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The Girls of St. Wode's

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I – PREPARING FOR THE YOUNG DÉBUTANTES

Eileen, Marjorie, and Letitia Chetwynd were expected home from school. It was a bright day early in April, and Mrs. Chetwynd was seated in her luxurious London drawing-room conversing with her special friend, Mrs. Acheson.

Two years ago Mrs. Chetwynd, on the death of her husband, a distinguished Indian officer, had returned to England. She was a fashionable, up-to-date-looking lady now. Her widow's dress was carefully chosen – not too depressing, but all that was correct and proper.

Mrs. Acheson, also the widow of an Indian officer, was not fashionable in the ordinary acceptance of the word. She was plainly, even shabbily, dressed. She wore long weepers to her widow's cap, and her hair was brushed smoothly away from her broad forehead. Her face was large and somewhat sunburnt, her hands well shaped, but with a look about them which showed that they were not unacquainted with manual labor.

"Yes," said Mrs. Chetwynd, uttering a sigh as she spoke, "this

is a great day for me. The girls are educated, and are coming home."

"For good?" said Mrs. Acheson.

"Well, yes, my dear; I suppose so. You see, they are all eighteen. It is absurd to keep girls at school after eighteen. They were eighteen the end of last year. In these days, when people grow old so terribly fast, girls ought to have their so-called education finished at eighteen."

"My dear Belle would not agree with you," said Mrs. Acheson.

Mrs. Chetwynd threw up her hands and slightly raised her arched brows.

"Spare me, dear Emily," she cried. "I do not want to hear any of your dear, extraordinary, clever Belle's theories at present. I sincerely trust – yes, my dear, I must be frank – I sincerely trust the wave of her influence will never come into my house."

Mrs. Acheson sighed and sank back in her chair.

"On the whole," she said, "I have much to be thankful for. I have enough to live on, and the memory of my dear husband's brilliant career will always be a comfort to me. Belle is also in excellent health. She is, of course, one of the great admirations of my life; but I will admit it, dear, in a whisper, that she is also one of my trials. But, dear Helen, I had forgotten that you had three daughters; and how can they be all eighteen at the same time?"

"I have not three daughters, my dear; I have only two. Letitia is not my daughter. She is my niece; she is my dear husband's younger brother's child. She happens to have been born within a

month of Eileen and Marjorie, who are twins, consequently the three are practically the same age. They will be home in about an hour and a half. They are all devoted to each other; but I confess it will be something of a handful taking three into society at the same time."

"Oh, you surely don't mean to introduce the whole three the same season?" said Mrs. Acheson. "How can you contemplate anything so appalling?"

"But I do contemplate it," said Mrs. Chetwynd, "and I believe I shall manage very well. I have been, of course, in close correspondence with their invaluable teacher, Mrs. Marchland, and have had frequent photographs of the children. Eileen and Marjorie are alike in appearance and strikingly handsome; they will be foils to Letitia, who is as fair as they are dark. Letitia is pretty and fascinating, of the petit order. I should think the three would make something of a sensation. You see, my dear, I have large means, for my husband came in for the property of his elder brother, who died six months before him. I can do well by the children, and I mean to do so."

"You contemplate matrimony as the aim and object of your ambition?" said Mrs. Acheson.

"Nothing of the kind," replied Mrs. Chetwynd, slightly reddening. "If it comes, well and good. If a really estimable, worthy man takes a fancy to any of my girls, and his affection is returned, I shall look upon marriage as a suitable life for my children; but I do not take them into society for the sole purpose

of getting husbands."

Mrs. Acheson slowly shook her head.

"You will find it difficult to make people believe that," she said.

"In all probability the three girls will marry," continued Mrs. Chetwynd in her calm, even voice, which seldom rose to excitement or dropped to melancholy. "Marriage is what Providence intends for all happy women, early marriage and happy homes of their own. But I shall not hurry the matter nor put myself out about it. I mean the girls to have a good time, and will leave other matters to Providence."

"Taking steps meanwhile to accomplish your real object," murmured Mrs. Acheson under her breath.

"My dear Emily, do tell me about your Belle," continued Mrs. Chetwynd. "So you have really sent her to St. Wode's College?"

"Yes; and she is very happy there, and hopes to do well in her tripos."

"I must frankly say that I hate girls' colleges," said Mrs. Chetwynd. "After all, these new-fangled ideas that women have taken hold of are most disastrous. What awful creatures one meets now and then! All womanliness extracted out of them – mere walking intellects with no hearts of any sort."

"You really do run to the fair with the thing," replied Mrs. Acheson. "I am sure my dear Belle – "

But Mrs. Chetwynd did not want to hear about dear Belle. Just at that moment there came a welcome interruption in the shape

of tea. It was placed on a small table in front of the hostess, who poured it out, helped her friend to rich cream, and offered her hot buttered cake. Mrs. Acheson could only manage plain teas at home, and she enjoyed her friend's meals, she was fond of saying, all the more by contrast.

"I shall long to hear of your dear girls, and also to see them," she said, as she sipped her tea and stirred it slowly with a small Russian spoon.

"Well, come over and take a peep at them on Saturday," said Mrs. Chetwynd. "Belle is away, is she not?"

"She comes home to-morrow night; she has had a very pleasant tour in Switzerland. May I bring her with me?"

Mrs. Chetwynd longed to say "No." She disliked Belle Acheson, she disliked her manners and her mode of life, and she did not wish her to exercise the smallest influence over Letitia, Eileen, and Marjorie. After a moment's reflection, however, she came to the conclusion that these young ladies could not be injured by any one so plain and unimportant. She therefore bent her head in token of willingness to receive Belle Acheson for a few hours into her house.

"Let it be Saturday, then," she said. "Come as early as you can in the afternoon. If all goes well, I mean to have my three girls presented this season. I took this house for the purpose: it is in a fashionable locality and close to everything. Yes, after all, three young débutantes will in one sense be an advantage. The thing will be out of the common; nothing is admired so much as the

uncommon. I expect I shall enjoy myself; and the girls, whatever happens, shall have a good time. If you are wise, my dear Emily, you will try to introduce Belle. If you dress her well you might do wonders with her, and – "

"Belle in society!" said Mrs. Acheson with a laugh. "Ah, I see you do not know her yet. Expect me on Saturday, and I will bring Belle if I can."

Mrs. Chetwynd heaved a sigh as her friend left the room.

CHAPTER II – IN A THIRD-CLASS CARRIAGE

Three girls were traveling in a third-class carriage to King's Cross. The train was not an express; it stopped at nearly every station. The carriage in which they sat was more or less crowded with country people who carried baskets, babies, feeding-bottles, and all sorts of parcels. The girls, looking bright and energetic, occupied corner seats. A woman with a fretful baby on her knee sat near one.

"How tired you must be!" said this girl. "Do let me hold your baby for a little."

As she spoke all the other passengers turned and stared at her. She was a tall, slim, very plainly-dressed girl; her dark-blue serge dress lacked freshness, her sailor hat was decidedly the worse for wear, and her gloves had been mended in many places. The woman whom the girl addressed, glancing first at the shabby clothes, then at the kind, bright, handsome young face, decided that the girl was not very much above herself in the social scale, and agreed to let her hold her baby for a bit.

A charming color came into the girl's face as she received the small atom of humanity on her knee. She held the baby tenderly; her young arms were strong, the little one nestled down comfortably, and the mother gave her a glance of admiration.

"Why, I do declare, my dear," she exclaimed, "one would think you had half-a-dozen of your own, you handle the little mite that knowingly!"

"Oh, it is because I love children," replied the girl. "It is kind of you to let me hold your little one. Look, Marjorie, do look; hasn't it pretty little fingers; and oh, do see its tiny toes!"

Another tall girl bent forward and began to examine the baby's feet. They were pink and very small; the girl stretched out her palm, and the other girl placed the little foot upon it.

"You are not to take the little dear from me," said the first girl.

"Oh, my dear Eileen, I would not deprive you of the little treasure for the world," was the quick reply. "I know by your face you are in the seventh heaven."

"I am, I am," replied the girl addressed as Eileen. "Oh, what a darling! It is so delicious, Marjorie, when it nestles up against you."

The train slackened speed, drew up at a great station, and the woman, the baby, and most of the other passengers got out. The three girls now found themselves alone in the carriage. The girl at the distant window, the smallest of the three, turned and eagerly faced her companions.

"Well, Eileen," she began – she shook her finger in the face of the bright, tall girl as she spoke – "if you begin that sort of thing just on the very day when you have left school, if you will insist on wearing those disgracefully shabby clothes, going third-class and taking us with you, when your mother sends us money

to travel first, and finally adopting strange babies who happen to be traveling in the same carriage, you will certainly break Aunt Helen's heart."

Eileen shrugged her shoulders.

"Not at all," she answered. "Mother may not like it at first, but she will soon learn to know once for all that Marjorie and I mean to follow our own bent. Marjorie and I do not intend to wear gay clothes, because we consider finery a sheer waste of money; but as to you, Lettie, it is the greatest pity you are not mother's own daughter. How exquisitely neat, how smart, you look!"

"Not smart at all, only suitably dressed," replied Letitia, bridling a little.

She was wearing a very correct traveling costume of dark gray; her bright wavy hair was arranged in the latest and most fashionable manner; little curls and bits of fluffy downy brightness would get out of their confinement and dance round her small, soft face. She was wearing the universal coat and skirt; but a light-blue cambric shirt and a white sailor hat with a broad white ribbon gave distinction to her costume. Her gloves were also white, and her little shoes had smart bows and buckles.

"My dress is only suitable," she repeated. "Now, your dress, Eileen, is not suitable; nor is yours, Marjorie. To wear what is not suitable is the height of vulgarity."

"Oh, do listen to her," said Marjorie, bursting into a hearty laugh. "She is trying to scare us with those old bogy words, as if we minded. Think what it all means, Lettie, before you condemn

us so severely. Mother's money is safe in my purse instead of on my person, and the difference between third and first class means a considerable addition also to my nice, heavy little purse. Who knows in what class we are coming up to town? Who cares to know? Mother is certain not to meet us at King's Cross, and old Fowler will not see what class we alight from."

"I am glad Aunt Helen has secured Fowler as her coachman," said Letitia. "But, all the same," she added hastily, "you both do look disgracefully shabby."

"Well, Lettie," said Marjorie, "I don't feel shabby, which is the main thing. What can be the matter with this serviceable dress? It is very strong and won't tear, and is the sort which does not crumple much."

"It is all over grease," replied Letitia; "spots of grease here, there, and everywhere. And, oh, your gloves – there is absolutely a hole in the thumb of the one on your left hand. It is too disgraceful!"

"My gloves suit my character," replied Marjorie.

She looked at her sister; they both sat back in their seats and indulged in hearty girlish laughter. They were very like one another; the same dark, handsome eyes beamed out of each face, the same good arched brows, the same hair, thick and straight, very dark in color, but cropped to within an inch of their respective heads. They had clear, good complexions. Plenty of color brightened each pair of healthy cheeks – their lips were beautifully formed and they had snow-white pearly teeth. And

yet these two girls, partly because of their dress, were not looked at twice during that journey, whereas Letitia was the cynosure of many admiring eyes.

CHAPTER III – THE TORN DRESS

King's Cross was reached without adventure, and a moment later Marjorie was eagerly talking to old Fowler the coachman.

"How are you, Fowler? I am so glad to see you again," she cried. She held out her hand to the old coachman as she spoke.

"I am quite well, I thank you, miss," he replied. He could not help smiling into the beaming dark eyes, and could not help thinking, notwithstanding a certain amount of chagrin, how nice it was to have Miss Marjorie back from school.

"Eileen and I have knitted some baby socks for the last addition to your family, Fowler," continued Marjorie. "We'll come round and see Mrs. Fowler and the bairns to-morrow. How old is the last baby? and is it dark or fair?"

"It's six weeks old, miss, and very dark; but the wife isn't as strong as she ought to be."

