

Meade L. T.

A Bunch of Cherries: A Story of Cherry Court School



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CHAPTER I. THE SCHOOL

The house was long and low and rambling. In parts at least it must have been quite a hundred years old, and even the modern portion was not built according to the ideas of the present day, for in 1870 people were not so aesthetic as they are now, and the lines of beauty and grace were not considered all essential to happiness.

So even the new part of the house had square rooms destitute of ornament, and the papers were small in pattern and without any artistic designs, and the windows were square and straight, and the ceilings were somewhat low.

The house opened on to a wide lawn, and at the left of the lawn was a paddock and at the right a shrubbery, and the shrubbery led away under its overhanging trees into the most perfect walled-in garden that was ever seen. The garden was two or three hundred years old. The oldest inhabitants of the place had never known the time when Cherry Court garden was not the talk of the country. Visitors came from all parts round to see it. It was celebrated on account of its very high walls built of red brick, its size, for it covered at least three acres of ground, and its magnificent cherries. The cherry trees in the Court garden bore the most splendid fruit which could be obtained in any part of the county. They were in great demand, not only for the girls who lived in the old house and played in the garden, but for the neighbors all over the country. A big price was always paid for these cherries, for they made such splendid jam, as well as being so full of juice and so ripe and good to eat that their like could not be found anywhere else.

The cherries were of all sorts and kinds, from the celebrated White Heart to the black cherry. There were cherries for cooking and cherries for eating, and in the season the trees, which were laden with ripe fruit, were a sight to behold.

In the height of the cherry season Mrs. Clavering always gave a cherry feast. It was the event of the entire year, and the girls looked forward to it, making all their arrangements in connection with it, counting the hours until it arrived, and looking upon it as the great feature of their school year. Everything turned on whether the cherries were good and the weather fine. There was no greater stimulus to hard work than the merest mention of this golden day, which came as a rule towards the end of June and just before the summer vacation. For Cherry Court School was old-fashioned according to our modern ideas, and one of its old-fashioned plans was to give holidays at the end of June instead of the end of July, so that the girls had the longest, finest days at home, and came back to work at the end of August refreshed and strengthened, and prepared for a good long tug at lessons of all sorts until Christmas.

The school consisted of twenty girls, never more and never less, for Mrs. Clavering was too great a favorite and had too wise and excellent ideas with regard to education ever to be without pupils, and never more, for she believed twenty to be the perfect number to whom she could give every attention and offer every advantage.

The school, small as it was, was divided into two sections, the Upper and the Lower. In the Upper school were girls from eighteen to fourteen years of age, and in the Lower some of the small scholars numbered even as few years as six. There was a resident French mistress in the school and also a resident German, and there was an English governess, and, of course, Mrs. Clavering herself;

but the other teachers came from the neighboring town of Hartleway to instruct the pupils in all those accomplishments which were in the early seventies considered necessary for a young lady's education. I can assure those of my readers who are well acquainted with modern schools that no one could have been more particular than Mrs. Clavering with regard to her girls. In such things as deportment and nice manners and all the code which signifies politeness, and in the almost lost art of brilliant conversation, she could instruct as very few other people could in her day, and then what accomplishments she did teach were thorough. The girls were taught French properly, they understood the grammar of the language, and could also speak it nicely; and their German was also very fair, if not quite as thorough as their French. And their music had some backbone in it, for a little of the science was taught as well as the practice, and their singing was very sweet and true. They could also recite, those of them who had any gift for it, quite beautifully, and if they had a turn for acting that also was brought to the fore and made the most of. As to their knowledge of the English language, it bade fair to eclipse many of the High School girls of the present day, for they did understand in the first place its literature, and in the next its grammar, and were well acquainted with the works of Shakespeare and those other lions of literature whose names we are so proud of and whose works we love.

CHAPTER II. THE GIRLS

It was a lovely day in the beginning of June, and, being Wednesday, was a half-holiday. The girls of the Upper school, numbering seven in all, were assembled in the cherry garden. The cherry garden stood a little apart, to the left of the great general garden, and was entered by a low walled-in door.

Mrs. Clavering was so proud of her cherries and so afraid that the neighbors might be tempted to help themselves to the luscious fruit, that she kept the door locked between the cherry garden and the other, and only those girls who were very privileged were allowed to sit in it. But the girls in the Upper school were, of course, privileged, and they were now enjoying a fine time seated on the grass, or on little camp-stools and chairs, under the trees, which were already laden with the tempting fruit.

They were all eagerly discussing the great event of the year, the Cherry Feast, which was to take place in three weeks from the present day. Their names were Mabel and Alice Cunningham, two handsome dark-eyed girls, aged respectively seventeen and fifteen; Florence Aylmer, who was also fifteen and the romp of the school; Mary Bateman, a stolid-looking girl of fourteen; Bertha Kennedy, who had only lately been raised to the rank of the Upper school; Edith King, a handsome, graceful girl, who competed with Mabel for the honors of the head of her class; and Kitty Sharston, who had only lately come, and who had some Irish blood in her, and was very daring and very much inclined to break the rules. She was a hobbledehoy sort of girl, having outstripped her years, which were only thirteen, and was considered by some of her companions very plain and by others very fascinating.

Mrs. Clavering did not quite know what to make of Kitty, but hoped to break her in by and by, and meanwhile she was very gentle, and Kitty loved her, although she never could be got to see that so many restrictions and so many little petty rules were not good, but extremely bad, for her character.

On this particular lovely summer's afternoon Kitty was the last to make her appearance. She came skimming gracefully through the orchard under the cherry trees, with her hair down her back, her skirt awry, and a great stain on the front of her pinafore. In the seventies girls as old as Kitty wore long white pinafores. The stain was caused by some cherry juice, for Kitty had stopped many times as she approached the others to take great handfuls of the ripe fruit, and thrust them into her mouth. Mabel called to her to sit down.

"We are all busy discussing the great event," she said, "and I have kept a seat for you near me, Kitty; wasn't it good of me?"

"Awfully good," answered Kitty. She flung herself on the ground by her friend's side and looked up at her with affectionate eyes.

"I like you all," she said, glancing round at them, "and yet all the same I hate school. The great thing that I look forward to in the treat is that immediately afterwards the holidays follow. I shall go down to join my father in Cornwall. He said he would take me to Ireland, but I doubt if he will. Now, Tommy, what are you frowning at?"

This remark was made to Florence Aylmer. Kitty from the first had insisted upon calling her Tommy. She was the first girl in Cherry Court School who had dared to adopt a nickname for any of her companions, and Florence, who had begun by being indignant, could not help laughing now as the saucy creature fixed her with her bright eyes.

"What are you frowning at, Tommy? Aren't you glad, too, that the holidays are so near?"

"No, I am not – I hate the holidays," replied Florence Aylmer. As she spoke Mabel took one of Kitty's hands, gave it a slight squeeze, it was a sort of warning pressure. Kitty looked up at her with a startled glance, then she glanced again at Florence, who was looking down. Suddenly Florence raised her face and returned the girl's gaze fully.

"I have no home like the rest of you," she said; "my mother is very poor and cannot afford to have me at home."

"Then where are you going to spend the holidays?" said Kitty; "do say, dear old Tommy, where – where?"

"Here probably, or wherever Mrs. Clavering likes to take me," replied Florence; "but there, don't talk of it any more – I hate to think of it. We have three weeks still to be happy in, and we'll make the best of that."

"Do you know, Mabel," asked Mary Bateman, now bending forward, "if Mrs. Clavering has yet decided what the programme is to be for the 25th?"

"I think she will tell us to-night," replied Mabel; "she said something about it this morning, didn't she, Alice?"

"Yes, I heard her talking to Mademoiselle Le Brun. I expect we shall hear at tea-time. If so we will meet in the oak parlor, and Mrs. Clavering will have her annual talk. She is always very nice on those occasions."

"She is nice on every occasion – she is an old dear," said Kitty.

"Why, Kitty, you don't know her very well yet."

