

**E. M. DELAFIELD**

CONSEQUENCES

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# E. M. Delafield

## Consequences

### Book I

#### I

### The Game of Consequences

The firelight flickered on the nursery wall, and the children sat round the table, learning the new game which the nursery-maid said they would like ever so, directly they understood it.

"I understand it already," said Alex, the eldest, tossing her head proudly. "Look, Barbara, you fold the piece of paper like this, and then give it to Cedric, because he's next to you, and I give mine to you, and Emily gives hers to me. That's right, isn't it, Emily?"

"Quite right, Miss Alex; what a clever girl, to be sure. Here, Master Baby, you can play with me. You're too little to do it all by yourself."

"He isn't Baby any more. We've got to call him Archie now. The new little sister is Baby," said Alex dictatorially.

She liked always to be the one to give information, and Emily had only been with them a little while. The children's own nurse would have told her to mind her own business, or to wait till she was asked, before teaching her grandmother, but Emily said complacently:

"To be sure, Miss Alex! and such a big boy as Master Archie is, too. Now you all write down a name of a gentleman."

"What gentleman?" asked Cedric judicially. He was a little boy of eight, with serious grey eyes and a good deal of dignity.

"Why, any gentleman. Some one you all know."

"I know, I know."

Alex, always the most easily excited of them all, scribbled on her piece of paper and began to bounce up and down on her chair.

"Hurry up, Barbara. You're so slow."

"I don't know who to put."

Alex began to whisper, and Barbara at once said:

"Nurse doesn't allow us to whisper. It's bad manners."

"You horrid little prig!"

Alex was furious. Barbara's priggishness always put her into a temper, because she felt it, unconsciously, to be a reflection on her own infallibility as the eldest.

"Miss Barbara," said Emily angrily, "it's not for you to say what Nurse allows or doesn't allow; *I'm* looking after you now. The idea, indeed!"

Barbara's pale, pointed little face grew very red, but she did not cry, as Alex, in spite of her twelve years, would almost certainly have cried at such a snub.

She set her mouth vindictively and shot a very angry look at Alex out of her blue eyes. Then she wrote something on the slip of paper, shielding it with her hand so that her sister could not read it.

Cedric was printing in large capitals, easily legible, but no one was interested in what Cedric wrote.

There was a good deal of whispering between Emily and little Archie, and then the papers were folded up once more and passed round the table again.

"But when do we see what we've written?" asked Alex impatiently.

"Not till the end of the game, then we read them out. That's where the fun comes in," said Emily.

It was a long while before the papers were done, and most of the children found it very difficult to decide what *he* said to *her*, what she replied, and what the world said. But at last even Barbara, always lag-last, folded her slip, very grimy and thumb-marked, and put it with the others into Emily's apron.

"Now then," giggled the nursery-maid, "pull one out, Master Archie, and I'll see what it says." Archie snatched at a paper, and they opened it.

"Listen!" said Emily.

"The Queen met Master Archie – whoever of you put the Queen?"

"Cedric!" cried the other children.

Cedric's loyalty to his Sovereign was a by-word in the nursery.

"Well, the Queen met Master Archie in the Park. She said to him, 'No,' and he answered her, 'You dirty little boy, go 'ome and wash your face.' Well, if that didn't ought to be the other way round!"

"I wish it was me she'd met in the Park," said Cedric sombrely. "I might have gone back to Buckingham Palace with her and –"

"Go on, Emily, go on!" cried Alex impatiently. "Don't listen to Cedric. What comes next?"

"The consequences was – whatever's here?" said Emily, pretending an inability to decipher her own writing.

"Well, I never! The consequences was, a wedding-ring. Whoever went and thought of that now? And the world said –"

The nursery door opened, and Alex shrieked, "Oh, finish it – quick!"

She knew instinctively that it was Nurse, and that Nurse would be certain to disapprove of the new game.

"Don't you make that noise, Alex," said Nurse sharply. "You'll disturb the baby with your screaming."

For a moment Alex wondered if the game was to be allowed to proceed, but Barbara, well known to be Nurse's favourite, must needs say to her in an amiable little voice, such as she never used to her brothers and sister:

"Emily's been teaching us such a funny new game, Nurse. Come and play with us."

"I've no time to play, as you very well know, with all your clothes wanting looking over the way they do," Nurse told her complacently. "What's the game?"

Alex kicked Barbara under the table, but without much hope, and at the same moment Cedric remarked very distinctly:

"It is called Consequences, and Archie met the Queen in the Park. I wish it had been me instead."

"Well!" exclaimed Nurse. "That's the way you do when my back's turned, Miss Emily, teaching them such vulgar, nonsensical games as that. Never did I hear – now give me those papers this minute."

She did not wait to be given anything, but snatched the little slips out of Emily's apron and threw them on to the fire.

"I'm not going to have no Consequences in *my* nursery, and don't you believe it!" remarked Nurse.

But omnipotent though Nurse was, in the eyes of the Clare children, she could not altogether compass this feat.

There were consequences of all sorts.

Cedric, who was obstinate, and Barbara, also obstinate and rather sly as well, continued to play at the new game in corners by themselves, refusing to admit Alex to their society because she told them that they were playing it all wrong. She knew that they were not playing it as Emily had taught them, and was prepared to set them right, although she felt uncertain, in the depths of her heart, as

to whether she herself could remember it all. But at least she knew more than Barbara, who was silly and a copy-cat, or than Cedric, who had concentrated on the possibilities the game presented to him of a hypothetical encounter between himself and his Sovereign. The game for Cedric consisted in the ever-lengthening conversation which took place under the heading of what he said to her and what she replied. When Her Majesty proceeded, under Cedric's laborious pencil, to invite him to drive her in her own carriage-and-pair, to Buckingham Palace, Alex said scornfully that Cedric was a silly little boy, and of course the Queen wouldn't say *that*. To which Cedric turned a perfectly deaf ear, and continued slowly to evolve amenities eminently satisfactory to his admiration for Her Majesty. Alex went away, shrugging her shoulders, but secretly she knew that Cedric's indifference had got the better of her. However much she might laugh, with the other children, or sometimes, even, in a superior way, with the grown-ups, when the children went into the drawing-room, at Cedric's slowness, and his curious fashion of harping upon one idea at a time, Alex was sub-consciously aware of Cedric as a force, and one which could, ultimately, always defeat her own diffused, unbalanced energies. If any one laughed at Alex, or despised one of her many enthusiasms, she would quickly grow ashamed of it, and try to pretend that she had never really been in earnest. In the same way, she would affect qualities and instincts which did not belong to her, with the hope of attracting, and of gaining affection.

But Cedric went his own way, as genuinely undisturbed by Nurse's scoldings and hustlings as by his elder sister's mockery, which had its origin in her secret longing to prove to herself, in spite of her own inmost convictions, that she was the dominant spirit in her little world.

It always made her angry when Cedric left her gibes unanswered, not from a desire to provoke her further, but simply from his complete absorption in the matter in hand, and his utter indifference to Alex's comments.

"Don't you hear what I say?" Alex asked sharply.

"No," said Cedric baldly. "I'm not listening. Don't interrupt me, Alex."

"You're playing it all wrong – you and Barbara. Two silly little babies," she cried angrily and incoherently. "And it's a stupid, vulgar game. Nurse said so."

Although Alex had been the most enthusiastic of them all when Emily had first taught her the game, she had at once begun to think it vulgar when Nurse condemned it.

She would have nothing more to do with "Consequences." It was quite likely that in a few days Barbara would get into one of her priggish, perverse moods, and in a fit of temper with Cedric go and tell Nurse that he was still indulging in the forbidden pastime. Alex thought she might as well be out of it.

She was in trouble often enough in the nursery. Nurse always took Barbara's part against her, and accused her of being violent and over-bearing, and then Lady Isabel, the children's mother, would send for her to her room while she dressed for dinner, and say complainingly:

"Alex, why do you quarrel so with the others? I shall send you to school, if you can't be happy with Barbara at home."

"Oh, don't send me to school, mummy."

"Not if you're good."

"I will be good, really, I will."

"Very well, my child. Now ring for Hawkins, or I shall be late."

"May I stay and watch you put on your diamond things, mummy? Do let me."

And Lady Isabel always laughed, and let her stay, so that Alex eventually went back to the nursery with an elated sense of having been very good, and accorded privileges which never fell to the lot of self-righteous Barbara.

She knew she was her mother's favourite, because she was the eldest, and was often sent for to the drawing-room when there were people there. Barbara, of course, was too ugly to go much to the drawing-room. Alex would toss her own mane of silky brown curls, and draw herself up conceitedly, as she thought of Barbara's pale face, and thin, attenuated ringlets. Besides, Lady Isabel had said that

Barbara really mustn't come down again when "people" were there until her second teeth had put in their tardy appearance. Even Cedric, though acclaimed as "quaint" and "solemn" by his mother's friends, was too apt to make disconcerting comments on their sparkling conversation, and would return to the nursery in disgrace. Alex' only rival for downstairs' favour was little Archie, who was only four, and at present a very pretty little boy. But he was too small for Alex ever to feel jealous of him. The new baby, christened with pomp in the big Catholic Church at the end of the Square, Pamela Isabel, was, so far, a negligible quantity in the nursery world.

She slept in the little room called the inner nursery, most of the day, and was only with the others when they were taken into the Park or to play in the square garden. Then Emily pushed the big pram that contained the slumbering Pamela, and Nurse grasped the hands of Barbara and Archie and dragged them over the crossings.

Cedric, by Nurse's express orders, always walked just in front of her with Alex, and unwillingly submitted to having his hand held by his sister.

"Not that I trust Alex for common sense," Nurse was careful to explain, "not a yard, but so long as they're together I can keep an eye on both and see they don't get under no hansom's feet. That boy's spectacles are too downright uncanny for me to let him cross the road alone."

For Cedric was obliged to wear a large pair of round spectacles, without which he could only see things that were very close to his eyes. He even had another, different, pair for reading, which seemed to Alex an exaggerated precaution, likely to increase Cedric's sense of his own importance.

"Well," said Cedric. "You have a plate, and I haven't."

Alex's plate was an instrument of torture designed to push back two prominent front teeth. It not only hurt her and kept her awake at night, but was very disfiguring besides, and she passionately envied Barbara, who at nine years old still had only gaps where her front teeth should have been.

"Of course," Alex would sometimes declare grandly, repeating what she had heard Lady Isabel say, "Barbara is dreadfully backward. She's such a baby for her age. *I'm* very old for my age."

But she only said this in the drawing-room, where it would provoke kindly laughter or perhaps interested comment. In the nursery, Nurse never suffered any airs and graces, as she called them, and would pounce on Alex and shake her at the least hint of any such nonsense.

"Just you wait till you're sent to a good strict school, my lady, and see what you'll get then," she told her threateningly.

"I'm not going to school. Mummy said I shouldn't go if I was good."

"We shall see what we shall see. Children as think themselves everybody at home, gets whipped when they go to school," Nurse told her severely.

Alex was used to these prognostications. They did not alarm her very much, because she did not think that she would be sent to school. She knew instinctively that her father disapproved of ordinary girls' schools, and that her mother disliked convents, and indeed most things that had to do with religion.

Alex supposed that this was because Lady Isabel was a Protestant! She thought that it was much the nicest religion to belong to, on the whole, since it evidently imposed no obligations in the nature of church-going, and she often wondered why her mother had let all her children be Catholics, instead of Protestants like herself. It certainly couldn't be because father cared which church the children went to, or whether they went at all.

The only person in the house who did seem to care was Nurse, who took Alex and Barbara and Cedric to High Mass at the Oratory every Sunday, where there was a front bench reserved for them, with little cards in brass frames planted at intervals along the ledge in front of them, bearing the name of Sir Francis Clare.

Nurse put Barbara on one side of her and Alex on the other, and Cedric on the outside, and was very particular about their kneeling down and standing up at the right moment, and keeping the prayer-books open in front of them. Alex and Barbara each had a *Garden of the Soul*, but Cedric

was only allowed *Holy Childhood* which had pictures and anecdotes illustrative of Vice and Virtue at the end.

Alex knew all the anecdotes by heart, and preferred her own grown-up-looking book with its small, close print. She had long since discovered that the one matter over which Nurse could be hoodwinked was print, and that she might quite safely indulge herself in the perusal of the pages devoted to the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony, or to a mysterious ceremony called Churching after Child-birth, during the many dull portions of the long service.

The only part of Church that held possibilities was when the little bell rang at the Elevation, and every one bent his or her head as far down as it would go over the bench. Alex always looked up surreptitiously, then, to see if by any chance a miracle was taking place, or to watch Cedric's invariable manoeuvre of hanging on to the ledge by his teeth and hands and trying to raise his feet from the floor at the same time.

Nurse was always piously bent double, her face hidden in her cotton gloves, breathing stertorously with Barbara on the other side devotedly imitating her, even to the production of strange sounds through her own tightly-compressed lips.

After that, Alex always knew that the end of Church was near, and that as soon as the priest had taken up his little square headgear and faced the congregation for the last time, Nurse would begin to poke her violently, as a sign that she was to get up and to make Cedric pick up his cap and his gloves.

Then came the genuflection as they filed out between the benches, and Nurse was always very particular that this should be done properly, frequently pressing a heavy hand on Alex's shoulder until her knee bumped painfully against the stone floor. The final ceremony connected with the children's religion took place at the door, when Cedric had to make his way through rustling skirts and an occasional pair of black trousers to the big stone basin of holy water. Into this, standing on tiptoe with immense difficulty, he plunged as much of his hand as was necessary to satisfy the sharp inspection of Nurse when he returned, proffering dripping fingers to her and to his sisters.

The last perfunctory sign of the cross made then, the worst of Sunday, in Alex's opinion, was over.

Roast beef and Yorkshire pudding for dinner was pleasant. Mademoiselle did not come in the afternoon, and Nurse generally went out and left Emily in charge. In the summer she took the children to sit in the Square garden – the Park on Sundays was not allowed – and in the winter they always walked as far as the Albert Memorial, for which Cedric entertained a great admiration.

Sunday was Lady Isabel's At Home day and the children, except during the season, always went down to the drawing-room after tea, Alex and Barbara in pale, rose-coloured frocks with innumerable frills at throat and wrists, and a small pad fastened under each skirt so that it might stand well out at the back. Cedric, like most other little boys of his age and standing, was forced to wear a Lord Fauntleroy suit, from which his cropped bullet head and spectacles emerged incongruously.