Fowler colored all over his face as he spoke. There was a porter standing near, listening to this conversation.

"Perhaps, young ladies," said the footman, coming to the rescue, "you wouldn't mind getting into the carriage, for the horses are that fresh Fowler can scarcely keep 'em standing much longer."

"But it's quite serious about his wife not being strong," said Eileen in a meditative voice. "Now, if she were to take extract of malt or Fellowes' Syrup – "

"Oh, do get into the carriage," cried Letitia. "Really, Eileen, you will be one of the most remarkable women of your day if you keep up your present fads. Can't you see how all those porters are enjoying the scene; and as to poor wretched Fowler, if you think he enjoys talking about his latest baby and the medicines his wife is to take, at King's Cross Station, you are vastly mistaken. For goodness' sake, get in."

As Letitia spoke she gave her energetic cousin a push. Eileen scrambled into the carriage almost headforemost, treading on her dress, and tearing a piece of braid as she did so. Marjorie followed suit, and Letitia entered last in a dainty and pretty manner. The footman shut the door and got on the box beside the coachman. Poor Fowler's ears were still red from the questions which Eileen had plied him with.

"Bless her 'eart," he exclaimed to the footman, "she don't know that it's rather awkward to talk about the wife and bairns at a place like King's Cross; but she's the best-natured young lady that ever walked. I knew her when she was a little tot."

"All the same, you looked like a fool when she questioned you," replied Hopkins; "and I doubt much if the missus will allow her young ladies to go a-visiting you in Fox Buildings."

"Well, all I can say is this," replied the coachman, "if Miss Eileen and Miss Marjorie are like what they used to be when they was young, I don't think the missus will be able to prevent them having their own way."

He whipped up his horses as he spoke, and a few minutes later

the girls had reached home.

Mrs. Chetwynd was standing in the hall to welcome them.

"My darlings, here you are at last," she cried. "Oh, good gracious, Eileen, take care where you are going. See that great piece of braid trailing in front of your dress; my dear child, you will be on your nose."

"Oh, never mind, mother," said Eileen. "I'm quite accustomed to this sort of thing. – Marjorie, have you a penknife? I'll cut it off."

"Cut it off!" cried Mrs. Chetwynd; "nothing of the kind! I wonder where your maid is?" Here she turned to the footman, who was standing motionless in the hall. "Go, Thomas, and desire Esther to come down immediately. – She will mend your braid, my dear Eileen. Well, Lettie, dear, and how are you?"

"Quite well, thank you, Aunt Helen," replied Letitia in her correct, ladylike voice. "I think Marjorie and Eileen are a little overexcited at getting home, and if you will excuse – "

"Pray, mother, do nothing of the kind," said Eileen. "We are not a bit ashamed of our dresses; we do not intend to waste money upon raiment. Having sufficient clothes to cover ourselves, that is all that is necessary. My idea is to have one warm dress for the winter, and one cool one for the summer, and no more. A felt hat for winter, and a sailor one for summer, and no more. When the dresses are completely worn out they can be given to the poor – who may or may not make something of them – and we can buy a couple of new ones. You are going to give us an allowance,

aren't you, mother?"

"We will talk of that presently, my dears. Remember, my dear children, I have not seen you for a year. I had a delightful time on the Continent, but I never forgot you, my loves. But now that you have come home for good, there will be much to talk over and arrange. Meantime, we can surely let the subject of dress drop."

"But, dear mother, did you say we had come home for good?" cried Marjorie. "You surely don't suppose that our education is finished? We are only just eighteen."

"We will talk of that also by and by," replied Mrs. Chetwynd, a frown knitting her brows, and her heart sinking a trifle.

Marjorie and Eileen had always been wayward children, difficult to manage; good-tempered and good-hearted, but with a certain stubborn element about them which caused them not to disobey, but to have their desires on almost every point gratified, simply because the trouble of opposing them was immense.

Mrs. Chetwynd remembered these traits in her two bright girls as she welcomed them to their home. She was delighted to see them of course; but it was painful to observe their greasy serge dresses and their hair cropped like boys. Then, too, their manners were eccentric; and there was nothing so distasteful as eccentricity.

Letitia, of course, looked all that was sweet and nice; but she was not Mrs. Chewynd's own daughter, which made a great difference. Try as she would, the widow could not take the absorbing interest in Letitia that she did in Eileen and Marjorie.

"Come upstairs, my darlings," she said. "You must see your charming little rooms. Esther has everything in perfect order for you; fires lighted and all. Come this way."

Mrs. Chetwynd conveyed the girls upstairs. The three rooms were on the same landing, and communicated one with the other. Mrs. Chetwynd had gone to some expense in having doors broken in the walls to effect this arrangement. When completed, the effect was charming. The rooms were papered with a self-colored paper of pale blue. There was a deep frieze of hand-painted flowers and birds. The paint on the doors and round the wainscot was creamy white. The furniture was also creamy white, with brass fittings. The carpet on each floor was a square of rich Turkey. The windows of the three pretty rooms were a little open; and with the cheerful fires burning in the small grates, and the sweet air coming in from the square garden, no rooms could look more tempting.

"Delightful! Oh, Aunt Helen, how perfectly sweet of you," said Letitia, as she danced into her own little room. "And do you mean to say we are to have one each. Oh, what a darling little bed – and a spring-mattress and all. How luxurious we shall be. Oh, and do look at those great, roomy cupboards in the wall."

"But what do we want great, roomy cupboards for?" cried Eileen. "With one dress for summer and one dress for winter, surely we don't want much room?"

"I tell you what it is, Eileen," said Marjorie, "I mean to use mine as a dark-room for photography – capital, excellent. Thank

you, mother, dear."

"You mean to use your dress-cupboard as a darkroom for photography?" said Mrs. Chetwynd. "My dear child, you will have little time for photography when you are introduced to Her Majesty, and are in the full swing of a society career."

"But, mother, I never mean to be in such a truly awful position," cried Marjorie.

Her mother knitted her brows anxiously.

"For goodness' sake, Marjorie, don't worry Aunt Helen the first evening," cried Lettie. – "Dear Aunt Helen, everything will be right – quite right. The girls have a crank, each of them; but these delightful rooms and you, dear Aunt Helen, ought to cure them in no time. – Now, girls, do get off those horrid dresses and get into respectable ones. – They have respectable dresses, I assure you, Aunt Helen. If you will leave us, we will all come down to the drawing-room in less than a quarter of an hour."

"And here is Esther to wait on you," said Mrs. Chetwynd. "You may as well dress for dinner now that you are about it, and I will have tea sent up to you to your rooms. We dine at half-past seven."

She left the room as she spoke, and Esther, a nice-looking girl, came respectfully forward. She looked with consternation at the torn braid on Eileen's dress.

"Oh, please, don't bother about me," said Eileen. "I wouldn't have the services of a maid to save my life. I hate to have anyone touch my hair but myself. Besides, as you doubtless observe, my

good girl, there is no arrangement necessary. It is only an inch long, and with a couple of brushes, one in each hand, I can push it into any position I like. Lettie, if you wish for Esther, please have her. Your neat little head, 'sunning over with curls,' requires plenty of arrangement; but not mine, thank goodness."

"Nor mine either," echoed Marjorie. "Oh, what a comfort it is to have short hair. I never mean to let my locks grow."

"Which dresses will you wish to wear this evening, young ladies?" asked Esther, who had gaped in astonishment while the girls were speaking.

As she spoke she held out her hand for the keys of their trunks.

"Here are the keys," said Marjorie; "but I don't know what evening-dresses we have. I am sure there is nothing fit to be seen. But can't we go downstairs as we are?"

"Perhaps you'll mend this braid," said Eileen, "if you prefer that to cutting it off, which is much quicker."

"I would suggest, miss, that you let me choose your dress. I will unpack your things, and see what are most suitable," said the maid in her prim voice.

"All right; lay them on the bed. Anything for a quiet life," sighed Marjorie.

Esther proceeded to take the things out of Marjorie's trunk, and Eileen walked to the window and looked out, whistling somewhat loudly and in a thoroughly boyish fashion as she did so.

The maid quickly put the contents of the small trunks into the receptacles for their convenience, laid two soiled and crumpled

evening-frocks of pale cream cashmere on the beds, and then retired to expend some of her skill, which was considerable, on Letitia's pretty person and charming wardrobe. Letitia was a young lady quite after Esther's own heart.

CHAPTER IV – IN THE GIRLS' BEDROOMS

Marjorie and Eileen, in soiled and much bedraggled school-party frocks, went down to dinner. Letitia, in pale-blue silk with lace ruffles, looked neat, pretty, and suitably attired; but the other two girls presented an appearance which caused poor Mrs. Chetwynd to shudder. With their really handsome faces, their wide-open intelligent eyes, their exquisitely-formed lips, and pearly rows of teeth, they were nothing but awkward, gauche, and unpresentable. Letitia was as pretty, trim, and agreeable to the eye as a young girl could be; but Eileen and Marjorie! What was to be done? Mrs. Chetwynd felt her heart sinking like lead in her breast; for there was a stubborn build about Marjorie's chin and about the slight, very slight frown which now and then visited Eileen's intelligent forehead. Mrs. Chetwynd perceived at a glance that if she was to mold these two girls to her ways of thinking, she would have a troublesome task before her. She was rich, and was also good-hearted, good-natured, and pleasant. It was in no way her fault if the girls took after their father, who had been not only a brave soldier, but also that strange combination, a scholar, as well, and who had died before the girls' education was complete. He was a man of extraordinary character and determination, and had all his life been the victim of fads. Mrs.

Chetwynd felt quite certain that their father was to blame for Marjorie's and Eileen's peculiar appearance. She was thankful that she had not asked any friends to meet the girls on their first evening home from school. She determined to make herself as pleasant as possible, and not to allude to the untidy wardrobes, the gauche appearance, and the cropped heads until the following morning.

Dinner passed quickly, for all three girls were hungry; and when they retired to the drawing-room Mrs. Chetwynd suggested a little music.

"Eileen, my darling, you sing, don't you?" she said, turning to the younger of the twins.

"Oh, dear me, no, mother; I have not the ghost of a voice," replied Eileen.

"But I thought that your teacher, Miss Fox, spoke highly of your musical talents?"

"She said I should play well if I practiced hard; but I did not think my very moderate gift worth cultivating," replied Eileen, yawning slightly as she spoke. "You see, unless one has genius, there is not the least use in the present day in being musical. Only genius is tolerated; and then I don't ever mean to be ornamental. My vogue in life is the useful. The music of the ordinary schoolgirl, after years of toil, is merely regarded as an accomplishment, and generally as an unpleasant one; therefore I have let my music drop."

"Dear, dear! How extraordinary of Miss Fox not to let me

know," said Mrs. Chetwynd. "Well, Marjorie, you at least play?" said her mother.

"Yes, mother," in a somewhat solemn style. "I can give you one of Bach's fugues, if you like."

"Do so, my dear. I have spent a great deal of money on your music, and should like to hear the result."

Marjorie rose, went to the piano, sat down, and began to thunder loudly. She had scarcely any taste for music, and she played several wrong notes. Mrs. Chetwynd had a carefully trained ear, and she quite shuddered when Marjorie crashed out some of her terrible discords.

Having finished the fugue, which took a considerable time, the young girl rose from the piano amid a profound silence. Eileen had turned away and was engrossed in a book on cookery which she had picked up from a side-table. She was muttering to herself half-aloud:

"Take of flour one ounce, butter, cream, three eggs, and – "

"What are you doing, Eileen?" said the mother.

Eileen made no reply.

Marjorie seated herself on a chair near her mother.

"I hope you liked that fugue?" she said. "I took tremendous pains learning it. I got up every morning an hour earlier than the others during the whole of last term, simply because I intended to play that fugue of Bach's to you."

"It was a great pity, dear," began Mrs. Chetwynd; then she sighed and stopped.

"A pity, mother? What in the world do you mean?"

