great, grey old gateway, and the old quadrangle lay before their eyes.

Figgins nodded.

"Yes. I forgot you had not seen the school before, Miss Pelham!" he exclaimed.

Miss Pelham compressed her under-lip for a moment. She was quite aware already that Figgins was thinking only of Ethel.

But the next moment she was all smiles.

"Yes, I have never seen the place before," she said. "How I should love to see it—to explore all those queer old places!"

Figgins laughed.

"That's the ruined tower," he said. "It was knocked up like that by a chap—lemme see, who was that chap who had King Charles's head chopped off?"

"Cromwell," said Ethel, with a laugh—the first time she had laughed.

"That's it," said Figgins. "Cromwell. He was a tremendous goer, Cromwell was. Some silly bounders held this place against him, and he brought that tower down about their ears. It's—it's awfully interesting, really!" said Figgins, who had never felt interested in the old tower before,

but realised all of a sudden that it was a most extremely interesting place.

"Suppose we all three explore it now?"

"I should love to!"

Ethel's face was cold.

"I have explored it, you know," said Ethel gently. "It is all quite familiar to me."

Dolores pouted.

"Ethel, my dear, do let me see it!"

"Yes," urged Figgins. "Tom Merry says there are some bloodstains on the flags, you know. Lowther said they're only the marks of muddy boots; but they're awfully interesting. Even if they're only bootmarks, they might be Cromwell's boots, you know, or King Charles's, or one of those old johnnies."

"You shall take Dolores to see the tower while I go in to speak to Mrs. Holmes," said Ethel.

Figgins's face fell in a way that was not complimentary to Dolores.

"Oh!" he said.

"I am sure Dolores will like it."

"Certainly!" said Dolores calmly.

There was no escape for Figgins.

"I—I shall be pleased," he stammered.

Ethel nodded to them both, and went on towards the Head's house. Ethel was a frequent visitor at St. Jim's and Mrs. Holmes, the Head's wife, was always glad to see her, and there was always a room ready for her when she cared to stay.

Cousin Ethel's face was not so bright as usual when she walked away from Figgins and Dolores. Something seemed to be aching in her heart.

But she could not put her thoughts into words, even to herself. Dolores was wilful, Dolores was wayward—that was all; and she had known that on her first day at St. Freda's. But——

Ethel would not think of that "but."

She was hurt, but she was determined not to feel hurt. She ran into the Head's house, and Mrs. Holmes greeted her with great affection. And if an odd expression passed for a moment over Mrs. Holmes's kind face when she learned that Ethel's friend was with Figgins, exploring the old tower, it was only for a moment.

Why had not Ethel remained with Dolores?

Was it because—although Ethel would not admit as much to herself—her intuition told her that her friend did not want her, or was it because she was hurt and offended, or both?

She hardly knew.

But one thing she knew well enough, and that was that she wished D'Arcy had never written that letter to her at Miss Penfold's, and that she had never brought Dolores Pelham with her to St. Jim's.

But it was too late to think of that now.

CHAPTER 29.

Figgins Has to Go.

COUSIN ETHEL did not look back as she left Figgins and his new friend. If she had done so, she would have seen Figgins's expressive face lengthen in a way that was not flattering to Dolores. Figgins's eyes followed Ethel till she disappeared into the Head's house, and Dolores watched him the while, with a half-amused and half-provoked expression.

When the door had closed behind Cousin Ethel, Figgins seemed suddenly to awake to the fact that he was not alone.

He turned to Dolores again, with a quick blush.

"I—I beg your pardon!" he stammered. "Did—did you say that you would like to explore the—the tower?"

"Yes," said Dolores calmly.

"This way," said Figgins.

He was very silent as he guided the Spanish girl into the old tower. Dolores did not seem to notice it. She talked cheerfully enough, without heeding Figgins's random answers.

Figgins was thinking about Cousin Ethel. Figgins was only too conscious of his failings and of his clumsiness in dealing with girls. He thought it quite possible that he had somehow offended Cousin Ethel without in the least intending to do so. Figgins, who had learned to follow and to know every expression upon the girl's face, knew what Cousin Ethel's brows meant when they were arched in a certain way. What was the matter? he wondered.

Figgins was feeling miserable.

Under the circumstances, Figgins was not a cheery companion for Dolores Pelham. But he did his duty nobly. If his thoughts would wander, that was not Figgy's fault.

"And the cannon shots?" said Dolores. "Where are the marks?"

"Oh, here they are!" said Figgins, halting before a fragment of battered wall. "You see the marks there? They are the bloodstains—I mean, the cannon marks. King Charles had his cannon planted over there by the elm-tree."

"King Charles!" said Dolores.

"I mean Cromwell," said Figgins. "It really doesn't matter."

Dolores laughed.

"No, I suppose it makes no difference now," she said. "And was the place taken by assault?"

"Yes. After they brought the wall down here, the Ironsides came up at a run, and the goalie had no chance," said Figgins—"I mean, the Cavaliers were quite done in. Those old Puritan johnnies were beggars to fight, you know. Chap was killed here, by the window—last chap to put up a fight in the place."

"How interesting!" said Dolores.

"Yes, isn't it?" said Figgins, staring through the window in the direction of the Head's house.

"What is there out of the window to see?" asked Dolores, with elaborate innocence.

Figgins started guiltily.

"Oh, n-nothing!" he said.

"What is that house over there by the trees?"

"The big one? That's the School House."

"No; the smaller building joined to it—the one you were looking at?"

Figgins coloured.

"That's the Head's house."

"Oh, I see! Dr. Holmes lives there?"

"Yes, that's right."

Dolores smiled.

"This is a most interesting old place," she exclaimed. "I have heard, too, that you have a very ancient chapel at St. Jim's."

"Yes, jolly old," said Figgins vaguely. "Thousands of years—two or three hundred, at any rate."

"I should love to see it!"

Figgins bore it like a man.

He had imagined that when they were finished at the tower he would be able to escort Miss Pelham to the Head's house, and then knock about with a chance of seeing Cousin Ethel and ascertain whether she were really "waxy"—as poor Figgins put it to himself—a most important matter for Figgins.

But it was evidently not to be done. Figgins was a polite chap, as far as his lights extended. His intentions, at all events, were first-rate

"Oh, certainly!" he said.

"It is such an interesting old place," said Dolores. "It is so—so pleasant to think that we are standing upon the very spot where Cromwell was killed."

Figgins stared.

"Cromwell wasn't killed," he said. "It was the Cavalier johnnies who pegged out."

"Oh, yes, of course!" said Dolores carelessly. "The—the Cavalier johnnies. What a curious name for the Cavaliers! Why did they call themselves johnnies?"

"They—they didn't," said Figgins. "I called 'em johnnies, you see. I meant chaps."

"Oh, I see! And where is the old chapel?"

"Over by the beeches."

"Shall we go?"

"Of course, if you'd like to see it!" said Figgins.

"I should love to see it!"

"Come this way, Miss Pelham."

"But I am taking up so much of your time," said Dolores.

"Oh, that's nothing!"

"Are you quite sure?"

"We're always glad to show our little sights to visitors," said Figgins, thus, with immense diplomacy, avoiding a direct answer, at which Miss Pelham smiled.

"Then we will go," said Dolores amicably. "You are so kind to show me about the place like this! And it is so pleasant to see a really interesting place with a guide who is so thoughtful, so careful, and so attentive all the time!"

"I'm sure you flatter me," said Figgins, who was never known to detect sarcasm, however thickly laid on.

"Not at all," said Dolores. "I shall always remember your kindness, Mr. Higgins."

"Figgins," said the junior.

"Oh, yes—Figgins!"

They left the old tower. Figgins had a private wish that the ancient chapel of St. Jim's—interesting relic of past times as it was—would be swallowed up in the earth before he could reach it.

That was not likely to happen. But something just as good, and a little less tremendous, occurred. Kerr came racing over the quadrangle to overtake them.

"Figgins! Figgy!"

Kerr had already changed into his football things, and had a long coat on. His face was pink with running.

Figgins turned round.

"What's the row, Kerr?"

"Have you forgotten the match?"

"By Jove!" said Figgins.

Kerr almost glared.

"You've forgotten it!" he roared.

"Blessed if I hadn't!" said Figgins.

"Dear me!" said Dolores. "I remember now. You were playing a cricket match this afternoon. That was what Ethel and I came over to see."

"A football match," said Figgins, while Kerr was silent. He knew that that little mistake had been intentional on Miss Pelham's part; but Figgins never suspected a girl of being capable of "spoofing."

"Oh, yes, a football match!" assented Dolores. "Has it begun?"

"No," said Figgins, laughing. "You see——"

"You see, that duffer's our skipper, and we can't play without him," said Kerr. "You must excuse him, Miss Pelham. Can I see you to the Head's house while Figgins goes and changes? There isn't a minute to spare. The School House chaps will be booing us if we're late."

Dolores looked at Kerr.

"Why, of course!" she said. "How stupid of me to forget that you were playing cricket—I mean baseball, this afternoon!"

"Football," said Figgins.

"Yes, I mean football."

"You'll excuse me, won't you?" Figgins said. "It was idiotic of me to forget the match!"

Dolores nodded with a smile.

Figgins raised his cap and raced off, and Kerr walked with Miss Pelham to the Head's house.

There was very little conversation on the way. What little there was, was done by Kerr. Miss Pelham did not feel cordial towards the Scottish junior, and it was not Delores' way to pretend what she did not feel, and sometimes she neglected the laws of courtesy when she was angry.

And she was angry now.

Why, she could hardly have told; but she was.

Kerr left her at the door of the Head's house, after it was opened. Dolores gave him the slightest of nods, and went in without a glance back.

Mrs. Holmes met her in the hall.

"You are Ethel's friend?" she said, with her kind smile.

"Yes," said Dolores.

"Yes, this is Dolores," said Ethel, coming out of the drawing-room. "Dolores, dear, this is my kind friend, Mrs. Holmes."

Dolores allowed Mrs. Holmes to shake hands with her. Her manner was polite in her stately Spanish way, but it was not cordial. Mrs. Holmes gave the Spanish girl a very curious glance. She was one of the very many people who did not understand Dolores.

"Come into my room, dear," said Ethel.

And she led Dolores up to the pretty little room she occupied when she was a visitor at St. Jim's.

Mrs. Holmes glanced after them. She was thinking what a charming contrast there was between Dolores's dark beauty and the fair skin and lovely blue eyes of the English girl. She was thinking, too, that Ethel's new friend probably had a trying temper, and that Ethel must need all her sweetness of disposition to keep on terms of close friendship with her.

CHAPTER 30.

About Figgins.

"So this is your room?" said Dolores.

She had noticed, of course, a constraint in Ethel's manner, but she determined to be in high spirits and see nothing.

She went to the window as she spoke.

Outside the window rose the big branches of an elm-tree, but beyond that was a wide view of the old quad and the playing fields.

Fellows could be seen already gathered on the junior football ground for the match.

"Yes," said Ethel.

"What a charming room!"

"Yes."

"And you have it all to yourself?"

"Except when Mrs. Holmes's niece is here," said Ethel. "She is a dear girl, and a kind friend of mine."

Dolores's dusky face clouded.

"You have many friends, Ethel?"

"Yes."

"You love this other very much?"

"Very much."

Dolores compressed her lips.

"And she is your chum, as you call it?"

Ethel smiled.

"Oh, no, not that! You see, she is nearly ten years older than I am—quite a woman. But we are great friends."

The Spanish girl's face cleared, but the shadow on it, though only momentary, had shown what a depth of jealousy there might be in the passionate heart.

"I don't like you to have other friends besides me, Ethel," she said. "I know it is silly of me, but I shall never have another chum."

Ethel was silent. She could not help thinking that if Dolores valued her so much, she might have acted in a different manner that afternoon

But Dolores was resolved not to see that anything was the matter. Dolores was in one of her most wilful moods that day.

"What a charming old place this is, Ethel!" she exclaimed. "And the boys are very nice! Will you help me with my hair, love? That dash in the trap has made it quite untidy. What a dear fellow your cousin is to let me drive!"

"Arthur is always kind."

"Very different from the tall person," said Dolores, with a yawn, as Ethel unbound her thick masses of hair—"the—the Wiggins, I think his name is."

"Figgins," said Ethel.

"Yes, Figgins. What an extraordinary name!"

"I have never noticed that it is extraordinary. Figgins is one of the best and kindest boys in the school," said Ethel, with a little warmth.

Dolores gave her a sidelong glance.

"And a very particular friend of yours, Ethel dear?" she asked.

"Not more than the others."

"Honour?"

"Of course!" said Ethel, with the first appearance of irritation she had shown. "How oddly you talk, Dolores! I don't quite understand you."

"You have not noticed that Figgins——"

Dolores paused.

"Suppose we don't discuss Figgins," suggested Cousin Ethel quietly. "We shall have to hurry, dear; they will be beginning the match."

"Well, we don't want to see the beginning," said Dolores. "It will be a frightful bore, of course. Football matches always are."

"I don't think so."

"Oh, you have such curious tastes, Ethel! What is there to see in a football match?" said Dolores impatiently. "But, of course, if Figgins is playing——"

"I wish you would not mention Figgins in that way, Dolores," said Ethel.

"Very well. I suppose you know all the boys?"

"Yes, I think so."

"How lucky you are to have a cousin like Arthur! What did you say?"

"We shall have to be quick, dear."

Dolores yawned.

"Oh, very well! But I do love to have you do my hair, Ethel! It makes me feel calm and contented. And I am not always calm, am I?"

Ethel smiled a little.

"No, indeed you are not, Dolores."

"But I am enjoying this afternoon," said Dolores. "It is delightful! Figgins is a curious fellow. I can see quite easily that he attaches immense importance to his game of football, and it seems very odd to me. Well, if you really think we ought to hurry, I suppose I must."

"I wish you would, dear. They will think we do not care if we miss the kick-off, and after Arthur has taken the trouble to drive over for us, it will look ungracious. Don't you think so?"

"Possibly."

Dolores's tone implied that she did not care very much how it looked. She had said she would hurry, but she allowed herself ample time. She looked at the reflection of her dusky, beautiful face carefully in the glass, and gave her hair and dress a final touch or two to make them perfection.

Ethel watched these preparations with ill-concealed impatience. She was beginning dimly to realise that there was likely to be a discord between her nature and Dolores's; that their minds did not run in the same groove on all matters.

Dolores was ready at last, and they descended.

As they emerged into the quadrangle, several fellows took their hats off to Cousin Ethel and her companion, and the Spanish girl was the recipient of many glances.

Four or five fellows came out of the School House in coats and mufflers over their football garb, and greeted Cousin Ethel warmly. Jack Blake. Herries, Digby, Monty Lowther, Manners, and Tom Merry were presented to Dolores.

They went down to the junior ground in a body, and Herries, as it happened, walked beside Dolores.

Herries was not much of a lady's man, but the burly Fourth-Former was polite, and he felt it his duty to talk to the visitor. He told her about his dog Towser—an inexhaustible subject with Herries of the Fourth.

Dolores listened with a charming smile.

"You ought to see him!" said Herries, delighted to have found so interested a listener. "I'll take you round to see him after the match, if you care to, Miss Pelham."

"Oh, I should love to!" said Dolores. "I am so fond of spaniels!"

Herries jumped.

"Spaniels!"

"Yes. Didn't you say he was a spaniel?"

"I said a bulldog."

"Oh, a bulldog!"

"Yes," said Herries; "a real-bred one, you know, and bites like a vice. If you put your hand in his mouth he'd have it right off in one snap."

Dolores gave a little shriek, and Herries roared with laughter

Jack Blake gave him an inquiring look.

"I'm just telling Miss Pelham about Towser," chuckled Herries. "Miss Pelham is fond of dogs."

"Yes, indeed I am," said Dolores brightly; "and especially collies."

"Towser is a bulldog, Miss Pelham."

"I mean bulldogs, of course," said Miss Pelham, with a charming smile.

Herries looked a little puzzled. But they had reached the ground now, and the subject of dogs had to be dropped.

Camp-chairs in an advantageous position had been arranged for the two girls when it was pleasing them to sit down, but for the present they stood to watch.

The two teams turned out into the field. Ethel's eyes ran over all her old friends. She gave them nods and bright smiles.