The half-hour in the drawing-room was not enjoyed by the others as it was by Alex, especially if there were many visitors. She would lean against Lady Isabel confidently, and hear people say how like she was to her mother, which always delighted her. Her mother looked so pretty, sitting on the sofa with her fringe beautifully curled and a lovely dress that was half a teagown, the tight bodice coming down into a sharp point in front and behind, and the skirt falling into long folds, with a train sweeping the ground, and huge loops and bows of soft ribbon draping it cross-wise.

Barbara was incurably shy, and poked her head when she was spoken to, but very few people took as much notice of her as of talkative Alex or pretty little Archie, who was all blue ribbons and fearless smiles. And before very long Lady Isabel was sure to say:

"Now, you'd better run back to the nursery, hadn't you, darlings? or Nurse will be comin' down in search of you. I've got the most invaluable old dragon for them," she generally added to her friends. "She's been with us since Alex was a baby, and rules the whole house."

"Oh, don't send them away!" one of the visiting ladies would exclaim politely. "*Such* darlings!"

"Oh, but I must! Their father won't *hear* of my spoilin' them. Now run along, infants."

Cedric and Barbara were only too ready to obey, though it was understood that Lady Isabel's "run along" only meant a very ceremonious departure from the room, Barbara taking little Archie by the hand and leading him to the door, where they both dropped the obeisance considered "picturesque," and Cedric making an unwilling progress to execute his carefully practised bow before each one of the ladies scattered about the big room.

If Alex, however, was enjoying herself, and getting the notice that her soul loved, she always said in a pleading whisper, loud enough to be heard by two or three people besides her mother:

"Oh, do let me stay with you a little longer, mummy. Don't send me upstairs yet!"

"How sweet! Do let her stay, dear Lady Isabel."

"You mustn't encourage me to spoil her. She ought to go up with the others."

"Just for this once, mummy."

"Well, just for this once, perhaps. After all," said Lady Isabel apologetically, "she *is* the eldest. She'll be comin' out before I know where I am!"

And Alex would enjoy the privilege of being the eldest, and sit beside her mother, listening to the conversation, and sometimes joining in with remarks that she thought might be acclaimed as amusing or original, or even merely precocious. No wonder that the nursery greeted her return with disdain. Even Emily called her "drawing-room child," and by her contempt brought Alex' ready tears of mortified vanity to the surface. But it was much worse on the rare Sunday afternoons when Nurse was in, when she would greatly resent the slight to Barbara if she was sent up from the drawing-room before her sister.

"Working on your mamma to spoil you like that, just because you're a couple of years older!" Nurse would say, pulling the comb fiercely through Alex' hair as she went to bed.

"I'm three whole years older."

"Don't you contradict me like that, Alex. I'm not going to have any showing-off up here, I can tell you. You can keep those airs and graces for your mamma's friends in the drawing-room."

Alex generally went to bed in tears.

If Nurse had not been scolding her, then Barbara had been quarrelling with her. They always quarrelled whenever Barbara ventured to differ from Alex and take up an attitude of her own, or still more when Barbara and Cedric made an alliance together and excluded Alex's autocratic ruling of their games.

"But it is for your good," she would tell them passionately. "I want to show you a better way. It'll be much more fun if you do it my way – you'll see."

But they did not want to see.

Their obstinacy always brought to Alex the same sense of incredulous, resentful fury. How *could* they not want to be shown the best way of doing things, when she knew it and they didn't? And, of course, she always did know it. Was she not the eldest?

It was not till Alex was almost thirteen that her belief in her own infallibility as eldest received a rude shock.

She nearly killed Barbara.

It was the first week of August, and Sir Francis and Lady Isabel had gone to Scotland. The children were going to the sea with Nurse on the following day, and took advantage of her state of excitement over the packing, and the emptiness of the downstairs rooms, to play at circus on the stairs. Emily only said, "Now don't go hurting yourselves, whatever you do, or there'll be no seaside tomorrow," and then went back to amuse Pamela, who was crying and restless from the heat.

"I'll tell you what!" said Alex. "We'll have tight-rope dancing. I'm tired of learned pigs and things like that – " This last impersonation having been perseveringly rendered by Cedric with much shuffling and snorting over a pack of cards.

"Give me the skipping-rope, Barbara."

"Why?" said Barbara, whining.

"Because I say so," replied her sister, stamping her foot. "I've got an idea."

"It's my skipping-rope."

"But if you don't give it to me we can't have the tight-rope dancing," said Alex in despair.

"I don't care. Why should you do tight-rope dancing with my skipping-rope?"

"You shall do it first – you shall do it all yourself, if you'll only let me show you," Alex cried in an agony of impatience.

On this inducement Barbara slowly parted with her skipping-rope, and let Alex knot it hastily and insecurely to the newel post on the first landing above the hall.

"Now just get up on to the post, Barbara, and I'll hold the other end of the rope like this, and you'll see –"

"But I can't, I should fall off."

"Don't be such a little muff; I'll hold you on."

"No, no – I'm frightened. Let Cedric do it."

"No," said Cedric. "I'm being a learned pig." He went down the short flight of stairs and sat firmly down upon the tiled floor with the pack of cards out-spread before him.

"Now come on, Barbara," Alex commanded her; "I'll hold you."

Between hoisting and pulling and Barbara's own dread of disobeying her, Alex got her sister into a kneeling position on the broad flat top of the newel post.

"Now stand up, and then I'll hold out the rope. You'll be the famous tight-rope dancer crossing the Falls of Niagara."

"Alex, I'm frightened."

"What of, silly? If you did fall it's only a little way on to the stairs, and I'll catch you. Besides, you'll feel much safer when you're standing up."

Barbara, facing the stairs, and with her back to the alarming void between her perch and the hall-floor, rose trembling to her feet.

"You look splendid," said Alex. "Now then!" She jerked at the rope, and at the same instant Barbara screamed and tried to clutch at her.

Alex caught hold of her sister's ankles, felt Barbara's weight slip suddenly, and screamed aloud as a shriek and crash that seemed simultaneous proclaimed Barbara's fall backwards into the hall.

Cedric and Barbara in a confused struggling heap on the floor – doors opening upstairs and in the basement – the flying feet of the servants – all was an agonized nightmare to Alex until Barbara, limp and inert on Nurse's lap, suddenly began to scream and cry, calling out, "My back! my back!"

They hushed her at last, and Nurse carried her into the boudoir, which was the nearest room, and laid her down on the broad sofa. Then Alex became aware of a monotonous sound that had struck on her ear without penetrating to her senses ever since the accident happened.

"My spectacles are broken. You've broken my spectacles," reiterated a lamentable voice.

"You horrid, heartless little boy, Cedric! When poor Barbara –" Sobs choked her.

"I like that!" said Cedric. "When it was all you that made her fall at all – and break my spectacles."

"What's that?" said Nurse, miraculously reappearing. "All you, was it? I might have known it, you mischievous wicked child. Tell me what happened, this minute."

But Alex was screaming and writhing on the floor, feeling as though she must die of such misery, and it was Cedric who gave the assembled household a judicial version of the accident.

The doctor came and telegrams were sent to Scotland, which brought back Lady Isabel, white-faced and tearful, and Sir Francis, very stern and monosyllabic.

"Father, my spectacles are broken," cried Cedric earnestly, running to meet them, but they did not seem to hear him.

"Where is she, Nurse?" said Lady Isabel.

"In the boudoir, my lady, and better, thank Heaven. The doctor says her back'll get right again in time."

Alex, hanging shaking over the balustrade, saw that Nurse was making faces as though she were crying. But when she came upstairs, after a long time spent with Lady Isabel in the boudoir, and saw Alex, her face was quite hard again, and she gave her a push and said, "It's no use crying those crocodile tears now. You should have thought of that before trying to kill Barbara the way you did."

"I didn't, I didn't," sobbed Alex.

But nobody paid any attention to her.

Good-natured Emily was sent away, because Nurse said she wasn't fit to be trusted, and Cook, who was Emily's aunt, and very angry about it all, told Alex that it was all her fault if poor Emily never got another place at all. Everything was Alex' fault.

There was no going to the seaside, even after Barbara was pronounced better. But Lady Isabel, who, Nurse said, had been given a dreadful shock by Alex' wickedness, was going into the country, and would take Archie and the baby with her, if they could get a new nursery-maid at once.

"And me and Cedric?" asked Alex, trembling.

"Cedric doesn't give me no trouble, as you very well know, and he'll stay here and help me amuse poor little Barbara, as has always got on with him so nicely."

"Shall I stay and play with Barbara too?"

"She's a long way from playing yet," Nurse returned grimly. "And I should think the sight of you would throw her into a fit, after what's passed."

"But what will happen to me, Nurse?" sobbed Alex.

"Your Papa will talk to you," said Nurse.

Such a thing had never happened to any of the children before, but Alex, trembling and sick from crying, found herself confronting Sir Francis in the dining-room.

"I am going to send you to school, Alex," he told her. "How old are you?"

"Twelve."

"Then I hope," said Sir Francis gravely, "that you are old enough to understand what a terrible thing it is to be sent from home in disgrace for such a reason. I am told that you have the deplorable reputation of originating quarrels with your brothers and sister, who, but for you, would lead the normal existence of happily-circumstanced children."

Alex was terrified. She could not answer these terrible imputations, and began to cry convulsively.

"I see," said Sir Francis, "that you are sensible of the appalling lengths to which this tendency has led you. Even now, I can scarcely believe it – a harmless, gentle child like your little sister, who, I am assured, has never done you wilful injury in her life – that you should deliberately endanger her life and her reason in such a fashion."

He paused, as though he were waiting for Alex to speak, but she could not say anything.

"If your repentance is sincere, as I willingly assume it to be, your future behaviour must be such as to lead us all, particularly your poor little sister, to forget this terrible beginning."

"Will Barbara get well?"

"By the great mercy of Heaven, and owing to her extreme youth, we are assured by the doctor that a year or two will entirely correct the injury to the spine. Had it been otherwise, Alex – " Sir Francis looked at his daughter in silence.

"When thanking Heaven for the mercy which has preserved your sister's life," he said gently, "I hope you will reflect seriously upon redeeming this action by your future conduct."

"Oh, I'm sorry – oh, shall you ever forgive me?" gasped Alex, amongst her sobs.

"I do forgive you, my child, as does your mother, and as I am convinced that little Barbara will do. But I cannot, nor would I if I could, avert from you the consequence of your own act," said her father.

Barbara did forgive Alex, in a little, plaintive, superior voice, as she lay very white and straight in bed. She was to stay quite flat on her back for at least a year, the doctor said, and she need do no lessons, and later she would be taken out in a long flat carriage that could be pushed from behind, then she would be able to walk again, and her back would be quite straight.

"If she'd been a hunchback, we might have played circus again, and I could have been the learned pig," said Cedric reflectively.

Alex went to school at the end of September.

And that was her first practical experience of the game of Consequences, as played by the freakish hand of fate.

## II School

Alex' schooldays were marked by a series of emotional episodes.

In her scale of values, only the personal element counted for anything. She was intelligent and industrious at her classes when she wished to gain the approbation of an attractive class-mistress, and idle and inattentive when she wanted to please the pretty girl with yellow hair, who sat next her and read a story-book under cover of a French grammar.

Alex did not read; she wanted to make the yellow-haired girl look at her and smile at her. She thought Queenie Torrance beautiful, though her beauty did not strike Alex until after she had fallen a helpless victim to one of those violent, irrational attractions for one of her own sex, that are apt to assail feminine adolescence.

"I hope that you will find some nice little companions at Liège," Sir Francis had gravely told his daughter in valediction, "but remember that exclusive friendships are not to be desired. Friendly with all, familiar with none," said Sir Francis, voicing the ideal of his class and of his period.

As well tell a stream not to flow downhill. Nothing but the most exclusive and inordinate of attachments lay within the scope of Alex' emotional capacities. She was incapable alike of asking or of bestowing in moderation.

Theoretically she would tell herself that she would give all, trust, confidence, love, friendship, and ask for nothing in return. Practically she suffered tortures of jealousy if the loved one addressed a word or smile to any but herself, and cried herself to sleep night after night in the certainty of loving infinitely more than she was loved.

The material side of her life as a *pensionnaire* at the Liège convent made very little impression upon her, excepting in relation to the emotional aspect, of which she was never unaware.

To the end of her days, the clean, pungent smell of a certain polish used upon the immense spaces of bare *parquet ciré* all over the building, would serve to recall the vivid presentment of the tall Belgian *postulante* whose duty it was to apply it with a huge mop, and whom, from a distance only to be appreciated by those who know the immensity of the gulf that in the convent world separates the novice from the pupils, Alex had worshipped blindly.

And the acrid, yet not unpleasant taste of *confiture* thinly spread over thick slices of brown bread, would remind her with equal vividness of the daily three o'clock interval for *goûter*, with Queenie Torrance pacing beside her in the garden quadrangle, one hand of each rolled into her black-stuff apron to try and keep warm, and the other grasping the enormous double *tartine* that formed the afternoon's refecton.

Even the slight, steady sound of hissing escaping from a gas jet of which the flame is turned as high as it will go, stood to Alex for the noisy evening recreation, spent in the enforced and detested amusement of *la ronde*, when her only preoccupation was to place herself by the object of her adoration, for the grasp of her hand in its regulation cotton glove, as the circle of girls moved drearily round and round singing perfunctorily.

The tuneless tune of those *rondes* remained with Alex long after the words had lost the savour of irony with which novelty had once invested them.

"Quelle horrible attente  
D'être postulante...  
Quel supplice  
D'être une novice  
Ah! quel comble d'horreur  
Devenir soeur de chœur..."

Alex' symbols were not romantic ones, but there was no romance in the life of the Liège convent, save what she brought to it herself. Even the memory of the great square *verger*, in the middle of gravelled alleys, brought to her mind for sole token of summer, only her horror of the immense pale-red slugs that crawled slowly and interminably out and across the paths in the eternal rains of the Belgian climate. Nothing mattered but people.

And of all the people in the world, only those whom one loved.

Thus Alex' sweeping, unformulated conviction, holding in it all the misapplication of an essential force, squandered for lack of a sense of proportion.

She despised herself secretly, both for her intense craving for affection and for her prodigality in bestowing it. She was like a child endeavouring to pour a great pailful of water into a very little cup.

Waste and disaster were the inevitable results.

The real love of Alex' young enthusiasm, fair-haired Queenie Torrance, was preceded by her inarticulate, unreasoned adoration for the Belgian *postulante*. But the Belgian *postulante* was never visible, save at a distance, so that even Alex' unreasonable affections found nothing to feed upon.

