



A College Girl

by Mrs. George de Horne Vaizey



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Contents

1. Boys and Girls
2. The Telegraph Station
3. Aunt Maria
4. A Double Picnic
5. Left Behind!
6. Dan to the Rescue
7. Aunt Maria' Choice
8. First Days
9. The Percivals
10. A Treaty
11. A Dangerous Adventure
12. Darsie's Suggestion
13. The Treasure Hunt
14. A Treasure Indeed

15. A Dream Fulfilled
16. After Three Years
17. The Auction
18. First Experiences
19. The Fancy Ball
20. Undergraduate Friends
21. Mrs. Reeves Makes a Proposal
22. Christmas Day
23. The Melodrama
24. Dan and Darsie
25. New Year's Eve
26. At the Orchard
27. Disaster
28. Brighter Days
29. Tripos Week
30. Farewell to Newnham

About Author



Boys and Girls

This is the tale of two terraces, of two families who lived therein, of several boys and many girls, and especially of one Darsie, her education, adventures, and ultimate romance.

Darsie was the second daughter in a family of six, and by reason of her upsetting nature had won for herself that privilege of priority which by all approved traditions should have belonged to Clemence, the elder sister. Clemence was serene and blonde; in virtue of her seventeen years her pigtail was now worn doubled up, and her skirts had reached the discreet level of her ankles. She had a soft pink and white face, and a pretty red mouth, the lips of which permanently fell apart, disclosing two small white teeth in the centre of the upper gum, because of which peculiarity her affectionate family had bestowed upon her the nickname of “Bunnie.” Perhaps the cognomen had something to do with her subordinate position. It was impossible to imagine any one with the name of “Bunnie” queening it

over that will-o'-the-wisp, that electric flash, that tantalising, audacious creature who is the heroine of these pages.

Darsie at fifteen! How shall one describe her to the unfortunates who have never beheld her in the flesh? It is for most girls an awkward age, an age of angles, of ungainly bulk, of awkward ways, self-conscious speech, crass ignorance, and sublime conceit. Clemence had passed through this stage with much suffering of spirits on her own part and that of her relations; Lavender, the third daughter, showed at thirteen preliminary symptoms of appalling violence; but Darsie remained as ever that fascinating combination of a child and a woman of the world, which had been her characteristic from earliest youth. Always graceful and alert, she sailed triumphant through the trying years, with straight back, graceful gait, and eyes a-shine with a happy self-confidence. "I am here!" announced Darsie's eyes to an admiring world. "Let the band strike up!"

Some inherent quality in Darsie—some grace, some charm, some spell— which she wove over the eyes of beholders, caused them to credit her with a beauty which she did not possess. Even her family shared in this delusion, and set her up as the superlative in degree, so that "as pretty as Darsie" had come to be regarded a climax of praise. The glint of her chestnut hair, the wide, bright eyes, the little oval face set on a long, slim throat smote the onlooker with instant delight, and so blinded him that he had no sight left with which to behold the blemishes which walked hand in hand. Photographs valiantly strove to demonstrate the truth; pointed out with cruel truth the stretching mouth, the small, inadequate nose, but even the

testimony of sunlight could not convince the blind. They sniffed, and said: "What a travesty! Never again to *that* photographer! Next time we'll try the man in C— Street," and Darsie's beauty lived on, an uncontroverted legend.

By a triumph of bad management, which the Garnett girls never ceased to deplore, their three brothers came at the end instead of the beginning of the family. Three grown-up brothers would have been a grand asset; big boys who would have shown a manly tenderness towards the weaknesses of little sisters; who would have helped and amused; big boys going to school, young men going to college, coming home in the vacations, bringing their friends, acting as squires and escorts to the girls at home. Later on brothers at business, wealthy brothers, generous brothers; brothers who understood how *long* quarter-day was in coming round, and how astonishingly quickly a girl's allowance vanishes into space! Clemence, Darsie, and Lavender had read of such brothers in books, and would have gladly welcomed their good offices in the flesh, but three noisy, quarrelsome, more or less grimy schoolboys, superbly indifferent to "those girls"—this was another, and a very different tale! Harry was twelve—a fair, blunt-featured lad with a yawning cavity in the front of his mouth, the result of one of the many accidents which had punctuated his life. On the top story of the Garnett house there ran a narrow passage, halfway along which, for want of a better site, a swing depended from two great iron hooks. Harry, as champion swinger, ever striving after fresh flights, had one day in a frenzy of enthusiasm swung the rings free from their hold, and descended, swing and all, in a crash on the oil-clothed floor. The

crash, the shrieks of the victim and his attendant sprites, smote upon Mrs Garnett's ears as she sat wrestling with the "stocking basket" in a room below, and as she credibly avowed, took years from her life. Almost the first objects which met her eye, when, in one bound, as it seemed, she reached the scene of the disaster, was a selection of small white teeth scattered over the oil-clothed floor. Henceforth for years Harry pursued his way minus front teeth, and the nursery legend darkly hinted that so injured had been the gums by his fall that no second supply could be expected. Harry avowed a sincere aspiration that this should be the case. "I can eat as much without them," he declared, "and when I grow up I'll have them false, and be an explorer, and scare savages like the man in Rider Haggard," so that teeth, or no teeth, would appear to hold the secret of his destiny.