"Nothing, love; we will talk of all those things to-morrow."

"What a terrible day to-morrow promises to be," said Marjorie, glancing towards Eileen. "I can see that mother is going to let the vials of her wrath loose. Oh yes, you dear old mammy, you are – you cannot deny it. But we are not such dreadful girls after all. All we want to do is this: we want to go our own way."

"Your own way, Eileen – your own way?"

"Yes, mammy, our own way; and you can go yours. Then we shall get on together like a house on fire. Now, what are you winking at me for, Letitia?"

"I was not winking at you," said Letitia. "I was wondering if Aunt Helen would like to hear me sing."

"Certainly, my dear; but I never knew before that you had a voice."

"I have only a little voice; but I have made the most of my opportunities. I won't sing if you would rather not."

"On the contrary, dear; I should like to hear you."

"A ballad, I suppose?" said Letitia.

"Yes; I am fond of ballads. What do you know?"

"All the usual ones, I think," replied Letitia. "I will sing 'Robin Adair' if that will suit you."

"I am fond of 'Robin Adair,'" said the widow; "but few people can render those beautiful words to satisfaction."

Letitia volunteered to try. She sat down to the piano; her accompaniment was fresh and rippling, her voice clear, not

particularly strong, but wonderfully true. It had a note of sympathy in it too, which rang through the old room.

Mrs. Chetwynd put down her knitting with a sigh of pleasure. The two girls sat with their hands lying idly in their laps, and gazed at their cousin.

When the old ballad came to an end, Mrs. Chetwynd felt tears not far from her eyes.

Oh, if only Eileen and Marjorie were like Letitia!

Marjorie suddenly jumped to her feet.

"Are you crying, mother?" she said, going up to her mother. "Oh, it's just like that wicked Lettie. To hear her sing you would suppose that she was the most sentimental creature in the world: but don't you believe a word of it, mammy. She has not one scrap of sentiment in her composition; she is the most worldly-wise little soul that I have ever come across. – Now, Lettie, don't be a humbug; sing something in which your real feelings appear – a modern love-song, for instance, or something about fine dress, or nothing to wear, or anything else in your real style. It's positively wrong of you to deceive mother in the way you are doing."

Letitia looked gently reproachful. She said she did not know any song about nothing to wear, nor any song either about dress; but she would sing "Shadowland" if Mrs. Chetwynd wished it.

This song again brought the widow to the verge of tears. Lettie then rose and shut the piano.

"You at least, my dear, have derived benefit from your education," she said. "How I wish your dear father and my dear

husband were alive to hear you."

"Father could always see through humbugs," said Eileen to Marjorie.

"Yes," replied Marjorie; "but don't you see whatever mother is she is not a humbug?"

"Only we don't want Lettie to twist her round her little finger, do we?" said Eileen.

"No; not that it greatly matters. Poor mother. I expect Lettie will do very much what we do; but I'm not sure. We must only wait and see."

The girls retired to bed; but Mrs. Chetwynd sat up late, wishing much that she had Mrs. Acheson to consult with.

What was to be done if Marjorie and Eileen went on in this peculiar manner which they had done that evening? Really, when everything was considered, they were very little better than Belle, and Belle happened to be Mrs. Chetwynd's bête noire.

"If only pretty, graceful, accomplished Letitia were my own daughter! She is a dear child, and yet I cannot quite cordially take to her," thought the widow. "I don't know what is the matter with her. I have no fault whatever to find. I suppose it is because she is not my own. Now Marjorie and Eileen rub me the wrong way every time they open their lips, and yet I love them with all my heart and soul. How handsome they are too! Anything could be done with them if only they would submit to the ordinary regulations of polite society. What terrible times these modern days are! Mothers have little or no influence over

their own children. The children take the upper hand and – keep it. But I just vow that Marjorie and Eileen shall submit to me in my own house. Poor darlings, they are as loving as possible; but they have been under some dreadful pernicious influence. I could never guess that a school so highly recommended as Miss Marchland's was would send back girls in the condition Marjorie and Eileen are in. No manners, disgraceful in appearance, and no accomplishments. What agony I went through while Marjorie was playing that fugue! She must never attempt to play in public. Eileen, who really had a taste for music, will not cultivate it, because, forsooth, she is not a genius. The two girls mean to be merely useful – merely useful, with eyes like those, and lips and teeth. My dear, dear, ridiculous children, society will soon knock all that nonsense out of your heads. Yes, I must present them both as soon as possible. I shall order their court dresses to-morrow. But that terrible cropped hair – straight too, not a scrap of curl in it. Oh dear, what is to be done; and they are both on such a large scale? They would make handsome boys. What a pity they are not boys. Dear me, I am an unhappy woman. If Letitia were my daughter, it would be plain sailing, but as it is I am at my wits' end."

By and by Mrs. Chetwynd went upstairs. She hesitated on the second landing, where her own room was. On the next floor were the girls' rooms, luxuriously and beautifully furnished. It occurred to her to go up and look at her darlings asleep. She did so, opening the door of Marjorie's room first. Marjorie

was in bed, curled up as her fashion was, with the bedclothes tucked tightly round her. Her cheeks were slightly flushed, and the long black lashes looked particularly handsome as they lay against her rosy cheeks. But what a condition the room was in! What was the good of a maid when girls went to bed in such a state of untidiness? Clothes tossed helter-skelter everywhere; one little shoe near the fireplace, one near the wardrobe; petticoats flopped on the nearest chair; the shabby serge dress, which Mrs. Chetwynd considered only to be fit for the next bag sent from the Kilburn Society, hanging on the brass knob of the bed.

Marjorie sighed in her sleep, and Mrs. Chetwynd bent over her.

"Dear, lovely child, I surely shall be able to mold her to my wishes," she thought; never considering that Marjorie's chin, with its cleft in the middle, was full of obstinacy, and that her lips were as firm as they were beautiful.

Mrs. Chetwynd went on to the next room. Eileen was also sound asleep, and her room was also untidy. The girl looked lovely, with her classical features and the long straight lashes lying upon the soft rounded cheeks. Yes, they were both singularly handsome girls, and very like one another. Of course they would do splendidly yet. Perhaps the world would appreciate them all the more for their little eccentricities. They must appear as débutantes at the very first drawing-room. Yes, to-morrow at an early hour, Madame Coray should put their presentation dresses in hand.

Mrs. Chetwynd hesitated a moment before she went into Letitia's room. It would not be very interesting to look at Letitia asleep; but still, what she did for her own girls she invariably did for her husband's niece.

Letitia's room was in exquisite and perfect order, everything put neatly away, and Letitia herself lying in her little white bed with her arms folded across her chest and her hair swept back from her pretty brow. Mrs. Chetwynd could not help feeling drawn to her. She bent and kissed her on her forehead. She had not dared to do this to her own girls, fearing to awaken them.

She then went back to her room, to sleep as best she could.

CHAPTER V – THE MODERN VIEW OF LIFE

The girls came home on Wednesday, and on the following Saturday Mrs. Acheson and Belle were coming to tea. In the meantime Mrs. Chetwynd had gone through more than one stormy scene with Marjorie and Eileen. The girls positively declined to be presented to her gracious Majesty.

"You may get the dresses, mother," said Eileen, "only I sincerely hope you won't, for we cannot wear them. We don't quite know yet what we mean to do with our lives; but fashionable society girls we will not be. Now, mammy, why should we be fashionable girls if we dislike the idea?"

Here Marjorie, notwithstanding her rude words, went on her knees, wound her strong young arms round her mother's waist, and looked with such imploring eyes into her face that, notwithstanding her anger, Mrs. Chetwynd was touched in spite of herself.

"We should hate it all, you know, dear mammy," said Marjorie. "I speak for Eileen as well as for myself. – You agree with me, Eileen, don't you?"

"Of course," replied Eileen. "Well, Marjorie, have it out with the dear mammy, for I must go at once to see Fowler's last baby. I am taking it a rattle and some chocolates."

"You will kill a young infant if you give it chocolate," said Mrs. Chetwynd, "and I forbid you to go to Fox Buildings. No young ladies from my house must go near such a place."

"Dear me, mother, why not?" said Eileen.

"Eileen, my dear, I decline to argue with you. Really, when I think of all that you two girls are doing to oppose me, and render my life miserable, I could almost wish that you were back at school."

"Of course, mother," said Eileen gravely, "if you positively forbid me to go I will obey you."

She sat down on the nearest chair and stared hard at her mother.

"I do forbid you, Eileen. Young ladies of eighteen are not allowed to go about London alone."

"But really, mother, you are mistaken," said Marjorie; "in these days they are. All that dreadful period of bondage in which the girl of twenty years ago was kept has passed away; the English girl of the present day has her freedom. I have read all about it; I know it to be a fact. College girls, too, have told me. You cannot deny us our birthright, mammy, can you?"

"College girls? What do you know about college girls – those awful, underbred, unwomanly creatures!" said Mrs. Chetwynd.

"You say that, mother, because you do not know them."

"Well, I do know one thing," continued Mrs. Chetwynd, her eyes filling with tears. "I cannot imagine what I have done to deserve such girls as you two. I have taken no end of pains

with you both. Of course I was obliged to stay in India during your father's lifetime, which prevented my having as much influence over you as I should otherwise have obtained: but I little thought to come back to such a reward as this. I sent you to the best schools I could afford, and have always attended to your wardrobe, and given you plenty of pocket-money. I have done all that a mother could do, and now just when I was beginning to expect my reward, there come back to me a couple of – "

"Tomboys, mother darling," said Marjorie. She wound her arms still tighter round her mother's waist, and kissed her on her cheek. "Mammy, you'll get accustomed to us after a bit," she cried. "We are not in the ordinary groove; but there are hundreds of girls like us. There will be more girls like us year after year; all the modern training tends to it, mammy, and you cannot keep us back. We are in the van, and in the van we will stay. Mammy, we decline to go into society, we decline to turn night into day, we decline to spend unnecessary money upon clothes."

"And what do you intend to do, Marjorie; if I may venture to ask?" said Mrs. Chetwynd, folding her hands in an attitude of despair. "Having declined so much, is there anything you agree to?"

"Oh yes, lots, mother, now you are becoming reasonable, and we can talk. First of all, what we want to know is, what allowance you will give us both?"

"Your father made an extraordinary will," said Mrs. Chetwynd. "I cannot understand what made him do it, and I think

he was wrong."

"What was it? Do let us hear," said Eileen.

"It was this: By his will, when you leave school and reach the age of eighteen, you are both entitled to one hundred and fifty pounds a year, and you are not to be coerced in the way you spend the money."

"Hip! hip! hurrah!" cried Eileen. She sprang suddenly to her feet, danced a minute in front of her mother, and then clapped Marjorie on the shoulder.

"Then, of course, everything is plain," she cried. "We won't spend any of that money on dress. Who would waste a precious hundred and fifty pounds in stupid things like frocks?"

"Well, children, I shall give you each a proper wardrobe to start with," said Mrs. Chetwynd. "You have not brought anything fit to be seen from school. Those dresses you have on now are simply disgusting; they are not even clean. I have ordered the carriage, my dears, and am going to take you at once to Madame Coray's. She will make you two or three everyday dresses and some evening ones."

"But at least not with our money," cried Marjorie; "that we cannot permit to be spent in such willful waste. Oh, mother, please, do allow us to dress as we like; do let us order our lives in our own way – do, mammy, do."

"I must know first of all what is your own way."

"We want to be useful members of society, and to spend scarcely any money on clothes. We have told you that we do not

intend to be presented to Her Majesty."

"Well, I hope to get you to change your minds yet; but I will not order the presentation dresses to-day."

"That's a dear. I knew you would submit. – She is the best little mother in the whole world," said Eileen, rapturously kissing her parent, and then clasping Marjorie's hand.

"Then, you will give in all round, mammy dear?" said Marjorie.

"Suppose I say no?" answered Mrs. Chetwynd.

"Then I am afraid – " said Eileen. She glanced at Marjorie, and Marjorie nodded.