There was a French girl, much older than herself, for whom Alex then conceived an enthusiasm. Marie-Angèle smiled on her and encouraged the infatuation of the curiously un-English little English girl. But she gave her nothing in return. Alex knew it, and recklessly spent all her weekly pocket-money on flowers and sweets for Marie-Angèle, thinking that the gifts would touch her and awaken in her an affection that it was not her nature to bestow, least of all on an ardent and ungainly child, six years her junior. Alex shed many tears for Marie-Angèle, and years later read some words that suddenly and swiftly recalled the girl who passed in and out of her life in less than a year.

"I love you for your few caresses,  
I love you for my many tears"

The lines, indeed, were curiously typical of the one-sided relations into which Alex entered so rashly and so inevitably throughout her schooldays.

She was fifteen, and had been nearly three years at Liège, when Queenie Torrance came. She was Alex' senior by a year, and the only other English girl in the school at that time. Alex was told to look after her, and went to the task with a certain naïve eagerness, that she always brought to bear upon any personal equation. In an hour, she was secretly combating an enraptured certainty, of which she felt nevertheless ashamed, that she had found at last the ideal object on whom to expend the vehement powers of affection for which she was always seeking an outlet.

Queenie was slight, very fair, with a full, serious oval face, innocent grey eyes set very far apart, and the high, rounded forehead and small, full-lipped mouth, of a type much in vogue in England at the time of the Regency. This was the more marked by the thick flaxen hair which fell back from her face, and over her shoulders into natural heavy ringlets. She was not very pretty, although she was often thought so, but she was charged with a certain animal magnetism, almost inseparable from her type. Half the girls in the school adored her. Queenie, already attractive to men, and sent to the convent in Belgium in reality on that account, nominally for a year's finishing before her *début* in London society, was for the most part scornful of these girlish admirers, but Alex she admitted to her friendship.

She was precociously aware that intimacy with Lady Isabel Clare's daughter was likely to accrue to her own advantage later on in London.

The genius for sympathy which led Alex to innumerable small sacrifices and tender smoothings of difficulties for her idol, Queenie at first received with a graceful gratitude which yet held in it something of suspicion, as though she wondered what return would presently be exacted of her.

But it became obvious that Alex expected nothing, and received with eager thankfulness the slightest recognition of her devotion.

Queenie despised her, but was lavish of gentle thanks and caressing exclamations. Hers was not a nature ever to make the mistake of killing the goose that laid the golden eggs.

Finding to her concealed astonishment that Alex only asked toleration, or at the most acceptance of her ardent devotion, and was transported at the slightest occasional token of affection in return, Queenie stinted her of neither. It would have seemed to her the most irrational folly to discourage a love, however one-sided, that found its expression in tireless sympathy, endless championship, and unlimited material gifts and help of any or every description. Alex did all that she could of Queenie's lessons, made her bed and mended her clothes for her whenever she could do so undetected by the authorities, spent her pocket-money on gratifying Queenie's shameless and inordinate passion for sweet things, and once or twice told lies badly and unsuccessfully, to shield Queenie from the effects of her own laziness and constant evasion of regulations.

Alex had been taught, in common with every other child of her upbringing and nationality, that to tell a lie was the worst crime to which a self-respecting human being can stoop. She also believed that a person who has told a lie is a liar, and that all liars go to Hell. Yet by some utterly illogical perversity of which she was hardly even aware, it did not shock or very much distress her, to find that Queenie Torrance told lies, and told them, moreover, with an air of quiet and convincing candour that placed them in a very different category to Alex' own halting, improbable fibs, delivered with a scarlet face and a manifest air of hunting for further corroboration as she spoke.

In the extraordinary scale of moral values unconsciously held by Alex, there were apparently no abstract standards of right and wrong. Where she loved, though she might, against her own will see defects, she was incapable of condemning.

Queenie took a curious, detached interest in coldly gratifying her vanity, by seeking to test the lengths of extravagance to which Alex' admiration would go.

"Supposing I quarrelled with every one here, and they all sent me to Coventry – whose part would you take?"

"Yours, of course."

"But if I were in the wrong?"

"That wouldn't make any difference. In fact, you'd need it more if you were in the wrong."

"I don't see that!" Queenie exclaimed. "If I were in the wrong I should have deserved it."

"But that would make it all the worse for you. It's always the people who are in the wrong who need most to have their part taken," Alex explained confusedly, yet voicing an intimate conviction.

"I don't think you have much idea of justice, Alex," said Queenie drily.

The conversation made Alex very miserable. It was characteristic of her want of logic that while she reproached herself secretly for her own impiety in setting the objects of her affection far above what she conceived to be the abstract standard of right and wrong, yet she never questioned but that any love bestowed upon herself would be measured out in direct proportion to her merits.

And despairingly did Alex sometimes review the smallness of her deserts.

She was disobedient, untruthful, quarrelsome, irreligious. It seemed to Alex that there was no fault to which she could not lay claim. Her lack of elementary religious teaching put her at a disadvantage in the convent atmosphere, and made its frequent religious services and instructions so tedious to her, that she was in constant disgrace for her weary, inattentive attitudes, not unjustly designated as irreverent, in the chapel.

She was not at all popular with the nuns. The "influence" which her class-mistress wielded over so many of the pupils, or the "interest" which the English Assistant Superior would so willingly have extended to her youthful compatriot were alike without effect upon Alex. She was not drawn to any of these holy, black-clad women, to one or other of whom almost all her French and Belgian and American contemporaries devoted a rather stereotyped enthusiasm.

Had the vagrant fancy of Alex lighted upon any one of the elder nuns charged with the direction of the school, the attraction would have been discreetly permitted, if not admittedly sanctioned, by the authorities. It would almost inevitably have led Alex to an awakening of religious sensibilities and the desirability of this result would have outweighed, even if it did not absolutely obscure in the eyes of the nuns, the excessive danger of obtaining such a result by such means.

But the stars in their courses had designed that Alex should regard the Mesdames Marie Baptiste and Marie Evangeliste of her convent days with indifference, and devote her ardent temperament and precocious sensibilities to the worship of Queenie Torrance.

The enthusiasm was smiled upon by no one, and thereby became the more inflamed.

"Je n'aime pas ces amitiés particulières," said the class-mistress of Queenie Torrance severely, to which Miss Torrance replied with polite distress that she was powerless in the matter. It made her ridiculous, she disliked the constant infringement of rules to which Alex' pursuit exposed her, but – one could not be unkind. She did not know why Alex Clare showed her especial affection – she herself had done nothing to encourage these indiscreet displays. Of course, it was pleasant to be liked, but one wished only to do right about it. Queenie mingled candour with perplexity, and succeeded in convincing every one with perfect completeness of her entire innocence of anything but a too potent attraction.

"Ce n'est donc même pas une amitié? C'est Alex qui vous recherche malgré vous!" exclaimed the class-mistress.

Under this aspect the question soon presented itself alike to the *pensionnat* and its authorities, rendering Alex ridiculous. In a system of *surveillance* which admitted of no loophole for open defiance or outspoken rebuke, Alex' evasions of that law of detachment which is the primary one in convent legislation, became the mark of every blue-ribboned *enfant de Marie* who wished to obtain a reputation for zeal by reporting the defection of a companion to her class-mistress.

It was always Alex who was reported. Queenie never sought opportunities to snatch a hurried colloquy during recreation, or manoeuvred to obtain Alex as companion at *la ronde*, or when they played games in the garden. She never infringed one of the strictest rules of the establishment, by giving presents unpermitted, or purchasing forbidden sweets and chocolate to be given away at the afternoon *goûter*.

Queenie accepted the presents, wrote tiny notes to Alex and skilfully gave them to her unperceived, and cut Alex to the heart by telling her sometimes that she made it very hard for one to try and be good and keep all the rules and perhaps get one's blue ribbon next term.

These speeches were to Queenie's credit, and made Alex cry and worship her more admiringly than ever, but they did not tend to lower the transparent, doglike devotion with which Alex would gaze at Queenie's bent profile in the chapel, utterly unconscious of the scandal which her manifest idolatry was creating for the severe nun in the carved stall opposite. She was scolded, placed under strict observation, and every obstacle placed in the way of her exchanging any word with Queenie, until she grew to see herself as a martyr to an affection which every fresh prohibition increased almost to frenzy.

One day she was made the victim of a form of rebuke much dreaded by the *pensionnaires*. A monthly convocation of the school and mistresses, officially known as *la réclame du mois*, and nicknamed by the children "the Last Judgment," was held in the *Grande Salle* downstairs, with the Superior making her state entry after the children had been decorously seated in rows at the end of the long room, and all the other nuns who had anything to do with the school had placed themselves gravely and with folded hands against the walls.

They all stood when the Superior came in, followed by the First Mistress, carrying a sheaf of notes and a great book, which each pupil firmly believed to be devoted principally to the record of her own progress through the school.

Then the Superior, with inclined head and low, distinct voice, spoke a few words of prayer, and settled herself in the large chair behind which the nuns clustered in orderly rows.

The children sat down at the signal given, and listened, at first with smiles as the record of the baby class were read aloud and each mite stood up in her place for all the universe to gaze at her, while the analysis of her month's work, mental and moral, sounded with appalling distinctness through the silence.

"Bébé de Lalonde! première en catéchisme, première en géographie ... calcul, beaucoup mieux ... elle y met beaucoup de bonne volonté!"

"A la bonne heure!"

The Superior is smiling, every one is smiling, Bébé de Lalonde, her brown curls bobbing over her face, is pink with gratification. Her young class-mistress leans forward, the white veil of novice falling over her black habit.

"Ma Mère Supérieure, pour le mois de S. Joseph, elle se corrige de cette vilaine habitude de mordre ses ongles. Elle a fait de vrais efforts..."

"C'est bien. Faites voir... Venez, ma petite."

Up the long room marches Bébé, two freshly washed tiny pink hands thrust out proudly for the Superior's inspection.

"Très bien, très bien. Vous ferez bien attention au pouce droit, n'est pas?"

The Superior is quite grave, however, every one laughs, and then the serious part of the proceedings begins.

The very little ones are not nervous. Most of them are good, even the naughty ones only get a very gentle homily from the Superior. Then their class-mistress claps her hands smartly and they get up and file out of the room, it not being considered politic to let *les petites* hear the record of that pen of black sheep, *les moyennes*.

The indictments become more serious. Marie Thérèse, twice impertinent to a mistress, taking no trouble over her lessons, worst of all, taking no trouble to cure that trick of which we have complained so often – sitting with her knees crossed.

"Even in the chapel, Ma Mère Supérieure."

This is very bad! It is unladylike, it is against all rules, it is extremely immodest... And what an example!

Marie Thérèse, says the Superior decisively, can abandon all hope of obtaining the green ribbon of an *aspirante enfant de Marie* until she has reformed her ways. The mention of a première in literature gains no approving smile from any one and Marie Thérèse sits down in tears.

Gabrielle, Marthe, Sadie – all through the three classes of the *moyenne* division of the school, with very few stainless reports and two or three disastrous ones.

Then *les grandes*. The first of these, in the lowest section, is a name to which the reader, a French woman, always takes exception. She finally compresses her lips and renders it as: "Kevinnie!"

Queenie is always cool and unmoved as she stands up, and Alex always looks at her. At this particular *séance*, the April one, she took her glances more or less surreptitiously, miserably aware that she had not enough self-control to refrain from them and so avoid risking a rebuke later on.

Queenie held no première. She was always last in her form, undistinguished at music, drawing, needlework, anything requiring application or talent alike. But her perfectly serene complacency was more or less justified by the exaggerated applause of her companions at her faultless "conduct" marks and the assurance of her class-mistress, always given readily, that she was "très docile, très appliquée."

Queenie's popularity was independent of anything extraneous to herself.

The Superior leant forward and asked a question in a low voice.

"Non, ma Mère Supérieure, non."

The denial of a possible accusation, of which Alex guessed the purport, was emphatic. She felt glad and relieved, but had no suspicions as to the indictment following on her own name.

"Alexandra Clare," said Mère Alphonsine sonorously, and Alex stood up.

She no longer felt self-conscious over the ordeal, and was indifferent to the habitual litany of complaints as to her unlearnt lessons, disregard of the rule of silence, and frequent bad marks for disorder and unpunctuality. But to the accusations which she knew by heart, and shared with the majority of the *moyenne classe*, came a quite unexpected addition, hissed out with a sort of dramatic horror by Mère Alphonsine:

"Alex recherche Kevinnie sans cesse, ma Mère Supérieure."

Only those familiar with the code of *pensionnaire* discipline in Belgium during the years when Alex Clare and her contemporaries were at school, can gauge the full heinousness of the offence, gravest in the conventual decalogue.

Even Alex, although she had been scolded and punished and made the subject of innumerable homilies, some of them pityingly reproachful, and others explanatorily so, on the same question, felt as though she had never before realized the extent of her own perversion.

She stood up, her hands in the regulation position, pushed under the hideous black-stuff pèlerine that fell from her stiff, hard, white collar to the shapeless waistband of her skirt, the whole uniform carefully designed to conceal and obscure the lines of the figure beneath it.

Overwhelmed with uncomprehending misery and acute shame, she heard two or three of the mistresses add each her quota, for the most part regretfully and with an evident sense of duty overcoming reluctance, to the evidence against her.

"She seeks opportunity to place herself next to Queenie at almost every recreation, ma Mère Supérieure."

"I am afraid that even in the chapel she lets this folly get the better of her – one can see how she lets herself go to distractions all the time..."

So the charges went on.

The summing up of Ma Mère Supérieure was icily condemnatory. She had tried every means with Alex, had spoken to her with kindness and tenderness; in private, had reasoned with her and finally threatened her, and now a public denouncement must be tried, since all these means had proved to be without effect.

Alex was principally conscious of the single, lightning-swift flash of reproach that had shot from the eyes of Queenie Torrance into hers.

How silently and viciously Queenie would resent this public coupling of her immaculate reputation with Alex' idiotic infatuation, only Alex knew.

With the frantic finality of youth, she wondered whether she could go on living. Oh, if only she might die at once, without hearing further blame or reproach, without encountering the ridicule of her companions or the cold withdrawal of Queenie's precariously-held friendship. Alex cried herself sick with terror and shame and utterly ineffectual remorse.

The despair that invades an undeveloped being is the blackest in the world, because of its utter want of perspective.