There were Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn on the New House side, prominent among the rest of the team. On the School House side Tom Merry was captain, and D'Arcy and Digby, Blake and Herries, Lowther and Manners, Reilly and Noble, Glyn and Dane, backed him up. They were two fine teams, and towering over them was Lefevre of the Fifth, who was referee, in Norfolk jacket and whistle complete.

The kick-off fell to the School House, and the ball rolled, and the two teams dashed into the game with great vigour.

It was junior football, with plenty of rush and kick, but it was fine football, all the same. House matches were very keenly contested at St. Jim's, and both Tom Merry and Figgins had their men in splendid form.

Dolores glanced at the School House junior captain with a new interest in her face.

"Who is that, Ethel?" she asked.

"Tom Merry," said Ethel.

"Oh, that is Tom Merry?"

"Yes. Do you like him?"

"He is very good-looking," said Dolores.

And once more Ethel was conscious of a jar. It had never occurred to her to think whether Tom Merry was good-looking or not. Why did Dolores think of such things—above all, speak of them?

Ethel did not reply to the remark. She kept her eyes intently fixed on the game, which was growing fast and furious.

CHAPTER 31.

School House *versus* New House.

"GOAL!"

"Hurrah!"

Dolores had turned away to watch the flight of a bird across the clear blue sky. The loud shouting of the excited crowd drew her glance back to the field of play.

She looked at the game.

Fatty Wynn, the New House goalkeeper, was stretched on the turf. He

had made a wild clutch to save, but the leather had evaded his finger-tips, and the ball was in the net.

The School House players were grinning with delight; the School House crowd round the ropes were roaring applause.

"Goal!"

"Bravo, Tom Merry!"

"What is it?" asked Dolores.

"A goal," said Ethel.

"Who has taken it?"

"Tom Merry—for the School House."

"Oh! And is the game finished now?"

Cousin Ethel laughed.

"Oh, no! They play for an hour and a half, and the greater number of goals wins the match, dear."

Dolores stifled a yawn.

"An hour and a half?" she said.

"Yes."

"And they have played ten minutes so far," said Dolores, looking at her little gold watch.

"Yes, about."

"Oh!"

Cousin Ethel looked at her. Fatty Wynn had fisted out the ball a little crossly, and the players were retiring to the centre of the field for the restart.

"Are you tired, dear?" asked Cousin Ethel.

"Oh, no!"

"Will you sit down?"

"I may as well."

Dolores sat down in one of the camp-chairs. Cousin Ethel sat down beside her. Ethel felt more out of harmony than ever with her friend. Why had Dolores come to the match if she were tired of it in ten minutes?

The answer, of course, was obvious. Dolores had come for the excursion, not for the football match; watching it was the price she was willing—or unwilling—to pay for the outing.

It was not an uncommon case, of course. Ethel remembered the enclosure at Lord's during a public school cricket match—sisters and cousins and aunts waiting or walking about listlessly while the cricketers played, wondering all the time what the fellows could see in the game, and how long they would be, and why they should prefer bowling a leather ball at three sticks in the ground instead of coming to have a cosy tea and chat.

To a girl who did not understand the game, after all, it was bound to be a bore; and a fellow who took a girl to see one, without acquainting her with how it was played, deserved to suffer the result. But with Dolores it was not only ignorance of the game—it was complete indifference. Ethel tried to explain to her, but the Spanish girl was hardly listening.

"You see Blake now," explained Ethel. "He is taking the ball along the touch-line. He is outside-right. He is trying to beat Kerr—outside-left on the New House side. I don't think he'll beat Kerr—he is too sharp for him. There, see, Kerr has sent the ball to his inside!"

"Why didn't Blake pick it up?" asked Dolores carelessly.

Cousin Ethel could not help laughing.

"This is Association," she explained. "Hands are not allowed. It is in Rubgy that the ball is passed by hand."

"Oh, indeed! Are there two kinds of football, then?"

In the face of a question like that, Ethel hardly knew what to say.

"Yes, dear," she replied at last.

"But I saw the plump boy—what do you call him?"

"Wynn—the goalkeeper."

"Yes. Well, I saw him pick up the ball in his hands."

"Yes; the goalkeeper is allowed to handle the ball within his own area, you see."

"Oh, I see!"

"Ah, there! Listen! Hands!"

The School House crowd was roaring.

"Hands! Hands!"

"Yah!"

"Play the game!"

Pratt, of the New House, at half, had handed the ball down, quite unintentionally, in the excitement of the moment. But the crowd were vigilant. The roar rang like a storm over the footer field.

"Hands!"

"Where's the referee?"

"Yah! This ain't Rugger!"

The referee's whistle rang out.

Pratt was penalised, and Cousin Ethel went on to explain the matter to Dolores; but she soon found that the Spanish girl was not listening. The play was growing hotter and hotter, and Ethel was keenly interested, and she soon left Dolores to herself, and watched the game.

It seemed ages to Dolores before the whistle went for the interval.

As the play ceased, and the players trooped off the field or lounged about it, resting, Dolores turned eagerly to Ethel.

"Is it over, Ethel?"

"The first half."

"Oh!"

"There will be an interval of five minutes."

"And then——"

"Then the second half."

"Oh!"

A group of players came over towards the edge of the field where the two girls were. Figgins beamed at Cousin Ethel.

"It's a warm game, Cousin Ethel."

"Yes, indeed, and I'm enjoying it," said Ethel.

"We haven't scored yet," Figgins remarked. "Sun against us, you know."

Cousin Ethel smiled.

"Yes, I know," she said.

"It will be a bit different in the second half, of course."

"Wathah not!" said D'Arcy. "The sun hasn't anythin' to do with it, deah boy. We're not beatin' you in the sun—we're beatin' you on the earth."

"Beating us!" said Figgins. "Look here, if you are going to be humorous——"

"Weally, Figgins——"

"Don't crow too soon, Gussy!" said Tom Merry, slapping the swell of St. Jim's upon the back. "Many a slip 'twixt the ball and the goal, you know."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"I wasn't quite ready for that goal, either," said Fatty Wynn.

"You won't be ready for the next, deah boy."

"Rats!"

"If you say wats to me, Fatty Wynn——"

"And many of 'em!" said Fatty Wynn emphatically.
"Weally, Wynn——"
"Don't crow, Gussy!"
"Weally, Blake, if you hint that I'm crowing——"
Phip!
"Hallo! There's the whistle!"
"You are intewwuptin' me, Tom Mewwy."
"There's the whistle, ass!"
"I wefuse to be called an ass. And you are intewwuptin'——"
"Oh, come on!" said Blake, grasping his chum by the arm, and rushing him off towards the centre of the field, and D'Arcy's voice died away in vain expostulation.
"They are beginning again?" asked Dolores.
"Yes."
"Another three quarters of an hour?"
"Yes. I am sorry you are so bored, Dolores. If you had told me, I would not have come here to-day. We could have done something you would have liked better."
"Oh, no; I am glad to come," said Dolores.
But her expression as she watched the resumption of the footer match was a sufficiently plain indication that it was not the football that she was glad to come for.

CHAPTER 32.

Glory for Figgins.

TOM MERRY and his merry men were pressing the New House hard now. In spite of the advantage gained by the change of ends, Figgins & Co. did not seem to benefit much. A sustained attack by the School House resulted in a goal scored by Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, with a splendid long kick that beat Fatty Wynn all the way.

Fatty Wynn did not look pleased. He was the star goalie of the New House juniors, and he had been beaten twice between the posts. Fatty Wynn did not mean it to happen again. He was all eyes and hands now. The School House attack was still pressing hard, but Fatty saved, and saved again, amid thunderous cheers from the New House supporters.

Ethel clapped her little hands.
"Bravo!" she cried.
Dolores looked at her.
"What is it," she asked—"another goal?"
"No; Wynn is saving splendidly. There were two that looked certain, and he has stopped them both."
"Oh!" said Dolores carelessly.
"It is very interesting, Dolores, if you would only take a little interest in it," said Ethel, with a touch of reproach in her voice.
Dolores laughed.

Harder and harder the School House pressed their attack, but Fatty Wynn was too good for them. As fast as the leather was whizzed in, a Welsh fist or a Welsh foot was ready for it, and it came out again.

And at last the backs cleared, and the fight went swaying away to mid-field. The School House rallied, and strove to press home the attack again, but the New House held their ground.

The School House had shot their bolt, for the present, at least. The New House advanced, and Tom Merry realised that defence was needed now.

He brought his men together to defend the goal, and a tussle waged in the School House half, Tom Merry & Co. striving in vain to clear.

And now Kerr, out on the wing, captured the ball, and ran in well, and, beaten by Herries at back, passed in to Figgins. Figgins captured the ball, beat Glyn easily, and slammed it in. And Dane in goal had no chance.

There was a roar from the New House crowd:

"Goal!"

"Hurrah, Figgins!"

"Goal! Goal!"

It was the first score for the New House. And as Figgins's name rang out in a wild yell of applause, Dolores showed a little gleam of interest.

"That was Figgins?" she asked.

Cousin Ethel did not reply. She was on her feet, clapping her hands, and her eyes were dancing.

Dolores smiled strangely.

Cousin Ethel sat down again as the teams lined up for the restart, and then Dolores repeated her question:

"That was Figgins?"

"Yes," said Ethel, "that was Figgins. He has taken a goal!"

And she was watching with all her eyes now.

That success had heartened the New House attack, and they were fairly swarming round the School House goal within a few minutes after the whistle.

Figgins was thinking of Ethel's eyes upon him, and, like a knight of old, he fought far more valiantly with a fair lady's eyes to watch his deeds. Figgins seemed to play like two men that afternoon. Alone, almost, he beat the School House halves, and kicked for goal with the backs almost upon him. And again Clifton Dane was beaten, and the ball rolled into the net. Figgins rolled himself on the grass the next second, with Herries rolling over him; but what did Figgins care? He sat up, dazed, to hear the inspiring roar round the crowded field:

"Goal!"

"Bravo!"

The score was equal now, with ten minutes more to play. Both sides were pretty well played out; but they went at it again hammer and tongs, equally determined that the game should not end in a draw.

There was no more show play; no skying of the ball just for bluff. It was deadly play, with the best the fellows had in them thrown into it. Both sides meant business; and here and there could be seen a fellow simply stranded, gasping for breath, with never a run left in him.

Loud rose the shouts of the crowd now:

"Go it, School House!"

"One more goal, Figgy!"

"Buck up, New House!"

"Play up there! Play up!"

But the minutes were creeping on. The struggle was in midfield now, but it broke and eddied up to the School House goal. Twice Dane flung out the ball, and yet again, but this time it met a hard head—the head of Figgins—and came back into the goal like a stone from a catapult, and Dane wasn't ready for that rapping return. There was a roar:

"Goal!"

"Figgy's done it!"

"Hurrah!"

"New House wins! New House wins!"

"Bravo, Figgy!"

Truly, the New House had won, for there were but two minutes more of play, and the whistle went with the score unchanged.

The New House had won with three goals to two, and Figgins—the great Figgins—had scored all three of the winning goals!

It was glory for Figgins, and no mistake!

His comrades clustered round him as he came off the field, thumping him on the back, while the crowd cheered themselves hoarse.

Figgins was the hero of the hour.

Even the School House fellows, little pleased as they were by their defeat, joined in cheering Figgins.

"Figgins! Figgins! Bravo, Figgins!"

"Good old Figgins!"

Figgins bore his blushing honours thick upon him with a good grace. There never was a more modest fellow than Figgins, or a fellow less likely to suffer from an attack of swelled head.

Best of all to Figgins was a clap from a pair of little hands, and a brilliant glance of congratulation from blue eyes.

Dolores looked almost irritable.

"What has Figgins done, Ethel?" she asked.

"Won the game," said Ethel.

"All by himself?"

"Well, he kicked all the goals for his side."

"Is it over now?"

"Yes," said Ethel, laughing.

"Thank goodness!" murmured Dolores.

CHAPTER 33.

Great Preparations.

TOM MERRY & CO. were pretty well fagged out by that gruelling match; but after a rub-down and changing their clothes, they felt pretty well themselves again. Looking very ruddy after the exercise, they clustered round Cousin Ethel and her friend in the best of humours. Every School House fellow had a separate explanation why the School House hadn't won. The explanations did not all tally one with another; but that did not matter. The New House explanation of the circumstance was that they had played a better game, an idea that was scouted by the School House fellows as absurd. But there was high good-humour on both sides; the fellows knew how to give and take, and football successes were so evenly divided between the two Houses as a rule that honours could be considered easy. And the presence of Cousin Ethel made it impossible for anybody to be in anything but a good humour.

Tom Merry, immediately he knew that Cousin Ethel was coming to see the match that afternoon, had planned a really gorgeous tea in the study for the entertainment of the two girls from St. Freda's. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had insisted that the feed should be in his own study; but Tom Merry pointed out that his room was larger, and that the number of guests would be considerable. D'Arcy gracefully conceded the point, but only on condition that he was allowed to contribute a full half towards the food. That was agreed to, and Fatty Wynn, of the New House, had been entrusted with the shopping—a task he was fully equal to, for, of course, Figgins & Co. had to come to the tea. Whenever Cousin Ethel had tea in the School House there was a general feeling that Figgins ought to be invited, though, as a member of the rival House, he was liable to be

seized and bumped severely if he entered the School House on any other occasion. The four chums of Study No. 6 were coming too, and, of course, Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther would be there, and, with the two girls, Tom Merry's study was likely to be well filled.

But did that matter? "Kind hearts are more than coronets," Manners said, when the subject came up; and although the quotation did not seem really very apposite, it was agreed that it was so. And if everybody were determined to be in a good humour and make things easy for everybody else, surely the party was bound to be a success. In fact, all parties, at all times and places, would be successes if that golden rule were carefully observed.

Leaving the two St. Freda's girls in charge of Figgins and D'Arcy and some other juniors, the Terrible Three had gone off to their study after the match to get the tea ready.

Dolores knew that tea in a study was coming, and she wondered very much what it would be like, and was looking forward to it with curiosity.

Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther set to work cheerfully in the study. It was always considered a privilege to entertain a girl to tea, and such a girl as Cousin Ethel was an acquisition anywhere.

Tom Merry cast an anxious glance about the familiar old study as he entered. It seemed to him a little shabbier than usual.

Perhaps it was the contrast after Cousin Ethel's bright face and pretty frock. The hero of the Shell looked round him quite disparagingly.

"Better dust up the study a bit," he remarked. "We had a duster once, I remember. Do you know where it is, Lowther?"

"Blessed if I do!" said Lowther.

"Manners, old man, what have you done with the duster?"

"Haven't seen it for monkey's years," said Manners.

Tom Merry sniffed.

"Look here, we must dust the study!"

"Better get tea," said Monty Lowther. "Figgins & Co. are coming in at five exactly, and they'll be peckish. You know what Fatty Wynn is. And the girls——"

"Yes, but we ought to make a study decent for the girls."

"Well, use a pocket-handkerchief."

"Right-ho!"

Tom Merry jerked Lowther's pocket-handkerchief from his pocket, and began to dust the mantelpiece with it.

Lowther gave a roar.

"You ass! Gimme my hanky!"

"I'm dusting."

"Give it me, you frabjous ass!"

"Well, it's jolly dusty now, if I did give it to you," said Tom Merry. "You'd better go and get another, old fellow."

And Monty Lowther, with a snort of wrath, did go and get another.

Tom Merry grinned, and continued to dust the study. He certainly made an improvement, but the handkerchief was in a decidedly grubby condition by the time he had finished.

"Getting on all wight, deah boys?"

It was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's voice at the door.

"Hallo!" said Tom Merry. "Come to lend a hand?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Right-ho! Get in some coals, will you?"

D'Arcy paused.

He was dressed in his most elegant garments, and fetching in coals certainly did not seem quite in accordance with his appearance.

"Ya-a-as, deah boy!" he said at last.

And he bore away the scuttle in a gingerly manner.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Manners.

D'Arcy came back in a few minutes. He was not alone. Jameson of the Third was carrying a scuttle, full of coals. Jameson was grinning. He was generally so grubby that a little coal-dust made no difference to him.

He brought the scuttle into the study, and set it down, and was presented with sixpence by the swell of the Fourth. Jameson bit the sixpence to make sure that it was a good one—a proceeding that D'Arcy viewed with silent indignation—and then went out, with a chuckle.