"She is an old dear," reported Kitty; "I love her with all my heart, but I should like beyond words to give her a right good shock. I cannot tell you girls, how I positively tremble to do it. At prayers, for instance, or still more at meals, when we are all so painfully demure, I want to jump up and utter a shout, or do something of that sort. I have suppressed myself hitherto, but I really do not know if I can go on suppressing myself much longer. Oh, what is the matter, Edith – what are you frowning at?"

"Nothing," replied Edith King; "I did not even know that I was frowning. I was just thinking how nice it was to be trained to be ladylike and to have good manners and all that. Mrs. Clavering is such a perfect lady herself that we shall know all the rules of polite society when we leave the school."

"And I hate those rules," said Kitty; "but there, somebody is coming to meet us. Oh, it is little Dolly Fairfax; she is sure to be bringing a message."

CHAPTER III. THE TELEGRAM

Dolly came up in her brisk way. She was holding something concealed in her little pinafore. She looked very mysterious. She had a round cherub face and two great big blue eyes, and short hair, which she wore in a curly mop all over her head. Dolly was the youngest girl in the school and a great pet with everyone. When Bertha saw her now she sprang to her feet and went forward in her somewhat clumsy way.

"Come, little Dolly," she said; "what's the mystery?"

"It's not for you, Bertha," said Dolly, "and don't you interrupt. It's for – it's for Kitty Sharston."

"For me?" cried Kitty. "Oh, what a love you are, Dolly; come and sit on my lap. Is it a box of bon-bons or is it a letter?"

"Guess again," said Dolly, clapping her hand to her little mouth, and looking intensely mysterious. Her blue eyes rolled roguishly round until they fixed themselves on Edith King's face, then she looked again at Kitty as solemn as possible.

"You guess again," she said; "I'll give you five guesses. Now, then, begin right away."

"It's the book that Annie Wallace said she would lend me – that's it, now, isn't it, Dolly? See, I'll feel in your pinafore."

"No, it's not – wrong again," said Dolly; "that's three guesses – two more."

Kitty made another guess – wrong again. Finally Dolly was induced to unfold her pinafore, and inside lay an unopened telegram.

Now, in those days telegrams were not quite as common as they are now. In the first place, they cost a shilling instead of sixpence, which made a vast difference in their number. Kitty's face turned slightly pale, she gripped the telegram, shook little Dolly off her lap, stood up, and, turning her back to the girls, proceeded to open it. Her slim, long fingers shook a little as she did so. She soon had the envelope torn asunder and had taken out the pink sheet within. She unfolded it and read the words. As she did so her face turned very white. "Is the messenger waiting for an answer?" she said, turning to Dolly.

"Yes," replied Dolly; "he is waiting up at the Court."

"Then I must run away at once and answer this," said Kitty. "Oh, I wonder if I have got money enough!"

"I'll lend you a shilling if you like," said Edith King.

"Thanks, awfully," replied Kitty. "I'll pay you back when I get my pocket-money on Saturday."

There was a queer, troubled, dazed sort of look in her eyes. Edith handed her the shilling and she disappeared under the cherry trees.

Dolly proceeded to skim after her.

"No, do stay, Dolly," cried Florence Aylmer; "stay and sit on my lap and I'll tell you a story."

Dolly looked undecided for a moment, but presently she elected to go with Kitty.

"There is something bothering her," she said; "I wonder what it can be. I'll run and see; I'll bring word afterwards."

She disappeared with little shouts under the trees. Nothing could ever make Dolly sad long. The other girls turned and looked at one another.

"What in the world can it be?" said Florence. "Poor Kitty! how very white she turned as she read it."

Meanwhile Kitty had reached the house; the messenger was waiting in the hall. Mrs. Clavering came out just as the girl appeared.

"Well, my dear Kitty," she said, "I hope it is not very bad news?"

"I will tell you presently; I must answer it now," said Kitty.

"You can go into the study, dear, and write your telegram there."

Kitty went in; she spent a little time, about ten minutes or so, filling in the form; then she folded it up, gave it to the boy with a shilling, and went and stood in the hall.

"What is the matter, Kitty?" said her governess, coming out and looking her in the face.

"My telegram was from father. He – he is going to India," said Kitty, "that is all. I won't be with him in the holidays – that's all."

She tried to keep the tremble out of her voice; her eyes, brave, bright, and fearless, were fixed on Mrs. Clavering's face.

"Come in here and let us talk, dear," said Mrs. Clavering.

"I can't," said Kitty; "it is too bad."

"What is too bad, dear?"

"The pain here." She pressed her hand against her heart.

"Poor child! you love him very much."

"Very much," answered Kitty, "and the pain is too bad, and – and I can't talk now. I'll just go back to the other girls in the cherry orchard."

"But, Kitty, can you bear to be with them just now?"

"I can't be alone," said Kitty, with a little piteous smile. She ran out again into the summer sunshine. Mrs. Clavering stood and watched her.

"Poor little girl," she said to herself, "and she does not know the worst, nor half the worst, for I had a long letter from Major Sharston this morning, and he told me that not only was he obliged to go to India, but that he had lost so large a sum of money that he could not afford to keep Kitty here after this term. She is to go to Scotland to live with an old cousin; she must give up all chance of being properly educated. Poor little Kitty! I wonder if he mentioned that in the telegram, and she is so proud, too, and has so much character; it is a sad, sad pity."

Meanwhile Kitty once more returned through the orchard. She began to sing a gay song to herself. She had a very sweet voice, and was carolling wild notes now high up in the air – "Begone, dull care; you and I shall never agree."

The girls sitting under the finest of the cherry trees heard her as she sang.

"There can't be much wrong with her," said Mary Bateman, with a sigh of relief. "Hullo, Kitty, no bad news, I hope?"

"There is bad news, but I can't talk of it now," said Kitty. "Come, what shall we do? We need not stay under the trees any longer surely, need we? Let's have a right good game – blind man's buff, or shall we play hare and hounds."

"Oh, it's much too hot for hare and hounds," said Edith King.

"Well, let's do something," said Kitty; "we all ought to be very happy on a half-holiday, and I don't mean to be miserable. Now, then, start something. I'll go and hide. Now, who will begin?"

Kitty laughed merrily; she glanced from one to the other of the girls, saw that their eyes were shining with a queer mixture of curiosity and sympathy, and felt that she would do anything in the world rather than gratify them.

"After all," she said to herself, as she ran wildly across the cheery orchard, "poor old Tommy and I will have our holidays together, for at the very best, even if father has not lost that money, I will have to stay here during the holidays. Oh, father! oh, father! how am I to live without you? Oh, father, dear, this is too cruel! I know, I am certain you have lost the money, or you would not be going to India away from your own, own Kitty."

She crushed down a sob, reached a little summer-house, into which she turned, pulled down some tarpaulin to cover her, and, crouching in the corner, lay still, her heart beating wildly.

"Begone, dull care," she whispered stoutly under her breath; and then she added, with a sob in her voice, "whatever happens, I won't give in."

That evening was a time of great excitement in the school, for the programme for the Cherry Feast was to be publicly announced, and the girls felt that there was further news in the air.

Immediately after early tea, between five and six o'clock, Mrs. Clavering called Kitty into the oak parlor.

"My dear," she said, "I want to have a talk with you."

Some of the wild light had gone out of Kitty's eyes by this time, and the flush had left her cheeks, leaving them somewhat pale.

"Yes, Mrs. Clavering," she said; "what is it?"

"I want you, my dear little girl, not to keep all your troubles to yourself."

"But what am I to do?" said Kitty, standing first on one leg and then on the other.

"Hold yourself upright in the first place, dear. After all, the laws of deportment ought to be attended to, whatever one's trouble."

Kitty gave an impatient sigh.

"There you are," she exclaimed, "that's what makes you so very queer; that's what makes it almost impossible for me to bear the restraint of school. When – when your heart is almost breaking, what does it matter how you stand?"

"My dear child, you will find in the events of life that it greatly matters to learn self-control."

"I have self-control," said Kitty, with a quiver in her lips.

"Well, dear, I hope you will prove it, for I fear, I greatly fear, that you are about to have a bad time."