Alex could see nothing beyond the present. She felt all the weight of an inexpressible guilt upon her, and all the utter isolation of spirit which surrounds the sinner who stands exposed and condemned.

She knew that nobody would take her part. She was young enough to reflect forlornly that an accusation mattered nothing if unjust, since the consciousness of innocence would sustain one, serene and unfaltering, through any ordeal.

But she had no consciousness of innocence. She saw herself eternally different from her companions, eternally destined to lose her way, wickedly and shamefully she supposed, without volition of her own she knew, amongst those standards to which the right thinking conformed, and which she, only, failed to recognize. With sick wistfulness Alex sought Queenie's glance as they came one by one into the refectory, after the *réclame* was over.

Queenie's fair, opaque face was as colourless as ever, her eyes were cast down.

Frantically, Alex willed her to cast one look of pity or forgiveness in her direction, but Queenie passed on to the refectory where the children's mid-day meal was waiting for them without a sign.

Amidst all the blur of emotions, passionate remorse and hopeless loneliness, which made up Alex' schooldays, that Saturday mid-day meal stood out in its black despair.

The choking attempts to swallow a mass of vegetable cooking, made salt and sodden with her own streaming tears, the sobs that strangled her and broke in spite of all her efforts into the decorous silence of the refectory, even the awed and scandalized glances that the younger children cast at her distorted face, remained saliently before her memory for years.

At last the nun in charge rose from her place at the end of the room and came down and told Alex that she might leave the table. The long progress down the endless length of the refectory destroyed the last remnants of Alex' self-control.

The tide of emotional agony that swept over her was to ebb and flow again, and many times again.

But only once or twice was that high-water mark to be reached, that bitter wave to engulf her, and each time add to the undermining of that small stability of spirit with which Alex had been endowed.

She left the misery of that black Saturday behind her, and was left with her childish nerves a little shattered, her childish confidence of outlook rather more overshadowed, her childish strength less steady, and, above all, set fast in her childish mind the ineradicable, unexplained conviction that because she had loved Queenie Torrance and had been punished and rebuked for it, therefore to love was wrong.

### III

## Queenie Torrance

School days in Belgium went on, through the steamy, rain-sodden days of spring to the end of term and the *grandes vacances* looked forward to with such frantic eagerness even by the children who liked the convent best. Alex was again bitterly conscious of an utter want of conformity setting her apart from her fellow-creatures.

The misery of parting for eight weeks from Queenie Torrance overwhelmed her. Casually, Queenie said:

"I may not come back, next term. I shall be seventeen by then, and I don't see why I should be at school any longer if I can get round father."

"What would you do?"

"Why, come out, of course," said Queenie. "I am quite old enough, and every one says I look older than I am."

She moved her head about slightly so as to get sidelong views of her own reflection in the big window-pane. There were no looking-glasses at the convent.

It was true that, in spite of a skin smooth and unlined as a baby's and the childish, semicircular comb that gathered back the short flaxen ringlets from her rounded, innocent brow, Queenie's slender, but very well-developed figure and the unvarying opaque pallor of her complexion, made her look infinitely nearer maturity than the slim, long-legged American girls, or over-plump, giggling French and Belgian ones. Alex gazed at her with mute, exaggerated despair on her face.

"Your parents will permit that you make your *début* at once, yes?" queried Marthe Poupard, as one resigned to the incredible folly and weakness of British and American parents.

"I can manage my father," said Queenie gently, and with the perfect conviction of experience in her voice.

As the day of the breaking-up drew nearer, discipline insensibly relaxed, and Queenie suddenly became less averse from responding in some degree to Alex' wistful advances.

On the last day, one of broiling heat, the two spent the afternoon alone together unrebuked, in a corner of the great *verger* where the pupils were scattered in groups, feeling as though the holidays had already begun.

"I shall have the journey with you," said Alex, piteously.

"Madame Hippolyte is taking us over, with one of the lay-sisters," said Queenie, naming the most vigilant of the older French nuns. "So it will be much better if we don't talk together on the boat. You know there will be the three Munroe girls as well, because they are going to spend their holidays in Devonshire or somewhere."

"How do you know it will be Madame Hippolyte?" said Alex disconsolately.

The authority deputed to conduct pupils on the journey to and from Liège was one of the many items in the convent curriculum always shrouded in impenetrable mystery until the actual moment of departure.

"I overheard two of them talking about it, in the linen-room this morning," placidly said Queenie. "I kept behind the door."

Part of her curious attractiveness was, that she never attempted to disguise or deny certain practices which Alex had been taught to consider as dishonourable.

Alex counted this as but one more stone in the edifice erected for the worship of her idol. It was not until she saw Queenie Torrance long after, in other relations and other surroundings, that she dimly realized how much of that streak of extraordinary candour was the direct product of a magnificently justified self-confidence in the potency of her own attraction, needing no enhancement from moral or mental attributes.

"Do you always live in London, Alex?"

"Yes, in Clevedon Square. You know, I told you about it, Queenie."

"Yes, I know, but I only wondered if perhaps you had a house in the country as well."

"No. Father and mother go to Scotland in the summer, and generally they send us to the seaside with Nurse and a governess or some one."

"I see," said Queenie reflectively. She had wondered if perhaps the Clares had a country house to which she, as a favourite school friend, would be asked to stay.

"Father hates the country," said Alex. "We are sure to be in London for a little while in September, before I come back here. Would you – would you – " She gulped and clasped her hands nervously. Certain of Lady Isabel's rules and recommendations rushed to her mind, but she desperately tried to ignore them.

"I suppose you would not come to tea with me one day, if I were allowed to ask you? Oh, if *only* your mother knew my mother!"

Smoothly Queenie took her cue. "Of course, mother won't let me go to tea with any one – unless she knows them herself – but I don't know... What Club does your father belong to?"

"Two or three, I think," said Alex, surprised. "He often goes to Arthur's or the Turf Club."

"So does father. Perhaps we could manage it that way," said Queenie reflectively.

She had every intention of cultivating her friendship with Alex Clare in London.

"Then you'd like to come, Queenie?" breathed Alex ecstaticly.

"Of course, I would," Queenie told her affectionately. "My dear, you know I have hated all the fuss here, and our never being allowed to speak a word to one another. But what could I do?" She shrugged her shoulders.

Then Queenie had really cared all the time!

Alex in that moment was compensated for all the tears and storms and disgraces of the year. That afternoon spent under the thick, leafy boughs of the old apple-trees with Queenie, enabled Alex to face with some degree of courage the prospect of their approaching separation. She knew that any sign of unhappiness for such a reason would be imputed to her as wrong-doing by the authorities, and as unnatural and heartless indifference to home on the part of her companions.

So Alex, who had no trust in any standards of her own, was ashamed of the tears which she nightly stifled in her hard pillow, and felt them to be one more of those degrading weaknesses with which her Creator had malignantly endowed her in order that she might be as a pariah among her fellows.

She felt no resentment, only blind wonder and fatalistic apathy. Nevertheless, all through Alex' childhood and early girlhood, unhappy though she was, there dwelt within her a curious certainty that, somewhere, happiness awaited her, which she, and she alone, would have full capacity to appreciate.

Side by side with that, was her intense capacity for suffering, but that she was learning to think of as only a cruel, tearing affliction despised alike by God and man.

Of the immense force latent in the power of intense feeling Alex knew nothing, nor did any of the teaching which she received vouchsafe to her any illumination.

She and Queenie and the three Munroe girls made the journey to England with Madame Hippolyte, who showed Alex a marked kindness not usual with her.

At fifteen, wakeful nights and storms of crying leave their traces, and Alex, pale-faced and with encircled eyes, was pitiful in her propitiatory attempts to join in the eager anticipations of holiday enjoyment exchanged between her companions.

Perhaps, thought the French nun, the little black sheep had not a very happy home. A bad report would follow Alex to England she well knew, and it might be that the poor child was dreading its results.

Her manner to Alex grew gentle and compassionate, and Alex noticed it with a relieved, uncomprehending gratitude that held something abject in its surprised, almost incredulous acceptance of any kindness.

Madame Hippolyte, though she sternly rebuked herself for the uncharitable impulse, felt a certain contempt of the way in which her advances were received.

She knew nothing of the self-assertive, arrogant manner that would presently revive, in the childish sense of security in home surroundings, and would yet be merely another manifestation of the unbalanced complexity that was Alex Clare.

But as the crossing came to an end and they found themselves in the train speeding towards London, Alex was silent, her small face white and her eyes tragical.

The American girls made delighted use of the strip of looking-glass in the carriage, and exchanged predictions as to the pleased amazement that would be caused by Sadie's growth, the length of Marie's plait of red hair, and Diana's added inches of skirt.

Queenie Torrance only glanced at her reflection once or twice, though an acute observer might have seen that she was not indifferent to the advantage of facing a looking-glass, after the many weeks in which none had been available. But she was merely completely serene in the immutability of her own attractiveness. Queenie did not need to depend upon her looks, which seldom or never varied from soft, colourless opacity and opulence of contour. The pale, heavy rings of her fair hair always fell back in the same way from her open, rounded forehead, her well-modelled hands, with fingers broad at the base, and pointed, gleaming nails were always cool and white.

The Americans were all three pretty girls, and something of race that showed in Alex' bearing and gestures made her remarkable amongst any assembly of children, but it was at Queenie that every man who passed the little group in the railway carriage glanced a second time.

Good Madame Hippolyte, as serenely unaware of this as only a woman whose life had been passed in a religious Order could be, regarded Queenie as by far the least of the responsibilities on her hands, and did not conceal her satisfaction when Marie and Sadie and Diana were immediately claimed at the terminus by a group of excited, noisy cousins, and hurried away to an enormous waiting carriage-and-pair.

"Et vous?" she demanded, turning to the other two.

"Dad'll come for me," said Queenie confidently, inadvertently uttering a nickname that would not have been permitted to the Clare children, and was, in fact, never in those days heard in the class of society to which they belonged.

Queenie shot an imperceptible glance of confusion at Alex, who was clinging speechlessly to her hand.

Next moment she had recovered herself.

"There's my father!" she cried.

Colonel Torrance was making his way rapidly towards them, a tall, soldierly-looking man, a trifle too conspicuously well groomed, a trifle too upright in his bearing, a trifle too remarkable altogether, with very black moustache and eyebrows and very white hair.

He raised his tall white hat with its black band, at the sight of his daughter, expanded his white waistcoat and grey frock-coat with the *malmaison* buttonhole yet further, and whipped off his pale grey glove to take the limp hand extended to him by Alex, as Queenie self-possessedly introduced her.

Alex hardly heard Colonel Torrance's elaborately courteous allusion to Sir Francis Clare, whom he had had the pleasure of seeing several times at the Club, but she wondered eagerly if that introduction would be considered sufficient to allow of her inviting Queenie to Clevedon Square.

She felt as though her spirit were being torn from her body when Queenie said, "Good-bye, Alex, dear. Mind you write. *Au revoir, ma mère.*"

Compliments were exchanged between Madame Hippolyte and Queenie's father, the gentleman flourished his top hat again, and then said to his daughter:

"My dear, I have a hansom waiting; the impudent fellow says his horse won't stand. I trust you have no large amount of luggage."

Queenie shook her head, smiling slightly, and in a moment, the brevity of which seemed incredible to Alex and left her with an instant's absolute suspension of physical faculties, they disappeared among the crowd.

Madame Hippolyte grasped the arm of her distraught-looking pupil.

"But rouse yourself, Alex!" she said vigorously. "Who is to come for you?"

"The carriage," muttered Alex automatically, well aware that neither would Lady Isabel sacrifice an hour of her afternoon to waiting at a crowded London station in July, nor old Nurse permit the other children to do so, had they wished it.

"And where is it, this carriage?" sceptically demanded Madame Hippolyte, harassed and exhausted, and aware that she had yet to find a four-wheeled cab of sufficiently cleanly and sober appearance to satisfy her, in which she might proceed herself to the convent branch-house in the east of London. But presently Alex came partially out of her dream and pointed out the brougham and bay horse and the footman in buff livery at the door.

"But you will not drive alone – in this *quartier*?" cried the nun, in horrified protest at this exhibition of English want of propriety.

Her fears proved groundless.

The neat, black-bonneted head of a maid appeared at the brougham window, and with a sigh of infinite relief Madame Hippolyte bade farewell to the last and most anxiously regarded of her charges.

"How you've grown, Miss Alex!" cried the maid, but her tone was scarcely one of admiration, as she gazed at the stooping shoulders and pale, travel-stained face under the ugly sailor hat of dark blue straw. "We shall have to make you look like yourself, with some of your own clothes, before your mamma sees you," she added kindly.

Alex scarcely answered, and sat squeezing her hands together.

She knew she must come out of this dream of misery that seemed to envelop her, and which was so naughty and undutiful. Of course it was unnatural not to be glad to come home again, and it wasn't as though she had been so very happy at Liège.

It was only Queenie.

No one must know, or she would certainly be blamed and ridiculed for her foolish and headlong fancy.

Alex wondered dimly why she was so constituted as to differ from every one else.

The cab turned into Clevedon Square. Alex looked out of the window.

The big square bore already the look of desertion most associated in her mind with summer in London. Shutters and blinds obscured the windows of the first and second floors of many houses, and against one of the corner houses a ladder was propped and an unwontedly dazzling cream-colour proclaimed fresh paint.

Some of the houses showed striped sun-blinds, and window-boxes of scarlet geraniums. Alex saw that there were flowers in their own balcony as well as an awning.

When the carriage drew up at the front door, she jumped out and replied hastily to the manservant's respectful greeting, a slight feeling of excitement possessing her for the first time at the prospect of seeing Barbara, and impressing her with her added inches of height.

She ran quickly up the stairs, hoping that Lady Isabel would not chance to come out of the drawing-room as she went past. On the second landing, safely past the double door of the drawing-room, she paused a moment to take breath, and heard a subdued call from overhead.

Barbara was hanging over the banisters with Archie.

"Hallo, Alex!"

Alex went up to the schoolroom landing, and she and Barbara looked curiously at one another, before exchanging a perfunctory kiss.

Alex suddenly felt grubby and rather shabby in her old last year's serge frock, which had been considered good enough for the journey, when she saw Barbara in her clean white muslin, with a very pale blue sash, and her hair tied up with a big pale blue bow.