"Anythin' else, deah boys?" asked D'Arcy.

Tom Merry looked round the study.

"Yes; make the toast."

"The—the toast?"

"Certainly!" said Manners. "I've cut the bread already. We only want about a dozen rounds made, and the fire's burning beautifully. Go ahead, and mind you don't burn it!"

"Vewy well, deah boy," said D'Arcy feebly

He was rather regretting by this time that he had come to help. But he could not retreat. He sat on the end of the fender with the toasting-fork, and began to toast. Monty Lowther came back to the study, and grinned as he saw D'Arcy at work.

"Good old Gussy!" he exclaimed. "Go ahead! Are you fond of making toast?"

"Weally, Lowther——" gasped D'Arcy.

"Look here, Tom Merry, I've got no more handkerchiefs," said Lowther. "I can't find any, you frabjous duffer!"

Tom Merry, having finished dusting, tossed the decidedly grimy handkerchief back to its owner.

"There you are, Monty, my boy."

Lowther took the handkerchief, and looked warlike; but as he saw the end of a cambric handkerchief peeping out of D'Arcy's pocket, his frown changed to a grin. He crept gently and quietly behind the swell of St. Jim's.

Tom Merry and Manners watched him in silence.

Lowther suddenly seized the elegant Fourth-Former, and pulled him back off the fender upon the hearthrug. D'Arcy gave a yell, the toast went in one direction, and the fork in another.

"Ow! Weally——"

Lowther, quick as thought, jerked D'Arcy's handkerchief from his pocket, and crammed the soiled one in its place, and then dragged D'Arcy to his feet.

"Sorry, old man!" he said.

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "You uttah ass! You fwabjous duffah! I weally think I ought to give you a feahful thwashin'!"

The swell of St. Jim's had not the slightest suspicion of the change made in the handkerchiefs. He was thinking only of his rumpled jacket and his dusty trousers. He glared at Lowther with great wrath.

"You uttah ass!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove!"

D'Arcy made a step towards the humorist of the Shell. Monty Lowther retreated through the doorway, laughing.

"Here, don't forget that toast!" exclaimed Manners, as D'Arcy made a movement to pursue Lowther down the passage.

"Weally, Mannahs——"

"You'll be late with it for tea."

"Oh, vewy well! I will give Lowthah a feahful thwashin' anothah time," said Arthur Augustus. And he returned to his occupation.

The swell of St. Jim's made round after round of toast. His face was steadily growing to a beetroot colour from the heat of the fire, but he stuck manfully to his task, and the pile of toast on the plate on the fender grew and grew.

Meanwhile, Tom Merry and Manners laid the cloth and set out the crockery—rather a cracked and varied array of crockery. Tom Merry eyed it with a very doubtful expression.

"Nip along the passages, and see what you can get, Manners, old man!" he exclaimed.

"Right you are!" grinned Manners.

And he went. He returned in about five minutes laden with various crockery-ware; he also had a large Delft jug containing a bunch of big roses.

"By Jove, that's nice!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "I never thought of having flowers in the study; but it will look ripping. Where did you get them?"

"Borrowed 'em from Kildare's study."

"Kildare there?"

"No."

Tom Merry laughed.

"I hope Kildare won't miss them," he said.

"Oh, he's not the chap to cut up rusty before girls!" said Manners easily. "Afterwards, it won't matter. Look here, we shall want some chairs."

"Get 'em from somewhere."

"Good!"

Manners departed. There was the sound of a soft voice in the passage. D'Arcy jumped up off the fender, very hot and perspiring.

"Bai Jove, the gals, you know!"

CHAPTER 34.

Tea in Tom Merry's Study.

COUSIN ETHEL and Dolores came along the Shell passage, escorted by quite a little crowd of juniors. They arrived at the doorway of Tom Merry's study. The study really looked very cosy, freshly dusted as it was, with a bright fire burning, and the tea-table laid, glowing with crockery of every colour and pattern. Tom Merry met his visitors with a cheerful grin, and D'Arcy with a blush. The blush was caused by the heat of the fire during the toast-making operations.

"Please come in," said Tom Merry. "I'm afraid you will find it a little crowded."

"Oh, no!" said Ethel.

"Not at all," declared Dolores.

Her black eyes took in the whole study at one glance, and she wondered in her mind why Cousin Ethel chose to have tea in that poky little room—for so Dolores mentally characterised Tom Merry's study—instead of in the big, airy room in the Head's house.

But a gentle smile remained on Dolores's red lips while she was making these mental criticisms, and no one—excepting, perhaps, Kerr—had any

idea of what she was thinking. More than once there had been an odd expression in Kerr's eyes as he glanced at the Spanish girl.

"We've got rather a decent spread this time," Tom Merry remarked, with a smile, "and Gussy has made heaps of toast."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"How hot you look, Arthur!" Ethel exclaimed, with a smile.

"Bai Jove, yaas!"

And Arthur Augustus took out his handkerchief and wiped his warm brow.

Then there was a shriek of laughter in the study.

D'Arcy had wiped a trail of grime all across his aristocratic features, and the change in his aspect was simply startling.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blake.

"Weally, Blake——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I entirely fail to see what you duffahs are cacklin' at."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Look in the glass!" gasped Cousin Ethel.

"Bai Jove, Ethel——

"Look in the glass——"

Arthur Augustus obeyed. Then he gave a jump.

"Gweat Scott!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Some feahful ass has put the wong handkerchief in my pocket!" gasped D'Arcy. "Bai Jove, I'll give the wottah a feahful thwashin'!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled the juniors.

The two girls were laughing as heartily as anybody. D'Arcy gave one more look into the glass, and then rushed from the study.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, dear!" gasped Figgins. "I know Gussy will be the death of me! I wonder who played that little jape on him?"

"I wonder!" said Monty Lowther, who had come into the study with the crowd. "It was rough on poor old Gussy. Hallo! What's that?"

There was a wild trampling and crashing in the passage, and Manners came tearing up, with a chair under each arm, and dashed into the study with his prizes.

After him came Hancock and Jones minor at top speed.

"Stop him!" yelled Hancock.

"Stop him!" roared Jones. "We'll—— Oh!"

They halted in the doorway at the sight of the two girls, and blushed.

"Oh, sorry!" gasped both of them, and fled.

Manners panted, and set down the chairs.

"Got 'em!" he gasped.

"Enough now?" asked Blake.

"Yes, if you two chaps sit on the window-ledge."

"Good! We can do that."

Cousin Ethel was placed in the best chair, and Dolores in the next best, at the table. The armchair had been slung out into the passage to leave more room. The juniors seated themselves round the table, or about the room, or at the window. There were ten boys and two girls in all, and the party was large for the size of the study. But it was no use quarrelling with the accommodation.

Arthur Augustus came in, with his face freshly washed, and clean as a new pin, looking newly swept and garnished, so to speak. A general grin greeted his reappearance, and he replied to it with a lofty stare through his eyeglass.

"You don't mind sitting on the coal-locker, do you, Gussy?" said Monty Lowther.

"Oh! I—I mean, not at all, deah boy!"

"Rats!" said Tom Merry, laughing. "Here's your chair, Gussy, next to Miss Pelham. Sit down, old son."

"Thank you vewy much, Tom Mewwy!"

Tom Merry had arranged D'Arcy's place next to Dolores. D'Arcy was the greatest lady's man at St. Jim's, and he knew Dolores better than the other fellows. And Ethel was quite satisfied with Figgins looking after her. Tom Merry thought his arrangement rather diplomatic.

The tea was made, and its pleasant scent pervaded the study. Cousin Ethel poured out the tea.

There was a cheerful fire of chatter round the tea-table. Football was naturally the topic, and for some time it was hardly noticed that Dolores was very silent.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was entertaining her with an account of the goals he would have kicked if it hadn't happened that he didn't kick them. He observed at last that Dolores was replying only in monosyllables, and toying with her teaspoon.

"Anothah cup of tea, deah girl?" he asked.

"No, thank you!"

"May I pass you the cake?"

"Thank you, no."

"Speakin' of cake," said D'Arcy, "weminds me of a wathah good stowy. There was a fellow named Wobinson or Wadcliff; but it doesn't weally mattah—and he had a cake on his birthday. It was a vewy large cake, with plums, you know. Are you fond of plum-cake, Miss Pelham?"

"No," said Miss Pelham.

"It is vewy nice," said D'Arcy. "Well, this fellow Wadcliff, or Wobinson—I forget which; but it is not weally matewial to the stowy—had a plum-cake on his birthday. He had a few fwiends——"

"Pass the watercress, D'Arcy."

"Certainly, deah boy!"

"And the salt."

"Here you are."

"Oh, Gussy can't kick for toffee!" Fatty Wynn was saying. "Why, if he'd put the ball at me like—like a New House chap, I should have had to play it over the bar."

"Weally, Wynn——"

"That would have been a corner for you, though," added Fatty Wynn reflectively. "I don't suppose it would have been much use to you chaps."

"Oh, wats!"

"Cheese it, Fatty!" grinned Figgins. "Order! Pass the sugar!"

Arthur Augustus jammed his eyeglass into his eye, and gave Fatty Wynn a withering glance, which was quite wasted upon Wynn, who was just then beaming in great delight upon the cake. D'Arcy turned back to Dolores.

"I was tellin' you about my fwiend Wobinson," he remarked.

"Were you?" said Dolores.

"Yaas, wathah! About a birthday cake, you know."

"Indeed!"

D'Arcy was discouraged.

He did not pursue the story of Robinson, or Radcliff, and the birthday cake. He tried Miss Pelham on several other topics, but found them all uninteresting to her. The swell of St. Jim's became a little silent himself.

towards the end of the meal. He was discouraged. If the young lady wouldn't talk herself, and wouldn't listen to him when he talked, there were difficulties in the way of a conversation.

Cousin Ethel glanced at her friend once or twice. Dolores coloured once under her glance, and made an effort to be cheerful and chatty, and succeeded to some extent. But the tea was nearly over now, and ere long it finished, and the crowded company in the study broke up.

"Bai Jove!" D'Arcy confided to Tom Merry. "I weally don't think I get on vewy well with Miss Pelham, you know."

"No?" said Tom Merry.

"No. I was tellin' her the stowy about Wobinson and his birthday cake, you wemembah."

"Yes, I remember," said Tom, rather hastily.

"It's all wight," said Arthur Augustus, with some dignity. "I wasn't going to tell you ovah again, Tom Mewwy. But Miss Pelham seemed quite bored, and I didn't finish tellin' her the stowy."

"Go hon!"

"Don't you think it's wathah wemarkable?"

"Simply amazing!"

And D'Arcy adjusted his monocle, and gave the hero of the Shell a very dubious glance. But after that D'Arcy did not inflict very much of his society upon Dolores Pelham.

"I want anothah chap to come with me in the twap when I dwive the girls home," he said to Blake, a little later. "Would you like to come, deah boy? I have a pass fwom Kildare for two, on purpose."

Blake grunted.

"Of course, I'd like to come," he said.

"Then come, deah boy."

Blake shook his head.

"No," he said heroically. "Take Figgins."

D'Arcy started.

"Figgins?"

"Yes, Figgins!"

"Bai Jove! Do you think Figgy is wathah stwuck with Miss Pelham, pewwaps?" said D'Arcy.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove! It's barely poss. that she might have pweferred sittin' beside Figgy at tea," said D'Arcy slowly. "She was awf'ly bored with me, you know. It seems odd that anybody should pwefer Figgy; but there's no accountin' for tastes, is there?"

"Not at all," said Blake.

"If you'd like to let Figgy come instead of you, Blake, I'll take him."

"Do!" said Blake.

"Vewy well."

And while the girls were gone into the Head's house for their coats and hats, D'Arcy approached Figgins, who was standing chatting with Kerr and Wynn, with a somewhat lugubrious expression upon his honest face.

"Figgins, old man!"

"Hallo!" said Figgins, rather gruffly.

"I was wonderin' if you'd care to come in the twap to St. Fweda's," said D'Arcy. "Blake thinks you might like to."

Figgins jumped.

"Me!" he exclaimed.

"Yaas, wathah, deah boy!"

"Oh, I say, Gussy, this is awf'ly decent of you!" Figgins exclaimed.

"Not at all, deah boy. I shall be dwivin', you know, and there ought to be somebody to talk to the girls, of course. I'm sure you'll like to have a dwive with Miss Pelham," said D'Arcy humorously.

"Miss Pelham," said Figgins vaguely. "Oh, yes, of course, I'll come with pleasure, Gussy, and I think it's very decent of you."

"Not at all, deah boy!"

And Figgins dashed off for his coat and cap.

CHAPTER 35.

Off-side.

"QUITE weady, deah girls?"

Cousin Ethel and Dolores came out of the Head's house, wrapped in their coats for the drive home to St. Freda's. Both of them looked very charming, and many of the fellows gathered round envied D'Arcy and Figgins that drive.

Figgins came racing up with his coat on.

"Right!" he gasped. "Here I am!"

Dolores looked at him.

"Are you coming?" she said.

"Ye-es," said Figgins, his enthusiasm considerably dashed by Miss Pelham's tone. "Gussy has asked me, and——"

"We shall be glad," said Cousin Ethel.

"Why, of course," said Dolores, with a charming smile.

And Figgins recovered again.

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus. "Figgins will talk to you while I dwive, you know. I'll let you dwive comin' back, Figgy; but while the ladies are in the twap I think we had bettah take evewy care."

Figgins laughed. He didn't want to drive—far from it.

"All right, old kid," he said.

"Quite weady, deah girls?"

"Quite," said Cousin Ethel.

The juniors gathered round. There were many good-byes to be said. Ethel had said good-bye to Mrs. Holmes and the Head; but there were quite a crowd of juniors in the quad to see her off.

"Good-bye, Cousin Ethel!"

"Good-bye!" said Ethel brightly. "And thank you all so much for the pleasant afternoon we have had."

"It's you that's made it pleasant, Cousin Ethel," said Tom Merry.

D'Arcy turned his eyeglass upon the Shell fellow.

"Bai Jove, Tom Mewwy, I wegard that as a weally gwaceful wemark!" he said. "You do not often expwess yourself so well."

Tom Merry laughed.

"Well, if you pass it, it's all right, Gussy," he said

"Yaas, wathah! You see——"

"Good-bye again!" said Cousin Ethel.

She waved her hand from the trap. Dolores did not wave her hand. Perhaps she thought she did not know the juniors of St. Jim's well enough.

D'Arcy took the ribbons, and the trap moved off through the dusk, the lamps gleaming out ahead as he drove away.

Tom Merry and his chums looked after them as they went. When the gleaming lights of the trap were lost in the darkness of the road, the juniors turned back to the house.

"What a ripping girl Cousin Ethel is!" Tom Merry remarked.

"Yes, rather!" said Blake. "How do you like her friend?"

Tom Merry paused for a moment before replying.

"Well, any friend of Cousin Ethel's must be nice," he said at last.

And Blake nodded, and it dropped at that.

Dolores—little thinking, and still less caring, what impression she had made upon the St. Jim fellows—sat in the cushioned seat, with her coat about her, and the thick rug over her knees, for the night was cold. All Arthur Augustus's attention was given to the horse, for the country road was almost pitchy dark, and he had to think wholly of his duties as a driver. Figgins was left to entertain the two girls during the drive—a thing that it was difficult for Figgins to do. For though Figgins, in his big, honest heart, regarded all girls with a feeling akin to veneration, and worshipped Cousin Ethel in particular, still, that did not help him as a conversationalist. In fact, Figgins, like many fellows who can do things, did not excel as a talker. He felt it incumbent to talk now, however, and he manfully did his best.

"Jolly game, wasn't it?" said he.

Cousin Ethel smiled in the darkness. She knew that Figgins would talk, and she knew that he would talk football, becaue it was the subject that interested him of all others; and he generally imagined all the rest of the world to be as keenly interested in it as himself. But Ethel knew what the mention of football would mean to Dolores, already bored to death with the afternoon's game and the talk about it.

"Yes," said Ethel slowly, thinking of some means to change the talk to a subject more agreeable to Dolores.

"You'd like to come over and see another match?" Figgins said eagerly.

"I would," said Ethel, "certainly!"