"Oh, I am having a bad time," said Kitty; "don't you suppose that I am not suffering. I am suffering horribly, but I won't let anybody know – that is, if I can help it. I am not going to damp the pleasure of the others; you know that father is going, and I am his only child. He is coming just once to say good-bye to me; yes, he promises me that even in the telegram. He will come in about a fortnight from now, just a week before the Cherry Feast. Oh, I am miserable, I am miserable!"

All of a sudden the poor child's composure gave way, she covered her face with her trembling hands, and burst into a great flood of weeping.

A look of relief crossed Mrs. Clavering's face.

"Now she will be better," she said to herself; "she will understand what I have to say to her better. Shall I say it to her now or shall I wait until the morning? It is very hard; perhaps she had better know all at once."

So Mrs. Clavering led the weeping girl to the nearest sofa, and presently she stole her arm round her waist, and coaxed her to lay her head on her shoulder, and by and by she kissed the tired, flushed little face.

Kitty, who had the most loving heart in the world, returned her embrace, and nestled close to her, and felt in spite of herself a little better than she had done before.

"I know it is very bad, dear," said Mrs. Clavering, "but we can talk about it now if you like."

"I don't know that there is anything to say," said Kitty; "he would not have gone but for –"

"But for what, my child!"

"But for that dreadful money. He was very anxious when he sent me here. Oh, perhaps, I ought not to say anything about it."

"I think you may, Kitty, for I know, dear. I had a long letter from your father this morning. He told me then news which I considered very sad. You know, my love, that this is an expensive school. All the girls who come here pay well; most of the girls who are here have rich fathers and mothers."

"Oh, I know that," interrupted Kitty; "and how I hate rich fathers and mothers! Why should only rich people have nice things?"

"Then you do like this school, don't you, my love?"

"As much as I could like any place away from father; but what did he say this morning, Mrs. Clavering?" Kitty started restlessly and faced her governess as she spoke.

"He said, dear, that he must go to India because he had lost a very large sum of money. He said he would send you a telegram as soon as he had made arrangements, as there was no good troubling you before. He thought it best you should know by telegram, as the sight of the telegram itself would slightly prepare you for the bad news. But, my dear little Kitty, in some ways there is worse to follow, for your father cannot afford to pay my fees, and you must leave Cherry Court School at the end of this term."

Kitty sat silent. This last news, very bad in itself, scarcely affected her at first. It seemed a mere nothing compared to the parting from her beloved father.

"Yes," she said at last, in a listless voice, "I must leave here."

"I will keep you with me, darling, until the end of the vacation." Kitty gave a perceptible shudder. "I am going to the seaside with Florence Aylmer, and you shall come with us. I will try and give you as good a time, dear little Kitty, as ever I can, but it would not be fair to the other girls to keep you here for nothing."

"No, of course it would not be fair," said Kitty. "And where am I to go," she added, after a very long pause, "when the vacation is over, when the girls come back here again at the end of August?"

"Then, my dear child, I greatly fear you will have to go and stay with your father's cousin, Miss Dartmoor, in Argyleshire."

"Helen Dartmoor!" said Kitty, suddenly springing to her feet, "father's cousin, Helen Dartmoor! She came to stay with us for a month after mother died, and if there is a person in the whole world whom I loathed it was her. No, I won't go to her; I'll write and tell father I can't – I won't; it shan't be. Nothing would induce me to live with her. Oh, Mrs. Clavering, you don't know what she is, and she – why, she doesn't speak decent English, and she knows scarcely anything. How am I to be educated, Mrs. Clavering? I could not do it."

"There is a school not far from Miss Dartmoor's; of course, not a school like this, but a school where you can be taught some things, my poor child."

"I won't go to Helen Dartmoor – I won't!" said Kitty, in a passionate voice.

"I fear there is no help for it, my love; but when you see your father he will tell you all about it. I wish with all my heart, I could keep you here, but I greatly fear there is no help for it."

"And is that all you have to say?" said Kitty, rising slowly as she spoke.

"Yes, dear, all for the present."

"Then I am a very miserable girl. I'll go away to my room for a little. I may, may I not?"

"On this occasion you may, although you know it is the rule that none of the girls go to their dormitories during the daytime."

Kitty left the room, walking very slowly. She had scarcely done so before a loud ring, followed by a rat-tat on the knocker of the front door, was heard through the house.

A moment later the door of Mrs. Clavering's oak parlor was flung open, and Sir John Wallis entered the room.

Sir John Wallis was the great man in the neighborhood.

He was the owner of Cherry Court School, renting the house and beautiful grounds to Mrs. Clavering year by year. He was an unmarried man, and took a great interest in the school. He was a very benevolent, kindly person, and Mrs. Clavering and he were the closest friends.

"Ah, my dear madam," he said, bowing now in his somewhat old-fashioned way, and then extending his hand to the good lady, "I am so glad to see you at home. How are you and how are the girls?"

"Oh, very well, Sir John."

"But you look a little bit worried; what is wrong?"

"Well, the fact is, one of my girls, Kitty Sharston – "

"That pretty, queer-looking half-wild girl whom I saw in church on Sunday?"

"The same; she is the daughter of Major Sharston, a very estimable man."

"Sharston, Sharston, I should think he is. Why, he is an old brother officer of mine; we served together in the time of the Crimea. Anything wrong with Sharston! What's up, my dear madam, what is up!"

"Well, it's just this," said Mrs. Clavering. "Major Sharston has lost a lot of money, and is obliged to take an appointment in India, and he cannot afford to leave poor Kitty at the school longer than till the end of term. I intend to have her as my guest during the holidays, but afterwards she must go to an old cousin in Scotland, and the poor child has little chance of ever being very well educated. She is very much shaken by the blow."

"But this is fearful," said Sir John, "fearful! What can we do?"

"Nothing, I am afraid," said Mrs. Clavering. "Nothing would offend Major Sharston more than for his daughter to accept charity in any form. He is a very proud man, and Kitty, when all is said and done, although very wild and needing a lot of training, has got a spirit of her own. She will be a fine girl by and by."

"And a beautiful one to boot," interrupted Sir John. "Well, this is terrible; what can we do?"

"Nothing," repeated Mrs. Clavering again.

Sir John looked very thoughtful.

"Is it to-night," he said, "you announce your programme for the Cherry Feast?"

"Yes," answered the good lady.

"Then I have a crow to pluck with you; you never sent me notice to attend."

"I did not, for I thought you would be away, but will you come in this evening, Sir John, we shall all be delighted to see you?"

Sir John considered for a moment.

"I will," he said, "and you know I always offer a prize of my own, which is to be given at the Cherry Feast. Now, why should not we on this occasion offer a prize which Kitty Sharston runs a chance of winning, and which would save her from leaving Cherry Court School?"

Mrs. Clavering shook her head.

Sir John bent forward and began to speak eagerly.

"Now, come," he said, "I think I can manage it. Could it not be done in this way?" He spoke in a low tone, and Mrs. Clavering bent her head to listen.

"But, even if you did offer such a prize," she said, "which in itself would be very valuable, what chance has Kitty of winning it? She is not particularly forward in any of her studies, and then the girls who did not want it would get it."

"I am persuaded that Kitty has plenty of ability," said Sir John.

"I quite agree with you, and to work for such a prize would be an immense stimulus; but then, you know, the feast comes on so soon, and there are only three weeks in which to prepare."

"We can manage it by means of a sort of preliminary canter," said the baronet, in a musing tone; "I am sure we can work the thing up. Now, let us put our heads together and get some idea into shape before to-night. That child must be saved; her father's feelings must be respected. She must stay here and be under your wing, and I will go and have a chat with Sharston and see if I cannot make life endurable to the poor little girl, even though he is away in India."

"Well, it is very nice your being a friend of Major Sharston's. If you will stay here for about half an hour while I am attending to something else, I will come back and we will see what scheme we can draw up."

"Good," said Sir John, "and don't hurry back, for I am going to put on my considering-cap. This thing must be managed by hook or by crook."

CHAPTER IV.

SIR JOHN'S GREAT SCHEME

It was in this way that the great prize which caused such excitement in Cherry Court School was started.