Barbara's hair had grown, which annoyed Alex. It fell into one long, pale curl down her back, and no longer provoked a contrast with Alex' superior length of shining wave. Deprived of the supervision of Nurse, with her iron insistence on "fifty strokes of the brush every night, and Rowland's Macassar on Saturdays," Alex' hair had somehow lost its shine, and hung limply in a tangled, uneven pigtail.

Alex thought that Barbara eyed her in a rather superior way.

She felt much more enthusiastic in greeting little Archie. He was prettier and pinker and more engaging than ever, and Alex felt glad that he had not yet been sent to school, to have his fair curls cropped, and his little velvet suit exchanged for cricketing flannels.

He pulled Alex into the schoolroom, with the enthusiasm for a new face characteristic of a child to whom shyness is unknown, and Alex received the curt, all-observant greeting which she had learnt to know would always await her from old Nurse.

"So you are back from your foreign parts, are you, Miss Alex?"

Nurse always said "Miss Alex" when addressing her returned charge at first, and as invariably relapsed into her old peremptory form of address before the end of the evening.

"My sakes, child, what have they been doing to you? You look like a scarecrow."

"Has she grown?" asked Barbara jealously. She knew that grown-up people were always, for some mysterious reason, pleased when one had "grown."

"Grown! Yes, and got her back bent like a bow," said Nurse vigorously. "An hour on the backboard's what you'll do every day, and bed at seven o'clock tonight. Have they been giving you enough to eat?"

"Of course," said Alex, tossing her head.

She did not like the convent when she was there, but a contradictory instinct always made her when at home uphold it violently, as a privileged spot to which she alone had access.

"You look half-starved, to me," Nurse said unbelievably.

Nothing would ever have persuaded her of what was, in fact, the truth, that Alex received more abundant, more wholesome, and infinitely better cooked food in Belgium than in London.

Barbara sat on the end of the sofa, swinging her legs and fidgeting with the tassel of the blind-cord.

"Have you brought back any prizes, Alex?" she enquired negligently.

And Alex replied with an equal air of indifference:

"One for composition, and I've got a certificate of proficiency for music."

This was not at all the way in which she had planned to make her announcements. She had thought that her prizes would impress Barbara very much, and she had foreseen a sort of small ceremony of display when she would bring out the big red-and-gilt book. But Barbara only nodded, and presently said:

"Cedric has got quantities of prizes: the headmaster wrote and told father that he was a 'boy of marked abilities and remarkable power of concentration,' and father is going to give him a whole sovereign, but that's because he made his century."

"When will he be here?"

"Next week. His holidays begin on Tuesday and he's got a whole fortnight longer than we have."

"We?" asked Alex coldly. "How can *you* have holidays? You're not at school."

"I have lessons," cried Barbara angrily. "You know I have, and Ma'moiselle is going to give me a prize for writing, and a prize for history, and a prize for application. So there!"

"Prizes!" said Alex scornfully. "When you're all by yourself! I never heard such nonsense."

She no longer felt wretched and subdued, but full of irritation at Barbara's conceit and absorption in herself.

"It's not nonsense!"

"It is. If you'd been at school you'd know it was."

"One word more of this and you'll go to bed, the pair of you," declared old Nurse, the autocrat whom Alex had for the moment forgotten. "It's argle-bargle the minute you set foot in the place, Miss Alex. Now you just come along and be made fit to be seen before your poor mamma and papa set eyes on you looking like a charity-school child, as hasn't seen a brush or a bit of soap for a month of Sundays."

Useless to protest even at this trenchant description of herself. Useless to attempt resistance during the long process of undressing, dressing again, brushing and combing, inspection of fingernails and general, dissatisfied scrutiny that ensued. Alex, in a stiff, clean frock, the counterpart, to her secret vexation, of Barbara's, open-work stockings, and new shoes that hurt her feet, was enjoined "to hold back her shoulders and not poke" and dispatched to the drawing-room with Barbara and Archie as soon as the schoolroom tea was over.

She felt as though she had never been away.

No one had asked her anything about the convent, and all through tea Barbara and Archie had talked about the coming holidays, or had made allusions to events of which Alex knew nothing, but which had evidently been absorbing their attention for the last few weeks.

They seemed to Alex futile in the extreme.

Downstairs, Lady Isabel kissed her, and said, "Well, my darling, I'm very glad to have you at home again. Have you been a good girl this term, and brought back a report that will please papa?" and then had turned to speak to some one without waiting for an answer.

Alex sat beside her mother while she talked to the one remaining visitor, and felt discontented and awkward.

Barbara and Archie were looking at pictures together in the corner of the room, very quiet and well behaved. The caller stayed late, and just as she had gone Sir Francis came in from his Club, the faint, familiar smell of tobacco, and Russia leather, and expensive eau-de-Cologne that seemed to pervade him, striking Alex with a fresh sense of recognition as she rose to receive his kiss. He greeted her very kindly, but Alex was quite aware of a dissatisfaction as intense as, though less outspoken than, that of old Nurse as he put up his double eye-glasses and gazed at his eldest daughter.

"We must see if the country or the seaside will bring back some roses to your cheeks," he said in characteristic phraseology.

But when the children were dismissed from the drawing-room, Sir Francis straightened his own broad back, and tapped Alex' rounded shoulder-blades.

"Hold yourself up, my child," he said very decidedly. "I want to see a nice flat, and straight back."

He made no other criticism, and none was needed.

Alex had gauged the extent of his dismay.

## IV Holidays

"Mother, may I ask Queenie Torrance to tea?"

Alex had rehearsed the words so often to herself that they had almost become meaningless.

Her heart beat thickly with the anticipation of a refusal, when at last she found courage and opportunity to utter the little stilted phrase, with a tongue that felt dry and in a voice that broke nervously in her throat.

"What do you say, darling?" absently inquired Lady Isabel; and Alex had to say it again.

"Queenie Torrance?" said Lady Isabel, still vaguely.

"Mother, you remember – I told you about her. She is the only other English girl besides me at the convent, and she knows all about father and you and everything, and her father belongs to the same Club – "

Snobbishness was not in Alex' composition, but she adopted her mother's standards eagerly and instinctively, in the hope of gaining her point.

"But, my darling, what are you talkin' about? You know mother doesn't let you have little girls here unless she knows somethin' about them. Give me the little diamond brooch, Alex; the one in the silver box there."

Lady Isabel, absorbed in the completion of her evening toilette, remained unconscious of the havoc she had wrought. Alex felt rather sick.

The intensity of feeling to which she was a victim, for the most part reacted on her physically, though she was as unconscious of this as was her mother.

But with the cunning borne of urgent desire, Alex knew that persistence, which with Sir Francis would invariably win a courteous rebuke and an immutable refusal, could sometimes bring forth rather querulous concession from Lady Isabel's weakness.

"But, mummy, darling, I do want Queenie to come here and see Barbara and Cedric."

It was not true, but Alex was using the arguments which she felt would be most likely to appeal to her mother.

"She wants to know them so much, and – and I saw her father at the station when we arrived, and he was very polite."

"Who was with you? I don't like your speakin' like that to people whom father and I don't know."

"Oh, it was only a second," said Alex hastily. "Madame Hippolyte was there, and Colonel Torrance just came up to take Queenie away."

"Torrance – Torrance?" said Lady Isabel reflectively. "Who's Torrance?"

The question made Alex' heart sink afresh. It was one which, coming from her parents, she heard applied to new acquaintances, or occasionally to protégés for whom some intimate friends might crave the favour of an invitation to one of the big Clare "crushes" during the season, and the inquiry was seldom one which boded well for the regard in which the newcomer would be held.

"Mother, you'd like her, I think, really and truly you would. She's awfully pretty."

"Alex!"

Lady Isabel for once sounded really angry.

"I'm so sorry; it slipped out – I didn't mean it – I never really say it. I never *do*, mother."

Alex became agitated, trying to fend off the accusation which she foresaw was coming.

"I suppose you learn those horrid slang words from this girl you've taken such a violent fancy to."

"No, no."

"Well, darling, both father and I are very much disgusted with some of the tricks you've picked up at the convent, and you'll have to find some way of curin' yourself before you put up your hair and come out. As for the way you're holdin' yourself, I'm simply shocked at it, and so is your father;

I shall see about sendin' you to MacPherson's gymnasium for proper exercises as soon as you get back from the country."

Lady Isabel gazed with dissatisfaction at her daughter.

"You mustn't be a disappointment to us, darling," she said. "You know you'll be coming out in another two years' time, and it's so important – "

She broke off, eyeing Alex anxiously. Already she had forgotten the question of the invitation to Queenie Torrance. Alex, in an agony, rushed recklessly at her point.

"But, mother, you haven't said yet – may I ask Queenie on Saturday? You know we shan't be here after Saturday. May I?"

Lady Isabel moved to the door with more annoyance than she often displayed.

"My dear child, you're old enough to know that these things aren't done, and besides, I've already said no. Father and I dislike these sudden, violent friendships, in any case. Run along upstairs, my darling, and if you and Barbara want a little tea-party on Saturday, you may ask those nice Fitzgerald children. Tell Nurse that I said you might."

Lady Isabel kissed Alex, and went downstairs, the trailing folds of her evening dress carefully held up in one hand as she descended the broad, curving stairs.

From the upper landing Alex watched her for a few moments, her face burning with mortification and the effort to restrain her tears. Then she broke into sobs and ran away upstairs.

Mother had not understood in the very least. She never understood, never would understand.

No one understood.

Alex felt, as so often, that she would barter everything she possessed for the finding of some one who would understand.

In her craving for self-expression, she talked to Barbara about Queenie Torrance, but represented their intercourse as that of an equal friendship, with unbounded affection and confidence on both sides.

Barbara listened believably enough, and even exhibited signs of a faint jealousy, and gradually Alex' inventions brought her a slight feeling of comfort, as though the ideal friendship which she so readily described to her little sister must have some real existence.

The old sense of supremacy began to assert itself again, and Barbara fell into the old ways of following Alex' lead in everything. She lost her shrinking convent manner, born of the sense of helpless insecurity, and when Cedric's return brought Barbara back to her earliest allegiance – the league which she and Cedric had always formed against Alex' overbearing ways in the nursery – her defection was resented by her sister with no lack of spirit.

"Idiotic little copy-cat! Just because Cedric's come, you pretend you only care for cricket and nonsense like that, as though he wanted to play cricket with a little girl like you."

"He doesn't mind playing cricket with me; he says I can bowl very well for a girl, and it gives him practice. Anyway," said Barbara shrewdly, "he likes talking about it, and how am I to be his pal unless I understand what he means?"

"You're not to say that horrid, vulgar word. You know mother would be very angry."

"I shall say what I like. It's not your business. You're a prig, ever since you went to that hateful convent!"

"You're not to speak to me like that, you're not!" shouted Alex, stamping her foot.

The dispute degenerated into one of the furious quarrels of their nursery days, and Alex, completely mastered by her temper, flew at Barbara, as she had not done since they were seven and ten years old respectively, and hit her and pulled her long curl viciously.

Barbara stood stock-still on the instant. She had infinitely more self-control than Alex, and a strong instinct for being invariably in the right.

But she uttered shriek upon piercing shriek that brought old Nurse, heavy-footed but astonishingly swift, upon the scene, and reduced Alex to dire disgrace for the rest of the day.

She cried again, suffering remorse and shame that seemed almost unbearable, and told herself hopelessly that she could never be good anywhere.

"Such an example to your little sister, who's never given me a moment's trouble all the while you've been away," Nurse declared, at the end of a long monologue during which Alex learnt and implicitly believed that a temper like hers, unbridled at the age of fifteen, must have irrevocably passed beyond one's own control into that of the Devil himself.

"When you remember," Nurse wound up, "how you nearly killed her with your naughty ways and had her on her back for a year, and she with never a word of complaint against you, poor lamb, one would think you'd want to make it up to her, instead of hitting one as never even hits you back. But you've no heart, Alex, as I've always said and always shall say about you."

Heart or no heart, old Nurse thoroughly succeeded in working upon Alex' feelings, and in sobbing abjection she begged Barbara's forgiveness.

Barbara, agreeably conscious of martyrdom, found it easy to grant, with a gentleness that redoubled Alex' shame, and the incident, except for Alex' swollen eyes and subdued tones next day, was closed. Cedric, characteristically, remained oblivious of it throughout.

He had grown into a good-looking boy, not tall for his eleven years, but sturdy and well set up, with steady, straight-gazing eyes behind the spectacles that his short sight still necessitated, to the grief of Lady Isabel. His mind was obsessed by cricket, and from his conversation one might have deduced that no other occupation had filled the summer term. Nevertheless, he brought home a large pile of prizes, and a report that caused Sir Francis to smile his excessively rare smile and utter two words that Cedric never forgot, and never mentioned to any one else: "Well done."

Two days after Cedric's return, Sir Francis and Lady Isabel went away for their annual round of country visits, and old Nurse, with the new, young nurse who devoted her services exclusively to Pamela, and a nursery-maid to wait upon them, went with the children to stay at Fiveapples Farm in Devonshire.

The farm was glorious.

The girls might run about the hay-fields and in the lanes, though Nurse, mindful of Lady Isabel's injunction as to complexion and the danger of freckles, always insisted on hats and gloves; and Cedric, followed everywhere like a little shadow by Archie, rode the farm horses and even went into Exeter to market with Farmer Young on Fridays.

Alex insensibly began to cease her preoccupied outlook for letters from Queenie, and the convent life began to relax its hold on her memory and imagination, as older influences resumed their sway.

Correspondence with Queenie had never been satisfactory.

Although not forbidden, Alex knew that it was considered a foolish and undesirable practice, and that her letters, although, as a matter of fact, generally given to her unopened, were always liable to supervision by the authorities as a matter of course.

Old Nurse might be unable to read, although no one had ever heard her admit as much, but she always slit open any letter that came for Alex or Barbara and made a feint of perusing it; unless the envelope, as rarely happened, bore Lady Isabel's superscription.

"In the absence of your mamma," said old Nurse severely, and she never failed to refuse unhesitatingly any request from Alex to be allowed to go to the post office for the purpose of buying stamps.

Queenie had only written twice. The second letter reached Alex at Fiveapples Farm, when she had nearly given up hope for it.

"DEAR ALEX,

"Thank you very much for your letters. It is nice of you to write to me so often. Please forgive me for not writing oftener to you, but I haven't got much time.

It's so hot in London now. You are very lucky to be in the country. I think we shall go soon, but I don't know yet where we shall go.