Russell had adenoids, and snored. His peculiarities included a faculty for breaking his bones, at frequent and inconvenient occasions, an insatiable curiosity about matters with which he had no concern, and a most engaging and delusive silkiness of manner. "Gentleman Russell," a title bestowed by his elders, had an irritating effect on an elder brother conscious of being condemned by the contrast, and when quoted downstairs brought an unflinching echo of thumps in the seclusion of the playroom.

Tim played on his privileges as "littlest," and his mother's barely concealed partiality, and was as irritating to his elders as a small person can be, who is always present when he is not wanted, absent when he is, in peace adopts the airs of a conqueror, and in warfare promptly cries, and collapses into a curly-headed baby boy, whom the authorities declare it is "cr-uel" to bully!

For the rest, the house was of the high and narrow order common to town terraces, inconveniently crowded by its many inmates, and viewed from without, of a dark and grimy appearance.

Sandon Terrace had no boast to make either from an architectural or a luxurious point of view, and was so obviously inferior to its neighbour, Napier Terrace, that it was lacerating to the Garnett pride to feel that their sworn friends the Vernons were so much better domiciled than themselves. Napier Terrace had a strip of garden between itself and the rough outer world; big gateways stood at either end, and what Vi Vernon grandiloquently spoke of as “a carriage sweep” curved broadly between. Divided accurately among the houses in the terrace, the space of ground apportioned to each was limited to a few square yards, but the Vernons were chronically superior on the subject of “the grounds,” and in springtime when three hawthorns, a lilac, and one spindly laburnum-tree struggled into bloom, their airs were beyond endurance.

The Vernons had also a second claim to superiority over the Garnetts, inasmuch as they were the proud possessors of an elder brother, a remote and learned person who gained scholarships, and was going to be Prime Minister when he was grown up. Dan at eighteen, coaching with a tutor preparatory to going up to Cambridge, was removed by continents of superiority from day-school juniors. Occasionally in their disguise of the deadly jealousy which in truth consumed them, the Garnett family endeavoured to make light of the personality of this envied person. To begin with, his name! “Dan” was well enough. “Dan” sounded a boy-like boy, a manly man; of a “Dan” much might be expected in the way of sport

and mischief, but—oh, my goodness—*Daniel!* The Garnetts discussed the cognomen over the play-room fire.

“It must be so *embarrassing* to have a Bible name!” Lavender opined. “Think of church! When they read about me I should be covered with confusion, and imagine that every one was staring at our pew!”

Clemence stared thoughtfully into space. “I, Clemence, take thee Daniel,” she recited slowly, and shuddered. “No—really, I couldn’t!”

“He wouldn’t have you!” the three boys piped; even Tim, who plainly was talking of matters he could not understand, added his note to the chorus, but Darsie cocked her little head, and added eagerly—

“Couldn’t you, really? What *could* you, do you think?”

Clemence stared again, more rapt than ever.

“Lancelot, perhaps,” she opined, “or Sigismund. Everard’s nice too, or Ronald or Guy—”

“Bah! Sugary. *I* couldn’t! Daniel is *ugly*,” Darsie admitted, “but it’s strong. Dan Vernon will fight lions like the Bible one; they’ll roar about him, and his enemies will cast him in, but they’ll not manage to kill him. He’ll trample them under foot, and leave them behind, like milestones on the road.” Darsie was nothing if not inaccurate, but in the bosom of one’s own family romantic flights are not allowed to atone for discrepancies, and the elder sister was quick to correct.

“Daniel didn’t fight the lions! What’s the use of being high falutin’ and making similes that aren’t correct?”

“Dear Clemence, you *are* so literal!” Darsie tilted her head with an air of superiority which reduced the elder to silence, the while she

cogitated painfully why such a charge should be cast as a reproach. To be literal was to be correct. Daniel had *not* fought the lions! Darsie had muddled up the fact in her usual scatterbrain fashion, and by good right should have deplored her error. Darsie, however, was seldom known to do anything so dull; she preferred by a nimble change of front to put others in the wrong, and keep the honours to herself. Now, after a momentary pause, she skimmed lightly on to another phase of the subject. "What should you say was the character and life history of a woman who could call her eldest child 'Daniel,' the second 'Viola Imogen,' and the third and fourth 'Hannah' and 'John'?"

Clemence had no inspiration on the subject. She said: "Don't be silly!" sharply, and left it to Lavender to supply the necessary stimulus.

"*Tell* us, Darsie, tell us! You make it up—"

"My dear, it is evident to the meanest intellect. She was the child of a simple country household, who, on her marriage, went to live in a town; and when her first-born son was born, she pined to have him christened by her father's name in the grey old church beneath the ivy tower; so they travelled there, and the white-haired sire held the infant at the font, while the tears furrowed his aged cheeks. *But*—by slow degrees the insidious effects of the great capital invaded the mind of the sweet young wife, and the simple tastes of her girlhood turned to vanity, so that when the second babe was born, and her husband wished to call her Hannah after her sainted grandmother, she wept, and made an awful fuss, and would not be consoled until he gave in to Viola Imogen, and a christening cloak trimmed with

plush. And she was christened in a city church, and the organ pealed, and the godmothers wore rich array, and the poor old father stayed at home and had a slice of christening cake sent by the post. But the years passed on. Saddened and sobered by the discipline of life, aged and worn, her thoughts turned once more to her quiet youth, and when at last a third child—”

“There’s only two years between them!”