Mrs. Chetwynd suddenly rose.

"Girls," she said, "don't say what you are just about to say. I can guess what it is, and I am not prepared to listen. Until you are of age it is your duty to obey me. Notwithstanding your father's will, and the improper allowance which I am forced to give you both, as long as you are under my roof you must be clothed as I wish, and you must not go to places that I disapprove of. My poor, dear, misguided children, a woman's true aim when she reaches maturity is to marry a good husband, and to have a happy home of her own."

"But I never intend to marry," said Marjorie. "I have not the faintest idea of putting myself under the control of any man. I mean to keep my liberty and have a jolly good, useful time."

"And so do I," said Eileen. "I mean to have a very full and very busy life, mother."

"Ditto," cried Marjorie.

"Letitia has not yet spoken," said Mrs. Chetwynd. – "What are your wishes, my love?"

"Well, of course, Aunt Helen, I should like a society-life very much."

"But you're just not going to have it, Lettie," said Eileen. "You'll have to do exactly what we do. We have no idea of having our own mother fagged to death; an old woman like mother taken out day and night at all hours, just to give you a jolly time."

"But, really, my dears, I am not an old woman," said Mrs. Chetwynd indignantly.

"Well, mother, you are not as young as you used to be. You are forty, if you are a day, and no one at forty can be called a chicken. It's much more healthy for you to go to bed in good time. Oh, I have read a lot about society and all its trash. It just encourages one to be terribly immoral."

"Immoral! my dear Eileen. It's awful to hear you speak."

"But it's true, mother. For instance, people tell no end of fibs – lies I call them. They say they are not at home when they are; they pretend to be delighted to see a person who in reality they loathe. Oh, I am acquainted with the ghastly round; and if you think I am going to let myself in for it you are mistaken. But, dear old mammy, you shan't be worried any longer; we will go out with you now, and we'll be as good as gold, and you shall get us each a new dark-blue serge dress and a new sailor hat, and a pair of thick dogskin gloves. Surely that is enough."

"And what about evening dresses, and Sunday dresses, and visiting dresses?" said Mrs. Chetwynd.

"As to Sunday dresses," cried Marjorie, "I don't see why neat serge dresses should not do quite well for church; and as to visiting dresses, we do not intend to visit in the ordinary sense. The friend who does not wish to see us in our serge costumes we do not intend to cultivate."

"There are still evening dresses, my dear."

"But, mother, you are not going to take us out to dinners?"

"You must have one or two dinner dresses," said Mrs. Chetwynd, "and that is an end of the matter. Go upstairs and put on your hats. I am ashamed to go out with you as matters now stand."

The two girls left the room linking their arms together. Letitia remained behind.

"May I ask, Letitia," said Mrs. Chetwynd, "when this madness seized Marjorie and Eileen?"

"It has been coming on gradually," said Letitia. "It is very bad, I know. I was afraid you would suffer a good deal when they explained themselves."

"But when did it begin?"

"Well, two or three girls – Americans, I think – joined the school last term, and Marjorie and Eileen became great friends with them; and just about then they began to change. They were always careless with regard to their dress, and would not allow Miss Ross – our English teacher who had us under her special

care – to spend the money which you sent on dress at all."

"And do you mean to tell me that Miss Ross consulted them?"

"Well, Aunt Helen, they had an extraordinary way of pleading their own cause. I cannot understand it. They have saved a good deal of money, if that is any satisfaction."

"None whatever, child. I have got more money than I know what to do with, and I choose my girls to look nice. Letitia, what a pity it is you are not my own child."

"For some reasons I wish I were, Aunt Helen."

"You are so very neat, dear, so very dainty – that is the only word for it. What am I to do with those other two?"

"I am dreadfully afraid you will have to give them their own way."

"Their own way! Nonsense, my dear! impossible. Children, only eighteen."

"But old enough, according to your own showing, Aunt Helen, to be presented to the Queen, to enter society, and to marry if suitable husbands come to the fore."

"Of course; but they would be presented to the Queen by their mother; they would enter society under their mother's wing; and if they married, their husbands would look after them. Now to allow those wild imps, those irresponsible girls, to have their own way is not to be heard of for a single moment."

"Well, Aunt Helen, I am sure it will come right in the end. They are queer, obstinate, out-of-the-way girls; but they have got fine characters, and would not willingly pain you. The only thing

is that they look at life from a totally different standpoint. I'll have a right good talk with them, so try not to fret. I will put it to them that it is their bounden duty to yield to you. They often mind what I say when they won't mind their elders. But is not that the carriage? Had not I better get ready?"

CHAPTER VI – BELLE THE SAGE

Belle Acheson was an ideal scholarly girl of the latter end of the nineteenth century. She wore spectacles, not pince-nez. Her hair was parted smoothly on her forehead and done up in a tiny knot or dab at the back of her neck. Her forehead was high, her complexion sallow, her eyes short-sighted and small. She had a long upper lip, and her mouth was thin and wide. In figure she was extremely spare, her feet and hands were large, and her shoulders angular. She was a plain girl, and she gloried in the fact. Belle Acheson lived altogether for the joys of intellect; to learn was her delight. The more abstruse, the more dry, the science, the more eagerly did Belle absorb it, and make it part of herself. She was a good classical scholar, and was also fond of modern languages. She studied Shakespeare, not for his beauty of language, but for his archaisms. She adored musty professors, and never had a good word to say for an athletic man. Her ambition was to carry off double-firsts, and some people thought that she had a fair chance of obtaining this blue ribbon.

Belle was an inmate of St. Wode's College, Wingfield. There were four halls of residence at St. Wode's, and Belle occupied an attic in North Hall. She had been there now for three terms, and had already made a profound impression on her tutors. She amassed knowledge with great rapidity. No nut was too hard for her to crack.

Now, if there was a girl in the entire of England that Mrs. Chetwynd loathed it was Belle Acheson. Mrs. Acheson was Mrs. Chetwynd's old friend. Their husbands had fought side by side in the same campaigns in India. They had belonged to the same regiment. She felt that nothing would induce her to desert her old friend; but alas! that old friend's daughter! It was fearful to think that such a girl was coming to pay a visit to Marjorie and Eileen at this important crisis in their lives.

"Can anything be done to prevent it?" said Mrs. Chetwynd on the morning of the fatal day. She was addressing Letitia, who was gradually getting herself more and more into the good woman's confidence.

"My dear Lettie," she said, "I would honestly pay twenty pounds to any hansom-driver to let his horse fall between here and Mrs. Acheson's in order to give Belle a wrench of the arm or a twist of the wrist, or something which would give her sufficient pain to send her home again."

"Then, as those are your very heathenish wishes, Aunt Helen, you may be quite certain that Belle will arrive in perfect health, without any accident, not in a hansom, but in that two-horse conveyance which is meant for the convenience of the poorer people of London."

Mrs. Chetwynd sighed.

"I beseech of you, dear," she said, "not to leave the children alone with that pernicious girl. Stay in the room yourself. When you perceive that the conversation is getting into dangerous

channels, turn it, my dear child. Now, remember, Lettie, I trust you. Everything depends on your discretion."

"I will do what I can, of course, Aunt Helen; but I must frankly admit that I shall have very little influence."

"I only wish Providence had made you one of my daughters. If you and Marjorie, for instance, had been my daughters, and Eileen had been you, then things might have been quite pleasant, for you would have influenced Marjorie and brought her back again into the right ways. As it is, however – "

"As it is, we must make the best of things," said Letitia.

There came a ring at the hall-door, and Mrs. Acheson and the redoubtable Belle were ushered in. Mrs. Acheson, in her usual somewhat diffident manner, kissed Mrs. Chetwynd, and then Belle flew up to her and gave her a little peck on her cheek.

"How do?" she cried. "Where are the girls? I am most anxious to see them at once. Pray, don't ring; I'll run up to them. I know the old schoolroom. I have a great deal to say. You know I go up again next week, and can think of nothing else. But I determined that whoever else was left in the cold, I must interview Marjorie and Eileen. Mother, have you got my small Virgil in your bag? I am writing a paper on that great man, and I wish to read it to the girls in order to get their opinion."

"They know nothing whatever about the classics," interrupted Mrs. Chetwynd. "I believe they are going out for a walk; would you like to go with them?"

"I don't think we shall have time for that," replied Belle. "I'll

find them; don't you trouble."

She nodded to Mrs. Chetwynd and to her mother in a friendly, offhand style, and left the room. Mrs. Chetwynd glanced at Letitia, of whom Belle had not taken the slightest notice, and the young girl followed the eccentric, scholarly undergraduate of St. Wode's upstairs.

Marjorie and Eileen had an old-fashioned schoolroom at the top of the house, They had cleaned it out themselves, and put it into order according to their individual tastes. It was now neat and bare. Marjorie, still wearing her shabby serge dress, was standing near an open window. She was holding a long, yellow canary on her finger, and whistling to the bird, who pecked at her in happy confidence.

Eileen was putting some pins into a great rent in her petticoat. The door was burst open, and Belle rushed in.

"How do, dears, both?" she said in a friendly voice. "Pray don't rush at me and devour me with kisses; we never go on in that way at North Hall. My dear Marjorie, how you have grown! Oh! I am pleased to see you in that plain serge dress; and Eileen – petticoat out of order? Never mind – here, this pin will set it finally right."

"Do stop for a moment, Belle. Of course I am delighted to see you," said Marjorie, "but I must put Daffodil back into his cage."

She crossed the room, still holding the bird on her finger, opened the door of his cage, and let him fly in. She then shut the cage-door and came back to where her friend was standing.

"I didn't know you wore spectacles, Belle," she said.

"Yes, dear, my sight is bad. I have been to Wiesbaden to the celebrated oculist, and he has ordered these special glasses. I have astigmatism in one eye, and have therefore to wear special spectacles. By the way, Marjorie, you look as if you ought to be short-sighted."

"Ought to be short-sighted?" said Marjorie. "I am not; I have excellent sight."

"You ought to be," repeated Belle; "it gives one a distinguished look. In all probability you will be very short-sighted when you come to college. Most scholarly girls – I see by the shape of your brow that you are meant to be scholarly – are obliged to wear spectacles."

"When I come to college!" replied Marjorie, "and I am supposed to be a scholarly girl. Delightful! And yet I am not sure that I wish to be scholarly; but what a dear delicious creature you are, Belle! Sit down; do sit down."

"Thanks," said Belle. She squatted down on a wooden bench in an ungainly fashion, crossing one leg over the other.

Letitia now advanced; she had been standing near the door.

"Who is that young person?" said Belle, raising her very short-sighted eyes, and staring hard at Lettie.

"You know quite well who I am," replied Letitia. "I am the cousin who has always lived with the twins. We are all three eighteen, and we are coming out in about a week or a fortnight."

"We are not coming out," said Eileen.

"Coming out!" cried Marjorie. "Now, Lettie, for goodness'

sake, don't be silly. You know that unpleasant matter has been arranged. Perhaps you would like to go down to the drawing-room to mother and Mrs. Acheson. Eileen and I have a great deal to say to Belle."

"No, I mean to stay and listen," replied Lettie. "I may have a good deal to say to Belle on my own account."

"Stay, if you wish to," said Belle; "but I don't suppose for a moment our conversation will interest you. You are fashionable; and that is quite enough. – Marjorie, what is it you have to say?"

"I want to ask you all about your life, dear," said Marjorie. "Eileen and I have left school. We have come home, and mother wishes us to go into society – poor, dear little mother, the best of souls; but we are not going to allow her to order our lives."

"Certainly not," said Eileen, "we are going to take our lives into our own hands, and we wish to consult you about the matter, Belle. You are – where did you say?"

"At St. Wode's College, Wingfield, the place in all England where women who wish to distinguish themselves ought to receive training."

"Then, would you recommend us to come to St. Wode's College?" asked Eileen.

"That I cannot say; but I will tell you about it if you like. By the way, I wish that young person – I beg her pardon – "

"Letitia is my name," said Lettie.