It was called the Scholarship prize, and was a new and daring idea of the early seventies. Girls were not accustomed to big prizes in those days, and scholarships were only in vogue in the few public schools which were then in existence.

Sir John and Mrs. Clavering between them drew up a scheme which put every other idea into the shade, for there was a great honor to be conferred as well as a very big money prize, and the girls were stimulated to try their very best. It was arranged that the prize was to be competed for between this day in early June and the day when the Cherry Feast was held by the entire Upper school, but that after that date the competitors were only to number three. The three girls who came out in the first list at the time of the Cherry Feast were to compete for the great prize itself in the following October, and Mrs. Clavering had made private arrangements with Sir John to keep Kitty at the school, in case she came out one of the first three, until October, when the prize itself was to be won.

There were three tests which were to qualify for the prize. First and above all, good conduct; an unselfish, brave, noble character would rank very high indeed. Second would come neat appearance and admirable deportment, which would include graceful conversation, polite manners and all those things which are more or less neglected in modern education; and last of all would come the grand educational test.

Thus every idea of the school would be turned more or less topsy-turvy, for Sir John's scheme was so peculiar and his prize so munificent that it was worth giving up everything else to try for.

The prize itself was to consist of a free education at Cherry Court School for the space of three years; accompanying it was a certificate in parchment, which in itself was to be considered a very high honor; and thirdly, a locket set with a beautiful ruby to represent a cherry, which was the badge of the school.

When the great day arrived it was decided that the happy winner of this great prize would receive the fees for a year's schooling in a purse presented to her by Sir John himself, also the scroll of merit and the beautiful ruby locket.

The news of Sir John's bounty and the marvelous prize which was to be offered to the fortunate girls was the talk of the entire school. Even Kitty, who little guessed how deeply she was concerned in the matter, could scarcely think of anything else. It diverted her mind from her coming sorrow. On the day that the prize was formally announced she sat down to write to her father to inform him on the subject.

"It is too wonderful," she wrote; "I was the most miserable girl in all the world when I got your telegram. I scarcely knew what I was doing, and then Mrs. Clavering took me into her oak parlor and told me still further bad news. That I – oh, father dear, oh, father – that I was to go and live with Helen Dartmoor. How could you think of it, father? But there, she said it had to be, and I felt nearly wild. You don't know what I was suffering, although I tried so very hard to be brave. I am suffering still, but not quite so badly, for what do you think happened in the evening.

"You know, or perhaps you don't know, that at the end of summer there is always such a glorious day – it is called Cherry Feast Day, and is given in honor of the school, which is called Cherry Court School. The whole day is given up to festivities of every sort and description, and all the neighborhood are invited to a great big Cherry Feast in the evening.

"The feast is held in the walled-in garden, which is lit with colored lanterns. In the very centre of the garden is a grass sward, the greenest grass you ever saw, father, and, oh, so smooth – as smooth as velvet, and on this grass, lit with fairy lamps, the girls dance all kinds of stately, wonderful, old-fashioned dances, and the neighbors sit round and watch, and then at the end we all go into the house, into the great oak hall in the middle, and Mrs. Clavering gives the prizes to the lucky girls.

"Of course, feasts of cherries are the order of the hour, and we wear cherry ornaments if possible. You cannot imagine how full of cherries we are in the school, even to cherry-colored ribbons, you know.

"Well, yesterday, when your dreadful telegram came, was the day when we were to draw up a programme for the Cherry Feast, and when all we girls came into the oak parlor in the evening – I mean all the girls of the Upper school, for the little ones, although they enjoy the feast splendidly at the time, are never allowed to know much of the preparations – well, when we were all in the oak parlor who should come in but Mrs. Clavering and such a tall, stately, splendid-looking man. His name is Sir John Wallis, and it seems, father dear, that he knows all about you, for he called me up afterwards and spoke to me, and he put his arm round my waist, and when he said good-bye he even kissed me, and he said that you and he were some of the heroes before Sebastopol. Oh, father, he did speak so splendidly of you, and he looked so splendid himself, I quite loved him, I did really. But there, how I am digressing, father!

"Mrs. Clavering gave out the programme for the day – the usual sort, you know, the dancing on the lawn in the evening, and the crowds of spectators, and the assembling in the big hall for the prizes to be given out to all the lucky girls who had won them.

"Of course, I won't get any this year. I have not been at school long enough, although I am trying and working very hard. Well, Mrs. Clavering read out the usual programme and we all stood by and listened, and I could not help glancing at Sir John, although I had not spoken to him then, and did not know, not a bit of it, that he knew you, darling, precious father.

"But all of a sudden Sir John himself came forward and he took Mrs. Clavering's place on the little rostrum, as they call it, and he spoke in such a loud, penetrating, and yet beautiful voice, and he said that he, with Mrs. Clavering's permission, had a scheme to propose.

"He began by saying how he loved the school, how he had always loved it, how his own mother had been educated at Cherry Court School, and how he thought there was no school like it in the world, and then he said that he was anxious, now that he had returned home to live and was growing an old man himself, to do something for the school, and he proposed there and then to offer it a Scholarship.

"Do you know what a scholarship is, father? I thought only men won scholarships. Well, anyhow, he did offer a Scholarship, such a magnificent one. It was to be held by the girl who was best in conduct, best in deportment, and best in her educational work, in the following October, and she was to hold it for three years, and what do you think the scholarship was?

"Oh, was there anything so splendid! A lovely, lovely gold locket with a ruby cherry on the right side and a wonderful inscription on the left side, and a parchment scroll, father, in which the full particulars of the great Scholarship were written down, and besides that, a purse of money. Oh, father, a girl would not mind taking money in that way, would she? – and what was the money for? – it was to pay all her fees for a year.

"Every expense connected with the school was to be met by this wonderful purse of money; she was to be educated and called the Cherry Court Scholarship girl, and it was to be a wonderfully proud distinction, I can tell you, and at the end of the year Sir John Wallis was to give another purse of money, and at the end of that year another purse of money, so that the lucky girl who won the Scholarship was to be educated free of expense for three whole years.

"Oh, father, father! I mean to try for it – I mean to try with all my might and main. I don't suppose I'll succeed, but I shall have such a fit of trying – you never knew anything like it in your life. But do you know, perhaps, that what Kitty tries for with all her might and soul she generally wins.

"Oh, dear father, this has made me quite happy and has taken off the worst of my great pain. I feel now that there is hope, for at the end of three years I shall be a well-educated girl – that is, if I win the Scholarship, and then perhaps you will allow me to come out to you to India. I am not without hope, now, but I should be utterly and completely devoid of it if I had to go and live with Helen Dartmoor.

"Your loving and excited daughter, KITTY."

CHAPTER V. FLORENCE

It began to be whispered in the school – at first, it is true, in very low tones and scarcely any words, but just a nod and a single glance – that Mrs. Clavering was very anxious that Kitty should win the Scholarship.

There was really no reason for this rumor to get afloat, but beyond doubt the rumor was afloat, was in the air, and was talked of by the girls – at first, as I have said, scarcely at all, but by and by more and more plainly as the hours flew on towards the Cherry Feast.

Kitty herself knew nothing of these whispers. She was very busy planning and reconstructing all her previous ideas with regard to education. Her first object was to come out one of the happy three who were to compete for the Scholarship in the coming October. If she succeeded in this she felt sure that all would be well. She began now eagerly to examine her companion's faces. Sometimes they turned away from her bright, almost too bright, eyes, but then again they would look at her with a certain compassion.

It would be very nice, they all thought, to win the Scholarship – there was no girl at Cherry Court School who would not feel proud to get so great a prize – but they also knew that what would be merely nice for them was life or death for poor Kitty Sharston, and yet nothing had been told them; they only surmised that there was a wish in Mrs. Clavering's breast that Kitty should be the lucky girl.

On a certain afternoon about a week before the Cherry Feast, Mabel and Alice Cunningham, with Florence Aylmer and Edith King, were once more assembled under one of the cherry trees in the cherry orchard.

"I am sure of it," said Alice. "Of course, it is nothing that I have heard, but it is a sort of look in Mrs. Clavering's face, and she is so eager to give Kitty all sorts of help. She has her by herself now every evening to coach her for an hour."