"Do you know that you are quite near where the Munroes are staying? Diana wrote to me the other day. Perhaps you will see them. Please give them my love. Do you remember how funny Diana was at her singing lessons? I often think of the convent, don't you? Now I must end, Alex, with fond love from your affectionate school friend,

*"QUEENIE.*

"P.S. I am not going back next term. I am very glad, except for not seeing you. I hope we shall see each other in London."

Alex read and re-read the postscript, and tried not to think that the rest of the letter was disappointing.

"Your great friend doesn't write you nearly such long letters as you write her," observed Barbara, eyeing the four small sheets which Queenie's unformed, curiously immature-looking writing had barely succeeded in covering.

"She hasn't got time," said Alex quickly and defensively.

"More like she's got a sensible governess who doesn't let her waste good pen and paper on such rubbish," old Nurse severely pointed the moral.

"What do girls want to write to one another for?" said Cedric. "They can't have anything to say."

Barbara, who was secretly curious, seized the opportunity.

"What does she write about, Alex?"

Alex would have liked to tell them to mind their own business, but she knew that any accusation of making mysteries would bring down Nurse's wrath upon her, and as likely as not the confiscation of the letter.

She read it aloud hastily, with a pretence of skipping here and there, leaving out the "dear Alex" at the beginning, and the whole of the last sentence and the postscript.

"I suppose you've left out all the darlings and the loves and kisses," Cedric remarked scornfully, more from conventionality than anything else.

Alex was not averse to having it supposed that Queenie had been more lavish with endearments than she had in reality shown herself.

"Who are the Munroes?" asked Barbara. "Are they nice?"

"The American girls who crossed from Liège with me. I remember now, they were going to spend their holidays with an aunt somewhere in Devonshire."

"Perhaps we shall see them. How old are they?"

"Sadie and Diana are much older than you," Alex told her crushingly. "In fact, they're older than I am. But the little one, Marie, is only twelve."

"Where does the aunt live?"

"How should I know?" said Alex. She reflected bitterly that even if her schoolmates should ever meet her in Devonshire, it would be impossible for her to make any advance to them, with old Nurse, even more strictly mindful of the conventions than Lady Isabel.

But for once it seemed as though fate were on Alex' side.

"I hear," wrote Lady Isabel, in one of her hasty, collective letters, addressed impartially to "My darling Children," "that Mrs. Alfred Cardew, who lives at a very pretty house called Trevoze, not more than a few miles from where you are, has her three little nieces with her for the holidays, and that they are at the same convent as Alex. So if you like, darlings, as I know Mrs. Alfred Cardew quite well, you may ask Nurse to let you arrange some little picnic or other and invite the three children."

Alex, taken by surprise, felt doubtful. She did not know whether she wanted to expose herself to the criticisms which she thought, disparagingly gazing round at her brothers and sisters and their autocratic guardian, they would inevitably call forth from strangers. Suppose they came, and Barbara was shy and foolish, and Cedric doggedly bored, and then the Munroes went back to Liège next term and laughed at Alex, and told the other girls what queer relations she had. And again, thought Alex, Nurse would probably think the Americanisms, which had amused Queenie and Alex at the convent, merely vulgar, and Barbara and Cedric would wonder.

"You *are* extraordinary, Alex!" said Barbara petulantly. "You're always talking about your friends at the convent and saying how nice they are, and then when there's a chance of our seeing them too, you don't seem to want to have them."

"Yes, I do," said Alex hastily, and consoled herself with the reflection that very likely the plan would never materialize.

But as luck would have it, Alex, the very next day, saw Sadie Munroe waving to her excitedly from the carriage where she was driving with a very gaily-dressed lady, obviously the aunt.

The following week, a charming note invited Alex, Barbara, Cedric and Archie to lunch and spend the afternoon at Trevoise. They should be fetched in the pony-cart, and driven back after tea.

At least, Alex reflected thankfully, old Nurse would not be there to put her to shame.

About Archie, with his clean sailor suit and shining curls, she felt no anxiety. He was always a success.

But she inspected Cedric, and especially Barbara, with anxiety.

The day was a very hot one, and Cedric in cricketing flannels looked sufficiently like every other boy of his age and standing to reassure his critical sister.

But Barbara!

Surely the three pretty, sharp-eyed Americans would despise little, pale, plain Barbara, with her one ridiculous curl of pale hair, and the big, babyish bow of blue ribbon against which Alex had protested so vigorously in her own case that Nurse had finally substituted black.

No amount of protest, however, even had Alex dared to offer it, would have induced Nurse to depart from the rule which decreed that the sisters should be dressed alike, and Barbara's clean cotton frock was the counterpart of Alex'.

Alex thought the similarity ridiculous, and hated the twin Leghorn hats, each with a precisely similar wreath round the crown, of thick, pale blue forget-me-nots, of which the clusters were unrelieved by any blade or hint of green.

Even their brown shoes and stockings and brown gauntlet gloves were alike.

Alex felt disgusted at the aspect which she thought they must present, and was unable to enjoy the four-mile drive in the pony-cart Mrs. Cardew had sent over for them. She could not have told whether she was more apprehensive of the effect Barbara and Cedric might have on the Munroes, or the Munroes on Barbara and Cedric.

"What do you suppose we shall do all the afternoon?" asked Barbara. She was in one of her rare moods of excitement, and her futile chattering and unceasing questions filled Alex with impatience.

The two were on the verge of a quarrel by the time the last hill was reached.

Then came a long, shady avenue, with two pretty little lodges and a wide stone gate, and the groom drove the pony smartly round a triangular gravel sweep which lay before the arched entrance to the big Georgian house.

Sadie, Marie and Diana were sitting on the low stone wall that divided the drive from what looked like a wilderness of pink and red roses, and Alex noticed with relief that they were all three dressed exactly alike in white muslin frocks, although she also saw that in spite of the blazing sun they were without hats or gloves. They jumped off the wall as the pony-cart drew up before the door and greeted the Clare children eagerly, and with no trace of shyness.

## V Other People

It seemed to Alex that the day was going to be a success, and her spirits rose.

She was rather surprised to see that Diana Munroe, who was seventeen, wore her hair in a thick plait twisted round the crown of her head, and asked her almost at once:

"Have you put your hair up, Diana? Are you going to 'come out'?"

"Oh, no. It'll come down again at the end of the holidays, for my last term. Only Aunt Esther likes to see it that way. There's Aunt Esther, at the bottom of the rose garden."

Looking over the terrace wall they saw half-a-dozen grown-up people, men in white flannels, and youthful-looking ladies in thin summer dresses. Alex was rather pleased. She had always been more of a success with her mother's grown-up friends than with her own contemporaries, from the time of her nursery days, when she had been sent for to the drawing-room on the "At Home" afternoons.

But though Mrs. Cardew looked up and waved her hand to the group of children on the terrace, she did not appear to expect them to join the party, and the interval before lunch was spent in the display of white rabbits and guinea-pigs.

At first Alex watched Barbara rather nervously, wondering if she would be shy and foolish, and disgrace her, but Barbara, no longer over-shadowed by an elder sister who outshone her in every way, had acquired a surprising amount of self-assurance. Alex was not even certain that she approved of the ease with which her little sister talked and exclaimed over the pet animals, asking Diana whether she might pick up the guinea-pigs and hold them, without so much as waiting for a lead from Alex.

"Of course, you may!" Diana exclaimed. "Here you are."

She distributed guinea-pigs impartially, and earnestly consulted Cedric as to the bald patch on the Angora rabbit's head.

As they went back towards the house, Sadie Munroe said to him:

"Do you mind not having any other boys here – only girls? I'm afraid it's dull for you, but Aunt Esther's boys will be here after lunch, only they had to go over and play tennis with some people this morning; it was all settled before we knew you were coming."

But Cedric did not seem to mind at all.

At lunch Archie, as Alex had known he would be, was an immediate success.

Even Mr. Cardew, who was bald and looked through Alex and Barbara and Cedric without seeing them when he shook hands with them, patted Archie's curls and said:

"Hullo, Bubbles!"

"Come and sit next to me, you darling," said Mrs. Cardew, "and you shall have two helpings of everything."

It was a very long luncheon-table, and Alex found herself placed between Sadie and a grey-headed gentleman, to whom she talked in a manner which seemed to herself to be very grown-up and efficient.

Barbara was on the same side of the table and invisible to her, but she saw Cedric opposite, quite eagerly talking to Marie Munroe, which rather surprised Alex, who thought that her brother would despise all little girls of twelve.

Quite a number of people whose names Alex did not know asked her about Lady Isabel, and she answered their inquiries readily, pleased to show off her self-possession, and the gulf separating her from the childishness of Barbara, who was giggling almost all through lunch in a manner that would unhesitatingly have been qualified by her parents as ill-bred.

Lunch was nearly over when the two schoolboy sons of the house came rushing in, hot and excited, and demanding a share of dessert and coffee.

"Barbarians," tranquilly said Mrs. Cardew. "Sit down quietly now, Eric and Noel. I hope you said 'How d' you do' to every one."

They had not done so, but both made a sort of circular salutation, and the elder boy dropped into a chair next to Alex, while Eric went to sit beside his mother.

Noel Cardew was fifteen, a straight-featured, good-looking English boy, his fairness burned almost to brick-red, and with a very noticeable cast in one of his light-brown eyes.

Alex looked at him furtively, and wondered what she could talk about.

Noel spared her all trouble.

"Do you ever take photographs?" he inquired earnestly. "I've just got a camera, one of those bran-new sorts, and a tripod, quarter-plate size. I want to do some groups after lunch. I've got a dark-room for developing, the tool-house, you know."

He talked rapidly and eagerly, half turned round in his chair so as almost to face Alex, and she tried to feel flattered by the exclusive monologue.

She knew nothing about photography, but uttered little sympathetic ejaculations, and put one or two timid questions which Noel for the most part hardly seemed to hear.

When Mrs. Cardew at length rose from her place, he turned from Alex at once, in the midst of what he was saying, and demanded vehemently:

"Can't we have a group on the terrace now? Do let me do a group on the terrace – the light will be just right now."

"Dear boy, you really mustn't become a nuisance with that camera of yours – though he's really extraordinarily clever at it," said his mother, in a perfectly audible aside.

"Would it bore you all very much to be victimized? You won't keep us sitting in the glare too long, will you, dear boy?"

Almost every one protested at the suggestion of being photographed, but while a good many of the gentlemen of the party disappeared noiselessly and rapidly before the group could be formed, all the ladies began to straighten their hats, and pull or push at their fringes. Noel kept them waiting in the hot sun for what seemed a long while, and Alex reflected rather gloomily that Mrs. Cardew showed a tolerance of his inconvenient passion for photography that would certainly not have been approved by her own parents.

At last it was over, and Sadie jumped up, crying, "Now we can have some proper games! What shall we play at?"

"Don't get over-heated," her aunt said, smiling and nodding as she moved away.

"Do you like croquet?" Diana asked, and to Alex' disappointment they embarked upon a long, wearisome game. She was not a good player, nor was Barbara, but Cedric surprised them all by the brilliant ease with which he piloted Marie Munroe and himself to victory.

"I say, that's jolly good!" Eric and Noel said, and gazed at their junior with respect.

Alex felt pleased, but rather impatient too, and wished that it were she who was distinguishing herself.

When they played hide-and-seek, however, her opportunity came. She could run faster than any of the other girls at Liège, and when Diana suggested picking up sides, she added good-naturedly:

"Alex runs much faster than any of us – she'd better be captain for one side, and Noel the other."

Noel looked as though his own headship were a matter of course, but Alex felt constrained to say:

"Oh, no, not me – You, Diana."

"Would you rather not? Very well. Cedric, then. Hurry up and choose your sides, boys. You start, Cedric."

"I'll have Marie," said Cedric unhesitatingly, and the little red-haired girl skipped over beside him with undisguised alacrity.

"Noel?"

Noel jerked his head in the direction of Alex.

"You," he said.

She was immensely surprised and flattered, connecting his choice with the same attraction that had made him sit beside her at lunch, and not with her own reported prowess as a runner.

Cedric's reputation for gallantry suffered somewhat in his next selections, which fell with characteristic common sense on Noel's brother Eric, and upon Barbara. Noel took Sadie and Diana, and they drew lots for Archie.

The game proved long and exciting, played all over the terrace and shrubbery.

Alex screamed and laughed with the others, and enjoyed herself, although she found time to wish that Barbara were not so stupid and priggish about keeping on her gloves, because old Nurse had said she must, and to wonder very much why Cedric appeared so pleased with the society of red-haired, chattering Marie, whose side he never left.

Presently, as she was looking for somewhere to hide, Noel Cardew joined her.

"Come on with me – I know a place where they'll never find us," he told her, and led her on tip-toe to where a very small, disused ice-house was half-hidden in a clump of flowering shrubs.

Noel pushed open the door with very little effort, and they crept into the semi-darkness and sat on the floor, pulling the door to behind them. Noel whispered softly:

"Isn't it cool in here? I *am* hot."

"So am I."

Alex was wondering nervously what she could talk about to interest him, and to make him go on liking her. Evidently he did like her, or he would not have sat next her at lunch and told her about his photography, and afterwards have chosen her for his partner at hide-and-seek.

Alex, though she did not know it, possessed a combination that is utterly fatal to any charm: she was unfeignedly astonished that any one should be attracted by her, and at the same time agonizedly anxious to be liked.

She wanted now, wildly and nervously, to maintain the interest which she thought she had excited in her companion.

She found the silence unbearable. Noel would think her dull, or imagine that she was bored.

"Is this where you do your developing?" she asked in an interested voice, although she remembered perfectly that he had said he used a tool-house for his dark-room.

"No – we've got the tool-house for that. Why, there wouldn't be room to stand up in here. Sometimes I get my things developed and printed for me at a shop, you know. Chemists will generally do it for one – though, of course, I prefer doing my own. But there isn't time, except in the holidays, and then one's always running short of some stuff or other. The other day I ruined a simply splendid group – awfully good, it would have been: mother and a whole lot of people out on the steps – like we were today, you know – " He paused for sheer lack of breath.

"I hope the one you took today will be good," said Alex, her heart beating quickly.

"Oh, yes, sure to be, with a day like this. Some fellows say you can get just as much effect on a dull day, using a larger stop, but, of course, that's all nonsense really. I say, I'm not boring you, am I?"

He hardly waited to hear her impassioned negative before going on, still discussing photographic methods.

It was quite true that Alex was not bored, although she was hardly listening to what he said. But his voice went on and on, and it flattered her that he should want to talk to her so exclusively, as though secure of her sympathy.