"I wish Letitia would sit so that I need not see that fashionable arrangement of her hair – it irritates me terribly. Why should

people waste time in fluffing and crimping their hair. It not only ruins the hair and ages the appearance, but, what is of much more consequence, it causes the unhappy victim to commit a sin – yes, a sin. It wastes time, and oh, time is so precious! I feel this more and more the longer I live. Each precious, valuable moment has to be accounted for. The brain is master of the body. To enlarge the brain, to cultivate the – "

"Hear! hear! This is as good as a lecture," said Eileen. "Go on, please, Belle; you are just the same dear, odd, delightful girl you always were."

"Whether I am delightful or not, it is very rude of you to interrupt me," said Belle, frowning. She had no sense of humor, and could see no fun in Eileen's remark.

"I will tell you both about the college if you really wish to learn," she continued; "but I must not stay here long to-day, for I have too much to do. Mother mentioned that you had come back from school, and that your mother intended to take you at once into that whirlpool of frivolity which is given the name of Society; and when I heard that, I thought it was my duty to tell you both plainly what I thought on the subject."

"But that is unnecessary, because you see we agree with you," said Marjorie.

"Well, well, so far so good; but you want my advice now as to what you will do. You distinctly intend to oppose your mother and that young girl with the fashionable head?"

"I really cannot see why I and my head should be dragged into

this controversy," said Letitia. "I am not speaking; I am simply sitting and listening. May I not listen to the words of wisdom which drop from your lips?"

"You talk, Lettie, as if poor Belle was Minerva," said Eileen. "You know whatever we do you'll have to do; because, though you are fashionable and horribly neat and particular about your outward appearance, you love us so well that you could not live without us."

"There is some truth in that," said Letitia, with a sigh.

"Well, now, stop wrangling, you three," said Belle, "and let me speak. You can go on with your quarrel when I am away; but during the few moments that I can spare from my own heavy tasks, for I have a vast deal to acquire before I return to college, I surely may be allowed to say what I have come to say?"

"So good of you to come, dear Belle," said Eileen, patting Belle's long, large, angular hand.

Belle snatched her hand away.

"I hate being petted and fondled," she said; "we never do that at North Hall, it is so schoolgirlish – at least not those girls who are worth anything. In every house of residence, in every college, there are drones, poor useless creatures, who follow the busy bees; but at St. Wode's such dangerous adjuncts to the public peace are generally rooted out. Miss Lauderdale, our adored principal, sees to that. Now, girls, if you wish to hear what the busy bees do, I will tell you."

"I wish you would begin," said Lettie; "you do nothing but

walk round the subject and never attack it."

"I don't suppose it will interest you," said Belle; "but here goes. – By the way, have either of you two" – as she spoke she turned to Eileen and Marjorie – "have either of you two ever been to St. Wode's College, Wingfield?"

"Never," said Eileen; "but Fay Everett, a girl at our school, has a sister there, and she sometimes describes the place to us. She said the students' rooms were so sweetly pretty, and that each girl could exercise her own individual taste."

"Good gracious! am I sitting here to talk of the girls who are supposed to have taste?" cried Belle. "Taste, what is taste? It is nothing but a device of the Evil One for wasting time. I am here to talk to you about the students, the real students. I, for instance, have a room. Would you like to know how my room is furnished?"

Letitia gave a perceptible shudder, and walking to the window deliberately shut it.

"What are you doing that for?" said Eileen. "It is going to be a very hot day."

"I felt a sudden chill," said Lettie.

"Well, do let the window remain shut; what does it matter?" cried Belle. "I have placed myself high above the mere influence of the weather. Is it hot? is it cold? I can never tell; I simply don't know. My mind is absorbed in abstruse speculations and such trivial matters as bodily discomforts cannot touch it. Oh, girls, it is grand to allow your mind to soar! Have you, for instance, ever

dipped deep into the intricacies of Virgil?"

"Never," said Eileen.

She looked at Marjorie.

"I don't think, after all," she continued, "we wish to be so very learned. Our idea was to be just useful, plain sort of women. Of course we should never think of marrying; but we should like to be women who help their fellow-creatures, who are ready to take their place in a sudden emergency. We want to know a little about nursing, something too about medicine. We should not object to going through a regular course of household training; but as to learning, we don't want to be bookworms."

"In that case, why, in the name of Heaven, have I been asked over here?" cried Belle. "Is my precious time to be wasted?" Here she jumped up suddenly and confronted the two girls. In her agitation and anger her spectacles dropped from her nose; they fell with a crash on the floor, and one glass was broken.

"Now, what am I to do?" said Belle. "Oh, the irreparable injury you two girls have done me! One of my glasses is broken, and I, who have astigmatism in one eye, cannot get it mended in a hurry. It is cracked right across. Most fortunately I took the precaution to provide myself with another pair, or I should be lost, simply lost. Oh dear! what a wasted afternoon!"

"But can't you tell us what you were going to say, even without seeing us very plainly?" said Eileen. "Do, Belle, sit down and be comfortable; tell us everything. We are not at all settled in our own minds as to what we will do yet. You have a room, and it

is not ornamental. Well, we don't care about ornamental rooms. This room is bare, is it not?"

"Bare! Do you call this a bare room?" cried Belle. "There are six chairs, for instance. Do you ever expect to entertain six people in the room where you work? In addition to the six ordinary chairs there is an armchair. Who wants to loll in an armchair? There is also a bench on which I am now sitting. Tell me, is a bench necessary as well as six ordinary chairs and an armchair? Are four tables required? Is that carpet essential? Does it stimulate the brain to keep the feet upon a carpet? Are those thick curtains necessary – they are only traps to collect dirt. Blinds to the windows I grant are required, or people might stare in. Oh yes, I will allow blinds; they are necessary. Now I will tell you about my room. I have asked to be put in one of the attics. The house is very full, and the vice-principal of North Hall, Miss Penrose, was quite willing to oblige me. The attic was not furnished when I got it, and I begged and implored of her to allow me to furnish it in my own way. I have therefore a camp-bed in one corner, a particularly narrow one. There is a small, hard mattress on it; The counterpane is colored; it is dark-blue, and does not require to be washed often – that is one item off the mind. The mind, my dear girls – that is, the minds of those who are students at St. Wode's College – have such deep problems to solve that they cannot be fretted by external worries. The minds of the real students must be left free to solve problems – the intricacies of Virgil, the great masterpieces of Homer, Dante in

his magnificent original – ”

Belle had now forgotten her auditors. She ceased staring at them, her glasses were useless, her eyes were dim; but nevertheless she herself was seeing visions.

Marjorie patted her on the arm.

“Go on, Belle, go on,” she said; “we will find out about Virgil and Homer and Dante presently. Now, what else have you in the room? You cannot live in a room that contains nothing but a camp-bed and a blind, and at present that is all you have admitted.”

“I have a desk, specially made for myself, in the window,” continued Belle; “there is a stool, a high stool, on which I sit. The stool has no back; I should scorn to lean back. I have a shelf on the wall which contains my books – my few books, twenty in all – standard works, mostly in the classics. Amongst them are to be found Polybius, Appian’s Civil War (Book 1.), Cicero’s Letters, Plato’s Republic, Bacon’s Novum Organum, Aristotle’s Politics, Locke On the Human Understanding, and – ”

“Good gracious!”

Lettie was the one who made this exclamation.

“Quiet, quiet, Lettie; do let her finish,” said Eileen. She kicked out her foot and gave Lettie a poke.

Letitia drew in her own neatly shod little foot and sat with her hands folded in her lap and her eyes dancing with suppressed mirth.

“I have a chair besides the one I occupy,” continued Belle.

"That chair is for a friend if a friend happens to come in. There is a small deal table upon which I never allow a cloth to be put, as it is apt to come off and spill the ink – such waste of time sopping up ink. Often, in my moments of frenzy, have I jumped up suddenly and pulled the cloth with me. You don't know what I feel at times with the greatness of the thoughts which surge through my brain. Having spilt the ink three or four times, I have discarded the cloth. A washhand-stand is of course essential, and there is a chest of drawers where I keep my things."

"By the way, how many dresses have you, Belle?" said Eileen suddenly. "Two – have you two?"

"I cannot tell you," replied Belle, turning her eyes towards Eileen, and looking at her as if she did not see her. "I have not the faintest idea what dresses I have. Mother supplies them. I put a dress on in the morning – I take it off at night. Occasionally, in the excitement of my thoughts, I have been known to come down to breakfast in an evening dress. I will admit that this has attracted attention and annoyed me; so as a rule I am careful to see that it is a morning dress which I am about to wear."

"But do you think evening dresses necessary at all?" said Eileen in an anxious voice. "We think it would be so much more useful to save our money. Marjorie and I mean to do great good in the world."

"Then if you will take my advice," said Belle, jumping to her feet, "you will come as soon as possible to St. Wode's. When you are there I will talk to you again. I cannot waste any more time

to-day. You will have to pass in Responsions; but doubtless that could be easily managed. Yes, when you are there I shall do my utmost to guide you. Marjorie, just let me place my finger on your brow; I shall be able to tell you in a moment whether you will be able to manage Virgil."

Marjorie submitted to this test with exemplary patience. Lettie laughed aloud.

"You'll do," cried Belle. "I'll just enter your name in my book. 'Marjorie Chetwynd comes to St. Wode's College as soon as possible.' The spring term begins in a fortnight, Marjorie, so you have little time to lose. – Now, Eileen, let me look at you. Yes, you also would do well; but I think perhaps your forte will be modern languages and English literature. All lighter accomplishments you will of course eschew."

"Oh, please don't leave the room," said Lettie, bounding forward, "until you have placed your fingers on my brow to see what I am worth. Really, this is most interesting. You are a kind of magician, Belle."

"You will be one of the frivols; one of the drones of our hive," replied Belle sternly. "Don't, I beg of you, come to St. Wode's."

"I can only tell you this," answered Lettie, running after Belle as she was flying downstairs, "if Eileen and Marjorie go I mean to accompany them."

CHAPTER VII – THE FATE OF THE GIRLS

Belle Acheson was a young woman who never let the grass grow under her feet. Having rushed downstairs at a headlong speed, she now presented herself in the drawing-room.

"I have just examined the frontal developments of Marjorie's and Eileen's heads," she said, speaking in a loud, rapid voice, and glancing in the direction where Mrs. Chetwynd and Mrs. Acheson were seated together on a sofa. "I have examined the frontal developments of the two girls, and I am glad to tell you that they both show marked intellectuality. I have recommended them to join me at St. Wode's College, Wingfield, immediately. Will you, therefore, Mrs. Chetwynd, kindly take the necessary steps to see that this is carried out? You must write to our principal, Miss Lauderdale, asking her to give you all particulars as to the necessary steps to be taken for admission. If the girls have not already passed some public examination, they must pass Responsions. The subjects are Latin, Greek, mathematics. But if they have already passed the London Matriculation, or the Cambridge Higher Local, or the – "

"My dear, my dear!" cried Mrs. Acheson, "you are positively bewildering my dear friend. What are you driving at?"

"I am driving at nothing," said Belle, in a voice of dignity. "I

am stating facts. The girls wish to enter St. Wode's. To do so they must have passed, or will have to pass, certain examinations; but the main thing is to write to Miss Lauderdale. Her address is Miss Lauderdale, Principal of St. Wode's College, Wingfield. Did you speak, Mrs. Chetwynd?"

"I did not," replied Mrs. Chetwynd, in an angry voice. "Will you take a chair, please? Can I give you a cup of tea?"

"Tea?" cried Belle. "I never take tea, thank you; but I should like a glass of water, please, for my throat is quite dry with all the talking I have been obliged to go through. Don't you know, Mrs. Chetwynd, that tea is decidedly bad for the brain, and also for the coats of the stomach. Oh, it has a shocking effect. Our best tutors at St. Wode's never countenance tea. Coffee, strong black coffee, one is obliged to take now and then, particularly when one has to sit up at night before an exam. for honors. Coffee and a wet towel; but tea – no, thank you. Will you permit me to ring for a glass of water? I was giving the girls a lecture upstairs; they have a great deal to learn."