Darsie frowned, but continued her narrative in a heightened voice

—

“—Was laid in her arms, and her husband suggested ‘Ermyntrude’; she shuddered, and murmured softly, ‘Hannah—*plain* Hannah!’ and plain Hannah she has been ever since!”

A splutter of laughter greeted this *denouement*, for in truth Hannah Vernon was not distinguished for her beauty, being one of the plainest, and at the same time the most good-natured of girls.

Lavender cried eagerly—

“Go on! Make up some more,” but Clemence from the dignity of seventeen years felt bound to protest—

“I don’t think you—*ought!* It’s not your business. Mrs Vernon’s a friend, and she wouldn’t be pleased. To talk behind her back—”

“All right,” agreed Darsie swiftly. “Let’s crack nuts!”

Positively she left one breathless! One moment poised on imaginary flights, weaving stories from the baldest materials, drawing allegories of the lives of her friends, the next—an irresponsible wisp, with no thought in the world but the moment’s frolic; but whatever might be the fancy of the moment she drew her companions after her with the magnetism of a born leader.

In the twinkling of an eye the scene was changed, the Vernons with their peculiarities were consigned to the limbo of forgotten things, while boys and girls squatted on the rug scrambling for nuts out of a paper bag, and cracking them with their teeth with monkey-like agility.

“How many can you crack at a time? Bet you I can crack more than you!” cried Darsie loudly.



2

The Telegraph Station

The Garnetts' house stood at the corner of Sandon Terrace, and possessed at once the advantages and drawbacks of its position. The advantages were represented by three bay windows, belonging severally to the drawing-room, mother's bedroom, and the play-room on the third floor. The bay windows at either end of the Terrace bestowed an architectural finish to its flattened length, and from within allowed of extended views up and down the street. The drawback lay in the position of the front door, which stood round the corner in a side street, on which abutted the gardens of the houses of its more aristocratic neighbour, Napier Terrace. Once, in a moment of unbridled temper, Vi Vernon had alluded to the Garnett residence as being located "at our back door," and though she had speedily repented, and apologised, even with tears, the sting remained.

Apart from the point of inferiority, however, the position had its charm. From the eerie of the top landing window one could get a bird's-eye view of the Napier Terrace gardens with their miniature grass plots, their smutty flower-beds, and the dividing walls with their clothing of blackened ivy. Some people were ambitious, and lavished unrequited affection on struggling rose-trees in a centre bed, others contented themselves with a blaze of homely nasturtiums; others, again, abandoned the effort after beauty, hoisted wooden poles, and on Monday mornings floated the week's washing unashamed. In Number Two the tenant kept pigeons; Number Four owned a real Persian cat, who basked majestic on the top of the wall, scorning his tortoiseshell neighbours.

When the lamps were lit, it was possible also to obtain glimpses into the dining-rooms of the two end houses, if the maids were not in too great a hurry to draw down the blinds. A newly married couple had recently come to live in the corner house—a couple who wore evening clothes every night, and dined in incredible splendour at half-past seven. It was thrilling to behold them seated at opposite sides of the gay little table, all a-sparkle with glass and silver, to watch course after course being handed round, the final dallying over dessert.

On one never-to-be-forgotten occasion, suddenly and without the slightest warning, bride and bridegroom had leaped from their seats and begun chasing each other wildly round the table. She flew, he flew; he dodged, she screamed (one could see her scream!) dodged again, and flew wildly in an opposite direction. The chase continued

for several breathless moments, then, to the desolation of the beholders, swept out of sight into the fastnesses of the front hall.

Never—no, never—could the bitterness of that disappointment be outlived. To have been shut out from beholding the *denouement*—it was *too* piteous! In vain Darsie expended herself on flights of imagination, in vain rendered in detail the conversation which had led up to the thrilling chase—the provocation, the threat, the defiance — nothing but the reality could have satisfied the thirst of curiosity of the beholders. Would he kiss her? Would he beat her? Would she triumph? Would she cry? Was it a frolic, or a fight? Would the morrow find them smiling and happy as of yore, or driving off in separate cabs to take refuge in the bosoms of their separate families? Darsie opined that all would *seem* the same on the surface, but darkly hinted at the little rift within the lute, and somehow after that night the glamour seemed to have departed from this honeymoon pair, and the fair seeming was regarded with suspicion.

As regards the matter of distance, it took an easy two minutes to cover the space between the front doors of the two houses, and there seemed an endless number of reasons why the members of the different families should fly round to consult each other a dozen times a day. Darsie and Lavender, Vi and plain Hannah attended the same High School; the Garnett boys and John Vernon the same Royal Institute, but the fact that they walked to and from school together, and spent the intervening hours in the same class-rooms, by no means mitigated the necessity of meeting again during luncheon and tea hours. In holiday times the necessity naturally

increased, and bells pealed incessantly in response to tugs from youthful hands.

Then came the time of the great servants' strike. That bell was a perfect nuisance; ring, ring, ring the whole day long. Something else to do than run about to open the door for a pack of children!

The two mistresses, thus coerced, issued a fiat. Once a day, and no oftener! All arrangements for the afternoon to be made in the morning *seance*, the rendezvous to be *outside*, not *inside* the house.