"How good! We can easily arrange it," said Figgins. "Miss Pelham is fond of seeing a good game, too, I suppose?" he added, as an afterthought.

If it had been light enough he would have seen Miss Pelham's lip curl; but, luckily, it was too dark.

"Oh, yes!" said Dolores.

Ethel made a movement. She did not like to hear Dolores say so. She knew that Dolores disliked the mere mention of the subject. Yet politeness called for some remark; and Ethel would not judge her friend harshly.

"You like to see the fellows play footer?" asked Figgins.

"I have very seldom enjoyed anything so much," said Dolores.

"How good!" exclaimed Figgins, in his honest, unsuspicious way. "It will be such a pleasure to us, Miss Pelham, if you will come over with Cousin Ethel next time."

"Oh, I shall surely come if Ethel will bring me," said Dolores softly. "I think St. Jim's is a grand old place. I love it!"

Figgins was feeling very happy. He felt that he had not liked Miss Pelham hitherto as much as she deserved. She was evidently a nice girl now, and quite worthy to be a friend of Cousin Ethel's.

Ethel was silent.

To her candid mind every one of Dolores' remarks was unpleasant; she knew that they could not be sincere. But she could not very well hint as much to Figgins.

So she said nothing. She would not become a party to a game in which Figgins was to be made a fool of.

That was evidently Dolores' object. It amused her wilful, wayward spirit to take this advantage of Figgy's unsuspiciousness.

"And the boys are all so nice," said Dolores deliberately. "Especially that nice boy with the handsome blue eyes. What was his name?"

"Tom Merry?"

"Oh, no! Are his eyes blue?"

"Why, they're as blue as the sky!" said Figgins, in astonishment.

"Are they really?" said Dolores carelessly. "No, I mean the good-looking boy who was standing near us, and did not play."

Figgins wrinkled his brow.

"A School House boy?" he asked.

"He had a carnation in his coat."

"Why, that was Mellish!"

"What a pretty name!" said Dolores.

Still Ethel did not speak. She knew Mellish well—Mellish, the fellow who was called the cad of the Fourth at St. Jim's. Dolores had not exchanged two words with him, and certainly had a peculiar taste if she considered him handsome. But Dolores had noticed that there was no love lost between Mellish and Figgins. That was why she was praising Mellish now. Figgins would never have dreamed of it. That a girl could deliberately trp to ruffle his temper by praising a fellow he disliked would never have occurred to Figgins as possible. Why should Dolores want to ruffle his temper, as far as that went?"

"I dare say it's a pretty name," said Figgins very briefly.

"Is he a friend of yours?" asked Dolores.

"Well, you see, he's a School House chap."

"But you have friends in the School House?"

"Oh, yes!"

Dolores laughed.

"But you do not like Mellish, I see. Of course, it is not because he's so good-looking; I am sure that wouldn't influence you."

"Blessed if I can see that he's good-looking," said Figgins. "I've never heard anybody say so before. Why, stand him beside Tom Merry, or Blake, or Kerr, he'd look nothing!"

Dolores laughed again.

"Not that his good looks matter, of course," Figgins added.

"Why don't you like him?" asked Dolores.

"I—I haven't said that I don't, Miss Pelham."

"But you don't?"

"Well, no, I don't."

Ethel could not touch Dolores' hand, as she wanted to, without Figgins knowing that she was giving her friend a signal. That would never have done.

"But why?" said Dolores.

"Oh, we don't get on!" said Figgins, who was not to be drawn, however cleverly, into talking about even a fellow he disliked behind his back. "Fellows don't get on sometimes, you know, Miss Pelham."

"Never mind," said Miss Pelham. "Tell me about football."

Figgins laughed in his good-natured way.

"That's rather a big order," he said. "What shall I tell you?"

"About the game—how it is played," said Dolores. "Ethel was explaining to me, but I did not follow very clearly. I should like to hear the rules of the game, especially the—the off-side rule."

Now, if there was a subject Figgins was great upon, it was the off-side rule. He wanted much less than that to start him. He forthwith launched into a disquisition upon football in general, and the off-side rule in particular. He waxed eloquent upon that subject, and did not notice how very silent Cousin Ethel was.

Dolores made such sufficient remarks to keep Figgins in full tide. Figgins, in the innocence of his heart, imagined that Ethel and Dolores were both as intensely interested in the topic as he was himself. Ethel, indeed, would have been; she liked to hear Figgins talk footer. But she knew that Dolores was only drawing Figgins out, and she knew how difficult Dolores found it to stifle her yawns, even while she was amusing herself at Figgins's expense in this way. What was the matter with Dolores? Cousin Ethel felt miserably that this was the least pleasant day she had ever spent in company with the St. Jim's juniors.

She was growing angry—angry with Dolores, angry with herself, angry with Figgins. She was indignant upon Figgins's account, and she was angry that he could not see that Dolores was only drawing him out; and yet she liked him all the better for not being able to see it. Mellish would have seen it at once.

There was an exclamation from the gloom where D'Arcy sat:

"Bai Jove! Here we are!"

And the trap stopped before the gate of St. Freda's.

CHAPTER 36.

Figgins Wonders.

FIGGINS jumped down to ring the bell, and the old porter of St. Freda's came to the gates. He was an old soldier, with a wooden leg, and although he still carried himself with some military erectness, his movements were very slow, and Figgins rang three times before he appeared at the gates. A lantern glimmed through the bars into the dark road and upon the glimmering horse and harness.

"It is all right, corporal," said Cousin Ethel. "You know us."

"All right, miss," said Corporal Brick. "Wait a minute, young sir!"

And the corporal fumbled for the keys and opened the gates. D'Arcy drove in, and Figgins swung himself up behind.

"That drive's jolly soon over," he said.

He addressed Cousin Ethel, but it was Dolores who replied. Ethel did not move her lips.

"Yes," said Dolores. "It was much quicker returning than going—I mean, it seemed so. Thank you so much!"

"Nothing to thank me for," said Figgins. "Nothing I enjoy so much as a good jaw about footer, you know. It's a grand game!"

And Figgins would probably have started off again, but just then the trap drew up before the house, and the door was opened. Figgins and D'Arcy jumped down, and assisted the girls to alight. Miss Penfold was standing in the lighted doorway. The boys lifted their hats to her.

"I twust we are not late, deah madam?" said Arthur Augustus. "We have brought home the young ladies safe and sound."

Miss Penfold smiled.

"No, you are not late," she said. "Come in, Ethel. Dear me, how pale you look! Was it very cold in the trap?"

"Oh, no!" said Ethel quickly.

Figgins glanced at her hastily. Now that they were standing in the lighted hall he could see that Cousin Ethel was a little pale.

His look of eager alarm melted Ethel's heart.

"I am all right, Figgins," she said. "Come in, Dolores. Good-night, Arthur! Thank you both so much for seeing us home!"

"Yes, indeed!" said Dolores.

"Bai Jove, you know, the pleasuah was all on our side," said D'Arcy, in his most stately way. "It will be vewy dull dwivin' back."

"Yes, rather!" said Figgins. "Good-night, Ethel! Good-night, Miss Pelham!" He shook hands with the girls. "Good-night, Miss Penfold!"

The juniors moved to the doorway again. Figgins had some slight hope that Cousin Ethel would follow him to the door for one good-bye more. But she did not move, remaining very close to Miss Penfold.

The juniors clambered into the trap, and D'Arcy drove off.

"That was a wippin' dwive here, Figgins," he remarked. "The horse wequired all my attention, so I wasn't able to help you."

"That's all right, Gussy."

"I twust you did not bore the girls too much?"

"Eh? Oh, we had a jolly talk!" said Figgins. "Miss Pelham is awfully interested in football!"

"Wats!"

"What?"

"I—I mean she is, is she?" said D'Arcy, busying himself with the reins. "Quite a slip of the tongue on my part, deah boy. Gee up, there—gee up!"

"We had a ripping talk!" said Figgins, rather warmly.

"Vewy good, deah boy."

And Arthur Augustus did not pursue the subject.

"I thought Cousin Ethel looked a little tired when we left her," said Figgins, after a long pause.

D'Arcy winked at the dark trees along the lane.

"Did she weally, deah boy?"

"I thought so."

"Well, pewwaps she was tired."

"Yet she didn't look tired when we started."

"When you started talkin' footah, do you mean?"

"No!" said Figgins sharply. "When we started from St. Jim's!"

D'Arcy chuckled softly.

"Pewwaps somethin' has tired her since," he remarked.

"Oh, shut up!" said Figgins crossly.

"Certainly, deah boy."

And the drive continued in silence for some time after that. But presently Figgins broke the silence.

"I say, Gussy!"

"Yaas, deah boy."

"I know Cousin Ethel likes talking footer; we've talked it lots of times, and she talks as much as I do, or more."

"That's all wight, then."

"I remember she didn't say much this time, as it happens."

"No?"

"But perhaps she was tired."

"Vewy likely," assented D'Arcy.

"Miss Pelham was very interested."

"Good!"

"She doesn't seem to know much about footer, but she's eager to learn, and she likes the idea of coming over to St. Jim's for another footer match."

"Yaas; I shouldn't wonder."

Figgins made an irritable movement.

"Look here, Gussy, what are you getting at?"

"Weally, Figgins——"

"What are you thinking about?"

"Suppah!" said Arthur Augustus candidly. "I am gettin' wathah hungwy. This keen air gives a chap an appetite, you know."

"Oh!" said Figgins.

"Yaas, wathah!"

The trap rattled on, D'Arcy driving in silence, and Figgins sitting under the rug without speaking. It was Figgins who spoke first again.

"Miss Pelham is a ripping girl, Gussy!"

"All gals are wippin', deah boy!"

"Well, yes; but some are more ripping than others! Miss Pelham is very nice—not so nice as Cousin Ethel, of course; but that's impossible."

"Quite imposs!" agreed D'Arcy. "Cousin Ethel is a stunnah!"

"Yes; isn't she? Besides," said Figgins argumentatively, "Miss Pelham is Ethel's friend, and so she must be nice."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"All the same——"

"Yaas?"

"Oh, nothing!"

Another long silence. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy devoted his attention to the horse. Figgins sat with his hands in his pockets, and with a thoughtful frown corrugating his rugged brows.

"Look here, Gussy——" he exclaimed at last.

"Yaas, deah boy?"

"Is it possible——" Figgins paused.

"Yaas?"

"Is it possible——"

"Well?"

"Is it possible——"

"Weally, Figgins, that depends upon what you are talkin' about, you know!" said D'Arcy, with great patience. "Pewwaps you might explain a little furthah."

"It isn't possible that I've offended Cousin Ethel in any way, is it?"

"Bai Jove! Why should you think so, deah boy?"

"I don't know."

"Then don't think it," said D'Arcy. "Cousin Ethel knows you're always putting your foot in it, you know, if you've been clumsy. To be quite fwank with you, Figgins, I've often wondahed how girls can stand you, but Ethel seems to stand you all wight. I shouldn't wowwy."

"Oh, I'm not worrying!" said Figgins.

"That's all wight, then."

The trap rattled on. Figgins sat silent this time till the lights of St. Jim's loomed up in the gloom ahead. Then he spoke.

"I wonder——"

"Yaas, Figgay?"

"I wonder——" repeated Figgins, and then he paused once more.

"Weally, Figgins, go on, you know! You wonder what?"

"Oh, nothing!"

And that was the end of Figgins's conversational efforts for that night. Authur Augustus never discovered what it was that Figgins wondered.

. . . . . .

Cousin Ethel went up to her own room. Dolores was watching her with a curious expression in her big, dark eyes—an expression that Ethel did not see, for she did not look at the Spanish girl. There was a very quiet look upon Ethel's face, and the Spanish girl did not speak to her then.

Ethel had anticipated a very happy afternoon at St. Jim's and a happy drive home in the evening, and then a pleasant talk with Dolores about the events of the day before going to bed.

She came down from her cubicle a little later, hoping that she would

not meet Dolores. Such was the outcome of her anticipations. She looked into the school-room, which the girls used as a common-room after lessons.

There was a big fire blazing in the broad, open grate at the end—a wood fire, with great logs crackling and sending forth a blaze of light and heat. Round it the girls were gathered, for the evening was very cold. The sound of laughter and pleasant voices came to Ethel as she looked in.

But Ethel, usually so cheery in society, was not in the mood for talk just then, and for the questioning she knew she would receive from her friends about her excursion to St. Jim's. She drew back without entering the room, and the gleam of a fire in one of the class-rooms caught her eye as she passed the open door. The room was empty, the fire dying in the grate. Its silence and gloom were a contrast to the merry scene she had looked upon a few moments before, but they suited Ethel better. She went quietly into the room, pushed the door to without latching it, and sat down in a low chair by the fire. She was glad of the silence and the solitude for the time.

She sat in a low chair, her hands clasping her knees, looking into the fire, which leaped and glimmered at intervals as it sank lower. Sombre shadows lay on the walls save when the blaze came, and when it came it danced in fantastic shapes on the walls and ceiling.

Ethel was lost in thought.

Suddenly, as she sat without stirring, two arms were thrown about her neck from behind. She started.

A cheek, wet with tears, was laid against her own, and the arms held her tighter.

Dolores's soft voice was murmuring in her ears:

"Ethel, I'm so sorry—I'm so sorry! Forgive me, Ethel dear! I'm so sorry!"

Ethel did not speak.

She was too surprised to do so for a moment. It was Dolores, and the wayward Spanish girl was in another of her changing moods.

Her hair was falling about Ethel's face as the Spanish girl threw herself upon her knees at the British girl's side. Her arms were still about Ethel's neck, her wet, dark cheek pressed to Ethel's fair skin.

"Tell me you forgive me, Ethel! I'm so sorry!"

She did not say what she was sorry for. She knew that Ethel knew.

Ethel was still silent.

"I was a cad!" went on Dolores. "I—I did not mean to be, but—but I was! I am often like that, Ethel; you have not seen the evil side of me yet. Did I not tell you once that you would be sorry you had made a friend of me?"

"You did, Dolores."

"And you are sorry now?"

Ethel was silent.

"But—but I know I did wrong!" said Dolores, in her soft tones, strangely like a little child pleading for pardon, although she was so much older than Ethel in other ways. "I know it was mean, Ethel, but—but it was me!"

Ethel could not help smiling.

"I'm sorry, too, Dolores. You know you should not have acted as you did."

"Oh, yes; I know it, Ethel! It was ungrateful, it was cruel and caddish! I know I am a bad girl—a bad girl. But anyone here could have told you that before, Ethel, if you would have listened to them."

"Why did you do it, Dolores?"

"I don't know."

"But—but——"

"But I was always so," said Dolores. "I cannot help it; it pleases me to make people do what they don't want to do, and to make fun of them secretly, and—and—— But I know you will think it very wicked."

"It is wicked!" said Ethel. "It was taking a mean advantage of Figgins to treat him as you did. If you don't like him——"

"But I do!"

"You do?" asked Ethel, in astonishment.

"Si, si," said Dolores. "Of course, I do! Isn't he a nice boy, and so brave and strong? I might even like him more than would please you, my Ethel!"

"Don't talk nonsense, Dolores!" said Ethel sharply.

The Spanish girl laughed softly.

"Never mind Figgins," she said. "But—but I am so sorry you are angry with me, Ethel. Why are you so patient with me? I am always worse when people are patient with me? If you had been harder——"

"Is that your idea of friendship, Dolores?"

"Oh, you are too good and sweet for me!" said Dolores, kissing her cheek. "I am wilful and hard-hearted, but—but I don't want you to be angry with me, Ethel. I don't care for any of the others; but I want you to like me, Ethel. Won't you pardon me?"

"Yes," said Ethel, half-smiling.

The dancing flame from the fire shot up and showed the smile upon her fair face. The Spanish girl laughed happily.

"My dear, dear Ethel; and how wicked I was! But it is all over now, and I will never be like that again, never! What a happy afternoon we had, Ethel!"

"Did we?" said Ethel.

Dolores laughed again and hugged her

"You are a little angel to forgive me," she said. "I would never have forgiven, in your place, never. But you are ever so much better than I am, Ethel. Miss Penfold knows that, and she thinks that your friendship may make me a better girl, Ethel. She has not said so, of course, but I have seen it in her face."

"Nonsense," said Ethel.