Belle did not wait for Mrs. Chetwynd's most unwilling permission. She sounded the electric bell by the fireplace, and presently the footman appeared. Water was supplied, and the young lady took a copious draught.

"That is refreshing," she cried as she placed her glass on the tray. "Now, then, mother, we must be off. Come, we have no more time to waste. I have promised Anne Morrison to call on her before dinner to-day; she wants me to look over some of her

matriculation papers, and I must on no account fail her."

"But, my dear Belle, Anne Morrison lives at the south side of London, and I am so tired," said poor Mrs. Acheson.

"Dear me, mother; have not you strength enough for that much! We will take a bus at the corner and get to Norland Square in no time. Come, don't you think you have had quite as much frivolous conversation as is good for you? Now, Mrs. Chetwynd, don't forget to write. The address is Miss Lauderdale, Principal of St. Wode's College, Wingfield. Come along, mother. By-by, Mrs. Chetwynd."

Poor Mrs. Acheson cast anxious eyes of misery and commiseration at her friend, and was hurled out of the room by the emphatic Belle. A moment or two later the hall-door was shut behind the pair.

"Thank goodness, they are gone at last!" cried Mrs. Chetwynd. "My dear Lettie, is that you? Come here, child, come here. Now, tell me, what did that awful girl say to the children?"

"Here are the children coming down to answer for themselves," said Marjorie, springing lightly into the room accompanied by Eileen.

"Oh, darling little mammy, what is the matter?" cried Marjorie. She ran up to her mother and kissed her. "Why, you look quite worried, you dear old thing. Let me smooth out those furrows on your dear brow! Ah! you look more like yourself now. Come, sit here, and I will sit near you. I will pet you, and you will soon forget all your worries. Is it not good, mammy dear, to

have a grown-up daughter on whom to lean?"

"But if the grown-up daughter won't be leant on," cried poor Mrs. Chetwynd. "Oh, my child, everything seems to be topsy-turvy; and that appalling girl, for there is no other word for her – "

"Of course the world did turn topsy-turvy twenty years ago," said Eileen. "For women everything is completely changed. We who were so low are now in the ascendant. It is men who are nowhere. You, dear mammy, must be guided by us for the remainder of your days. You will live here, of course, or anywhere else you fancy, and we will spend our vacations with you."

"My dear, dear Eileen, you don't know what you are talking about. That terrible girl has inoculated you with her democratic views. She is a fearful creature, a sort of monster; and the queer, extraordinary things she said, and the way she hurled her poor mother out of the room, I have really no words to describe. I do pity Mrs. Acheson; but if you think for a single moment, Eileen, that I am going to submit to you and Marjorie having the upper hand and managing your own lives, you are mistaken."

Eileen uttered a deep sigh.

"It will be troublesome," she said slowly, "and we would much rather not be troublesome; it would worry you, and we would much rather not worry you. Mammy, why don't you give in at once? It would be so much more graceful of you, mammy; it would really."

"Yes, mother; I wish you would," said Marjorie.

"But what am I to give in about?" said Mrs. Chetwynd. – "Letitia, have you nothing to say? You have lived with us since you were a baby; in every respect you have been treated as a daughter of the house. Can't you speak, can't you show these insubordinate, wicked girls how dreadfully they are acting?"

"It is useless," said Lettie, shrugging her shoulders; "they are determined to have their own way. I am afraid you must bear it, Aunt Helen."

Mrs. Chetwynd burst into tears. Marjorie and Eileen looked at her with eyes full of pity.

"I wish it was not necessary," said Eileen. "I do wish we could comfort you, dear old mammy. I do wish we could say that we would be presented to Her Majesty, and go into society six evenings out of the seven; but you see we just can't, and it would be the maddest weakness to yield."

"Go into society I will not," said Marjorie. "I have made up my mind. I also think what Belle said is excellent; and after two or three years of that splendid training, I am – "

"Yes, yes, yes. I too have made up my mind," interrupted Eileen. "Mother, dear, you will write to-night?"

"To Miss Lauderdale?" said poor Mrs. Chetwynd; "that awful girl gave me the name. What in the wide world am I to write to her about?"

"To get all the necessary particulars, as we want to go to St. Wode's at the beginning of term."

"Oh, my child, I cannot permit it," said Mrs. Chetwynd.

"But, mother dear, do listen," said Marjorie. She sat down by her mother and began to speak. Eileen took her mother's other hand. The girls could talk well; they had plenty of intellect, and they could expound their views in a simple and yet telling manner. Now, Mrs. Chetwynd could never answer any argument which required a logical deduction. She was therefore completely worsted by her clever and modern daughters. Each of her little excuses, each of her small efforts to get the girls to remain at home with her, to go into society, to lead the ordinary life of the ordinary young woman, were quietly and politely demolished by both Eileen and Marjorie. Finally, Mrs. Chetwynd found herself saying she would think about the matter. All three girls knew well that when Mrs. Chetwynd went as far as that the thing was accomplished.

"Don't worry the mammy any more now," said Eileen. "Lie back in your chair, dear mammy. Lettie, run upstairs for mother's eau de Cologne; we will put some on her forehead. Poor dear darling, she's the sweetest mother in all the world; isn't she, Marjorie?"

"A perfect angel," said Marjorie.

She stooped and kissed her mother. Eileen also kissed her. There they stood in their shabby dresses, a little piece of Eileen's petticoat peeping below her skirt, their short hair pushed up from their foreheads, their handsome faces alight with fire and excitement.

Mrs. Chetwynd glanced at them, and despair entered her soul.

She had not the slightest chance against them; and she knew it.

The girls left the room, and only Letitia remained behind.

"Well, Lettie, you at least will remain with me," said Mrs. Chetwynd. "It is terrible to feel that I have brought girls like Marjorie and Eileen into the world. My only comfort is that their poor dear father – such a kind, scholarly, soldierly man – is not here to witness their base ingratitude."

"But really, Aunt Helen, I don't think they are base nor ungrateful. They are just modern, you see – terribly modern, the reverse of archaic. They must keep with the times; that they have determined on. There is no use whatever in opposing them. Doubtless life will teach them its own lesson, and they will be delightful when they return from St. Wode's."

"How long must they stay there?" asked Mrs. Chetwynd. She took up her handkerchief as she spoke, to wipe away the tears from her eyes.

"I believe the usual course is three years," said Lettie. "You cannot get your certificate, which is equivalent to a degree, under that time."

"Your certificate, which is equivalent to a degree, Lettie! Oh, my child, not a man living will speak to the girls. They will never be married, Lettie; they will be old maids to the end of the chapter. It is fearful to think of it!"

"Well, they don't actually *take* a degree, because it is not allowed," said Lettie; "but they work for it, and they get the honor."

"Worse and worse," cried Mrs. Chetwynd. "You see how sternly the men disapprove of this fearful step on the part of modern women."

Letitia suppressed a short sigh.

"The girls are modern, and nothing will make them anything else," she said.

"And yet, my dear, they are the reverse of fashionable."

"Oh, Aunt Helen, I think fashionable women are going out."

"Going out, my dear! What can you mean?"

"I really do think so; there will be fewer and fewer as time goes on. We are so terribly earnest now, we have no time to think of mere ornamentation."

"Thank goodness, Lettie, you at least will always dress neatly."

"I should think so," replied Lettie. "I honestly confess that I am quite fond of clothes, and I like to look smart."

"Well, dear, it is a comfort that I shall have you to stay with me."

"But, Aunt Helen, I am ever so sorry. I think you ought to let me go too."

"You, Lettie? You go to St. Wode's College? What do you mean?"

"I think I ought to go, if for no other reason than to watch those two poor dear girls through this eccentric phase of their existence. Think of them, Aunt Helen, alone with Belle Acheson!"

"There is something in what you say," said Mrs. Chetwynd;

“and as Mrs. Acheson intends to go on the Continent in the winter, and she wishes me to – oh, of course I pooh-poohed the idea; but I really think I shall do it now. I shall go about from one fashionable place to another and amuse myself, and try to forget that I have children. Oh, it is a cruel, a crushing disappointment.”

“You will live through it,” said Lettie. She bent and kissed Mrs. Chetwynd on her cheek.

“After all,” she continued, “there is no good in forcing Marjorie and Eileen into grooves which were never meant for them. You will write to Miss Lauderdale, will you not, to-night?”

“My dear child, have the goodness to write to her yourself, and I will sign the letter. I have not the faintest idea what I am to say to that woman.”

“I will write, then, at once,” said Lettie.

She skipped across the drawing-room to her aunt’s davenport, took out a sheet of paper, rapidly wrote a few words, and then brought her letter to Mrs. Chetwynd to sign. In less than an hour that letter was dropped into the nearest pillar-box.

Thus was the fate of the three girls quickly decided.

CHAPTER VIII – THE GILROYS

The Gilroys lived in a small house in West Kensington. The house was full to overflowing. There were a great many children, ranging from Leslie the eldest girl, aged nineteen, to little Dan, aged two. Mrs. Gilroy was one of the busiest women in London. She had a small income, not exceeding three hundred a year, and six children to maintain. When her husband died, a month before little Dan's birth, the mother made up her mind not to skimp the children's education, not to starve them on a mere pittance, but to add to her income by her own exertions. She was very clever and strong both in mind and body. All her children loved her passionately.

Mr. Gilroy, during his lifetime, had been sub-editor on a large London daily, and after his death Mrs. Gilroy got a post on the staff. She also did a good deal of other journalistic work, and occasionally wrote up-to-date articles in the magazines. Thus she added considerably to her income, and the children never wanted for anything.

The house was a model of neatness and order, although there was only one small servant; but then each child had been trained thoroughly, and each child did his or her appointed task without a murmur. The faces of all the young Gilroys were bright, all the pairs of eyes were frank and happy; but the mother had to work very hard. Often and often, when all the children were in bed, she

sat up or went round from one editor's office to another supplying the necessary items which would appear the next morning in the papers. She enjoyed her work and never complained; and Llewellyn and Leslie, the eldest boy and girl, sympathized heart and soul with her.

On the very day when Belle Acheson had visited the Chetwynds in their fashionable house in Belgravia, Mrs. Gilroy, coming in later than usual, found Llewellyn, a handsome lad of sixteen years of age, crouching over the fire in the little parlor, with his head in his hands.

"What is wrong, Lew?" said the mother.

"Nothing," he answered. "I have only been thinking."

"But what about, my boy?"

Mrs. Gilroy seldom petted her children, she seldom used loving words to them; but then her touch was a caress. She laid her hand now upon the lad's shoulder; he looked up into her kindly firm face; and the shadow fell from his own.

"It's just nothing," he cried. "I ought to be ashamed of myself. Don't ask me at the present moment, mother. I have a fit of the blues, that's all."

"Well, and I have a fit of the cheerfuls," said Mrs. Gilroy.

"What do you mean, mother?" Llewellyn was all life and spirits in a moment. "Has anything good happened; have you got another post? Are you to be made sub-editor on one of the great dailies; that, you know, is your ambition, your great passionate ambition, little mother."

"Nothing of the kind at present, Lew, dear. I am just where I always was. I have plenty of work, and I am paid fairly well; but I have good news all the same. I will tell you afterwards. It has to do with Leslie. It will be the finest thing in all the world for her, simply the making of her."

Llewellyn's face once more looked downcast. He did not want his mother to observe it, however, and he went slowly to the door.

"I had better let Kitty and Mabel know that you are in," he said.

He went into the little hall and shouted his sisters' names. The next moment two trim, neatly-dressed little girls, with long hair hanging down their shoulders, in dark-blue frocks and white pinafores, came tripping in.

"Mother's come," said Llewellyn; "she wants tea. Sound the gong when it is ready."