"... And they say colour-photography will be the next thing. I believe one could get some jolly good effects down here. Young Eric is all for messing about with beastly paints and stuff, but I don't agree with that."

"Oh, no!"

"My plan is to get hold of a real outfit, as soon as they get the thing perfected, and then be one of the pioneers, you know. I say, I hope you don't think this is awful cheek – "

"Oh, no!"

"This isn't a bad place for experiments, I will say. You see, you can get the sea, and quite decent scenery, and any amount of view and stuff. I say, what ages they are finding us," he broke off suddenly.

Alex felt deeply mortified. Evidently Noel was bored, after all. But in another minute he began to talk again.

"I shouldn't be surprised if one of these days I tried my hand at doing sort of book stuff. You know, photographs for illustrations. I believe it's going to pay no end."

"What sort of things?"

"Oh, scenery, you know, and perhaps houses and things. Sure I'm not boring you?"

"No, indeed, I'm very interested."

"It is rather interesting," Noel agreed simply.

"Another thing I'm keen on is swimming. Rather different, you'll say; but then one can't do one thing all the time, and, of course, the swimming is first class at school. I went in for some competition and stuff last term; high diving, you know."

"Oh, did you win?"

"Can't say I did. Young Eric got a cup of sorts, racing, but I just missed the diving. Some day I shall have another try, I daresay. You know, I've got rather a funny theory about swimming. I don't know whether you'll see what I mean at all – in fact, I daresay it'll sound more or less mad, to you – but *I* believe we do it the wrong way."

"Oh," said Alex, wishing at the same time that she could divest herself of the eternal monosyllable. "Do tell me about it."

"Well, it's a bit difficult to explain, but *I* think we're all taught the wrong way to begin with. It doesn't seem to have occurred to any one to look at the way *fishes* swim."

Alex thought that Noel must really be very original and clever, and tried to feel more flattered than ever at being selected as the recipient of his theories.

"I believe the whole thing could be revolutionized and done much better – but I'm afraid I'm always simply chockfull of ideas of that kind."

"But that's so interesting," Alex said, not consciously insincere.

"Don't you have all sorts of ideas like that yourself?" he asked eagerly, filling her with a moment's anticipation that he was about to give the conversation a personal turn. "*I* think it makes life so much more interesting if one goes into things; not just stay on the surface, you know, but go into the *way* things are done."

Alex thought she heard some one coming towards their hiding-place, and wanted to tell Noel to stop talking, or they would be found, but she checked the impulse, fearful lest he should think her unsympathetic.

The dogmatic schoolboy voice went on and on – swimming, photography, cricket, and then photography again. Alex, determined to feel pleased and interested, could only contribute an occasional monosyllable, sometimes only an inarticulate sound, expressive of sympathy.

And at the end of it all, when she was half proud and half irritated at the thought that they must have been sitting there in the semi-darkness for at least an hour, Noel exclaimed:

"I say, they *are* slow finding us. I should think it must be quite tea-time, shouldn't you? How would it be if we came out now?"

"Yes, let's," said Alex, trying to keep the mortification out of her voice.

They emerged into the sunlight again, and Noel pulled out his watch.

"It's only a quarter past four. I thought it would be much later," he remarked candidly. "I wonder where they all are. I expect they'll want to know where we've been hiding, but you won't give it away, will you? It's a jolly good place, and the others don't know about it."

"I won't tell."

Alex revived a little at the idea of being entrusted with a secret.

"Do you often play hide-and-seek?"

"Oh, just to amuse the girls, in the summer holidays. They've spent the last three summers with us, you know. Next year I suppose they'll go to America, lucky kids!"

"I'd love to go to America, wouldn't you?" Alex asked, with considerable over-emphasis.

"Pretty well. I tell you what I'd really like to do – I shall do it one day, too – make a regular tour of England, with a camera. I don't know whether you'll think it's nonsense, of course, but my idea has always been that people go rushing abroad to see other countries before they really know their own. Now, my plan would be that I'd simply start at Land's End, in Cornwall, just taking each principal town as it came on my way, you know, and exploring thoroughly. I shouldn't mind going off the main track, you know, if I heard of any little place that had an old church or castle or something worth looking at. I don't know whether you're at all keen on old buildings?"

"Oh, yes," Alex said doubtfully; "I've seen Liège and Louvain, in Belgium –"

"Ah, but I'm talking about English places," Noel interrupted her inexorably. "Of course the foreign ones are splendid too, and I mean to run over and have a look at them some day, but my theory is that one ought to see something of one's own land first. Now take Devonshire. There are simply millions of old churches in Devonshire, and what I should do, would be to have a note-book with me, and simply jot down my impressions. Then with photographs one might get out quite a sort of record, if you know what I mean –"

Alex was rather glad that her companion should be talking to her so eagerly as they came in sight of a group of people on the terrace.

"Here are the truants," said Mrs. Cardew, laughing, and Diana Munroe exclaimed that Aunt Esther had called them all to tea, and they had given up further hunt for them.

"Noel always finds extraordinary places to hide in," she added rather disparagingly.

It was evident that Noel was not very popular with the American cousins.

"That boy would be very good looking if he had not that terrible cast," Alex overheard one lady say to another, as the visitors were waiting on the steps for the pony-carriage to take them away. The grey-haired man next to whom Alex had sat at lunch, and who evidently did not know any of the group of children apart, nodded in the direction of little Archie, flushed and excited, trying to climb the terrace wall, surrounded by adoring ladies.

"That's the little chap for my money."

"Isn't he a darling? That's one of Isabel Clare's children – so are the two girls in blue. I couldn't believe anything so tall was really hers."

"Oh, yes – I noticed one of them – rather like her mother?"

Alex felt sure that she ought not to listen, and at the same time kept motionless lest they should notice her and lower their voices.

She felt eagerly anxious to overhear what the grey-haired gentleman might have to say after the very grown-up way in which she had made conversation with him at lunch, and having been a very pretty and much-admired drawing-room child in her nursery days, could not altogether divest herself of the expectation that she must still be found pretty and entertaining.

But the grey-haired gentleman said impartially:

"They are neither of them a patch on Lady Isabel, are they?"

"They are at the awkward age," laughed the lady to whom he was talking. "One of them sat next to you at lunch, didn't she?"

"Yes. Not quite so natural as the other children. That little, red-haired American girl, now – a regular child –"

Alex, with a face grown suddenly scarlet, left Barbara, shyly, and Cedric, briefly, to thank their hostess for the pleasant day they had spent.

A new, and far more painful self-consciousness than any she had yet known, hampered her tongue and her movements, until they were safely in the pony-carriage half-way down the drive.

"They are nice, aren't they?" said Barbara. "I'm sure they are nicer than Queenie."

"No, they aren't," Alex contradicted mechanically.

"Well, Marie and Diana are, anyway." She looked slyly at Cedric. "Don't you think so, Cedric?"

"How can I tell whether they are any nicer, as you call it, than another kid whom I've never seen?" inquired Cedric reasonably.

"But didn't you like Marie?"

"She's all right."

Barbara giggled in the way most disliked by her family, the authorities of whom stigmatized the habit as "vulgar," and Cedric said severely:

"I shouldn't think decent girls would want to play with you at all, if you don't leave off that idiotic trick of cackling."

But Barbara, who was not at all easily crushed, continued to giggle silently at intervals.

"Why are you so silly?" Alex asked her crossly, as they were going to bed that night.

She and Barbara shared a room at Fiveapples Farm.

Barbara whined the inevitable contradiction, "I'm not silly," but added immediately, "you wouldn't be so cross, if you knew what I know. I expect you'd laugh too."

"Well, what is it?"

"I shan't tell you."

Alex was not particularly curious, but she had been the nursery autocrat too long to be able to endure resistance to her command.

"Tell me at once, Barbara."

"No, I won't."

"Yes, you will. Well, what is it about?" said Alex, changing her tactics.

"It's about Cedric."

"Is he in a scrape?"

"No, it's just something he did."

"*What?* Did he tell you about it?"

"Oh, no. He doesn't know I know. He'd be furious if he did, I expect."

"Who told you? Does any one else know?"

"Nobody told me. One other person knows," giggled Barbara, jumping up and down in her petticoat.

"Keep still, you'll have the candle over. Who's the other person who knows?"

"Guess."

"Oh, I can't; don't be so silly. I am not going to ask you any more."

"Well," said Barbara in a great hurry, "it's Marie Munroe, then; it's about her."

"What about her? She didn't take any notice of any one except Cedric, and I think it was very rude and stupid of her."

"It was Cedric's doing much more than hers," Barbara said shrewdly. "I think he thinks he is in love with her. I saw them in the shrubbery when we were playing hide-and-peek; and – what do you think, Alex?"

"Well, what?"

"Cedric kissed her – I saw him."

"Then," said Alex, "it was perfectly hateful of him and of Marie and of you."

"Why of *me?*" shrieked Barbara in a high key of indignation. "What have I done, I should like to know?"

"You'd no business to say anything about it. Put out the candle, Barbara, I'm going to get into bed."

In the darkness Alex lay with her mind in a tumult. It seemed to her incredible that her brother, whom she had always supposed to despise every form of sentimentality, as he did any display of feeling on the part of his family, should have wanted to kiss little, red-haired Marie, whom he had only known for one day, and who was by far the least pretty of any of the three Munroe sisters. "And to kiss her in the shrubbery like that!"

Alex felt disgusted and indignant. She thought about it for a long while before she went to sleep, although she would gladly have dismissed the incident from her mind. Most of all, perhaps, she was filled with astonishment. Why should any one want to kiss Marie Munroe?

In the depths of her heart was another wonder which she never formulated even to herself, and of which she would, for very shame, have strenuously denied the existence.

Why had she not the same mysterious attraction as un-beautiful little Marie? Alex knew instinctively that it would never have occurred, say, to Noel Cardew – to ask her if he might kiss her. She did not want him to – would have been shocked and indignant at the mere idea – but, unconsciously, she wished that he had wanted to.

## VI The End of an Era

No salient landmarks ever seemed to Alex to render eventful the two and a half years that elapsed between those summer holidays at Fiveapples Farm and her final departure from the Liège convent to begin her grown-up life at home.

The re-arrangement of the day's routine consequent on the beginning of the winter half-year caused her to miss Queenie less acutely than she had done when she first came home for the holidays, and with Queenie's absence there were fewer revolts against convent law, and less disfavour from the authorities.

She made no other great friends. Marie Munroe showed her a marked friendliness at first, but Alex could not forget that giggling revelation of Barbara's, and shrank from her advances unmistakably. She had very little in common with her French contemporaries, and knew that they thought her English accent and absence of proficiency in needlework, marks of eccentricity and of bad form, so that she became self-conscious and aggressive before them.

She was hardly aware of her own intense loneliness – the poignant realization of it was to come later – but the want of any channel of self-expression for her over-developed emotional capabilities produced in her a species of permanent discontent that reacted on her health and on her spirits, so that she got the reputation, least enviable of any in schoolgirl circles, of being "a tragedy queen."

Her morose pallor, partly the result of an under-vitalized system, and partly of her total lack of any interest in her surroundings, were considered fair game.

"Voyez, Alex! Elle a son air bête aujourd'hui."

"A qui l'enterrement, Alex?"

They were quite good-humoured, and did not mean to hurt her. It was not their fault that such pin-pricks stabbed her and sent her away to cry over her own friendlessness until she felt sick and exhausted.

She did not expend on any one else the extravagant worship bestowed upon Queenie Torrance. For a year she wrote to Queenie throughout the holidays, and received meagre and unsatisfactory replies, and then gradually the correspondence ceased altogether, and Alex only looked forward with an occasional vague curiosity to the possibility of meeting Queenie again in London, on the terms of equality symbolized by their both being "grown-up."

During her last year at school, lack of intimate intercourse with any one, and the languid sentimentality of adolescence, made her take for the first time some interest in religion as understood at the convent. She prolonged her weekly confession, which had hitherto been a matter of routine to be got through as rapidly as possible, in order to obtain the solace of talking about herself, and derived a certain tepid pleasure in minutely following and applying to herself the more anecdotal portions of the New Testament.

For a time, it seemed to her that she had found a refuge.

Then came the affair of the examination. Alex, in her last term, and taking part in the final midsummer *concours*, could not bear the penalty of failure which it seemed to her would be displayed in the mediocrity which had all along been her portion. She had never been admitted to the virtuous society of the *enfants de Marie*, had never taken more than one of the less distinguished prizes at the end of any term, and had no warmly-worded report to display her popularity and the sense of loss that her departure would leave.

Her place in the half-yearly examination was not a good one. She had none of Cedric's power of concentration, and her abilities were not such as to win her any regard in the continental and Catholic system of education of the middle nineties.

She cheated over the examination.

It was quite easy to copy from the girl next her, who happened to be one of the best vehicles for carefully-tabulated and quite unconnected facts, in the school. Alex could read the dates, and the proper names, and all the principal words on her history paper, and transferred them to her own, clothing the dry bones in the imaginative fabric of her own words, for the English girls were allowed to do most of the papers in their own language.

At the end of the morning she was oddly elated, at the sight of her well-filled paper, and felt no qualms at all. In the afternoon she was again next to Marie-Louise, and congratulated herself that the paper should be the literature one. Arithmetic, she knew, was not the strong point of Marie-Louise, and besides, it would be almost impossible to copy the working of problems figure for figure without ultimate detection.

That night, however, when Alex knelt down to say her prayers, she was suddenly overwhelmed by remorse and terror.

Her crime came between her and God.

The vaguely comforting belief that because she was lonely and miserable, He would vouchsafe to her an especial pity, was destroyed. Between God and a sinner, so Alex had been told, lay an impassable gulf that only repentance, confession, atonement and punishment, could bridge – and even then, an indelible entry against one's name testified to eventual exposure and shame at some dreadful, inevitable assizes, when sins hidden and forgotten, large and small, of commission and omission alike, would be made known to all the world, assembled together for the Last Judgment. Faced with this inevitable retribution, Alex felt that no present success was worth it, and wondered whether she could not repair her wickedness as far as possible on the morrow by confession.

But when the morrow had come, the Day of Judgment seemed far removed from the hot July morning, and the breaking-up, when the result of the examinations would be heard, a very present reality indeed.

It was a relief to the hot, tossing sensation of balancing values in her mind, to remember that it was the day of the Catechism examination, which would be viva voce.

She acquitted herself very badly, and the temptation to retrieve her failure in the afternoon was irresistible, when she again found herself placed next to the prodigy Marie-Louise.