"But she does think so; and she is right. And I shall never be a better girl," said Dolores. "I am as my nature is—as you have seen it to-day. But I shall never be ungrateful to you again. I'm so sorry."

"Well, there is no more to be said about it, then," said Ethel brightly. "Let us forget it all. Dear me! There is the supper-bell!"

"Oh, never mind supper!" said Dolores.

But Ethel rose.

"Come, Dolores, we have had a long leave to-day, and we cannot return Miss Penfold's kindness by being troublesome for nothing."

Dolores made a pettish gesture, but the next moment she was all softness again.

"You are right, Ethel, quite right, and I am wrong, as usual. Let us go."

And the two girls left the class-room, meeting in the passage a stream of girls going towards the supper-room.

Claire Pomfret looked at them.

"Did you have a good time to-day, Ethel?" she asked.

"Oh, splendid!" said Dolores, before Ethel could reply. "Ethel was an angel, and I——"

"And you weren't," said Milly Pratt.

Dolores laughed and nodded.

"Quite right; and I wasn't," she said. "Come on, Ethel, or we shall be late."

Ethel's face was bright enough at the supper-table. Her kind heart could never harbour resentment long. And certainly Dolores had expressed contrition enough; but how long the contrite spirit would last was another question.

With Dolores's wayward and passionate nature, faults and contrition were likely to follow upon one another's heels, and a friend who bore with her failings was likely to be called upon to bear a great deal.

But Ethel did not think of that now. She was naturally inclined to look upon the bright side of everything, and to make the best of everyone, especially among her friends.

When the girls went to bed that night, Dolores insisted upon brushing Ethel's hair—the long, fair hair that was so beautiful and so great a contrast to her own. She bent over Ethel as the English girl's fair face lay upon the pillow.

"Quite forgiven, Ethel?" she said softly.

Ethel smiled.

"Quite, Dolores. Good-night, dear!"

"Good-night," said Dolores softly.

And the Spanish girl went to her own cubicle. But, when Miss Tyrrell had put the lights out in the lower dormitory, Dolores did not sleep. Neither did sleep come readily to Ethel. Long after the lights were out, and the voices had died away, Ethel heard a sound in the next cubicle; and, anxious for Dolores, she slipped from her bed and looked into the next apartment. A glimmer of light from the dormitory windows fell into the cubicle and showed her a slim, white form kneeling beside the bed. It was Dolores.

The words she was murmuring Ethel did not know; but she knew that Dolores was murmuring a prayer, there alone in the deep silence of the night, and she crept back silently to her own bed, her own eyelids wet.

CHAPTER 37.

D'Arcy's Duty.

"I'VE been thinkin' about Ethel, deah boys."

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy made that observation to his chums at St. Jim's. Jack Blake was astride on the bar in the gym, and his friends were watching him with admiration. Arthur Augustus had been standing with his monocle firmly screwed into his eye, and his eye fixed upon Blake, as if not to lose a single one of his movements. Blake had been rather flattered by the close attention the swell of St. Jim's was giving him, till D'Arcy's remark showed him that his thoughts were quite elsewhere.

Blake snorted.

"Oh, have you?" he remarked. "Is that why you have been staring at me like a graven image?"

"Was I staring at you, deah boy? I was quite unaware of it," said Arthur Augustus innocently. "The fact of the mattah is, that I have been thinkin'——"

"Oh, well, that was bound to make you look a little unusual," assented Blake. "But what are you starting it for?"

"Weally, Blake——"

"You shouldn't take these changes too suddenly," said Digby, with a shake of the head. "You never know——"

"I wefuse to continue this widiculous discush," said D'Arcy with

dignity. "I wepeat that I have been thinkin' about Cousin Ethel. I wegard the mattah as important, and needin' immediate attention."

"Nothing wrong at St. Freda's, is there?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

Jack Blake dropped off the bar.

"That alters the case," he remarked. "What's the row?"

"There isn't exactly any wow——"

"Then what's the racket?"

"It isn't pwecisely a wacket."

"Then what's the trouble?"

"It isn't what you'd call a twouble——"

"My only hat!" ejaculated Blake, in exasperation. "If there isn't a row, a racket, or a trouble, what is the matter at all?"

"There isn't anythin' exactly the mattah. I will explain. Ethel has gone to a girls' school——"

"I suppose she wouldn't be sent to a boys' school!" snorted Blake.

"Certainly not. I should have wegarded such a step as decidedly imposs. But undah the circs., the mattah stands like this. Ethel has gone to a girls' school, and things at a girls' school are howwidly slow."

"I shouldn't wonder."

"I wegard it as our bizney to buck things up for Ethel," said Arthur Augustus. "I have been thinkin' a lot about Ethel. Even Figgins, who is usually an ass, and never sees anythin', thinks that if we get Ethel to pay us anothah visit here, it will be a good idea, don't you see?"

The juniors grinned.

"Good old Figgins!" said Herries.

"Yaas, Figgay isn't wholly an ass, as a mattah of fact, though he doesn't see anythin' that isn't diwectly undah his nose, as a wule," said D'Arcy. "But to wesume. Visits here fwom Cousin Ethel are vewy nice, but she can't visit us evewy day. Now, my ideah is that we ought to do somethin' to bwighten up life at the girls' school.

"My hat!"

"That's the posish, deah boys."

"Well," said Blake, "I suppose it would brighten up the place a lot if you were to get in there one evening——"

"Yaas?" said D'Arcy eagerly.

"And turn all the electric lights on," concluded Blake.

Herries and Digby chuckled, and D'Arcy screwed his eyeglass more firmly into his eye, and gave Blake a freezing stare.

"If you are goin' to waste the time making wotten jokes, Blake——"

"Well, I've got no other suggestion to make, unless you took a bike lantern," said Blake. "But for really brightening up a place, I should suggest the electric lights."

"You uttah ass——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Herries and Dig.

"Hallo, what's the joke?" asked Tom Merry, who had just entered the gym. "Expound, my sons. Is Gussy out-classing 'Punch' again?"

"He's got a dodge for sneaking into St. Freda's at night and turning on all the lights to brighten up the place," Blake explained.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I haven't!" shouted D'Arcy. "That is a wotten joke. I nevah suggested anythin' so widiculous."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I wegard Blake as an uttah ass! My idea is that things must be feahfully dull at St. Fweda's for Ethel——"

"Why?" asked Tom Merry.

"Oh, because—because, you know," said D'Arcy, rather at a loss, "they don't have any footah, you know, or any dormitowy waids, or any House wows, and they nevah fight, you know—it's considahed bad form in girls. They nevah have study feeds, or feeds at night in the Form. It's wotten all wound. What they want at St. Fweda's is a weal wag. Suppose they smuggled a lot of gwub in, and had a dormitowy feed?"

Tom Merry laughed.

"I don't suppose they'd enjoy it as much as we do," he said.

"Pewwaps not; but they could be educated up to it," explained D'Arcy. "Girls haven't, natuwally, so much bwains as boys, and it's our bizney to impwove them. My idea is to stand tweat, and help them smuggle the things into the school, you know, so that they can have a wegular bust-up. I will pay Ethel a visit in secwet, and awwange with her about sendin' the stuff in for the dorm. feed."

"She will be down on you."

"I should not care if she were," said D'Arcy loftily. "I wegard it as my duty, as an old public school chap, to show beginnahs the wopes, you know, and put them up to the game. Cousin Ethel is entitled to know all the dodges, and I'm goin' to put her up to them——"

"Whether she likes it or not?" grinned Blake.

"Well, dutay is dutay, you know."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I weally wish you would westwain that widiculous cackle, you fellows. Now, what do you think of the ideah?"

The chums exchanged glances, and then delivered their opinion in a kind of chorus:

"Rotten!"

"Weally, you uttah asses——"

"Utterly rotten!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy jammed his monocle into his eye, and fixed a withering look upon the juniors.

"I wegard you as a set of asses!" he exclaimed. "It's not much good tellin' you chaps wippin' ideahs. I wegard you as chumps. The question is, are you fellows goin' to help me in cawwyin' out this plan?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Are you goin' to help me or not, you wottahs?"

"Not!"

The reply was given unanimously.

"Better chuck it up," suggested Tom Merry. "You see——"

"Wats!"

"Look here——"

"Oh, wats!"

And Arthur Augustus walked away with his aristocratic nose very high in the air, leaving the other fellows grinning.

CHAPTER 38.

Very Mysterious.

"ETHEL!"

Dolly Carew came up to Cousin Ethel in the garden on Wednesday afternoon, looking extremely mysterious. Dinner was over at St. Freda's, and Ethel and Dolores were in the garden, chatting. The two girls were on the best of terms again already, and Ethel was trying her best to forget the little unpleasantness that had occurred at St. Jim's. But she did not think of visiting St. Jim's again for a while.

Dolly Carew did not look at Dolores as she spoke. As a matter of fact, she did not like the Spanish girl very much.

Dolly had been very kind and attentive to Ethel when the latter came to St. Freda's, and had intended to make a great chum of her, and Dolores—the least likely girl in the whole school—had stepped in and taken her new friend.

Dolly had, of course, no claim upon Ethel, excepting in her friendly intentions towards her, but she was naturally a little nettled.

She considered, too, that Dolores was gaining an unfair advantage by sheer force of character, dominating Ethel almost against her will, and she thought Ethel weak for yielding to the Spanish girl's influence. But she liked Ethel, all the same. No one could help liking Ethel.

"Well?" asked Ethel, smiling a little at Dolly's mysterious manner. "Is it a message, dear?"

"Yes."

"From Miss Penfold?"

"Oh, no!"

"Miss Tyrrell, then?"

Dolly Carew made a little grimace.

"Certainly not."

"Why, what is it, then?" asked Ethel, looking perplexed. "I don't understand——"

"It is a boy in the village——"

"What!"

"The boy from the stationer's shop," explained Dolly. "He has a note for you."

Ethel looked amazed.

"The boy from the stationer's shop has a note for me?" she exclaimed.

Dolly nodded her head vigorously.

"Exactly. He said it was given him to give you, and he was not to place it in any other hands. Otherwise, I should have brought it to you. You will have to go and see him, and take it from him yourself."

A little wrinkle appeared on Cousin Ethel's clear brow.

"I don't think I had better take it," she said. "No one has a right to send me written messages, and I'm sure Miss Penfold would not like it."

"Oh, stuff!" said Dolly. "It may be from one of the St. Jim's boys. That would be all right, wouldn't it?"

"If it is one of my friends, yes," said Ethel slowly.

"It might be from Figgins," said Dolores. "He may have some plan of an excursion for the afternoon. Wednesday afternoon is a half-holiday at St. Jim's as well as here, Ethel."

Ethel frowned a little.

"You had better take the note, anyway!" exclaimed Dolly Carew. "I tell you I'm simply dying with curiosity."

"Well, I suppose I can take the note. Where is the boy?"

"In the road. He called to me over the side gate, and asked me if I were Miss Ethel Cleveland," said Dolly, laughing.

Ethel followed her slowly. Dolores remained on the garden-seat. There was a gleam in Dolores's eyes now. Perhaps she would not have objected to the quiet of the afternoon being broken into by a visit from the St. Jim's juniors.

Ethel, still feeling very doubtful in her mind, followed Dolly to the side gates, under the thick shadow of trees, where the simple, heavy-featured village lad stood with the note in his grubby hand. He touched his cap to Ethel.

"Miss Cleveland—Miss Cleveland?" he asked.
"Yes."
"The young gent gave me this for you."
He extended the note.
Ethel took it hesitatingly. If it were from one of her friends, well and good. If it were from some impertinent fellow who had had the impudence to send her a note, at all events she need take no notice of it.
The lad turned away, evidently expecting no answer.
"Open it, Ethel!" exclaimed Dolly Carew impatiently.
Ethel slowly opened the envelope. It was addressed to her in pencil, and she gave a start as she looked at the superscription. The hand was like that of her cousin, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.
The letter was as great a surprise as its manner of delivery.

"Dear Ethel,—I shall be waiting for you at three o'clock by the stile in the lane. Come alone, and don't breathe a word. Very important.
—ARTHUR.
"P.S.—Mum's the word.
"P.P.S.—Keep it dark!"

Ethel stared at the letter.
She had not the faintest idea what the secretiveness about it meant.
Dolly Carew was looking at her eagerly.
"Well?" said Dolly at last, as Ethel did not speak. "Well, Ethel, what is it? Who is it from? Why don't you explain?"
"It's from my cousin."
"Cousin Arthur?"
"Yes."
"But why does Cousin Arthur send a note in this way?" said Dolly, in surprise. "Why couldn't he write from the school? Miss Penfold allows us to receive letters."
Cousin Ethel shook her head.
"I really do not know, Dolly!"
"It's very odd."
"Perhaps he came over suddenly to-day," Ethel mused, "and there was no time to write a letter."
"But why couldn't he come here and speak to you, instead of sending a note by the stationer's boy?"
Ethel could only shake her head again.
"I really don't know, Dolly."
Dolly tossed her golden head.
"There's something mysterious about it," she said—"very mysterious."
Ethel did not offer to read out the letter, and Dolly did not ask her to. Ethel returned slowly to the garden-seat where she had left Dolores.
The Spanish girl met her with an inquiring look.
"It's a note from my Cousin Arthur," said Ethel. "He wants me to go out and see him. He is waiting near St. Freda's."

CHAPTER 39.

Enid Craven's Find.

"WHY doesn't he come here?"
"I don't know."
"Are you going?"
"I suppose I had better."

"Shall I come with you?" asked Dolores indifferently.

Ethel coloured.

"Arthur asks me particularly to go alone," she said. "I don't know why, but he says it is very important."

"Oh, don't go!" said Dolores. "Let him come here."

"He asks me to."

"Oh, do as you please!" said Dolores, with a cloud on her brow. "Of course, I don't want to detain you if you want to go."

"I don't want to go specially, but I cannot very well refuse Arthur," said Ethel. "I hope you will not be offended about nothing, Dolores."

"I am not offended at all," said Dolores, in her most stately way.

Ethel nodded, and ran out of the garden. It was very near the time Arthur Augustus had fixed in his note for their meeting, and she was anxious not to be late. She was curious to know what it was that was so important, and why Arthur Augustus was so very mysterious about it.

She could only surmise that something unusual had happened at St. Jim's; though even then there appeared to be no reason why D'Arcy should be so secretive.

Ethel put on her hat and left the school. The stile was only a few minutes' walk from St. Freda's.

As the girl passed out of the gates she passed Enid Craven. Ethel had hardly spoken to Enid since that day when she had spoken to comfort her in the cubicle, after Enid's narrow escape from expulsion. Ethel's kindness had made no lasting impression upon Enid; the natural repugnance between the two girls was too strong for that. And Ethel's growing popularity at St. Freda's was a thorn in the side of the jealous and bitter girl.

Enid looked after her with a far from affectionate expression.

The keen wind caught Cousin Ethel as she went out into the road, and she threw her hand up to her hat. Something white fluttered from her hand, and blew along the road. It was the note.

Enid's eye caught it, and she wondered what it was.

The wind blew it fairly to her feet, and it rested for a moment close to her, and instinctively Enid put out one boot and covered it.

Ethel, with her hair blowing about her face, looked round for the note she had lost, and came running back with flushed cheeks and panting breath.

"Have you lost anything?" asked Enid.

"Yes; a note."

"Indeed! Did it blow this way?"

"It must have. I thought you might have seen it," said Ethel.

Enid shook her head. She did not care to actually tell a falsehood, but the shake of the head was as near a lie as was possible.

"Well, never mind," said Ethel. "After all, it does not matter."

She ran down the lane, fearing to be late for her appointment. As soon as she was out of sight, Enid Craven removed her boot from the note and picked it up.

"Ethel, deah boy--I mean, deah girl!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy raised his silk topper in his graceful way as Ethel came up to the stile in Burford Lane, with sparkling eyes and cheeks red from running.

"What is it, Arthur?"

"Eh?"

"What has happened?"

"Nothin'."

"What is wrong, then?"

"I am not aware of anythin' bein' wong, Ethel."

"Really, Arthur——"

"Everythin' is all wight, so fah as I know," said Arthur Augustus, looking puzzled.

Ethel gave him an indignant look.

"Then why did you alarm me with your note?"

"Bai Jove! I nevah meant to alarm you, Ethel."

"Why is it necessary to meet you here, and why did you write in so mysterious a way?" demanded Ethel.