He bounded up the narrow stairs three at a time to his own special den at the top of the house. There, big, handsome, overgrown boy that he was, he shed some tears. He was ashamed of his tears; they scalded right down into his heart.

"I wish I didn't feel it so much," he said to himself. "I just had a wild hope for a moment, when mother spoke about good news, that it had something to do with me. But it's only Leslie. Well, dear old girl, why shouldn't it be about her? What a brute I am to grudge it to her. She is mother's right hand, and about the very best girl in the world. There, I shall hate myself if I give way another moment. I'll just tell mother right out, and put an end to

the thing. She'll be a bit surprised, but I guess she'll be only too glad to consent. It's good-by to daydreams, that's all; but a fellow can't think of them when his mother is in the question."

Meanwhile the girls downstairs were quickly preparing the tea. Kitty went to the kitchen to fetch the tray with the cups and saucers; Mabel laid the white cloth, which was made of the finest damask, on the center table. Kitty then knelt down before the fire to make an apparently unlimited supply of buttered toast; Mabel put the right amount of tea into the old teapot. There were many relics of bygone respectability, nay, of bygone wealth, in the Gilroys' humble house. The silver teapot was one – it was real silver, not electroplate. It was very thin and of an antique shape, and the children were often heard to declare that nothing would induce them to have their tea made in anything else. The cups and saucers, too, were of rare old china and of a quaint pattern. They were neither cracked nor broken, because the girls themselves washed them and looked after them, and put them away in the little pantry.

The small maid of all work, Elfreda, was never allowed to go near the pantry. She only did the rough work under severe superintendence from Kitty; but the house was perfectly organized, and no one felt unduly fatigued.

The tea, when it was ready, consisted of fresh eggs, honey in the comb, hot cakes which Mabel had been secretly watching for the last half-hour, a pile of buttered toast, bread both brown and white, delicious country butter, tea, and even cream.

When everything was in order, Mabel sounded the gong, and Llewellyn came down.

He had scarcely taken his place at the table before there was the click of a latchkey in the hall door, and light steps, the steps of a young girl, were heard in the passage outside.

"There's Leslie," said Mrs. Gilroy. She was seated at the head of her table pouring out tea. She paused now, and a look of considerable expectancy filled her eyes. Llewellyn watched her; the others, engaged in their own chatter, took no special notice.

"Leslie, late as usual," said Mabel. Just at that moment Leslie poked in her head.

"Oh, do just keep a nice hot cup of tea for me," she called out. "I am starving. There has been such a cold wind blowing, and I had to walk half the way, as every omnibus was full. I'll just run upstairs to tidy up. Please keep a right good tea for me; I'll trust you, Mabel."

"Yes, you may," shouted out Mabel. "I am keeping back the crispest of the hot cakes, and there is buttered toast in a covered dish by the fire."

Leslie's steps were heard running quickly upstairs, and a minute or two later she entered the room. She was a tall girl, with quantities of golden-brown hair, large brown eyes, a complexion of cream and roses, and straight regular features. It needed but a glance to show that she was a beautiful girl, with beauty above the average; but it was not only the regularity of her features and the clearness of her complexion which made Leslie's face so

specially attractive. It was the marked and wonderful intelligence on her open brow, the speaking, thoughtful expression in her eyes, the firm, proud outline of her beautiful lips.

Mrs. Gilroy just glanced up when her eldest daughter came into the room. That one glance showed that the girl was the mother's special idol; that she loved her with a worship which was almost idolatry, that she was a shade more proud of her and dreamt more daydreams about her than about any of the others.

Llewellyn, who could read his mother like a book, who loved her passionately, saw all these thoughts now in her eyes. He suppressed a sigh, and attacked the loaf with vigor.

"Come, Leslie," said her mother, "here is your place by me as usual. Now, have a good tea, my darling, for we have much to talk of afterwards. I want all of you children to be present too; you must all hear my good news."

"Good news, mother. That's cheering," said Leslie. "I have had such a cross day."

"Cross – what do you mean?" said Kitty. "Do tell us, Leslie, what can have happened. Didn't you get on with your pupils?"

"No, they were contrary; they would play and would not learn. I didn't seem to have any control over them. Mother, dear, I am sick of teaching!"

"What rot!" cried Llewellyn. "One must go on with a thing whether one is sick or not."

"Oh, I know, Lew, dear old boy, and I really don't mean to grumble; only I felt cross and I am owning to it. I don't feel cross

now," added the girl.

She helped herself to brown bread and butter. Kitty put a quantity of honey on her plate. Tea came to an end presently, and then the children in orderly file began to remove the tea-things.

In less than a quarter of an hour the little parlor – they always sat in the parlor in the evenings – was looking as snug and comfortable as a room could look. The lamp, beautifully trimmed and burning clearly, stood on the center table, the red curtains were drawn round the windows; a fire, blazing merrily, gave a final touch of cheerfulness to the pleasant room.

"Now, then, mother, get into your own special chair and tell us the news," said Leslie. – "Llewellyn, you are not going away, are you?"

"No," said Llewellyn.

"But before you begin, mother, do wait for us," cried Mabel. "Kitty and I must go upstairs to turn down the beds, and then I must see Elfreda in order to get her to put the fish in soak for to-morrow's breakfast. She does forget things so dreadfully."

"Yes, and I have got to wash the tea-things; it's my turn, I'm sorry to say," remarked Hester, a somewhat heavy-looking girl, the least attractive of the family.

"Well, dears, I will wait for you three for exactly twenty minutes," said Mrs. Gilroy. "Be as quick as possible; bustle away, get the house into perfect order, and then you shall come down to hear my good news."

The children ran off.

When the door closed behind them Leslie looked at her mother.

"Must you go out again to-night, mother?" she asked.

"No, my darling, not to-night. To-morrow I shall not be home until very late. I have to attend two big functions, and must take my copy afterwards to the *Grapho* and the *Daily Post*."

Llewellyn fidgeted; he stood up and then sat down again. He looked at his mother as if about to speak, and then restrained himself.

"What's the matter, Lew? What are you worrying about?" said his sister.

"It's only the thought of mother doing this beastly grind night after night," he said. "It drives me half-wild sometimes."

"My dear boy, I enjoy it," said the mother; "and you shall take my place all in good time. There is an excitement about the life which exactly suits me. I could never be a drone even if I wished it, Lew – not even to please you, dear old fellow."

The mother bent forward as she spoke and gave the boy one of her rare caresses, just a touch on his white forehead. He sat down near her. Another boy would have held out his hand for his mother to clasp, but Llewellyn's long hands hung between his knees. He was bending over the fire, looking into the blaze. The daydreams which he had so often seen in those flames were receding farther and farther away. His face was pale, and the expression of his gray eyes heavy.

But Mrs. Gilroy, too much interested in Leslie at present to

notice her son's depression, continued to talk cheerfully. By and by she would see it all and speak of it, but not just now.

Quite within the appointed time the three girls returned. They took up their work, for never for a moment in this family was idleness allowed, and sat down near the lamp.

"Now then, we are ready," said Hester; "but I do wish, before mother begins, that you would show me, Kitty, how you turn this heel. I know I am doing it wrong."

"I should think you are, you old goose," said Kitty. "Well, I can't show you at present. Just take the needles out and unravel a few rows, then put the needles in again, and I'll be ready to give you a lesson before bedtime. But, remember, I am going to charge for it. It's a farthing a lesson, and the money to go to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. Is not that a good idea, mother?" continued Kitty, looking up.

But Mrs. Gilroy was not listening. She had something important to say, and the mere idle chatter of this happy family passed over her ears unnoticed.

"Leslie," she said laying her hand on her eldest girl's arm, "my news has to do with you; but, as we have no secrets in our family, I will tell it before the rest of the children."

Leslie looked eager and excited. Even Llewellyn dropped his despondent air and stood up, big and manly, five feet ten, on the hearthrug.

His mother glanced at him, noticed, without really noticing it, the marked look of power on his intellectual face, and then

turned to her favorite child.

"I was in my usual place at the office of the *Grapho* to-day," she began. "I was busily engaged preparing copy for to-morrow's issue when a gentleman, an old friend of your father's, a certain Mr. Parker, came in."

"Mr. Parker! A friend of father's! I never heard of him before," said Leslie.

"He has been in Australia for the last twelve years, but has just returned home. He sent in his card and begged to see me. As soon as ever I saw him I remembered that your dear father had constantly spoken of him. Well, he wishes to do something for – for the sake of his old friend."

Mrs. Gilroy's voice faltered.

"He is quite a gentleman," she continued, "though a little rough; but a capital good fellow at bottom. He spoke to me most frankly, and finally ended by making me an offer. The offer has to do with you, Leslie."

"With me?" said Leslie.

"Yes, darling. He asked me all about our means. He was not at all prying; he was good and kind and oh! so generous at heart. I hated to tell him, and yet I felt obliged to. He was shocked; he thought your father would have left us better off."

"He had no right to ask about our father's means," grumbled Llewellyn. "No one could have worked harder than our father did."

"No one, truly," echoed Leslie.

"And no one ever led a more upright, exemplary, splendid life," said the widow. Her voice trembled; she paused for a moment.

Kitty and Mabel laid down their needlework.

"But, all the same," continued the mother, "you must not blame Mr. Parker. He and your father had not met for many years, and in Australia they lead a different life. When a man is lucky there he is very lucky; and Mr. Parker has been one of the lucky ones. He took shares in some gold-mines, and explained to me that he is now a man of great wealth."

"He must have interrupted your work a good bit," began Llewellyn, then he checked himself. His mother glanced at him, took no notice of his speech, and continued with her story.

"The result of our interview is this," she said, looking round at her children and laying her hand on Leslie's arm. "Leslie is to have a chance, a right good chance in life."

"Mother, what do you mean?" said Leslie. She opened her pretty eyes wide, and the color rushed into her face.

"Mr. Parker is a man of peculiar views," said the mother. "He does not want to help boys, he says; they must stand or fall on their own merits. But for girls he has a peculiar feeling, an unbounded pity. The fact is, poor fellow, he had a wife of his own, and a daughter, and if the daughter were alive she would be your age, Leslie. I have not the slightest doubt that accounts for his prejudice in favor of girls. Now, my darling, he has offered to pay all your expenses either at Newnham or at

that other great college, St. Wode's, Wingfield. He wants you to give up your present employment immediately, and to go to either of these places at the beginning of term. You are to have every advantage that is possible. When you have completed your university education he will take further steps to insure your commanding an excellent living. The money is to be paid direct to me as required, and he has now given me a check for fifty pounds to buy the necessary outfit which you will require for your new life. I have taken the check and have accepted the offer. That is my news. It is a great chance for you, Leslie; it is a great chance. You go away from us, I know, my darling, and I shall miss you terribly; but it is a great chance."

"And you have really accepted it, mother?"

"I have. I could not allow you to throw it away. Mr. Parker is such an old friend of your father's that I am willing to put myself under this supreme obligation. He has even hinted that by and by he will do great things for Kitty and for Mabel."

"And what about poor Hester?" said that individual, dropping her stocking and looking with piteous eyes at her mother.

"You are to be my home-bird, darling." Then Hester rose and knelt by her mother, and put her strong young arms round her waist and kissed her.

"Yes; I for one would never leave you, mammy; and I don't care a pin about being learned. I want just to be useful, although I am afraid I am a bit of a failure all round. There always is a failure in every family, isn't there, mother; so it's just as well that

I should be the one."

"We mean to have no failures in this family," said Mrs. Gilroy. "Now, then, you young ones, it is time for bed; off you go at once. I have much to say to Leslie and to Llewellyn by themselves."

CHAPTER IX – ONE TAKEN, THE OTHER LEFT

When the younger girls had rather unwillingly left the room, Leslie took a seat near her mother. Llewellyn, going to a bookcase at the further end of the room, began to fumble with some books.

"Come here, Lew," called out his sister; "we want you to talk to us and give us your advice; you are always so wise. Come, what are you doing at the other end of the room? Are you not delighted? Are not you as glad as I am?"