"Well, for my part, I don't call it a bit fair," said Florence Aylmer.

"Florry! Oh, surely you are not jealous, and of poor little Kitty?"

"I am not exactly jealous – oh, no, I am not jealous," said Florence, "but it rather takes the heart out of one. If after all one's trouble and toil and exertion one gets the thing and then Mrs. Clavering is discontented and Kitty Sharston's heart is broken, I don't see the use of having a big fight – do you, Mabel? do you, Edith?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Edith; "I only feel puzzled; perhaps it is a mere suspicion and there is no truth in it."

"I cannot imagine, if it is really Sir John's wish that Kitty should be the successful competitor, why he does not give her the money straight away and end the thing," said Florence again.

"But, you see, he could not do that," said Mabel, "for Kitty is very proud and –"

"Well, I don't like it," said Florence, "and I tell you what it is – now that the whisper has got into the air, I mean to know. I shall go straight to Mrs. Clavering and ask her. If it is true I for one will not enter the lists at all."

"But would you dare to ask her?" exclaimed Mabel, in a voice almost of awe. "You know, Mrs. Clavering, although she is the kindest woman in the world, never allows any liberties to be taken with her. I don't think you can dare to ask her, Florry – I really don't."

"Oh, I shall, all the same," replied Florence. "If this thing is fair and above board, and equal chances are given to us all, why, I shall go in for it and be delighted to have a chance, but if it is not, Kitty shall have it without much exertion, as far as I am concerned."

She got up restlessly as she spoke, and moved towards the house.

The day was a very hot one, and all the doors and windows stood wide open. Sir John Wallis was standing inside the porch talking to Mrs. Clavering.

Florence came slowly forward. Sir John held out his hand to her.

"Well, Miss Aylmer," he said, in his pleasant voice, "and how do the studies get on, and are you all agog to be one of the lucky three?"

"I am not at all sure about that," said Florence; "I was coming to you, Mrs. Clavering, to speak about it."

"Why, what can be wrong?" said the baronet; "I thought that you were one of the most promising pupils and had a very good chance."

"But what," said Florence, her face suddenly blazing into color, and her eyes fixing themselves first on Sir John's face and then on that of Mrs. Clavering, "what if you don't want me to win the prize!"

"Don't want you – what nonsense!" said Mrs. Clavering, but she colored faintly as she spoke.

Sir John gave Florence a very keen glance.

"I may as well speak out now that I am about it," continued the girl. "There is a rumor in the school – I cannot tell you who started it, but there is a rumor – that you, Sir John, want Kitty to get the prize."

"It is perfectly true that I should like her to get it," said Sir John, instantly, "but the prize shall be bestowed upon the girl who comes out best in deportment, best in conduct, and best in learning, whether she is Kitty Sharston or another. Now, that is all, Florence Aylmer. I have spoken. Don't, I beg of you, say a word of what you have just said to me to Kitty herself. You have all equal chances. If Kitty fails she fails. I shall be disappointed, but I shall honor the girl who wins the great prize all the same."

"Thank you," replied Florence. She entered the hall; a moment later Mrs. Clavering followed her.

"My dear," she said, "what is wrong with you? I would not know you with that expression on your face."

"Things seem very hard," said Florence. "At first, when the prize was mentioned, it seemed quite too delicious, for you know, dear Mrs. Clavering, that I am poor, too, and if I were to win the prize it would be only too delightful; but if you do not wish me to take it" – tears filled her eyes; one of them rolled down her cheeks.

"I do heartily wish you to have it if you really win it, Florence. The competition is an open one, rest assured of that; and now, my dear, cease to think unkind thoughts of Kitty, and, above all things, don't breathe a word of what you have just said to me to her."

"That I promise," said Florence, but she went upstairs feeling discontented and depressed.

She sat down to write a letter to her mother.

"Dear mother," she wrote, "we are trying for an extraordinary prize here, quite a valuable Scholarship, such as are given to men at the Universities, and I am going to have a big try for it, but I should like to talk things over with you. I wonder if Aunt Susan would rise to the occasion, and let me have a third-class return ticket to Dawlish, and if you, Mummy, could secure a tiny room for me next yourself. I want to spend a week with you during the coming holidays. I have a good deal to say and am rather anxious and miserable. Try and arrange it with Aunt Susan. It won't cost very much really, and I promise to return at the end of a week."

"Your loving daughter, "FLORENCE."

"P. S. – I shall eat very little and be satisfied with the plainest food. You might mention that to Aunt Susan when you are writing."

"P. S. 2. – There is a new girl at the school; she came just at the beginning of term, but I never mentioned her name to you before. She is called Kitty Sharston, and I think she has a very great chance of winning the Scholarship. She is rather an awkward kind of girl, but will be handsome by

and by. She is a great friend of Sir John Wallis, the man who is the patron of the school, and who is giving the Scholarship. I mean to have a good try for the Scholarship, Mummy, dear. Be sure you say so to Aunt Susan when you ask her for my third-class fare to Dawlish. Good-bye again, Mummy dear. FLORENCE."

Having written this letter Florence uttered a sigh of relief, put it into its envelope, addressed it, stamped it, and ran downstairs to put it in the school letter-box. Just as she was in the act of doing so the chaise drew up at the front door, a tall soldierly man got out, he came into the porch, and just as he was about to ring the bell, his eyes met those of Florence.

"This is Cherry Court School, is it not?" he said, taking off his hat to the girl.

"Yes," replied Florence; "can I do anything for you, sir?"

"My name is Major Sharston. I have come to see my daughter; can you tell me where I shall find her?"

"Are you indeed Kitty's father?" said Florence, her heart now shining out of her eyes. She had beautiful eyes, dark grey with very long, black lashes. Her face, which was somewhat pale, was quite quivering with emotion.

"Yes, I am Kitty's father," was the reply. "Shall I go into the house, and will you be kind enough to tell her that I am here; or perhaps," added the Major, looking as wistful as Florence herself, "you might take me to her straight away?"

"I will take you to her straight away, that's just it," said Florence. She turned back to drop her letter into the school letter-box, and then conducted the Major across the lawn and into the outer garden. In this garden every old-fashioned flower imaginable bloomed and thrived, and reared its graceful head. The Major walked down through great lines of tall hollyhocks and peonies of every color and description. Then he passed under a sweet-briar hedge and then along a further hedge of Scotch roses, red and white; and the scent from mignonette and sweet peas and the sweet-briar and the roses came up to his nostrils. Never to the longest day of his life did the Major forget the sweet scent of the old-fashioned garden and the pain at his heart all the time, for he was going to see Kitty, to bid her good-bye for years – perhaps, who could tell? for ever.

Florence seemed to guess some of his feelings, though she did not know the actual story, for Kitty was very reserved and kept her troubles to herself. The Major made no remark about the garden, which in itself was somewhat curious, for strangers were always in raptures over this old-world garden, with its yew-trees cut in quaint shapes, and its high walls, and its flowers, which seemed, every one of them, to belong to the past.

At last the Major and Florence reached the postern-gate which opened into the cherry orchard, and then Florence stood still and raised her voice and called, "Kitty! Kitty Sharston!" and there came an answering call, clear and high as a bird's, and the next instant Kitty, in her white summer dress, was seen emerging from under the cherry-trees. She saw her father, uttered a cry half of rapture, half of pain, and the next instant was clasped in his arms. Florence saw the Major's arms fold around Kitty, and a queer lump rose in her throat and she went away all by herself. Somehow, at that moment she felt that she shared Mrs. Clavering's wish that Kitty Sharston should get the prize.