Arthur smiled mysteriously.

"Because it's necessary to keep it dark, deah gal."

"To keep what dark?"

"The wheeze."

"The—the what?"

"The wheeze, you know."

"I don't know, and I don't understand in the least," said Ethel. "What do you mean?"

"I will explain. Now that you are at school, Ethel, I wegard you as bein' undah my pwotection, and I considah it my dutay to put you up to the wopes, you know. As an old hand, I know all the twicks. There are lots of dodges for livenin' things up at school that you girls don't know anythin' about."

"Such as putting rats in the headmistress's hatbox," suggested Cousin Ethel, with a smile.

"Well, I only advised that for extweme cases," said Arthur Augustus. "But this is not a jape on the Head that I am thinkin' of now. I suppose you wemembah the studay feeds we've had at St. Jim's?"

"Yes, certainly."

"You can't have studay feeds at St. Fweda's, because you haven't any studays. I wegard that as wotten."

Ethel laughed.

"My dear Arthur——"

"But there is no weason why you shouldn't have a dorm feed," said Arthur Augustus. "And that is the wheeze."

"A dorm. feed!" repeated Ethel, in wonder.

"Yaas, wathah! You see," went on D'Arcy confidently, "we often have that sort of thing in the School House at St. Jim's after lights-out, you know. We light up candles or bike-lanterns, and have a feed."

"I don't think I should care for it," said Ethel. "You might catch cold."

"We are weady to wisk that, you know."

"And you might have indigestion, and make your nose red," said Ethel severely.

"Weally, Ethel——"

"It is very naughty of you, Arthur."

Arthur gasped. He was prepared to be considered very doggish, or very reckless, or very dashing; but very naughty was not pleasing.

"Weally, Ethel——"

"But you did not send me that absurd note so that I could come here and hear about your absurd dormitory feeds, did you?" exclaimed Ethel.

"Er—no. Ahem! My ideah is that you girls should do the same thing. When you twy it, you will find it wippin' to have a dorm. feed."

"I hardly think so."

"Take my word for it, my deah girl, as your eldah," said Arthur Augustus, with quite a fatherly manner. "There is not the slightest doubt

on the subject. Now, I have had a fivah fwom my governah, and I am pwepared to stand tweat."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Ethel——"

"You mean you are prepared to stand us a dorm. feed?" asked Ethel, laughing.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"My dear Arthur, we couldn't think of such a thing! It would be impossible, and I shouldn't like it. Please give up the idea."

"Imposs, deah gal!"

"Why impossible?"

"The gwub is alweady ordahed."

"What?"

"I have made all the awwangements," said Arthur Augustus, with great satisfaction. "You wemembah what an awf'ly deep fellah I am."

"Dear me! What have you done!"

"I've ordahed a hundwed jam-tarts of the best quality, and they will be sent to you in a bandbox labelled 'Hats,' so that they will pass in without excitin' the least suspish."

"Oh!"

"Then the cake will come in as 'Books.'"

"Arthur!"

"And the sweets as 'Ink.'"

"Ink! Oh, dear!"

"And sevewal othah things undah othah names," said D'Arcy. "You will get the whole lot in without anybody feelin' the slightest suspish on the subject. It's a jollay wippin' dodge, don't you think so?"

Ethel did not know what to say.

Her cousin was looking so thoroughly pleased with himself and the method he had adopted to elude the vigilance of Miss Penfold, that she hardly liked to say anything to bring his satisfaction tumbling to the ground.

But the thought of piles of indigestible eatables being delivered to her at St. Freda's, in a disguise which would probably be penetrated at once by the mistresses, filled her with dismay.

"Arthur! You must not——"

"It's done, deah gal. It's all wight."

"I—I wish you had spoken to me first," said Ethel, very much distressed. "Why didn't you come up to the school and see me?"

D'Arcy shook his head.

"It was more cautious to meet you here, Ethel, you see—less likely to attwact attention, don't you know."

"Nothing could be more likely to attract attention, I think, than sending me a note by the stationer's boy!" Ethel exclaimed.

D'Arcy's face fell.

"Bai Jove, I nevah thought of that! But I was afwaid of waisin' suspish, Ethel. You see, we shall have to be vewy cautious if I'm to help you get up dormitory feeds. I mustn't be seen wound the coll. Bai Jove! There's one of the St. Fwedah's gals comin' this way! I must be off!"

"Arthur!"

"Excuse me, deah girl—caution, you know. I don't want to get you into a wow."

And Arthur Augustus jumped over the stile and vanished.

Ethel turned her head, to see Enid Craven approaching.

Arthur Augustus was gone, and Enid was looking at her suspiciously. Ethel, with a troubled look on her face, walked back slowly in the direction of St. Freda's.

Whether she would see Arthur Augustus again that afternoon she did not know. The swell of St. Jim's was growing so very mysterious that he was not to be depended upon in any way.

But what she was to do with the eatables that he had ordered for her was a puzzle. She did not know who was to send them, or when they were to come. What would be the result if Miss Penfold or Miss Tyrrell discovered that consignments of indigestible pastry were arriving for her under cover of innocent labels? And if D'Arcy's great "wheeze" became known it might lead to the swell of St Jim's being forbidden to visit St. Freda's.

Ethel's face was troubled as she went back to school. As she came up to the gates she caught sight of a van in the side lane which led to the tradesmen's entrance. The van had a Burford confectioner's name upon it.

Ethel glanced at it in dismay, and she wore a troubled look as she went in. She knew what it meant. The first consignment had arrived.

CHAPTER 40.

"Hats, With Care."

"DEAR me!" said Mrs. Filby.

Mrs. Filby, the housekeeper, was surprised.

She had reason to be surprised. It was not always—in fact, it was not frequently—that hats were delivered to St. Freda's by confectioners' vans.

But here was the confectioner's van, and here was the confectioner's boy, and here was the box with the big label on it: "Hats, with care."

It was addressed to Miss Ethel Cleveland, St. Freda's.

And Mrs. Filby was surprised.

She looked at the box, and she looked at the boy. She lifted the box, and thought it weighed a little heavy for hats.

"You are sure there is no mistake?" she asked.

The boy grinned. He had more than a suspicion of what was inside the box.

"All right, mum," he said.

"Has Mr. Pufton opened a millinery department?" demanded Mrs. Filby.

"Not that I knows on, mum."

"Then how does he come to be sending a hat to Miss Cleveland?"

"I don't know, mum," said the boy.

"Well, I suppose I must take it in," said Mrs. Filby.

"Yes, mum."

And Mr. Pufton's boy retired, leaving the box with Mrs. Filby.

Mrs. Filby carried it off in surprise.

"Dear me!" she said. "Now I—— Ah, Miss Cleveland!"

Cousin Ethel was coming up.

She had hurried in after seeing the van outside, and was ready to take the parcel. The easiest way out of the matter, she thought, was to take whatever was sent to her, and smooth the matter over quietly.

"This is for you, Miss Cleveland," said Mrs. Filby.

"Thank you!" said Ethel, taking the box.

"It came by the baker's van?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps the milliner asked them to deliver it," said Mrs. Filby; "but it is very odd."

"Yes," said Ethel.

"Well, there it is, Miss Cleveland"

"Thank you!"

Cousin Ethel walked away with the box in her hand.

"New hats!" exclaimed Dolly Carew, as she met her friend. "Are you going over to St. Jim's again soon, Ethel?"

Cousin Ethel could not help laughing.

"Do let me see it!" exclaimed Dolly, with natural feminine curiosity to see that most entrancing object to a girl—a new hat. "Bring it into the dorm."

"I—I——"

"What colour is it?"

"You see——"

"What style?"

"I—I——"

"You are going to show it to me, aren't you?" asked Dolly, looking at Ethel's confused face in astonishment. "Ethel, my dear, what's the matter?"

"You see——" began Ethel haltingly

"Blessed if I do!" said Dolly. "Don't you want to show me your new hat?"

"I—I——"

"New hat!" exclaimed Milly Pratt, coming up. "Who's buying new hats?"

"Ethel is: it's just come."

"Good! I suppose that means that you are rolling in money, as usual, Ethel! Could you lend me sixpence?"

Dolly Carew sniffed, but Milly elaborately took no notice of her.

"I've left my purse somewhere," said Milly. "I shall pay you when I find it. I believe I owe you a shilling from the other day, too. I will settle both together when I find my purse. You haven't seen it about, have you?"

"No," said Ethel.

"How unfortunate! Can you lend me sixpence?"

Ethel handed over the sixpence, an action that called forth a still more unmistakable sniff from Dolly Carew.

"Do let us look at your hat!" exclaimed Milly, checking her desire to rush off to the tuckshop immediately with the sixpence. "I love new hats!"

"You see——" began Ethel.

"Oh, do come to the dorm and show it to us!" said Milly.

Ethel, with a troubled brow, carried off the hatbox to the dormitory. She took it into her own cubicle, and Dolly and Milly followed her in, and the hatbox was set upon a chair, and Milly unfastened the string.

"What kind of hat is it?" Dolly Carew asked.

"Oh, it isn't a hat!" said Ethel desperately, at last.

Dolly stared.

"Isn't a hat?" she exclaimed.

"No."

"But it's labelled a hat."

"I can't help that."

"But what is it, then?"

"I'm not sure—jam-tarts, I think."

Dolly Carew gave quite a jump, and Milly's fingers worked faster than ever in unfastening the string. Milly might like new hats, like other girls, but jam-tarts touched her heart more nearly.

"But how does it happen that you're getting jam-tarts sent you in a hatbox?" exclaimed Dolly Carew, in amazement. "It's never happened to me."

Ethel laughed ruefully.

"It's from my Cousin Arthur."

"Oh!"

"He has an absurd idea that we like dorm. feeds, the same as they have sometimes at St. Jim's, and he's smuggling these things in to me."

"Phew!"

"My word!" said Milly

She dragged the lid off the box.

Great piles of tarts, fresh and flaky and jammy, were inside, wrapped in tissue-paper, and the smell of them was really delicious.

Milly Pratt's eyes danced.

"Oh, splendid!" she exclaimed. "I wish Arthur were my cousin! What a splendid fellow, and what lovely tarts!"

"I wish he had not sent them," said Ethel. "There will be trouble if Miss Penfold sees them; and there are more things coming."

"Do you want to get rid of them?" asked Milly.

"Yes, indeed!"

"Then it's perfectly easy. I'll eat them for you."

"Rely on Milly," said Dolly Carew, laughing. "She will eat anything for anybody. Won't you, Milly?"

Milly did not reply. Her mouth was stopped with the first of the jam-tarts. It was surprising to see how fast her jaws could work.

"My word, though, they look nice!" said Dolly. "I will have one, if I may, Ethel?"

Cousin Ethel nodded.

"Certainly!" she said. "Have as many as you like."

Ethel smiled, and took one. The jam-tarts were very nice, and she took another. Dolly managed four, and Milly Pratt was already at her sixth, and still going strong.

"They'd better be put away out of sight somewhere," Dolly suggested, regarding the box of tarts when she had finished. The mass of pastry in the box did not seem to be at all diminished so far.

"Yes," said Ethel. "Where can I put them?"

"Groo!"

"Dear me, Milly! Are you choking?"

"Groo!"

"You shouldn't eat so fast," said Dolly, thumping Milly Pratt on the back. "There! Is that better?"

"Ow! No! Leave off! Yow!"

"You were choking."

"I wasn't!" exclaimed Milly indignantly. "I was only trying to speak, and my mouth was full. I'll scratch you if you punch me in the back again!"

"Now, don't be ungrateful, Milly——"

"Groo! I was going to say, Ethel, that you needn't trouble about putting the tarts away. I'll look after them for you."

"In fact, Milly will put them away for you," said Dolly sarcastically.

"Certainly!" said Milly unsuspiciously. "You leave them to me, Ethel. I'll take proper care of them."

Dolly made a sudden movement.

"Somebody's coming!"

Ethel started nervously. She hated feeling guilty, but she could not help it now. If the great consignment of tarts should be discovered in her cubicle there would certainly be trouble.

The dormitory door was heard to open.

As all the cubicles were open at the end, one had only to walk down the

dormitory to see into each one: so if the new-comer came along, the three girls and the hatbox could not fail to be discovered in Ethel's cubicle.

Ethel stepped quickly out of the cubicle, making a sign to Dolly to get the box out of sight.

Dolly grasped it and pushed it under the bed. But Milly Pratt's jammy mouth and sticky fingers remained to betray them if they were seen.

A trim maidservant had come into the dormitory. She stopped as Ethel hastily advanced towards her.

"Mrs. Filby wants to see you, miss," she said.

"Mrs. Filby?"

"Yes, miss. There's a parcel come for you."

Ethel's heart sank.

It was evidently the second of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's consignments.

But she nodded calmly, and took her way with as tranquil a face as she could muster to the housekeeper's room.

CHAPTER 41.

More Parcels for Ethel.

"ANOTHER parcel for you, Miss Cleveland," said Mrs. Filby. "You are getting quite a large number of parcels to-day."

"Yes, indeed," said poor Ethel.

"Books this time," said Mrs. Filby.

"Where is the parcel, please?"

"Here it is."

Cousin Ethel looked at the parcel. It was wrapped in thick brown paper, and tied with string, and labelled "Books, With Care."

The parcel was a large one, but quite easy for Cousin Ethel to carry. It weighed only about five or six pounds.

"I suppose they are school books?" said Mrs. Filby.

"School books?" repeated Ethel.

"Yes. Other books the young ladies are not allowed to have without Miss Penfold seeing them," said Mrs. Filby. "The same with newspapers. There was a young lady 'ere once who used to read the serial story in a penny newspaper, and there was great trouble when Miss Penfold discovered it."

"Indeed!" said Ethel.

"Yes, indeed, Miss Cleveland. Perhaps you wouldn't mind opening the parcel 'ere——"

"Oh!"

"Or giving me your word that it does not contain any books of that sort," said Mrs. Filby—"no six-shilling novels or newspapers?"

"Oh, certainly!" said Ethel. "I assure you that it does not contain anything of the kind, Mrs. Filby."

"Then you may take the parcel," said the housekeeper.

"Thank you."

Cousin Ethel left the housekeeper's room with the parcel in her hand. From its bulk and weight, she knew that it must contain the cake sent by her Cousin Arthur.

Ethel was beginning to feel exasperated.

It was really too bad.

If the parcels continued to arrive there was certain to be comment and inquiry sooner or later, and then the whole story would come to light.

"Books!" said Dolly Carew, as Cousin Ethel went towards the dormitory with the parcel. "How awfully studious we are!"

Cousin Ethel laughed.

"Poor Milly is quite ill," went on Dolly cheerfully. "She gorged the tarts in the greediest way, and she will be ill presently."

"I am very sorry for that," said Ethel.

"Oh, it will be a lesson to her!" said Dolly. "Don't worry about Milly. But what are you doing with all those books?"

"I'm taking the parcel to my cubicle."

"Anything interesting to read?"

"Oh, no!"

"You don't mean to say they're dry school books?"

"Well, no."

"Then what are they?" asked the persistent Dolly.

"Well, as a matter of fact, it's cake," said Cousin Ethel. "It's another gift from my absurd cousin."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It is growing to be a great bother."

Dolly Carew laughed heartily.

Cousin Ethel carried the parcel into her cubicle, and opened it. There was a huge plum cake in the box. Ethel, half laughing and half exasperated, wrapped it in the paper and placed it in her trunk, putting it under some clothes for safety. Then she carried away the box it had come in to a box-room, and deposited it among some lumber.

Somewhat relieved in her mind at having disposed of the body, so to speak, the girl went down into the garden again. But her troubles were not at an end. A maid with a smiling face met her on the path, with an announcement that a consignment of ink had arrived for her by van, and that it was waiting for her in the housekeeper's room.

"Ink?" said Ethel.

"Yes, miss."

"Very well; I will come."

Poor Ethel hardly dared to show herself in the housekeeper's room again. But there was no help for it—she must go.

As she entered, the sound of a calm voice struck her with dismay.

Miss Penfold, the headmistress of St. Freda's, was in the room, speaking to Mrs. Filby. Ethel drew back; but it was too late.

"Come in, my dear!" said Miss Penfold, with a smile and a nod to Cousin Ethel. "Come in, Ethel!"