Llewellyn responded to Leslie's invitation unwillingly. His mother looked up at him.

"What is the matter?" she asked.

"Nothing, mother. I am, on the whole, heartily pleased."

His reply came slowly, and as though he had weighed each word.

"But I don't at all know that I ought to accept, even though mother is so good as to give me leave," said Leslie.

"That's all rot, you know, Leslie," said her brother roughly. "Mother has accepted; the thing is done. It is a chance which may never come in your way again."

"But I don't want it," she cried, touched to her very heart's core by something in his voice. "If it were only your chance,

how happy I should be! Oh, Lew, with your tastes, with your wishes, what could you not achieve? You know it has been the passion of your heart since you were a little boy to go to one of the universities, and now – Mother, dear, it is surely not too late; you could speak to Mr. Parker. You could explain to him that Llewellyn is the one in the family with genius; that Llewellyn will do him credit if he sends him to Oxford or Cambridge. Oh, leave me out! I can do without the university training. But, Lew – it would be the making of Lew! I suppose I am fairly well educated. I have passed right through the high school from the beginning, and no girl who does that can be said to be ignorant. This chance ought to be Llewellyn's. Mother, it would be possible, surely, for you to put it to Mr. Parker in the right light?"

"No, Leslie; he wishes you to go," said the mother quietly. "I have no choice in the matter. I have accepted for you. Look upon it, my darling, as a settled thing, and do not disturb, with the thought of any indecision, the great joy which ought to be yours."

"There is a ring at the hall door," cried Leslie. "I wonder who it can be?"

Mrs. Gilroy started.

"I quite forgot," she said, coloring slightly. "Mr. Parker asked if he might come round and be introduced to you all. Doubtless that is his ring. Llewellyn, dear, will you go and open the hall door?"

Llewellyn strode across the room.

"I feel quite overcome," said Leslie to her mother. "I never

heard of Mr. Parker until half an hour ago, and now he is an immense factor in my life."

Her words were interrupted, the door of the little parlor was thrown open, and Mr. Parker, accompanied by Llewellyn, entered.

"Here I am, here I am, as I promised!" called out the former, rubbing his hands as he spoke, and pushing up his red hair from his almost as red forehead. "Here I am, and right glad to see you again, Mrs. Gilroy. And so these are some of the youngsters? What's your name, young sir?"

"Llewellyn," replied the boy.

"And how old may you be?"

"Sixteen," replied Llewellyn.

"'Pon my word, you're a well-grown chap. We don't have 'em better in the Bush, notwithstanding all the fine development that hard work gives. But you have fine shoulders – eh, and good stout legs. Fine young chap, Mrs. Gilroy; I congratulate you, ma'am, in possessing him. And so this is the young lady. How do you do, my dear? I am proud to make your acquaintance."

Mr. Parker's voice had been rough enough while he was addressing Llewellyn; but when he glanced at Leslie, who, tall, straight, and beautiful, stood before him, a spasm crossed his face and his voice faltered. It sank to a husky whisper; there was emotion in his tone.

"How do you do, my dear?" he said again; and he held out a great rough hand for the girl to shake.

She let her little hand lie in his for half a moment, and then withdrew it. She then went and stood by the fireplace.

"Sit down, please, Mr. Parker," said Mrs. Gilroy, "Leslie, I think our friend would like a glass of wine; will you get it?"

"No wine for me, thank you, ma'am; no wine for me. I have dined, and admirably. Steak and stout, and boiled apple pudding; that's fare after my own heart. Simple, ma'am, you can see – simple as my own tastes. Well, I am glad to see you, Mrs. Gilroy, at home; and a nice, snug little parlor you have. No show or pretension, or anything of that kind; just the sort of room I'd expect Gilroy's widow to have; and," added the man, glancing at the boy and girl, "just the sort of children too."

The two children, thus alluded to, could not help sighing. Llewellyn wished himself fifty miles away. Leslie felt uncomfortable, and did not dare to meet her mother's eyes.

Meanwhile Mr. Parker glanced around him. The ceiling of the little room was low, and the furniture, although exquisitely clean and orderly, was shabby. He sank back in the armchair which Mrs. Gilroy had invited him to take possession of, and proceeded to speak slowly and thoughtfully.

"This all reminds me of poor Gilroy," he said; "and yet I expected him, with his talents, to live in a palace by this time. Instead of that, he has his six foot of earth – his six foot of earth, ma'am – just what we all will come to some day; and you are left a widow, and with the care of that big boy on your shoulders."

"I won't be on mother's shoulders any longer," grumbled

Llewellyn.

"Ha! ha! young sir, don't you be impatient; let me say my say out. This young lady now, she's my charge for the future. Yes, ma'am, she's my charge. My dear Miss Leslie, you'll be a sort of adopted daughter to me. Now, sit down near me, and tell me what your inclinations are. I think your mother would send you to one of those new-fangled women's colleges if you liked it; but if your inclinations are not set that way, why, I will set you up in business. I'll give you capital, and you may do well – any line you like; you have only to name it. But your mother suggests that I should make an educated woman of you."

"To a certain extent Leslie is that already," interrupted the mother. She saw that the girl found it difficult to reply, that her lips were trembling, and her eyes shining through tears.

"My dear child has the best education I could give her," continued Mrs. Gilroy. "Please, Llewellyn, take a chair."

The boy flung himself down on the nearest seat.

"Mr. Parker, I have just been telling my children of your great kindness," continued Mrs. Gilroy. "Leslie is, of course, delighted. There is nothing in the world she would like better than to go through one of the universities. She wishes, by and by, to earn her bread as a teacher; and, if she does that, it is essential that she should have the best education that can be procured."

"Well, ma'am, if that's your whim, it's mine also," said Mr. Parker. "I am only gratified to be able to please you in any way. This is a debt I owe, ma'am; so there's no obligation on your part,

nor on yours either, Miss Leslie."

"A debt you owe?" said Mrs. Gilroy, in some astonishment.

"Well, you see, it was this way," said Parker. "Gilroy and I were lads together in the same school. I don't mean to say that we were exactly in the same set, for Gilroy belonged to gentlefolks, whereas I – well, my father kept a grocer's shop. I always had a wonderful admiration for Gilroy; for, though he was an aristocrat, as they call them, he had no high and mighty haw-haw ideas, and he was good to me, and wouldn't let the other fellows trample on me – not he, not he. And one day I got out of my depth before I could swim quite well, and he pulled me to shore. He made nothing of it; but, as a matter of fact, he saved my life. So, after that, there was nothing I wouldn't do for him; and when we both left school, and Gilroy was going to one of your fine universities and I was off to the colonies, we had a supper together, and at the end of the supper we made a bargain one with the other. Gilroy said to me, 'Parker, nobody knows what the chances of life are. It is possible that you may come back some day a rich man; if so, don't forget that we were chums, that we were lads together, and if you can do a kindness to me or mine, do it. I am an unmarried man, and so are you. We are both young fellows on the threshold of life; but if ever I should have a wife and children, and I myself should be beneath the sod, you will look after them for me, Parker. It shall be a bargain between us, and I will do the same for your wife and children should the position be reversed.'

"Those were his words, ma'am," said Mr. Parker, standing up

as he spoke, “and I never forgot them – never. They followed me all through the years; and when I heard of his death I felt there was nothing in the world for it but to wind up my affairs, and to hurry back as fast as possible. There were Gilroy’s bonds that he had laid upon me, and I had to see to it that I obeyed the last words he ever said to me. Night after night I’d see him standing by my bedside; the light in his eyes seemed to shine into mine, and I felt again the way he gripped my hand. Well, ma’am, it has pleased the Almighty to take my wife and child away from me, and I am here at your service, and with the orders of your dead husband to do what I can for you and yours. My dear,” added Parker, suddenly turning and looking at Leslie, “you have a look of your father, the best fellow that ever breathed. You must let me, to a certain extent, be a father to you. My own wife is dead, and my – my girl, too. Aye, the girl was bonny. I’ll show you her picture some day, Miss Leslie.”

Leslie did not reply; but the tears which had been coming to her eyes now rolled down her cheeks. Mr. Parker noticed her emotion and was not ill pleased with it.

“You go to college if you wish it, young lady,” he said, “and I hold the purse-strings. When you want money you just write to me, and don’t bother that good mother of yours overmuch. So that affair is settled. Now, to turn to the others. This boy, for instance; he is Gilroy’s boy and worthy of his father. What do you mean to do, sir? Do you want a university life, too?”

“Oh, if you would only give it to him!” said Leslie. “Mother

says you are rich, and if it is really as you say, and father laid his bond upon you, it does not seem too hard. Oh, if you would only do it!"

Her whole face lit up, her eyes shone, and she laid her hand on Mr. Parker's arm.

"I'd do anything in the world for you, my dear; so if it is your wish, you have only to say the word. The boy looks intelligent, too. In Australia we would give a boy like that a bit of the bush to clear out, and a house to build, and we would teach him the rough essentials of life, and leave out the polishings; but Australia is Australia, and England is England; and as it seems to be all the development of the brain here – "

"And the body, too," said Mrs. Gilroy. "You cannot say that we do not develop the bodies of our lads as long as we have football and cricket."

"We have those, too, in Australia, and we manage to beat you once in a while," said Parker, with a slight twinkle in his eyes. "But what does the lad want himself – that is the question?"

"Llewellyn wants to go either to Oxford or Cambridge," said Leslie. "It has been the dream of his life."

"Yes, it has been the dream of his life," replied the mother.

She glanced at Llewellyn, whose face was now white as death.

"It is the dream of my life no longer," he said. His voice was husky, not to say rough.

"Then, what is it you want, my boy?"

Parker went up and clapped his hand heavily on the boy's

shoulder.

"Nothing from you, sir," was Llewellyn's answer. "Oh, I am obliged, of course, or I try to be obliged; but I don't want anything. What is more, sir, I wouldn't take anything."

"Llewellyn!" said his mother.

"I don't wish to take anything from Mr. Parker, mother. I was about to tell you when we were alone; but I will tell you now, instead. I accepted a situation to-day at Lee & Forrest's."

"Lee & Forrest's!" said the mother. "You accepted a situation at that big draper's round the corner? Llewellyn, you must be mad!"

"I am not. I have been thinking about it for some time; this is not as sudden as it looks to you. You know young Forrest has been my friend at school, and there is a vacancy in the shop. They want a boy to train for the business, and Mr. Forrest is so pleased with me for applying that he is going to start me at once. I saw him to-day, and I accepted it, mother, subject to your leave, which, of course, you will give. Mr. Forrest said it would do him a lot of good to have a lad like me about the place; and young Forrest himself goes to one of the universities. It is a good thing for me, mother, and I have made up my mind."

There was a dead silence in the room. Mrs. Gilroy's face looked white; all the pleasure had left it. She glanced at Parker, whose deep-set eyes twinkled half with fun and half with sympathy. He patted Llewellyn again on the shoulder.

"The truth now," he said; "you are too proud to take help from

me?"

"I am," said Llewellyn.

"That's a right spirit; but I am going to tempt you. I will give you two hundred a year if you wish to go to Oxford."

"No, thank you," answered the boy. He shook the kindly hand off and stepped back a foot.

"But why, my lad?"

"Oh, Llewellyn, why?" said the mother.

"Oh, Llewellyn, are you mad?" cried Leslie.

"I will tell you why, if you all want to know," said Llewellyn. "I don't choose to be beholden to anybody, not even to Mr. Parker, who was my father's friend. I may some day go to the university; but I don't think there is much chance of it. Sir, I will tell you another reason: I want to help my mother; she needs help at once. She could take it from me when she could not take it from a stranger. If I went to Oxford I could not earn any money for three or four years; now I start at once with a pound a week. I can live at home, too, and half the money will go straight towards the house. In a year's time my screw is to be raised. It is all settled, sir. I am obliged to you all the same, but I can't take your help."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.