After this came on the age of signals; whistlings outside the windows, rattling of the railings, comes through letter-boxes and ventilation grids, even—on occasions of special deafness—pebbles thrown against the panes! A broken window, and a succession of whoops making the air hideous during the progress of an extra special tea party, evoked the displeasure of the mistresses in turns, and a second verdict went forth against signals in all forms, whereupon the Garnetts and Vernons in conclave deplored the hard-heartedness of grown-ups, and set their wits to work to evolve a fresh means of communication.

"S'pose," said Russell, snoring thoughtfully, "s'pose we had a telegraph!"

"S'pose we had an airship! One's just as easy as the other. Don't be a juggins."

But Russell snored on unperturbed.

"I don't mean a *real* telegraph, only a sort—of *pretend*! There's our side window, and your back windows. If we could run a line across."

"A line of *what*?"

"String. Wire. Anything we like."

“S’pose we *did* fix it, what then?”

“Send messages!”

“How?”

Russell pondered deeply. He was the member of the family who had a natural aptitude for mechanism; the one who mended toys, and on occasion was even consulted about mother’s sewing-machine and escapes of gas, therefore he filled the place of engineer-royal and was expected to take all structural difficulties upon his own shoulders. He pondered, blinking his pale blue eyes.

“Can’t send messages in the usual way—too difficult. If the cord were double, we might have a bag and switch it across.”

Ha! the audience pricked its ears and sat alert, seeing in imagination the tiny cord swung high in space above the dividing ground, stretching from window to window, fastened securely on the sills, “somehow,” according to the girls, the boys critically debating the question of ways and means, strong iron hoops, for choice, clamped into the framework of the windows.

“How would the messages be sent?”

“In a bag, of course. Put the letter in the bag; then we’d pull and pull, and it would work round and round, till it arrived at the opposite end.”

A stealthy exchange of glances testified to the general realisation of the fact that it would take a *long* time to pull, a much longer time, for instance, than to run round by the road, and deposit the missive in the letter-box, a still unforbidden means of communication. Every one realised the fact, but every one scorned to put it into words.

What was a mere matter of time, compared with the glory and *eclat* of owning a real live telegraph of one's own?

The first stage of the proceedings was to obtain the parental consent, and this was secured with an ease and celerity which was positively disconcerting. When mothers said, "Oh, yes, dears, certainly—certainly you may try!" with a smile in their eyes, a twist on their lips, and a barely concealed incredulity oozing out of every pore, it put the youngsters on their mettle to succeed, or perish in the attempt. The mothers obviously congratulated themselves on a project which would provide innocent amusement for holiday afternoons, while they inwardly derided the idea of permanent success.

"We'll show 'em!" cried Harry darkly. "We'll let 'em see!"

The next point was to decide on the window in each house which should act as telegraph station. In the case of the Vernons there was obviously no alternative, for the third-floor landing window possessed qualifications far in excess of any other, but with the Garnetts two rival factions fought a wordy combat in favour of the boys' room and the little eerie inhabited by Lavender, each of which occupied equally good sites.

"Stick to it! Stick to it!" were Harry's instructions to his younger brother. "They can't put the thing up without us, so they're bound to come round in the end, and if we've got the telegraph station, it will give us the whip hand over them for ever. It's our room, and they've jolly well got to behave if they want to come in. If they turn rusty, we'll lock the door, and they'll have to be civil, or do without the telegraph.

Let 'em talk till they're tired, and then they'll give in, and we'll go out and buy the cord."

And in the end the girls succumbed as predicted. Lavender's pride in owning the site of the great enterprise weakened before the tragic picture drawn for her warning, in which she saw herself roused from slumber at unearthly hours of the night, leaning out of an opened window to draw a frozen cord through bleeding hands. She decided that on the whole it would be more agreeable to lie snugly in bed and receive the messages from the boys over a warm and leisurely breakfast.

These two great points arranged, nothing now remained but the erection of the line itself, and two strong iron hoops having been fixed into the outer sills of the respective windows a fine Saturday afternoon witnessed the first struggle with the cord.

Vi Vernon and plain Hannah unrolled one heavy skein, threaded it through their own hoop, and lowered the two ends into the garden, where John stood at attention ready to throw them over the wall. Darsie and Lavender dropped their ends straight into the street, and then chased madly downstairs to join the boys and witness the junction of the lines. Each line being long enough in itself to accomplish the double journey, the plan was to pull the connected string into the Garnett station, cut off the superfluous length, and tie the ends taut and firm. Nothing could have seemed easier in theory, but in practice unexpected difficulties presented themselves. The side street was as a rule singularly free from traffic, but with the usual perversity of fate, every tradesman's cart in the neighbourhood seemed bent on exercising its horse up and down its length this

Saturday afternoon. No sooner were lines knotted together in the middle of the road than the greengrocer came prancing round the corner, and they must needs be hastily untied; secured a second time, the milkman appeared on incredibly early rounds, reined his steed on its haunches, and scowled fiercely around; before there was time to rally from his attack a procession of coal-carts came trundling heavily past. By this time also the frantic efforts of the two families had attracted the attention of their enemies, a body of boys, scathingly designated "the Cads," who inhabited the smaller streets around and waged an incessant war against "the Softs," as they in return nicknamed their more luxurious neighbours.