"I—I came for a parcel," said Ethel, blushing, as she entered.

"Yes. Is there a parcel for Ethel Cleveland, Mrs. Filby?"

Mrs. Filby gave a slight sniff.

"There seems to be nothing else this afternoon, ma'am," she said, "what with hats, and soap, and books, and such! Yes, here's the ink!"

"Ink?" ejaculated Miss Penfold.

"Yes, ma'am."

Mrs. Filby pushed forward a large brown paper parcel.

Miss Penfold looked at it in amazement.

It was labelled "Ink," but it did not bear the remotest resemblance to the shape of an ink-bottle.

"Dear me!" said Miss Penfold. "Have you been ordering a large quantity of ink, Ethel?"

"No-no!" stammered Ethel.

"There must be a large quantity here—at least a gallon jar," said the headmistress of St. Freda's. "It is very extraordinary."

"May I take it, please?" said Ethel timidly.

"Stay a moment. If you did not order a quantity of ink, there must be

some mistake," said Miss Penfold, with a puzzled look. "It cannot be for you."

"Miss Cleveland's name is written on it, ma'am," said Mrs. Filby.

"Yes, but there must be some mistake, as Ethel has not ordered the ink. Indeed, what use should a gallon or more of ink be to a girl? You had better open the parcel here, Ethel, and let me see what it contains."

Ethel's heart sank.

But there was no help for it, and with unsteady fingers she began to remove the cord from the parcel.

Miss Penfold watched her quietly. The headmistress of St. Freda's was not suspicious. She was surprised; but she thought that some mistake had been made, which could be rectified when the parcel was opened.

Ethel's fingers worked slowly.

She knew that as soon as the wrappings were undone, boxes of sweets would be revealed, which it was against the rules for the girls to smuggle into St. Freda's.

She was hoping against hope that something would happen to call Miss Penfold away before the contents of the packet were finally revealed.

But nothing happened.

"Do you find the knots difficult, Ethel?" said Miss Penfold. "Mrs. Filby will lend you a pair of scissors."

"Here they are, miss," said Mrs. Filby.

"Thank you," stammered Ethel.

She cut the string desperately. There was no help for it now. She threw open the brown paper, and disclosed two large cardboard boxes.

One of them was labelled "Chocolates," and the other "Mixed."

Miss Penfold looked at them, and her eyes seemed to grow large and round with amazement. She signed to Ethel to open the boxes.

The girl obeyed.

"Sweets!" ejaculated Mrs. Filby. "Bless my soul!"

Miss Penfold looked at Ethel. The girl was silent, with crimson cheeks.

"Dear me!" said Miss Penfold. "This is not—er—ink!"

"No-no!" stammered Ethel.

"Why have you had sweets sent to you in this way, Ethel?" asked Miss Penfold quietly. "You must know that it is not right to have things smuggled into St. Freda's in this way. You are allowed to make purchases to a certain extent at the school shop, but anything of this sort is quite forbidden."

"I—I know," stammered Ethel.

Miss Penfold's face grew very severe.

"But you have done it, all the same, Ethel."

"But——"

"Please explain."

"It—it was not I who ordered these things," said Ethel, seeing that the whole story must come out now. "They were sent to me."

"Oh, I see! Without your knowledge, Ethel? That alters the case completely, of course."

"Without my knowledge at the time they were ordered, certainly," said Ethel. "I was told they were coming, that is all, when it was too late to stop them."

"Ah!"

"They were sent in kindness, but very thoughtlessly," said Ethel. "I did not know what to do when I heard they were being sent. There were other things, too—ginger-beer and cake."

"And who sent them?"

Ethel was silent.

"You see, Ethel, this is really a smuggling trick, and if a relation of yours has been so foolish as to smuggle things to you here, it amounts to setting all authority at defiance," said the Head of St. Freda's. "I must write to the person, whoever it is, and point out that this cannot be continued."

"It is a boy, Miss Penfold," said Ethel, scarlet. "He—he imagines that things can be done here the same as in a boys' school. But he meant no harm, Miss Penfold."

The Head's face broke into a smile.

"Ah, I think I can guess what boy, too! Your Cousin Arthur?"

"Yes," said Ethel, hanging her head.

"The lad I saw in the train the day you came to St. Freda's, who recommended you, if I remember rightly, to put rats in my hatbox if I should not meet with your approval as a headmistress?" said Miss Penfold.

"Ye-e-es."

"Well, I am sure the lad had no intention of being disrespectful to me, either in that case or in this," said Miss Penfold. "I shall not take any notice of the matter, Ethel; but you must write to him and tell him that there must be nothing of the sort again. Or, if you are seeing him soon, you may tell him."

"Thank you so much, Miss Penfold!"

"Not at all."

"And the—the sweets!" said Ethel hesitatingly. "Shall I leave them here?"

"They must be confiscated," said Miss Penfold, with a nod. "You may leave them here, Ethel."

"Yes, Miss Penfold."

And Ethel, glad to escape so cheaply, left the housekeeper's room.

Dolores met her in the passage.

"What is the matter?" she asked, noticing Ethel's flushed cheeks.

Cousin Ethel explained.

Dolores laughed softly.

"The ridiculous boy!" she exclaimed. "But he has a kind heart, Ethel. I like your cousin very much."

"He has a very kind heart," said Ethel. "But he will get me into trouble here if he is not more careful. I shall write to him."

"No need to do that—you can see him."

"How do you mean, Dolores?"

"Look!"

Dolores unclosed her hand and showed a stone with a note tied round it. "Miss Ethel Cleveland," was scrawled on the outside in pencil.

Cousin Ethel looked at it in amazement.

"Where did you get that, Dolores?" she asked.

"It was pitched over the wall into the garden from the road."

Ethel looked distressed.

"Oh, dear! The foolish fellow!"

"He is very mysterious," agreed Dolores. "I came to look for you, when I picked it up. It is fortunate that Miss Tyrrell did not find it. She might have imagined that you were receiving messages from a boy outside the school."

Ethel looked startled.

"Surely none of the girls of St. Freda's do anything like that, Dolores?"

Dolores gave a curious laugh.

"This is your first boarding-house, Ethel, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Well, there is a great deal for you to learn, then, that is all."

"But, Dolores——"

"Read your note," interrupted the Spanish girl, changing the subject. "It means that Arthur wishes to see you, no doubt, and if you do not come, he may throw over another message."

"Oh, dear!"

In the quadrangle, Cousin Ethel unwrapped the paper from the stone and spread it out, and read the message scribbled on the inner side.

"Am waiting by the side gate.—ARTHUR."

"The foolish fellow!"

Dolores's eyes sparkled."

"What fun!" she exclaimed.

CHAPTER 42.

D'Arcy is Surprised.

"MISS PENFOLD would be angry if she knew," said Ethel.

"Bother Miss Penfold!" said Dolores recklessly.

Ethel looked really shocked, as she felt.

"Oh, Dolores!"

"Oh, it's fun!" said the Spanish girl impatiently. "I'm tired of doing exactly as I'm told, and saying, 'Yes, Miss Penfold,' and 'No, Miss Penfold.' Bother!"

"My dear Dolores——"

Dolores placed a pretty little hand over Ethel's mouth.

"No, I won't be lectured this afternoon!" she exclaimed. "Let us go and see Arthur. I am dying to see somebody!"

"But——"

"Take me with you, Ethel. I'm bored to extinction!"

"Oh, very well!"

Ethel's tone was not so gracious as usual; but Dolores did not appear to observe it.

The two girls made their way to the side gate—a postern that was used, as a rule, only by the mistresses. It was half hidden by the masses of ivy that grew on the walls. The gate was not barred, and it was too high to see over. But as the girls came up to it, the sound of their footsteps probably reached the ears of someone waiting on the other side, for a pair of hands appeared between the spikes on the top of the gate, and a face rose into view, surmounted by a silk hat.

It was the face of the swell of St. Jim's.

"Bai Jove!" said D'Arcy.

He let go with his right hand to raise his hat, but he did not seem equal to the strain of supporting his weight, for he suddenly disappeared.

Dolores laughed softly.

In a few moments, however, the hands were seen on the top of the gate again, and Arthur Augustus looked over with a flushed face.

"Jollay glad to see you!" he exclaimed. "And you, too, Miss Pelham! Did you find eithah of my notes?"

"Either!" exclaimed Ethel.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I found one," said Dolores.

"You did not throw any others?" exclaimed Ethel, in dismay.

Arthur Augustus nodded.

"Yaas, wathah! You see, I thwew ovah one, and waited a bit, and then

thwew ovah the othah, in a diffewent place. Then I waited here. If you hadn't come soon, I was goin' to thwow ovah anothah."

"Oh, Arthur, you silly fellow!"

"Weally, Ethel——"

"Someone else will find the other note, and it may fall into my Form-mistress's hands!" Ethel exclaimed, in distress.

D'Arcy's face fell.

"Bai Jove! I never thought of that, you know."

"You would not," agreed Dolores. "But it is all right. It is great fun! Miss Penfold has discovered the sweets you sent in."

"Gweat Scott!"

"And Ethel has had a lecture—haven't you, Ethel?"

"Bai Jove! That's wotten!"

"It was all right," said Ethel. "Miss Penfold was very kind. She realised that it was a ridiculous cousin of mine who was to blame."

"Oh, weally, Ethel——"

"I am very angry with you, Arthur! You must never, never do such a thing again!" Cousin Ethel exclaimed.

"But, my deah gal——"

"Hush!" exclaimed Dolores, suddenly holding up her hand.

"Weally, Miss Pelham——"

"Hush! Someone is coming!"

"Bai Jove!"

There were footsteps behind the shrubbery near the gate. Arthur Augustus dropped out of sight in a moment, and Cousin Ethel and Dolores turned to face the new-comer.

Enid Craven came down the garden-path, with a keen, suspicious look upon her face.

She glanced inquiringly at Cousin Ethel.

Dolores was perfectly cool, and showed no sign of being disturbed in any way; but there was a blush on Ethel's cheeks. She hated being put into a position of keeping a secret and making concealments.

But there was no help for it now.

Enid Craven halted.

"I thought I heard someone talking here," she said.

"We were talking," said Dolores.

"Wasn't there anybody else?" asked Enid.

Cousin Ethel was silent.

"Why should you think there was anybody else?" asked Dolores coldly.

Enid's narrow eyes glittered.

"I believe I heard a boy's voice," said Enid.

No reply.

"Will you tell me?"

Silence.

"Miss Penfold would have something to say if she knew that you were meeting boys in secret, Ethel."

Ethel flushed scarlet.

"How dare you say that!" she exclaimed.

"Isn't it true?"

"You have spied upon us!" said Dolores contemptuously. "Then you know that there is no harm in what Ethel is doing."

"I know there is a boy here somewhere," said Enid, with a suspicious glance among the shrubberies. "I know——"

"Bai Jove!"

Enid Craven started as a handsome face, adorned with an eyeglass, rose into view over the top of the gate.

She stared blankly at the aristocratic countenance of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

The swell of St. Jim's contrived this time to hang on to the gate with his left hand while he raised his silk topper with his right. Practice makes perfect.

"Pway do not misundahstand the posish, my dear young lady!" he exclaimed. "I am Ethel's cousin, and am meetin' her by my own ordah. Ethel had no choice in the mattah, as I diwected her as her eldah."

Ethel smiled.

"Oh, it is D'Arcy!" said Enid.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Miss Penfold would not allow Ethel to meet anybody in secret, even her cousin," said Enid spitefully.

"The fault is entiahly mine," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Pway do not misundahstand the mattah, you know. I have been so jollay cautious, that I wondah vewy much how you came to know anythin' about the mattah."

Enid laughed.

"I found a note," she said.

"Bai Jove! She's found the othah note, Ethel!" D'Arcy looked puzzled. "But the note was addwessed to Ethel."

"Yes, I know that."

"Then how could you possibly know what was inside it?" asked Arthur Augustus, looking very puzzled indeed.

Enid turned red, and Dolores burst into a laugh. It evidently did not occur to Arthur Augustus D'Arcy that anybody could be mean enough to open and read a letter addressed to another person.

"It is vewy wemarkable!" D'Arcy observed.

"I read the note!" said Enid angrily.

"Gweat Scott! But it was addwessed to Ethel!"

D'Arcy's astonishment was more cutting than any blame could have been. Enid's face was crimson. She gave Ethel and Dolores a bitter, furious look, and turned away and disappeared through the shrubberies.

Dolores laughed lightly

"She had what she deserved!" the Spanish girl said. "You are really a hard hitter, Arthur."

D'Arcy looked amazed.

"I? A hard hittah? Bai Jove!"

"Yes, indeed. Ha, ha!"

"You must go now, Arthur," said Ethel hurriedly. "Enid will tell about this. And perhaps my Form-mistress will come here."

"Bai Jove, that would be wotten!"

"Run away at once. I am very much obliged to you for your good intentions, Arthur, but I must ask you never, never to do anything of the sort again."

"Weally, Ethel——"

"And now do run away!"

"But——"

"Lose no time, Arthur!"

The swell of St. Jim's shook his head decidedly.

"You are quite wong, deah gal. You think that that young person will tell your Form-mistwess about your meeting me heah?"

"She will contrive to let Miss Tyrrell know, at all events."

"Bai Jove! I should wag her, then! We always wag tell-tales at St. Jim's."

"Yes, but go now."

"There's no huwwy, deah girl."

"Yes, yes, yes—there is a hurry! Do go!" urged Ethel.

"Not at all. You see, if your Form-mistwess questions you, you will be in a jollay awkward posish. I had bettah be heah to speak up for you."

"You?"

"Yaas, wathah! I shall have to explain to Miss Tywwell, you know."

"Arthur——"

"I assure you that I am quite wight, deah girl. You can always twust a fellah of tact and judgment, you know."

"My dear Arthur——"

"It's all wight. I'm comin' in!"

And the swell of St. Jim's swung himself over the gate with great agility. Ethel uttered a little cry of dismay.

She was far from sharing D'Arcy's unbounded faith in his tact and judgment, and she was more than afraid that his proposed explanation to the junior mistress of St. Freda's would only make matters worse.

But it was too late to stop him now.

Arthur Augustus was in the garden. His silk hat had rolled on the ground, but the swell of St. Jim's recovered it, and brushed it carefully with a cambric handkerchief, and placed it on his head.

Then he smiled at Ethel in a reassuring way.

"It's all wight, I assure you."

"Really, Arthur——"

"Weally, Ethel——"

"You foolish, foolish fellow! There would be trouble at once if Miss Penfold found you in the grounds."

"But I am going to explain."

"You are going to do nothing of the sort!" exclaimed Ethel, while Dolores laughed. "It will only cause more trouble."

"Weally, Ethel——"

"You must go away at once!"

"It's too late!" exclaimed Dolores, catching Ethel's arm. "Here they come!"

"Bai Jove!"

Cousin Ethel pushed Arthur Augustus into the shrubbery, where a great bush of laurel hid him from sight.

"Stay there!" she whispered breathlessly.

"But——"

Ethel did not wait for Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's "buts."

She ran across the path with Dolores and into the shrubbery on the other side.

A few moments later Miss Tyrrell and Enid Craven came down to the gate. Miss Tyrrell's face wore an annoyed expression.

"There is no one here!" she exclaimed.

"There was a few minutes ago, Miss Tyrrell," Enid said tartly. "I suppose they have gone. There was a boy talking over the gate—one of the St. Jim's boys."

"Are you quite sure?"

Miss Tyrrell looked over the gate. She was tall enough to see over it to the path beside the wall outside. There was no one in sight.

"There is no one here now, Enid."

"Then he has gone."

"And you are quite sure?"

"Yes, Miss Tyrrell. I thought it my duty to tell you," said Enid. "I know how wrong it is to receive notes from boys outside the school."

CHAPTER 43.

Seeing D'Arcy Off.

MISS TYRRELL looked hard at Enid.

"It is certainly very wrong and very bold to act in such a way," she said. "I hope none of the girls at St. Freda's do so. It is almost impossible for me to believe that Ethel Cleveland would be guilty of such an act. But I shall certainly question her."

"Pway excuse me, Miss Tywwell!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had suddenly stepped into view from behind the laurel-bush, silk topper in hand, with his very best bow.

"Oh!" exclaimed Miss Tyrrell.