"Although it means a great deal to me, a great deal more than anyone can guess," thought Florry to herself, "for Aunt Susan is never very kind to the dear little mother, and she makes such a compliment of giving her that money term after term, and she insists on doing everything in the very cheapest way. Why will she not," continued Florence, looking down at her dress as she spoke, "why will she not give me decent clothes like other girls! I never have anything pretty. It is brown holland all during the summer, the coarsest brown holland, and it is the coarsest blue serge during the winter; never, never anything else – no style, no fashion, no pretty ribbons, not even a cherry ribbon for my hair, and so little pocket-money, oh! so little – only a penny a week. What can a girl do with a penny a week? Of course, she does allow me a few stamps, just a very few, to send Mummy letters, but she does keep me so terribly close. Sometimes I can scarcely bear the

life. Oh, what a difference the Scholarship would make, and Sir John Wallis would think a great deal of me, and so would Mrs. Clavering. Why, I should be the show girl of the school, the Cherry Court Scholarship girl; it would be splendid, quite splendid! But then Kitty, poor Kitty, and what a look the Major had on his face! I wonder what can be wrong? Oh dear! oh, dear! my heart is torn in two. Why do I long beyond all words to win the prize, and why, why do I hate taking it from Kitty Sharston?"

CHAPTER VI. KITTY AND HER FATHER

Meanwhile the Major and Kitty went away by themselves. As soon as Kitty had hugged her father, one close, passionate, voiceless hug, she released him, stepped back a pace, looked him in the face, and then said eagerly, "Come away quickly, father; there is a meadow at the back of the cherry orchard which we can have quite to ourselves. Come at once. Did Mrs. Clavering send you out here? How good of her to let me see you alone!"

"She does not even know that I have come, Kitty," replied her father. "I met a girl – I don't know what her name is – just as I reached the porch, and she took me to you. I cannot stay very long, my love, as I must get back to Chatham to-night."

"All right," said Kitty; "let us make for the meadow; there is a big oak-tree and we can sit under it and no one need see us. We must be alone all, all during the time that you are here."

The Major said nothing. Kitty linked her hand through his arm. She was feeling wildly excited – her father and she were together. It might be an hour, or it might be two hours, that they were to spend together, but the time was only beginning now. They were together, and she felt all the warm glow of love, all the ecstasy of perfect happiness in their reunion.

They reached the oak-tree in the meadow, the Major sat down, and Kitty threw herself by his side.

"Well, Kitty," he said, "what is this that I hear? I read your letter; it is quite a wonderful letter, little girl. It was the sort of letter a brave girl would write."

"The sort of letter a girl would write whose father was a hero before Sebastopol," said Kitty.

"What has put that in you head, my darling?"

"Sir John Wallis spoke of it. Oh, father dear, won't you go and see Sir John Wallis – he is so nice and so kind? You were both heroes before Sebastopol, were you not, father dearest, you and he?"

"We were in the trenches and we suffered a good bit," said the Major, a grim smile on his face, "but those are bygone times, Kitty."

"All the same they are times that can never be forgotten while English history lasts," said Kitty with a proud sparkle in her eyes.

"Well, no, little girl, I don't suppose England will ever forget the men who fought for her," replied the Major; "but we won't waste time talking on these matters now, my child; we have much else to say."

"What, father?"

"Well, your letter for instance; and you greatly dislike going to stay with Helen Dartmoor?"

Kitty's face turned pale; she had been rosy up to now. The roses faded out of her cheeks, then her lips turned white, and the brightness left her eyes.

"I should hate it," she said; "there are no other words."

"And you think there is just an off chance that you may win this wonderful Scholarship?"

"I mean to have the biggest try a girl ever had, and you know your Kitty," replied the girl.

"Yes, I know my brave, brave Kitty, the girl who has clung to her father through thick and thin, who has always tried to please him, who has a spirit of her own."

"Which I inherit from you," said Kitty. "Oh, I have lots of faults; I can be so cheeky when I like, and so naughty about rules, but somehow nothing, nothing ever frightens me, except the thought of going to Helen Dartmoor. You see, father, dear, it would be so hopeless. You cannot take the hope out of anybody's life and expect the person to do well, can you, father? Do speak, father – can you?"

"No, my child, I know that, but even if you have to go to her, Kitty, remember that I am working very hard for you – that as soon as possible I will make a home for you, and you shall come to me."

"How long will you be in India, father?"

"I do not know, my child. The appointment which I have just received under Government I can, I believe, retain as long as I please. My idea is, darling, to do very good service for our Government, and to induce them to send me into a healthy place."

"But where are you going now?" said Kitty; "Is the place not healthy, is your life to be endangered?"

"No, I am too seasoned for that," replied the Major, in a very cheerful tone which, alas! he was far from feeling. "You need not be a scrap anxious, my love," he added; "the place would not suit a young thing like you, but a seasoned old subject like myself is safe enough. Never you fear, Kitty mine."

"But go on, father; you have more to say, haven't you?"

"Yes, Kitty, I have more to say and the time is very brief. If you win the Scholarship, well and good. You will be well educated, and my mind will be relieved of an untold load of care. But, of course, darling, there is a possibility of your failing, for the Scholarship is an open one, and there are other girls in the school, perhaps as clever, as determined, as full of zeal as you, my Kitty."

"I am afraid, father, dear, there are other girls much cleverer than your Kitty, who know a vast lot more, and who are very full of zeal. But," added the young girl, and now she clasped her hands and sprang to her feet, "there is no one who has the motive I have, and this will carry me through. I mean first of all to come out one of the lucky three – that's certain."

"When is the preliminary examination to take place, Kitty?"

"On the day of the Cherry Feast," replied Kitty.

"Well, dear, I have been thinking matters over. If you fail you fail, but I am determined to give you this chance. I shall see Mrs. Clavering before I leave and arrange that you are to stay with her until October; then if you win the Scholarship your future is arranged; you take your three years' education, and then by hook or by crook, my darling, you come out to me to India, for by then, unless I am vastly mistaken, I shall have got into a hill station where it will be safe for you to stay with me."

"Oh, you darling, how heavenly it will be!" said Kitty. She clung close to her father, flung her arms round his neck, laid her head on his breast, and looked at him with eyes swimming in tears.

"Oh, I am not a bit unhappy, though I cry," she said, "it is only because I feel your goodness so much, for though I would have tried away with Helen Dartmoor I should not have had the chance I shall have here, for Mrs. Clavering is very good, and I know she wants me to get the prize, only she feels that I must compete fairly with the other girls."

"Of course, you must compete fairly with the other girls, Kitty," said her father; "if I thought there was any special favoritism in this, well – " His bronzed cheeks flushed, an indignant light fired his eyes.

"What, father?"

"I am a proud man, Kitty, and Helen Dartmoor is your cousin, and would keep you for the very small sum which it is in my power to offer her."

"Your pride shall not be hurt, father, darling. I will win the Scholarship honorably and in open fight."

"That is my own Kitty."

"I vow I'll win it," said the girl.

The Major smiled at her. "You must not be too sure," he said, "or you will be doubly disappointed if you fail. And now there is one thing more to be said, and then we can talk on other matters. If you do fail, my Kitty, you will go to Helen Dartmoor with a heart and a half."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you will go to her and not allow hope to die out of your breast; you will go as a brave girl should, making the best of what seems an adverse circumstance. If you do this, Kitty, it will be severe discipline, but not too severe discipline for a soldier's daughter. Never forget that, my dear, and that, one way or other, at the end of the three years you come out to me."

"When I come out to you," said Kitty, "I want you to be proud of me. I want you to say, 'My girl is a lady, my girl knows things, she is not ignorant, she can deport herself well, and act well and she knows things.' But in any case, father, whether I am ignorant or whether I am not, I promise – yes, I promise – to make the best of circumstances."

"Then God bless you, child, you are your mother's own girl."

"And yours – yours," said Kitty, in a low tone of mingled pain and love.

"We will go back to the house, and I will see Mrs. Clavering, and afterwards I will ask her permission to let me take you up to see Sir John Wallis, for, strange as it may seem, I have lost sight of Wallis for quite fifteen years – such are the fortunes of war, my love. We were brothers, standing shoulder to shoulder during a momentous year of our lives, and since then Sir John retired from the service, and I have heard and seen nothing of him. It was almost immediately afterwards, I believe, that he came in for the great property and the title which he now possesses. But come, Kitty, we have not much time to lose."

Kitty never forgot the rest of that afternoon, for she and her father had so much to do, so many people to see, and so many things to arrange, that time flew on wings, and it was not until the last moment when the parting really came that she realized all it meant to her.