The Cads rushed to the scene with hoots and howls of derision; white-capped heads peered over bedroom blinds; even the tortoiseshell cats stalked over the dividing walls to discover the cause of the unusual excitement. Clemence, with the sensitiveness of seventeen years, hurried round the corner, and walked hastily in an opposite direction, striving to look as if she had no connection with the scrimmage in the side street. Darsie read the Cads a lecture on nobility of conduct, which they received with further hoots and sneers. Plain Hannah planked herself squarely before the scene of action with intent to act as a bulwark from the attack of the enemy. The three boys worked with feverish energy, dreading the appearance of their parents and an edict to cease operations forthwith.

The first lull in the traffic was seized upon to secure the knots, when presto! the line began to move, as Russell the nimble-minded hauled vigorously from the upstairs station, whence he had been

dispatched a few moments before. The Cads yelled and booed as the first glimmering knowledge of what was on foot penetrated their brains; they grouped together and consulted as to means of frustration; but with every moment that passed yards of line were disappearing from view, and the skeins in the streets were rapidly diminishing in size. Presently there was not a single coil left, and a cheer of delight burst from the onlookers as they watched the cord rise slowly off the ground. Now with good luck and the absence of vehicles for another two minutes the deed would be done, and the Garnett-Vernon telegraph an accomplished fact; but alas! at this all-important moment one line of string caught in an ivy stem at the top of a garden wall, and refused to be dislodged by tuggings and pullings from below. The Cads raised a derisive cheer, and to add to the annoyances of the moment a cab rounded the corner, the driver of which pulled up in scandalised amaze on finding the road barricaded by two stout lines of string.

His strictures were strong and to the point, and though he finally consented to drive over the hastily lowered line, he departed shaking his whip in an ominous manner, and murmuring darkly concerning police.

“On to the wall, John. Quick! Climb up and ease it over. If we don’t get it up in a jiffy we shall have the bobbies after us!” cried Harry frantically, whereupon John doubled back into his own garden, and by perilous graspings of ivy trunks and projecting bricks scaled to the top and eased the line from its grip.

“Right-ho!” he cried, lifting his face to the opposite window. “Pull, Russell! *pull* for your life!”

Russell pulled; a second time the double thread rose in the air. Darsie jumped with excitement; Lavender clasped her hands, all white and tense with suspense, plain Hannah ran to and fro, emitting short, staccato croaks of delight; Harry stood in manly calm, arms akimbo, a beam of satisfaction broadening his face. That smile, alas! gave the last touch of exasperation to the watching Cads. To stand still and behold the line vanishing into space had been in itself an ordeal, but Harry's lordly air, his strut, his smile—these were beyond their endurance! With a rallying shout of battle they plunged forward, grabbed at the ascending cord, hung for a dizzy moment suspended on its length, then with a final cheer felt it snap in twain and drag limply along the ground.

Alas for Harry and for John—what could they do, two men alone, against a dozen? The girls screamed, declaimed, vowed shrill revenge, but in the matter of practical force were worse than useless. Even with Russell's aid the forces were hopelessly uneven. Harry stood looking on gloomily while the Cads, chortling with triumph, galloped down the road, trailing behind them the long lengths of cord; then, like a true Englishman, being half-beaten, he set his teeth and vowed to conquer, or to die.

“They think we're sold, but they'll find their mistake! We'll get up at five on Monday morning and have the thing in working trig before they have opened their silly eyes.”

This programme being duly enacted, the telegraph stations remained for years as an outward and visible sign of the only piece of work which Harry Garnett was ever known to accomplish before the hour of his belated breakfast.



3

Aunt Maria

Among the crowd of relations near and far most families possess one relation *par excellence*, who stands out from all the rest by reason either of generosity, aggravatingness, or strength of character. Sometimes this relation is an uncle; more often it is an aunt; almost invariably he or she is unmarried or widowed, because the single state naturally allows more time and energy for interests beyond the personal household.

The Garnetts' relation *par excellence* was Aunt Maria—*Lady* Maria as they erroneously called her, being unsophisticated in the niceties of the peerage. Her rightful cognomen was Lady Hayes, and she was the elderly, very elderly, widow of an estimable gentleman who had been created a Baronet in recognition of services rendered to his political party. The Garnetts felt that it was very stylish to possess an aunt with a title, and introduced her name with an air when the Vernons grew superior on the subject of “the grounds.” Lady Hayes

was an eccentric individual who inhabited a beautiful old country house in the Midlands, from which base she was given to suddenly swooping down upon her relations, choosing by preference for these visits the times when carpets had been sent away to be cleaned, or the maids granted days off to visit relations in the country. Then Lady Hayes would appear, announce her intention of staying a couple of nights, declare her unwillingness to give the slightest trouble, and proceed to request that her maid should be accommodated with a room next to her own, and that they should both be supplied with a vegetarian diet, supplemented by glasses of sterilised milk at intervals of every two hours. Sometimes the vegetarianism gave place to a diet of minced beef, but whatever might be the diet of the moment it was invariably something which no one else wanted to eat, and which took about three times as long to prepare as the entire rations for the household dinner of ten.