"Pway excuse me! I am sowwy if I startled you!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, in his politest tones. "You see, deah madam, that I felt bound to speak, aftah what you just said."

"What are you doing here?" exclaimed Miss Tyrrell.

"I came to see my cousin."

"Oh, you are Ethel's cousin?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"You did not mention that, Enid!"

"I—I forgot."

"Very well. But you must know, Master D'Arcy, that girls here are not allowed to receive visits from their boy cousins without the special permission of the headmistress!" exclaimed Miss Tyrrell severely.

"I am extwemely sowwy——"

"Have you met Ethel?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Then I am afraid you have made it necessary to punish her."

D'Arcy looked dismayed.

"Bai Jove!, But I am speakin' up now so that you will know tha Ethel is not to blame in the mattah, you see."

Miss Tyrrell suppressed a smile.

"Please come with me to Miss Penfold!" she exclaimed.

"Yaas, wathah! With pleasuah!"

And Arthur Augustus D'Arcy walked with Miss Tyrrell up the garden path, and then towards the house. Miss Tyrrell proceeded directly to Miss Penfold's study, and she found both Ethel and Dolores with the Head.

After Enid's tale-bearing, Ethel felt that there was but one thing to be done—to explain the whole matter to the Head.

That she had immediately proceeded to do, and Miss Penfold listened to the story with considerable amusement.

The absurd devices of Arthur Augustus for the purpose of providing the girls of St. Freda's with a dormitory feed made the Head laugh in spite of herself. She knew part of the story already, and the rest of it did not make her angry. She could not help laughing. She could see, of course, that every word Ethel told her was the exact truth—in fact, it never occurred to Ethel at all that her word might be doubted; and it seldom does occur to anyone who always tells the truth. It is that unconscious expectation of being believed natural to truthful people which gives the ring of truth to their statements.

Ethel had just finished her explanation when Miss Tyrrell came in with Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

The swell of St. Jim's bowed gracefully to Miss Penfold over his silk hat.

"Good-aftahnoon, madam!" he said. "I twust I see you vewy well?"

The Head of St. Freda's smiled.

"You have been acting in a very foolish way, Master D'Arcy!" she said.

"Oh, madam!"

"You have been holding clandestine communication with a girl of my school——"

D'Arcy started.

"Oh, bai Jove, madam! What a howwid word!" he exclaimed.

"That is the correct word!" said Miss Penfold severely.

"Bai Jove!"

"Of course, you did not intend anything of the sort——"

"Bai Jove!"

"Now, I don't know what may be your ways of amusing yourself at St. Jim's," said Miss Penfold, "but I object very strongly to your transferring the scene of your activities to St. Freda's!"

Arthur Augustus was silent.

He felt that he had put his foot into it, and his only anxiety was that Ethel should not get into trouble over the matter.

"I twust you won't come down heavy on Ethel, Miss Penfold," he said at last. "It was all my doin', you know, fwom first to last. Ethel told me I was a silly ass to start with—or words to that effect!"

"Yes, I am sure it was all your fault," said Miss Penfold. "Now, the absurd things you have sent here will all be handed to the carrier, to be delivered to you at your school."

"Oh!"

"And if you ever—ever make such an attempt again to introduce St. Jim's customs into St. Freda's I shall be very angry!"

"Ya-a-a-as!"

"And, that matter being settled——"

"You are not goin' to lick Ethel, then, Miss Penfold?"

The Head laughed.

"Ethel will not be punished at all. I am sure that the whole matter has been worry enough to her already."

"Bai Jove!"

"That being settled," said Miss Penfold, "you will kindly take your departure, and never enter St. Freda's in a surreptitious manner again! If you want to see your cousin on a half-holiday, you may come and ask permission in a frank and open way. I do not like secrecy in young people."

"I—I vewy much disappwove of secwecy myself Miss Penfold. It was all owin' to the vewy peculiah circs. of the case——"

"Exactly! But no more of it, please. Miss Tyrrell, will you kindly assemble the girls to see Master D'Arcy off?"

Miss Tyrrell looked surprised for a moment, and then her eyes twinkled. She understood what the Head meant.

"Certainly!" she said, and she quitted the room.

"Bai Jove, that is very kind and attentive of you, Miss Penfold!"

"Good-bye!" said Miss Penfold.

"Good-bye, madam!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy shook hands with Ethel and Dolores.

"Good-bye, deah girls!" he murmured. "I'm awf'ly sowwy about that feed! But we'll stand you a wippin' one when you come to St. Jim's again, so it will be all wight!"

"Good-bye, Arthur!"

The swell of St. Jim's quitted the study. He went down to the School-House door, and found that Miss Tyrrell had carried out instructions.

A double row of smiling girls waited for Arthur Augustus to pass along

to the gates. And their smiles grew broader as the swell of St. Jim's appeared.

"Bai Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus.

He turned pink as he descended the steps.

Wide smiles and soft laughter greeted him as he passed along between the double row of girls.

His face was crimson by the time he reached the end.

Corporal Brick let him out at the gates, grinning broadly.

"Bai Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus, pushing back his hat and mopping the perspiration from his brow as he stood in the road. "Bai Jove, I wondah if that was a little joke of Miss Penfold's? It made a fellow feel an awful ass!"

He glanced back over the wall.

He could see the crowd of girls still, and he could see that they were all laughing now. His crimson complexion grew more crimson.

"Bai Jove, it's simply wotten!" he muttered.

And Arthur Augustus D'Arcy stepped out in the direction of St. Jim's. He had seen Cousin Ethel and Dolores among the girls, and Dolores was laughing. Ethel had tried to keep a grave face.

"So there won't be any dorm. feed after all, Ethel!" said Dolores, taking Ethel's arm, and walking down the garden with her.

Then Ethel laughed.

"No; we shall lose that great treat," she replied. "All the things will be taken, excepting those Milly Pratt has already eaten." She stopped at the seat where Milly sat; she had not moved for the past hour. "How do you feel now, Milly?"

Milly smiled a sickly smile.

"I feel a little—a little strange," she murmured. "Of course, it wasn't the tarts."

"Of course not!" said Ethel, laughing.

And she went on, leaving Milly Pratt to her meditations.

CHAPTER 44.

The Fateful Letter.

"THERE'S a letter for you, Ethel," Dolly Carew remarked, one morning, a week or two after the visit of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy to St. Freda's.

"Thank you, Dolly!"

Cousin Ethel took the letter.

A good many of the St. Freda's girls looked interestedly on while she opened it. The girls took a great interest in Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, as a matter of course, and they were curious to know if the letter was from St. Jim's.

Ethel started as she saw the writing.

"It is from my mother!" she exclaimed.

"Oh!" said Dolly.

Ethel did not note the comical disappointment in Dolly's tone. She carried the letter away to a quiet corner with trembling hand. She wanted to be alone to read it. Her heart was beating painfully.

Her mother was in bad health, abroad. That was why Ethel had come to St. Freda's. Mrs. Cleveland had not written letters herself for a long time. A letter in her mother's hand was a surprise to Ethel. Did it mean that Mrs. Cleveland was much better, or——

She opened the letter quickly.

Then her eyes danced as she read it.

It was a brief letter, but full of happy news to Ethel.

"My dearest Ethel,—You will be glad to know how much better I am, and that I am home again. I want my own dear girl to come to me now. I have written to Miss Penfold, and arrangements will be made for you to return home at once. Whether you go back to St. Freda's will depend upon the state of my health, but I shall keep you with me if I can."

Ethel's eyes danced and shone.

She kissed the letter, and then ran off to find Dolores. Dolores was in the garden, and her dusky face lightened up at Ethel's approach.

She caught sight of the letter in the girl's hand.

"Good news?" she asked.

"Yes, indeed. My mother is well again—and home."

"I am so glad!" said Dolores.

"And I am going home to her!" cried Ethel gaily.

Then she paused suddenly, struck by the expression upon the face of the Spanish girl.

She was glad to go home, to be with her mother again—to take up her old life as she had left it. But she had grown fond of St. Freda's, too; she had grown to love the place, and the girls there, especially Dolores.

It would not be all pleasure to leave, after all.

"So you are glad to go, Ethel?" said Dolores, in a low voice.

"I am glad to go to my mother again," said Ethel slowly.

"And not sorry to leave us?"

"Of course I am sorry."

Dolores smiled ironically.

"You do not look very sorry," she said.

Ethel's face became very grave.

"I had not thought for a moment about what I should be leaving," she said quietly. "I was so pleased with the news about my mother. But I am very, very sorry to be leaving you, Dolores! And—and you must come and stay with me the first holiday."

Dolores's face softened.

"You are right, Ethel!" she exclaimed. "And I am selfish and bitter. But—but I shall miss you so much!"

Miss Penfold sent for Ethel to come into her study, and greeted her very affectionately.

She had a letter on her desk, and Ethel knew why she was sent for.

"You are leaving St. Freda's," said Miss Penfold. "I am very sorry, Ethel. We shall all miss you. If you return to us we shall all be glad: in any case, we shall always remember you with affection. And you will have the knowledge, Ethel, that during your stay here you have done good to at least one person."

"It is very kind of you to say so," murmured Ethel.

"Not at all! Dolores will ever be indebted to you for having brought about a complete reformation in her character. And—— Wait a moment, Ethel! I have given my permission for a party of St. Jim's boys, including your cousin, to come over here this evening for the farewell entertainment which will be held in your honour."

Ethel's eyes sparkled.

"Thank you so much, Miss Penfold!" she said brightly; and then the girl sped away to inform Dolores of the glad news.

CHAPTER 45.

Au Revoir.

"ETHEL, deah girl!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy greeted his fair cousin effusively in the old gateway of St. Freda's. Behind him came the Terrible Three—Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther—and Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn were also among the arrivals.

"I am so pleased to see you all!" said Ethel. "It was very jolly of Miss Penfold to give you permission to come over."

"I believe we should have taken French leave if she hadn't," said Tom Merry, laughing. "Anyway, we shouldn't have let you go without saying good-bye."

"Wathah not!"

"Come along!" came the brisk voice of Dolores. "Everything's ready!"

And a movement was made to the class-room. All the girls were present without exception, and Miss Penfold herself had a seat in the front row.

At the end of the room platforms had been erected, and Miss Tyrrell presided at the piano. Everything seemed to make for an enjoyable evening.

"It'll go off swimmingly," murmured Monty Lowther, "so long as Gussy doesn't give a tenor solo."

"Weally, Lowthah, you ass, I wegard that statement as widic!"

"Shurrup!" whispered Tom Merry.

The St. Jim's juniors were given a row of seats to themselves, and Miss Penfold, her staid, strict manner entirely absent, approached them with a smile.

"You will each give a turn?" she inquired.

"Oh, crumbs!" groaned Tom Merry. "I can't sing at the best of times, let alone before a crowd of—ahem!—young ladies!"

"Never mind. You shall recite, then," said Miss Penfold. "Surely you can do that, if it's only 'Mary Had a Little Lamb'?"

"All right," said Tom. "I'll try and struggle through with something."

"And I shall be vewy pleased to entahtain the audience with a wollickin' soldiah's song," said Arthur Augustus.

"Hurrah!" chortled Monty Lowther. "That let's me off doing my bit."

"Why?" demanded D'Arcy.

"Because nobody'll survive your song!" explained Lowther, with a grin.

"You uttah wottah!"

"Peace, my infants!" said Tom Merry. "The show's starting."

Miss Tyrrell set the ball rolling with a few lively selections on the piano. Then, amid a burst of clapping, Dolores Pelham stepped up to give the first song.

Dolores had a splendid voice, full of rare beauty. She rendered a song of sunny Spain, and was loudly encored.

Then Kerr, the Scots junior, sent the audience into roars with his wonderful impersonations. He mimicked Mr. Ratcliff, the master of the New House at St. Jim's, in such a lifelike manner that the girls insisted upon his doing it all over again, and even Miss Penfold could scarcely repress her smiles.

Then Kerr imitated Taggles, the crusty old porter, and Corporal Brick of St. Freda's. To wind up his performance, he rendered "The Bluebells of Scotland."

"It's all right for that bounder!" growled Figgins when the storm of cheering had subsided. "He could face the crowned heads of Europe without turning a hair. I'm blessed if I could!"

"Where's Fatty?" asked Manners suddenly. "We'll get him to give us 'The Men of Harlech.' He's got the best voice of any of us."

"Good egg!" said Tom Merry. "Wynn, old man—— Why, my hat, he's vanished!"

The Falstaff of St. Jim's had discreetly made himself scarce. In the adjoining class-room a magnificent spread had been prepared, and Fatty Wynn was not proof against such tempting viands. Lured on by Milly Pratt, who had once more recovered her gigantic appetite, the fat junior had seized an opportune moment, and slipped away from his chums unobserved.

"Where the thunder is he?" asked Figgins. Then the light of understanding came into his eyes. "He's after the grub, I'll wager!" he said.

"Milly Pratt is absent also," said Cousin Ethel. "Let's come and rout them out."

They found the feasters going strong. Fatty Wynn had discovered a kindred spirit in Milly Pratt. Both were able to go great guns in the gorging line, and it was a moot point which could outdo the other.

Fatty Wynn was bolting a huge rabbit-pie by instalments. He looked up in alarm at the sudden invasion.

"Fatty, you old porpoise," said Figgins, "we want you to give us 'The Men of Harlech.'"

"I—I couldn't in my present famished state, Figgy, old man."

"Rats! You've stowed away sufficient for a fully-fledged cormorant already. Chuck it, and come along!"

"You, too, Milly," said Ethel. "You'll make yourself positively ill, over-eating like this!"

Fatty Wynn and Milly Pratt exchanged mutual glances of commiseration, and went back to the concert.

Whether Fatty was famished or not, his voice did not suffer. He rendered his song in rousing style, and was cheered to the echo.

Thenceforward the performance went without a hitch. Gussy gave "The British Grenadiers," and Monty Lowther's humorous recitation literally brought the house down.

Manners, whose brain had been busy for the past half-hour, vastly astonished his hearers by giving them an original song which centred round the great Gustavus. The first verse ran as follows:

"He's always dressed in Sunday best,
Complete with shining topper;
A modest cap, this lofty chap,
Regards as most improper!
His waistcoat, too, is pink and blue,
For spats he's fairly fussy.
He is the nuttiest of the nuts,
Our own immortal Gussy!"

"Weally, Mannahs!" protested the swell of St. Jim's, in shrill tones.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The St. Jim's juniors roared with merriment, and a ripple of laughter uprose from the girls. Manners didn't have much of a voice, but the novelty of his song amply atoned for this deficiency.

The Shell fellow was loudly applauded; and then the rest of the juniors, whether willing or not, were compelled to give a turn. Figgy's love-ditty—the only one of the evening—seemed to be intended solely for the ears o

Cousin Ethel, and that young lady coloured perceptibly as the leader of the New House fixed his eyes directly upon her during the song.

Finally, Tom Merry and Cousin Ethel contributed a duet—the finest item on a fine programme. Tom's voice blended well with Ethel Cleveland's, and the audience fairly rose to them.

Then Miss Tyrrell struck up "For Auld Lang Syne," and the happy throng adjourned to the supper-room, where Fatty Wynn and his girl rival again got busy.

The entertainment had been a roaring success. There could be no question about that. Cousin Ethel might possibly have felt just a little miserable but for the musical evening, which banished all gloomy thoughts from her young mind.

Even the boundless appetite of Fatty Wynn was satisfied at last, and then the St. Jim's juniors bade their girl chums good-night. It was arranged that D'Arcy and Figgins should obtain the permission of Dr. Holmes to see Cousin Ethel to the railway-station on the morrow.

* * * * * * * * * *

Next morning, at the appointed time, a smart turn-out drove into the gateway of St. Freda's, and whisked up the drive and stopped before the School House door.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy and Figgins descended, hat in hand, to greet Cousin Ethel.

Dolores stood on the step watching them. The Spanish girl's heart seemed to be in her eyes. In spite of all the efforts of her pride, two big tears wetted her black eyelashes.

"Adios, Ethel mia!"

"Good-bye, Dolores—dear Dolores!"

"Bai Jove! Say au wevoir, but not good-bye, you know!" said Arthur Augustus.

And the sweet voice floated back to the hearing of Dolores, standing on the school steps:

"Au revoir!"

THE END.

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