The paper was headed "Histoire de l'Église," and immense value was attached to proficiency in the subject, strenuously taught to the convent pupils out of enormous old-fashioned volumes containing much loyal fiction with a modicum of distorted historical fact.

Alex fell.

She could overlook her neighbour's papers so easily, hardly even turning her head, that it only struck her as inconvenient, and did not awake in her any fear of detection, when presently Marie-Louise pulled a piece of blotting-paper towards her so that it covered the page on which she was working.

Alex finished the question to which Marie-Louise had unwittingly supplied her with material for the answer, and looked about her, subconsciously waiting for the removal of the blotting-paper. Her eyes met those of a younger child, seated exactly opposite to her, whose sharp, dark gaze was fixed upon her with a sort of eager, contemptuous horror. In that instant, when it seemed as though her heart had stopped beating, Alex knew herself detected.

The colour rushed from her face and she felt cold and giddy.

Lacking the instinctive guard against self-betrayal which is the hall-mark of the habitual deceiver, her terrified gaze turned straight to Marie-Louise.

The smooth, dark head was bent low, one hand still clutched at the covering blotting-paper, and the ear and piece of cheek which were all that Alex could see, were scarlet.

Marie-Louise knew.

The sharp-eyed child opposite had seen Alex cheat, and had no doubt conveyed a silent telegraphic warning.

It seemed to Alex that the world had stopped. Accusation, disgrace, expulsion, all whirled through her mind and left no permanent image there. Her imagination stopped utterly dead at the horror of it.

She sat perfectly motionless for the remaining hours of the morning, unconscious of the passage of time, only conscious of an increasing sense of physical sickness.

It was an absolute relief to her when the bell rang and she found herself obliged to get up and move across the long class-room with the others to give up her papers.

"Vous êtes malade, Alexandra?"

"J'ai mal-au-coeur," said Alex faintly.

She was sent to the infirmary to lie down, and the old lay-sister in charge of it was so kind to her, and commiserated her wan, forlorn appearance so pityingly, that Alex burst into a flood of tears that relieved the tension of her body, and sent her, quivering, but uncomprehendingly sensible of relief, to rest exhaustedly upon the narrow infirmary bed with little white curtains drawn all round it.

No doubt every one would soon know of her disgrace, and she would be expelled, to the shame and anger of her father and mother, and the downfall of all her boastings to Barbara. No doubt God had abandoned one so unworthy of His forgiveness – but Soeur Clementine was kind, and it seemed, in the incredible comfort of a little human tenderness, that nothing else mattered.

And, after all, that hour's anticipation proved to be the worst that happened to her. She went downstairs for the evening preparation, and Marie-Louise, a trusted *enfant de Marie*, obtained permission to speak to her alone, and solemnly conducted her to the lavatory, as the most private place in the school.

Standing over the sink, with its stiff and solitary tap of cold water, Marie-Louise conducted her inquiry with business-like, passionless directness.

Alex made no attempt either to deny her sin or to palliate it. She was mentally and emotionally far too much exhausted for any effort, and it did not even occur to her that any excuse could avail her anything.

Marie-Louise was not at all unkind.

She knew all about *la charité*, and was agreeably conscious of exercising this reputable virtue to the full, when she informed Alex that no one should ever know of the lapse from her, provided that Alex, making her own explanation to the class-mistress, should withdraw her papers from the examination.

"But what can I say to her?" asked Alex.

"Quant à ça," said Marie-Louise, in the detached tones of one who had accomplished her duty and felt no further interest on the point at issue, "quant à ça, débrouillez-vous avec vôtre conscience."

To this task she left Alex.

And Alex ended by doing nothing at all. Partly from inertia, partly because she knew that Marie-Louise would never ask her what she had done, she shirked the shame and trouble of confession to her class-mistress, and let her papers go in with the others. She knew that she would not get a high place, for her work all through the term had been bad, and would have to be taken into consideration, and over all the remaining papers she muddled hopelessly. Besides, she was leaving for good, and no one would know.

She had lost her self-respect when she first realized that she was cheating, and it was then, as she neared the completion of her seventeenth year, that the belief was ineradicably planted in Alex' soul that she had been born with a natural love of evil, and that goodness was an abstract attitude of mind to which she could never do more than aspire fruitlessly, with no slightest expectation of attainment. She was further conscious of an intense determination to hide the knowledge of her own innate badness from every one.

If she were ever seen in her true colours, no one would love her, and Alex already knew dimly, and with a further sense of having strange, low standards of her own, that she wanted to be loved more than anything in the world.

Far more than she wanted to be good.

The affair of the examination passed, and although Alex did not forget it, she mostly remembered it as merely the culminating scandal of a succession of petty evasions and cowardly deceptions.

She left Liège without regret.

She had hated the physical discomfort of the conventual system, the insufficient hours of sleep, the bitter cold of the Belgian winters and the streaming rain that defiled the summers; she had hated the endless restrictions and the minute system of *surveillance* that was never relaxed; above all, she had hated the sense of her own isolation in a crowd, her own utter absence of attraction for her kind.

It seemed to Alex that when she joined the mysterious ranks of grown-up-people everything would be different. She never doubted that with long dresses and piled-up hair, her whole personality would change, and the meaningless chaos of life reduce itself to some comprehensible solution.

Everything all her life had been tending towards the business of "growing up." Everything that she was taught at home impressed the theory that her "coming out" would usher in the realities of life, and nothing impressed her more with a sense of the tremendous importance of the approaching change than Lady Isabel's greeting, when she came back to Clevedon Square after her final term at Liège.

"We've put off Scotland for a week, darling – your father's been so good about it – so that I may see about your clothes. I've made appointments with Marguerite and the other places for you, so there'll be nothin' to do but try on, but, of course, I shall have to see the things myself before they finish them, and tell them about the colours; they're sure to want to touch everything up with pink or blue, and white is so much prettier for a young girl. White with a tiny little *diamanté* edging, I thought, for one of your evenin' dresses..."

"The first thing, of course, is your hair. Louise must go with you to Hugo's, and watch them very carefully while they do it in two or three different styles, then she'll be able to do it for you every evening. I expect she'll have to do it every day to begin with, but you must try and learn. I should like you to be *able* to be independent of a maid in that sort of way – one never knows quite that some time one mightn't find oneself stranded for a day or two..."

"I don't think your hair will need waving, Alex, which is such a comfort. So many women have to wear their fringe in curlers every night – thank Heaven, I've never had to. As a matter of fact, they say fringes are goin' out now, but I'm certainly not goin' to let yours grow until we're quite certain about it ... and a bald forehead is always so unbecomin'."

Alex listened with a sense of importance and excitement, but she was also rather bewildered. The contrast between all this preoccupation with her clothes and her appearance, and the austere mental striving after spiritual or moral results which had permeated the convent atmosphere, was too violent.

"You'll be interested in it all, my darling, won't you?" asked Lady Isabel disappointedly. "I couldn't bear to have a daughter who didn't care about her things – some girls are like that – so disappointin'; after one's had all the trouble of their upbringin' and is lookin' forward to a little reward."

Alex could find no words in which to explain what she knew quite well, that she was as full of eager anticipations as Lady Isabel could wish, but was too much bewildered by the novelty of it all, as yet, to give any expression to them.

She became rather boisterous and unconvincing in her endeavours to express, by means which were not spontaneous, the pleasure and excitement expected of her.

"You'll learn to move prettily and quietly, darling, and we must see about some dancin' lessons before next year. Dancin' fashions alter so quickly now-a-days," said Lady Isabel, her low, gentle tones a shade lower and more gentle than usual.

"But I shan't go to balls – yet," stammered Alex.

She and Barbara had only been allowed a very few children's parties, and for the last few years she had been considered too old for these. She thought of a ball as a prolonged, glorified party.

"Not until after your presentation, of course, and that won't be till the spring. But there may be one or two affairs in the country at Christmas, if I take you to stay about, as I hope.

"You see, darling, my plan is to let you have the next two months in the country with little Barbara, just as usual – only you must take great care not to let yourself get freckled in the sun – and then, when you come back to town in October, you can have your hair properly put up, and come about with me, so as to get to know people and make a little beginnin' before there's any question of really doing the season properly next summer."

Alex began to feel vastly important. She had never been the centre of so much attention before.

Evidently this affair of coming out was the culminating point to which all life had hitherto been tending.

Even Barbara treated her with a rather envious respect now.

Only Cedric remained unimpressed, and treated his eldest sister's marked tendency to assume airs of extreme maturity with silent indifference.

His school career was proceeding more triumphantly than ever, and his "removes" succeeded one another with a rapidity only less startling than his increasing reputation as a cricketer.

He spent most of his holidays with a schoolfellow, and showed himself rather scornful of girls in general and of his sisters in particular, although he played willingly enough with little Pamela, who had grown to an attractive and talkative age.

Barbara asked him once, with the touch of slyness characteristic of her in certain moods, whether he remembered Marie Munroe.

"Red-haired American kid? Oh, yes," said Cedric loftily. "Didn't she have a sister who was bosom friends with Alex at Liège, or some rot of that kind?"

And Alex had felt unaccountably relieved at the implication of the evanescent character of Cedric's whilom admiration.

They spent August and September at the seaside on the Cornish coast.

Alex enjoyed the daily bathing, and scrambling over the rocks barefooted, and the picnic teas in any sheltered cove that old Nurse judged sufficiently protected from the profane gaze of possible trippers. But she had all the time the sense that these hot, leisurely days were only a time of waiting, and even when she enjoyed herself most she was conscious of a gnawing impatience for the next step.

The week in London before Lady Isabel and Sir Francis started for Scotland had rather disappointed Alex, although she did not own it, even to herself.

Perpetual "tryings on" in hot weather had proved a tiring performance, and her feet ached from standing and from the hot pavement, so that she dragged herself rather than walked, or stood on one foot so as to save the other, which had vexed Lady Isabel, and led to a long admonition as to the importance of moving properly and always holding oneself upright.

Moreover, Alex, although she did not give very much thought to her own looks as a rule, had always expected that as soon as she grew up she would almost automatically become very beautiful, and it vexed and surprised her to find that her new frocks, still in a very incompleated stage, did not at once produce any startling change in her appearance. It was also disappointing that her mother and her mother's dressmaker should so often seem to find in her hitherto unsuspected deficiencies.

"Mam'selle won't be able to wear elbow-sleeves just at present, Móddam, I'm afraid – at least, not until we've got rid of that redness."

"Dear me, no! I suppose that comes from keepin' her elbows on a school desk – how very vexin'. Really, the nuns must have been very careless to let you get into the way of it, Alex. And it's made your shoulders round, too."

"Mam'selle *must* keep her shoulders well back if that white chiffon is to look like anything at all," chimed in Madame Marguerite most impressively. "It will simply be ruination to let it drop like that in the front ... takes away all the smartness from it."

Alex straightened herself uneasily.

"It's such a simple little frock, the whole thing is how it's worn..."

Which made Alex feel miserably unequal to the responsibility laid upon her.

"Her neck is very thin," sighed Lady Isabel, and Madame Marguerite, her large head with its weight of elaborate yellow waves well on one side as she gazed at Alex, had looked very disparaging indeed as she said, in tones more consolatory than hopeful:

"Of course, Mam'selle may fill out a bit before next year."

Alex, in her heart, had been thankful when it was all over, and she had gone back to the old blue cotton frocks that were to be worn out at the seaside.

Her only responsibility there was the daily struggle of putting up her hair.

To her disgust, and to Barbara's derision, the hair-dresser had insisted upon a large, bun-like frame, which made her head ache, and, pinned on by her unskilful hands, displayed a strong tendency to slip down the back of her neck. And however much she might brush and pull her hair over it, there always appeared a hiatus sooner or later, through which a large patch of what Barbara jeeringly called "false horsehair," might plainly be seen.

In spite of it all, however, Alex enjoyed those last schoolroom days of hers more than any she had yet known.

Real life was going to begin, and though Alex had no idea as to how the transformation would be effected, she was convinced that everything which she had longed for, and utterly missed, throughout her schooldays, would now be hers.

## VII London Season

Alex' first London season, from the very extravagance of her expectations, was a disappointment to her.

Her own appearance, indeed, in her first ball-dress, surprised and delighted her, and she stood before the great pier glass in the drawing-room, under the chandelier which had been specially lit for the occasion, and gazed at her reflection with incredulous admiration.

Her dress, in the height of the prevailing fashion, had been the subject of Lady Isabel's minute and careful consultations with Madame Marguerite of New Bond Street. Of stiff white satin, the neck was cut into a hard square, and the bodice, as it was still called, unsoftened except for a small draping of pleated white chiffon held on the left shoulder with a cluster of dead-white roses, which were repeated at the side of the broad, white-ribbon belt. The most prominent feature of the dress was the immensity of the sleeves, stiffened within by strips of petersham, and standing well up from the shoulders. Thence, the monstrous, balloon-shaped things narrowed imperceptibly, and were gathered in just below the elbow, leaving no hiatus visible between them and the *mousquetaire* white-kid gloves.

The skirt had no train, but fell into plain, heavy folds, sweeping the ground, and with a slight additional length of "tail," and a considerable additional fulness behind. A white ostrich-feather fan hung by white satin ribbon from her waist.

"It looks charming," said Lady Isabel delightedly. "Better than your presentation frock."

The servants, who had respectfully petitioned through Lady Isabel's maid to be allowed to see Miss Clare in her ball-dress before she started, were grouped in the doorway, the long white streamers of the maids' caps contrasting sharply with their neat black dresses.

Old Nurse, a privileged personage, was right inside the drawing-room, inspecting critically.

"I never thought you'd look so well, Miss Alex," she observed candidly. "They've hid your failings something wonderful, and your hair and complexion was always good, thanks to the care I've took of them – that I will say."

"Don't those shoes pinch, Alex?" asked Barbara, looking on enviously in her plain schoolroom frock and strapped shoes, with her hair still hanging down her back.

Alex did not care whether her pointed, white satin shoes pinched her feet or not. She was too happy in her first triumph.

It was not quite a solitary triumph, for Sir Francis, after a prolonged gazing through his double eye-glasses that made her flush more than ever from nervousness, gave one of his rare smiles of gratification and said:

"Very pretty indeed. I congratulate you on your appearance, my dear child."

But it was to Lady Isabel that he turned next moment, with that sudden softened glance that he never bestowed elsewhere.

"How beautifully you've dressed her, my dear. You will be taken for sisters, now that she is in long dresses."

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