It was at the close of the Midsummer term, when the Garnett family were blissfully preparing for the yearly migration to the sea, that a letter from Aunt Maria fell like a bombshell upon the peaceful scene. This year the holiday promised to be even more blissful than usual, for the Vernons had secured a second farmhouse, not ten minutes' walk from their own, and connected with the sea by the same fascinating field-paths. A farm and the sea! Could there possibly exist a more fascinating combination? The young people sniffed in advance the two dear, distinctive odours which, more than anything else, presented the scenes before them—the soft, cow-milky scent of the farm, the salt, sharp whiff of the brine. From morn till night, at every available moment, they discussed the day's

programme—feeding animals, calling the cows, bathing, picnicking on the sands, crab-hunting, mountain climbing. Excitement grew until it really seemed impossible to exist through the intervening days, and then the bombshell fell! A letter arrived by an evening post, when Mr and Mrs Garnett were enjoying the one undisturbed hour of the day. It bore the Hayes crest, and was written in Aunt Maria's small, crabbed handwriting—

My Dear Emily,

I propose, all being well, to pay you a short visit from Tuesday to Thursday next, twelfth to fifteenth instant. Please let me have the same rooms as on my last visit. I am at present living on Bengers's food, and must ask you to see that it is made freshly for each meal, in a perfectly clean, enamelled saucepan.

The chief object of my visit is to bring back one of your three daughters to stay with me during the summer vacation. I have been feeling somewhat lonely of late, and my doctor recommends young society, so it has occurred to me that in obeying his instructions I might at the same time afford pleasure and benefit to one of your family. Should I become interested in the child it might be to her advantage hereafter, but it must be understood that I can make no promises on this point.

The eighteen months which have elapsed since my last visit have somewhat dimmed my remembrance of your girls, so that I must see them again before deciding as to which of the three I should prefer as a companion.

With love to William and yourself,

Believe me, my dear Emily,

*Your affectionate Aunt,
Maria Hayes*

Mrs Garnett read this communication in silence, handed it to her husband, and watched him flush and frown over the perusal.

“Does not even go through the form of asking our consent!”

“No! That’s Aunt Maria all over. You could hardly imagine that she would. Oh dear! Oh dear! I’m afraid, Will—I’m *afraid* she will have to go!”

“Poor little kiddie, yes! How she will hate it! Just at this moment when they are all wild with joy at the thought of their holiday with the Vernons. It seems positively brutal!”

“Oh, it does. I am so sorry for her—whichever it may be—but one must sometimes be cruel to be kind. We can’t afford—I am not mercenary, as you know—but with our means we *can’t* afford to refuse any possible advantage for our girls! The sacrifice of a summer holiday ought not to weigh against that.”

“No, you’re right, quite right. So be it then. Write and tell her to come, only I tell you plainly my holiday’s spoiled... With Darsie gone —”

“Dear! she has not chosen yet.”

“Dear! you know perfectly well—”

They looked at each other, smiling, rueful, half-ashamed. It seemed like treason to the other girls, this mutual acknowledgment that Darsie was the flower of the flock, the child of the six to whom all strangers were attracted as by a magnet. Clarence and Lavender were equally as dear to the parents’ hearts, but there was no

denying the existence of a special and individual pride in the fascinations of Darsie.

Mr Garnett turned aside with an impatient shrug.

“There’s one thing, Emily, *you* must tell her when it is settled! There’ll be a tremendous scene. I flatly refuse—”

“Very well, dear, very well; I’ll do it. But it’s not decided yet, remember, and one can never be sure. I’d better break the idea to the girls before Aunt Maria comes, and let them get over the first excitement. To-night would be a good opportunity. You will be out late, so would be spared the scene!”

“Bless you, Emily! I’m a coward, I know, but I *should* be grateful. I can’t answer for what I should do if Darsie cried, and begged my protection. Women have twice the pluck of men in these affairs!”

Nevertheless it was with a quaking heart that Mrs Garnett broached the object of Aunt Maria’s proposition over the schoolroom tea that afternoon, and her nervousness was not decreased by the smilingly unperturbed manner in which it was received. Never, never for a moment did it appear possible to the three girls that such a proposition could be seriously discussed.

“So likely!” sneered Clemence with a fine disdain. “Give up all the fun and excitement of the sea with the Vernons, to *browse* with Aunt Maria. So likely, to be sure!”

“Poor dear old love! She *is* deluded. Thinks it would be a pleasure and benefit, does she. I wouldn’t take a thousand pounds—”

Thus Lavender. Darsie went a step farther in tragic declamation.

“I’d drown myself first! To sit there—panting, in hot rooms, on Benger’s food, and know that all the others were bathing and

running wild on the shore—I'd burst! I'd run away in an hour—”

“Dears, it's a beautiful old place. There are gardens, and lawns, and horses, and dogs. Cows, too! I am sure there are cows—she used to keep a herd of Jerseys. You could see them being milked.”

“Welsh cows are good enough for me. I don't need Jerseys. *Or* lawns! Give me the free, untrammelled countryside!

“And to see it reflected in eyes that I love.”

Darsie paraphrased a line of the sweet old ballad, singing it in a clear, bell-like voice to a pantomime of clasped hands and rolling eyes. “It would be bad enough in an ordinary year, but to rend us apart from the Vernons—oh, no, it's unthinkable!”

“You have the Vernons near you all the year, dear. Aunt Maria only asks for eight weeks. There are occasions in life when it does not do to think only of our own pleasure.”

Silence. A note in the mother's voice had startled her hearers into the conviction that the invitation must be regarded seriously, and not tossed aside as a joke. A lacerating suspicion that the authorities were in favour of an acceptance pierced like a dart.

“Mother! What do you mean? You couldn't *possibly* be so cruel—”

“Mother, you don't mean—.”

“Mother, what *do* you mean?”