There was a hurried clasp in the strongest, bravest arms in all the world, a brief kiss on her cheek, a look in her father's eyes which was enough to stimulate the highest in any girl's heart, and then the parting was over.

The Major had left Cherry Court School, having given all possible directions for his little girl's comfort and well-being, and had gone away sorely broken down, crushed to the earth himself, but leaving Kitty with a courage which did not falter during the days which were to come. For the Major knew that, strong as he was, he was going to a part of India where brave men as strong as he are stricken down year after year by the unhealthy climate, and three years even at the best was a long time to part with a girl like Kitty, particularly when she was the only child he had, the light of his eyes, the darling of his heart.

CHAPTER VII. CHERRY-COLORED RIBBONS

The day of the Cherry Feast dawned bright and glorious. The girls awoke in the early morning of that splendid summer day, feeling that something very delightful was about to happen. One after another they peeped out and saw the sun on the grass and heard the birds sing and felt the soft zephyrs of the summer breeze blowing on their cheeks. Then they returned back again to their different little beds in their different dormitories, and remarked with intense satisfaction that the long wished-for day had come, and that to-morrow they were all going home – home for the holidays. Could anything be more fascinating, stimulating, and delightful? And each girl hoped to go back again to the beloved home with honor, for Mrs. Clavering had a wonderful way with her pupils, a very stimulating way, and she so arranged her prizes and her certificates that no girl who had really worked, who had really taken pains, was excluded from distinction. It was only the hopelessly idle, the hopelessly disobedient, who could leave Cherry Court School without some token of its mistress's sympathy, regard, and encouragement.

Kitty Sharston was too new a scholar to expect to get any reward in the ordinary sense of this term, but, all the same, she had worked fairly well, and during the last three weeks had tackled her studies and regulated her conduct like a veritable little Trojan. Every moment of Kitty's day was now marked out. There was never an instant that she was off guard with regard to herself; there was no time left in her busy life for reckless speeches and reckless deeds. The goal set before her was such a high one, the motive to struggle for pre-eminence was so strong, that Kitty was quite carried along by the current. Her natural keen intelligence stood her in good stead, her marks for punctuality, for neatness, for early rising were all good, and she had little, very little fear of the results of this afternoon's brief examination.

The examination was to be very short, and was to be conducted on this special occasion by no less a person than Sir John Wallis himself. Mrs. Clavering having reckoned up the marks, Mademoiselle Le Brun having given her testimony, Fraulein having given hers, and the English teachers having further testified to the industry of the pupils, the girls of the Upper school were to pass muster before Sir John, who was to decide without prejudice in favor of the lucky three who alone were to compete for the great Scholarship in October.

Florence and Kitty were in the same class in school, and up to the date of the offering of the Scholarship had been excellent friends. They were still friends as far as Kitty was concerned, for she was a generous-hearted girl, and although the winning of the prize meant everything almost in her life, did another girl take it from her fairly and honorably in open fight, she would resign it without a trace of ill-will or any sore feeling towards the winner. But there were things in Florence's life which made her now look aloof at Kitty. She had been receiving letters from her mother, and the mother had been asking the girl strange questions, and Mrs. Aylmer was not a woman of lofty principle nor of strong courage, and some of the jealous thoughts in Florence's heart had been fanned into flame by her mother's injudicious words. So on the day of the great Cherry Feast she awoke with a headache, and, turning away from Kitty, who looked at her with anxious, affectionate eyes, she proceeded to dress quickly and hurried off to the school-room.

The dormitory in which Kitty slept was a long, low room with a sloping roof. It ran the whole width of the house, and was occupied by Kitty herself, by Mabel and Alice Cunningham, by Edith King, and by Florence Aylmer. Each girl had her little cubicle or division curtained off from her fellows, where she could sleep and where she could retire, if necessary, into a sort of semi-solitude. But one-half of the dormitory was open to all the girls, and they often drew their curtains aside and chatted and talked and laughed as they dressed and undressed, for Mrs. Clavering, contrary to most

of the school-mistresses of her day, gave her girls a certain amount of liberty. They were not, for instance, required to talk French in the dormitories, and they were always allowed, provided they got into bed within certain limits and dressed within certain limits, to have freedom when in their rooms. They never dreamt of abusing these privileges, and better, healthier, brighter girls could not be found in the length and breadth of England.

"Well, I am glad the day has come at last," said Edith, as she rose that morning with a yawn. "Oh, dear, and it's going to be splendid, too. Kitty, what dress are you going to wear at the festival to-night?"

Kitty replied with a smile that she meant to wear her Indian muslin.

"And have you got your cherry-colored ribbons?" said Edith; "we all wear bunches of cherry ribbons in the front of our dresses and tying back our hair. Have you got yours, Kitty?"

"Yes," replied Kitty; "father sent me a quantity of cherry-colored ribbons last week."

She hardly ever mentioned her father's name, and the girls did not like to question her. Now she turned her head aside, and proceeded hastily with her dressing.

"Well, it is going to be a splendid day," said Alice, "and, you know, there are no lessons of any sort; all the examinations are over and the results will be known to-night; the day is to be a long and happy one – no lessons, nothing to do except to wander about and please ourselves; pack our trunks, of course, which will be truly a delightful occupation. Think of the joys of the evening and the further delights of to-morrow. I expect to reach home about six o'clock in the evening. When will you get to your place, Edith?"

"A little later than you," replied Edith, "for it is farther away, but father and mother have promised to come and meet me at Canterbury. I shall reach Canterbury about six o'clock in the evening. We have ten miles to drive then, so I don't suppose I shall be home till half-past seven. The boys are going to make a bonfire; there is to be no end of fun – there always is when I come home for the summer holidays."

Kitty gave a faint sigh and there came a cruel pang at her heart. She and Florence Aylmer were to spend the holidays together. She had tried to think she would enjoy this solitary time, but in her heart of hearts she knew that she had to make a great struggle with herself.

"But, never mind," she muttered now softly under her breath, "I shall spend most of the hours in studying; there is so much to get through before the Scholarship exam. comes off in October, and I know Florence will study, too, and, of course, I shan't be at all jealous of her, and if she does succeed in winning the prize, why, I will just remember father's words and make the best of things, whatever happens." But the next moment she was saying fiercely under her breath, "I shall win, I will win; whatever happens, I will, I must win."

The girls went down to breakfast, which was a very sociable meal that morning, the English tongue being allowed to be spoken, and the usual restrictions all being utterly withdrawn.

Florence appeared then and took her place at the table; she looked a little pale and untidy, and her eyes were red as if she had been secretly crying. More than one girl glanced at her and wondered what was the matter. When breakfast was over Kitty went up to Florence, slipped her hand through her arm, and pulled her out into the sunshine.

"Is anything wrong, Florry?" she said.

"Oh, it's only that beastly mean Aunt Susan," retorted Florence, shrugging her shoulders.

"Your Aunt Susan?"

"Yes, of course; you have heard me talk of her. I am dependent on her, you know; oh, it's the most hateful position for any girl!"

"I am very sorry, and I quite understand," said Kitty.

"I don't believe you do; you have never been put in such an odious plight. For instance, you have cherry-colored ribbons to wear to-night, have you not?"

"Such beauties," replied Kitty; "father sent them to me a week ago. A yard and a half to make the bunch for the front of my dress, and a yard and a half to tie up my hair – three yards; and such a lovely, lovely color, and such soft ribbon, corded silk on one side, and satin at the other. Oh, it is beautiful."

"Yes, of course, it is beautiful," said Florence; "you have told us about those ribbons a great many times." Florence could not help her voice being tart, and Kitty looked at her in some astonishment.

"But all the same," she said, "you're glad I have got cherry-colored ribbons, are you not?"

"I don't know," replied Florence, flushing; "I believe I hate you for having them. There, I'm nothing if I'm not frank."

"You hate me for having them? Oh, Florry, but you cannot be so mean."

"I wrote to Aunt Susan myself – there was no time to tackle her in a roundabout way through mother. I wrote to her and got her reply this morning. She sent me – what do you think? Instead of the beautiful ribbons which I asked for, three yards of which are absolutely necessary to make even a show of a decent appearance, six stamps! Six stamps, I assure you, to buy what I could for myself! Did you ever hear of anything so miserably mean? Oh, I hate her, I do hate her!"