“I mean that you ought to go, dears, which ever one of you is asked. Aunt Maria is an old lady, and she is lonely. Her doctor has ordered cheerful companionship. Moreover, she has been a kind friend to father in the past, and has a right to expect some consideration in return. If you went in the right spirit, you could be of

real use and comfort, and would have the satisfaction of doing a kind deed.”

Darsie set her lips in a straight line, and tilted her chin in the air.

“Couldn’t pretend to go in the right spirit! I’d be in a tearing rage. Somebody else can have the ‘satisfaction,’ and I’ll go to the sea.”

“Darsie, dear, that’s naughty!”

“I *feel* naughty, mother. ‘Naughty’ is a mild word. *Savage!* I feel savage. It’s too appalling. What does father say? I’m sure he would never—”

“Father feels as I do; very disappointed for our own sakes and for yours that our happy party should be disturbed, but he never shirks a disagreeable duty himself, and he expects his children to follow his example.”

Lavender instantly burst into tears.

“It’s always the way—always the way! It was too good to be true. We might have known that it was. She’ll choose me, and Hannah will go without me. We’d planned every day—fishing, and bathing, and making hay, and I shall be mewed up in a close carriage, and have meals of nuts—and n-n-nobody to talk to. Oh, I can’t—I can’t bear it! I wish I could die and be buried—I *cannot* bear it—”

“You won’t have to bear it. She’ll choose me. I’m the eldest, and the most of a companion.” Clemence spoke with the calmness of despair, her plump cheeks whitening visibly, her pale eyes showing a flush of red around the lids. “Of course, if it’s my duty, I must go—but I’d as soon be sent to prison! I’m feeling *very* tired, and thought the holiday would set me up. Now, of course, I shall be worse. Eight

weeks alone with Aunt Maria would try anybody's nerves. I shall be a wreck all winter, and have neuralgia till I'm nearly mad."

"Nonsense, darling! If you are so tired, the rest and quiet of The Towers will be just what you need; and as we don't know yet which one of you Aunt Maria will wish as a companion, it is a pity for you all to make yourselves miserable at once. Why not try to forget, and hope for the best! Surely that would be the wiser plan."

The three girls looked at each other in eloquent silence. Easy to talk. Forget, indeed. As if they *could*! Mother didn't really believe what she said. She was making the best of it, and there were occasions when making the best of it seemed just the most aggravating thing one could do.

It was a relief to the girls when Mrs Garnett was summoned from the room on household business, and they were left to themselves. A craving for sympathy was the predominant sensation, and prompted the suggestion, "Let's wire to the Vernons," which was followed by a stampede upstairs. The telegraph was a sufficiently new institution to appear a pleasure rather than a toil, even though a message thus dispatched was an infinitely longer and more laborious effort than a run round the terrace, so to-day a leaf was torn from the note-book, a dramatic announcement penned and placed in the hanging-bag, with its jingling bell of warning, and the three girls took it in turns to pull at the cord till the missive arrived at its destination. Attracted by the sound of the bell, Vi and plain Hannah stood at the window awaiting the communication, read over its contents, and stood silent and dismayed. The Garnetts, watching

from afar, realised the dramatic nature of that pause, and thrilled in sympathy.

“One of us is going to be sent to prison instead of to the country!”

“Prison!” Vi and plain Hannah wagged their heads over the cipher, hesitated long, pencil in hand, and, finally, in a frenzy of impatience, which refused to be curbed even by loyalty to the telegraph itself, dispatched an urgent summons to speech—

“Come round and talk!”

The Garnetts flew. The Vernons, waiting upon the doorstep, escorted them upstairs to the scantily furnished room which had first been a nursery, then promoted to playroom, and, ultimately, when the more juvenile name wounded the susceptibilities of its inmates, had become definitely and proudly “the study.” The bureau in the corner was Dan’s special property, and might not be touched by so much as a finger-tip. The oak table with three sound legs and a halting fourth, supported by an ancient volume of *Good Words*, was Vi’s property; John and plain Hannah shared the dining-table, covered with the shabby green baize cloth, which stood in the centre of the room. There were a variety of uncomfortable chairs, an ink-splashed drugget, and red walls covered with pictures which had been banished from other rooms as they acquired the requisite stage of decrepitude and grime.

The five girls surged into the room, faced each other, and burst into eager speech—

“Who’s going to prison?”

“We don’t know. Wish we did!”

“What do you mean by prison?”

“Aunt Maria’s!”

“Lady Maria’s?”

“Lady Maria’s! One of us has to go and stay with her for eight weeks instead of going with you to the sea.”

Vi Vernon collapsed on to the nearest chair, and gasped for breath. “Stu-pendous!” she murmured beneath her breath. Vi had a new word each season which she used to describe every situation, good and bad. The season before it had been “Weird!” this season it was “Stupendous,” and she was thankful for the extra syllable in this moment of emotion. “It’s really true? You mean it in earnest? *Why?*”

“Thinks it would be a pleasure to us, and that we should be cheery companions. So likely, isn’t it?”

“But—but surely your mother— What does she say?”

“Preaches! Oughtn’t to think of ourselves. Ought to show a right spirit and go.”

“Stu-pendous!” cried Vi once again. Plain Hannah hoisted herself on to the corner of the table, and hunched herself in thought. She really was extraordinarily plain. Looking at her critically, it seemed that everything that should have been a line had turned into a curve, and everything that should have been a curve into a line; she was thick-set, clumsy, awkward in gait, her eyes were small, her mouth was large, she had a meagre wisp of putty-coloured hair, and preposterously thick eyebrows several shades darker in hue, and no eyelashes at all. Friends and relations lavished much pity on poor dear Hannah’s unfortunate looks, but never a sigh did Hannah breathe for herself. She was strong and healthy, her sturdy limbs stood her in good stead in the various games and sports in which

she delighted, and she would not have exchanged her prowess therein for all the pink cheeks and golden locks in the world. Hannah's manner, like her appearance, lacked grace and charm; it was abrupt, forceful, and to the point. She spoke now, chin sunk in her grey flannel blouse, arms wrapped round her knees—

“Is she coming to see you before she chooses, or will it be done by post?”

“She's coming! Two days next week. Isn't it too awful? We were so happy—the telegraph up, and the weather jolly, and holidays nearly here. ‘All unsuspecting of their doom the little victims played.’ And then—*this!* Holidays with Aunt Maria! Even the third of a chance turns me cold with dismay. I couldn't bear—”

“You won't need to. She won't have you. She'll choose Darsie.”

Darsie squealed in shrillest protest—

“No, no! It's not fair. She won't! She can't! It's always the eldest or the youngest. I'm the middle—the insignificant middle. Why should she choose me?”

“You are not so modest as a rule! You know perfectly well that strangers always *do* take more notice of you than any one else. You are always the one who is fussed over and praised.”

“Because I want to be! This time I shan't. I'll be just as sulky and horrid as I can for the whole blessed time.”

“You'll be there anyway, and you can't alter your face.”

“My fatal beauty!” wailed Darsie, and wrung her hands in impassioned fashion. Then she looked critically from one sister to another, and proceeded to candid criticisms of their charms.

“Clemence is not pretty, but she’s *nice*! If she did her hair better, and sat up, and had a colour, and didn’t poke her chin, she’d look quite decent. I should think it would be interesting to take some one who *needed* improving, and see what you could do. Lavender’s gawky, of course, girls *are* gawky at her age, but I shouldn’t wonder if she grew quite decent-looking in time. Rest and quiet would do wonders!”

“Thank you, indeed! You *are* kind!” The sisters bridled and tossed their heads, by no means appeased by such prognostications of their future charms. “Certainly if she took *you*, she might teach you to be modest!”

“Oh, dear, oh, dear, I don’t want *any* of you to go!” Vi, the peacemaker, rushed to the rescue. She was just sixteen, younger than Clemence, older than Darsie, attached almost equally to the two. Lavender, of course, was quite too young for a companion, but then Lavender and Hannah paired together; if she were absent, Hannah at a loose end would demand entrance into those three-sided conferences which made the joy of life. The fear of such an incursion made Lavender at that moment seem even more precious than her sisters. Vi continued her lament with bitter emphasis—

“*Too* bad—*too* hard—stupendous! Spoil everything. Horrid interfering old thing! If I were your parents I wouldn’t—not for all the money in the world, I wouldn’t sacrifice a child to an old ogre like that! I’d keep my own children and let them be happy while they could, but, of course, if she talks of duty...! If there’s one thing more stupendous than another it’s being put on one’s honour! It gives one

no chance. Well, you'll have to go, I suppose, and our holiday is spoiled. I've never been so disappointed in my life."

"Think of how *we* feel!" croaked Clemence tragically, but this time the tragedy did not ring so true, for since plain Hannah's verdict her spirits had risen considerably. Hannah was the shrewdest and cleverest of all five girls, and her prophecies were proverbially correct. Clemence felt sufficiently reassured to reflect that as the eldest in years, she would do well to show an example of resignation. She lengthened her face, and added solemnly—

"I don't think you ought to talk like that about honour, Vi! It ought to be an incentive. If I go, the only thing that will console me most is the feeling that I am doing my duty!"

Vi stared, and the younger girls coughed in derisive chorus.

"Isn't it easy to be resigned for somebody else?" demanded plain Hannah of the ceiling. "You are *not* going, my dear, and you know it. Darsie likes well enough to queen it as a rule, and now she's got to pay the price. That's the cost of good looks. Thank goodness no one will ever want to run off with *me*!—not even a staid old aunt. Tell us about your aunt, by the way—you've talked enough about yourselves. Where does she live, and what is she like, and what does she do, and what will *you* do when you're there? Have any of you ever seen the place?"

"Not since we were old enough to remember, but mother has been and told us all about it. It's big, with a lodge, two lodges, and a park all round, very rich, and grand, and respectable, and dull. There are men- servants to wait at table, and the windows are never open, and she drives out every day in a closed carriage, and plays patience at

night, and wears two wigs, turn about, a week at a time. Her cheeks are red, the sort of red that is made up of little red lines, and never gets brighter or darker, and she likes to be quiet and avoid excitement. Oh, imagine what it would be like to *choose* to be quiet, and deliberately run away from a fuss! Can you imagine if you lived a thousand years ever reaching such a pitch as that?"

Darsie held out both hands in dramatic appeal, and her hearers groaned with unction. It was impossible, absolutely beyond the power of imagination to picture such a plight. Each girl hugged to herself the conviction that with her at least would remain immortal youth; that happen what might to the rest of mankind, no length of years could numb her own splendid vitality and *joie de vivre*.

Not even, and at the thought the three Garnetts sighed in concert, not even Aunt Maria!

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