"Poor Florence!" said Kitty; "but you must have the ribbons somehow, must you not?"

"I must; I dare not appear without. Mademoiselle Le Brun is going into Hilchester immediately after breakfast, and I am going to ask her to get me the best she can, but, of course, she will get nothing worth having for sixpence – a yard and a half at the most of some horrid cottony stuff which will look perfectly dreadful. It is mean of Aunt Susan, and you know, Kitty," continued Florence, her tone softening at the evident sympathy with which Kitty regarded her, "I am always so shabbily dressed; I wouldn't be a bit bad-looking if I had decent clothes. I saved up all the summer to have my muslin dress nicely washed for this occasion, but it's so thick and so clumsy and – oh, dear! oh, dear! sometimes I hate myself, Kitty, and when I look at you I hate myself more than ever."

"Why when you look at me? I am very sorry for you, Florence."

"Because you are so generous and so good, and I am just the other way. But there, don't talk to me any more. I must rush off; I want to have another look through those geography questions; there is no saying what Sir John Wallis may question us about to-night, and if I don't get into the lucky three who are to compete for the Scholarship, I believe I'll go off my head."

Florence dashed away as she spoke and rushed into the school-room, slamming the door behind her. Kitty stood for a moment looking after her. As she did so Mary Bateman, the stolid-looking girl in the Upper school, came slowly up.

"A penny for your thoughts, Kitty Sharston," she said.

"They are not worth even that," said Kitty. "Where are you going, Mary?"

"Into the cherry orchard; we are all to pick cherries for to-night's feast. By the way, will you be my partner in the minuet? You dance it so beautifully."

Kitty hesitated, and a comical look came into her face.

"You know we are to open the proceedings by dancing the old-fashioned minuet," continued Mary Bateman; "on the lawn, of course, with the colored lamps lighting us up. I believe I can do fairly well if I have you for my partner, for although you are awkward enough you dance beautifully."

"I'll be your partner if you like," said Kitty, with a sigh, "but look here, Mary, when is Mademoiselle Le Brun going into Hilchester?"

"I did not know she was going at all," replied Mary; "do you want her to buy you anything?"

"I am not quite sure, but I'd like to see her before she goes."

"Well, there she is, and there's the pony cart coming round. I expect she has to buy a lot of things for Mrs. Clavering. Run up to her if you want to give her a message, Kitty. Hullo, mademoiselle, will you wait a minute for Kitty Sharston – she wants to say something to you?"

But Kitty stood still. There was a battle going on in her heart. She had very little pocket-money, very little indeed, but when her father was saying good-bye to her he had put two new half-crowns into her hand.

"Keep them unbroken as long as you can, Kitty," he said. "The money will be something to fall back upon in a time of need." And five shillings was a large sum for the Major to give Kitty just then, and Kitty cherished those two half-crowns very dearly, more dearly than anything else in the world, for they had been her father's last, very last present to her.

But perhaps the hour of need had come. This was the thought that darted into her heart, for Florence did want those cherry-colored ribbons, and Florence's heart was sore, and things were nearly as bad for her as they were for Kitty herself. Kitty had a brief struggle, and then she made up her mind.

"One moment, mademoiselle; I won't keep you any time," she called out to the governess, who nodded back to her with a pleased smile on her face, for Kitty was a universal favorite.

Then the young girl rushed upstairs to her dormitory, unlocked her little private drawer, took out her sealskin purse, extracted one of the new half-crowns, and was down again by the little governess cart, whispering eagerly to Mademoiselle Le Brun, within the prescribed time.

"All right," said mademoiselle; "I'll do the very best I can."

"And have the parcel directed to Florence," said Kitty, "for I don't want her to know about my giving it to her; I am sure she would rather not. If there is any change from the half-crown you can let me have it back, can you not, mademoiselle?"

"I'll see to that," said mademoiselle; "there is Florence's own sixpence towards it, you know. Oh I daresay I can give you a shilling back and get very good ribbon."

"Well, be sure it is soft and satiny and with no cotton in it," called Kitty again, and then the governess cart rolled down the avenue and was lost to view.

Notwithstanding that she had only half a crown in that sealskin purse Kitty felt strangely exultant and happy when she ran back to the cherry orchard and helped her companions in gathering the ripe fruit.

She had put on a large blue apron, for cherries stain a good deal when they are as luscious as those in Cherry Court orchard, and quantities had to be picked, for it was the custom from time immemorial for each of the guests to take a basket of cherries away with them, and the baskets themselves – long, low, broad, and ornamental – were filled now first with cherry-leaves, and then with fruit, by the excited and happy girls.

After Kitty had spent an hour or two in the cherry orchard she ran into the house, washed her face and hands, smoothed her hair, and ran down to the school-room, for she too wanted to look through her examination papers. They were not difficult, and she was very quick and ready at acquiring knowledge, and she soon felt certain that she could answer all the questions, and, having folded them up, she replaced them in her desk.

It was the custom of the school that each girl should keep her desk locked, and Kitty now slipped the key of hers into her pocket. As she did so the door was opened and Florence came in. Florence looked pale and *distract*.

"Do you know," she said, "I have got the most racking headache; I wonder if you would hear me through my English History questions, Kitty. It would be awfully kind of you. I am so wretched about every thing and things seem so hopeless, and it is so perfectly miserable to think of spending all the holidays here, for I don't believe Mrs. Clavering is going to take us to the seaside after all. Really, I think life is not worth living sometimes."

"Oh, but it is," said Kitty, "and we are only preparing for life now – don't forget that, Florry."

"I can't take a high and mighty view of anything just now," said Florence; "I am cross, and that's a fact. I wish I wasn't going to the feast to-night. If it were not for the chance of being one of the lucky three in the Scholarship competition I wouldn't appear on the scenes at all, I vow I would not, with that horrid bit of cottony cherry-colored ribbon – yes, I vow I wouldn't. Why, Kitty, how you have stained your dress; you must have knelt on a cherry when you were picking them just now in the orchard."

"So I have; what a pity!" said Kitty. She glanced down at the deep red stain, and then added, "I'll run upstairs presently and wash it out."

"Well, don't catch cold, whatever you do. But stay, won't you first hear me my English History questions?"

Kitty immediately complied. Yes, Florence was stupid; she did not half know her questions; her replies were wide of the mark. Kitty felt at first distressed and then very determined.

"Look here, Florence," she said, "this will never do; you must work through that portion of English History all the afternoon, and I will help you to the very best of my ability. I happen to know the time of Queen Elizabeth so well, for it was a favorite time with my father. He always loved those old stories of the great worthies who lived in the time of Queen Elizabeth. Yes, I'll help you. Shall we read these chapters of history together this afternoon?"

"I cannot, I cannot," said Florence. "My head aches and everything seems hopeless. Why, if that is so, Kitty, I shan't even have a chance of being one of the lucky three."

"Oh, yes, you will – you must," said Kitty. "Half of the pleasure of the competition would be lost if you and I were not to work together during the holidays."

"Well, there is something in that," said Florence, brightening as she spoke. "I forgot when I spoke so dismally that you, too, were to spend the holidays here. By the way, has your father sailed yet?"

"On Monday last," said Kitty, in a very low voice. She turned her head aside as she spoke.

"I believe you are the bravest girl in the world," said Florence, stoutly; "but there, you are a great deal too good for me. I wish you were naughty sometimes, such as you used to be, daring and a little defiant and a little indifferent to rules, but you are so changed since the Scholarship has come to the fore. Does it mean a great deal to you, Kitty?"

"I can't talk of it," said Kitty, "I'd rather not; we are both to try for it; I believe it means a great deal to us both."

"It means an immensity to me," said Florence.

"Then it is not fair for us to talk it over when we are both going to try our hardest to win it, are we not?"

"If that is the case why do you help me with my English History?"

"Because I should like you to be one of the lucky three."

"Are you certain? Although I don't know this history very well, I shall be a dangerous rival, that I promise."

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