

Keeping my Word.

IN THREE PARTS.

('Sunday at Home.')

CHAPTER II.

Two days after, the report of our work was completed and read out at the close of morning school. It was the custom to give each girl's name with the number of marks gained in each branch of study. None interested me specially but Effie's and Norah's, before my own was read. Effie's was fairly good, but I was rather annoyed to find that Norah had nearly the full number of marks for arithmetic. Still I knew I must yet be a little ahead. Presently Miss Marshman came to my name, and following reports for other exercises, came one for arithmetic, which fairly struck me dumb.

'For arithmetic,' said Miss Marshman, 'there are no marks at all, not because the work has been done incorrectly, but because it has been left incomplete. Pupils are, of course, aware that unless an attempt at least is made to answer every question given in each branch, no exercise can receive commendation. Several sums were perfectly worked, but others were omitted altogether.'

Then followed the rest of the report, of which I heard not a word, either of my own or of my school-fellow's success. My cheeks were burning with indignation and disappointment. Vexed, not merely at losing the prize, but at being humiliated in this way before all the class, I was so angry I could scarcely keep my seat quietly, or restrain my tongue. My judgment was blinded by wilful passion, and I made up my mind during the few moments that I had for meditation that Effie was the culprit. She was so friendly with the hated Norah, she wanted her to be successful over my head; she had, therefore, taken some mean advantage and withheld a part of my exercise, or destroyed it. I worked myself up into a white heat of passion, and the instant the class dispersed, and I was free, I sought out the unsuspecting child, and charged her with the offence.

'So this is the way you treat your best friends, Effie,' I began, angrily. 'You had my exercises to take to the desk the other day, and you wanted your fine new friend to have the best of it, so you played me a shameful trick. Pray, what did you do with the rest of the sums? Perhaps you will be good enough to tell me that. You don't suppose I was so foolish as not to remember I finished them all?'

Effie turned to me astonished, her face flushed. She looked quite frightened at my violent manner and stern tones. This I chose to take for a sign of guilt, and added some further bitter reproaches, till the poor little girl did not know how to reply in self-defence.

'Oh, Ruth,' she faltered, when I paused and gave her an opportunity to speak, 'Oh, Ruth, what do you mean? You know I would never do anything so wicked. I wondered so to hear your report. Are you sure you didn't forget any of the sums?'

'Forget any!' I exclaimed contemptuously. 'As if I should forget what I wanted specially to do best of all. I filled three slates with the sums because I wanted plenty of room without crowding them. They were all perfect. I declare it is too bad to be cheated like this!'

Effie flushed yet deeper at the cruel insinuation, but she was really calmer than I,

and began to see at once where the mistake had been made. 'Three slates, Ruth?' she said, 'you only gave me two. You never fill more than two for your sums, and I did not think of asking for three.'

But I was in no mood to give the matter any quiet consideration, and I only answered angrily, 'Nonsense, Effie, don't make ridiculous excuses. You've spoilt all my chance, and I don't believe you care a bit. You think of nobody now but that stupid Norah, so you'd better go and take up with her, and leave me alone.'

'Oh, but Ruth,' pleaded Effie, as I turned away from her, 'Ruth, do listen; do talk about it. I think we can find out how it happened.'

'Hold your tongue,' I retorted. 'It's done now, and can't be helped, and it's all your fault, however it happened. It's no use to make up a tale about it now; I shan't listen to anything more. You're a mean little thing, and I won't speak to you for a month.' And with that I flounced out of the room, put on my hat and jacket, and started for home, leaving Effie to follow alone as best she could.

After my temper had somewhat cooled down and I had time to consider the matter calmly, I began to see that Effie had been quite right in the explanation she had given of the mistake. It was quite true that I generally filled but two slates with my sums and answers to arithmetic questions, and as we were clearing up in haste, I had evidently quite forgotten that a third should have been given to Effie to go up to the desk. I had, no doubt, carelessly left it with others on the table, some unused, and others with scraps of unfinished exercises, and these had all been collected and cleaned when our work was over.

This reflection, though it cleared Effie from any suspicion of guilt, was not a very consoling one for me, as whether the answers were right or wrong mattered little now; they had not been presented at the right time, and my chance was gone. But instead of reproaching myself for my hasty injustice and trying at once to make amends, I nursed my disappointment and vexation, and very unreasonably continued to look on poor little Effie as the cause of it all. I knew perfectly well that it was clearly my duty to own myself in the wrong; to go at once to Effie and ask her pardon for my cruel and hasty words, and though chiefly occupied still in the remembrance of my own disappointment, I had some vague sort of intention of making it all right again the next morning when we met, for I really loved Effie, and felt sorry to have grieved her.

But suddenly there flashed upon me the remembrance of my last words as I had abruptly left her—'You're a mean little thing, and I won't speak to you for a month.' I regretted them heartily. I would have given anything to recall them, but as they had once been spoken, I was too proud to go back from my word. I persuaded myself that it was only from a lofty regard for truth and rectitude that I was unwilling to break my word, indeed I rather prided myself on keeping a rash vow to the letter; but all the while I was really only cherishing a stubborn determination to show my schoolfellows that I, at least, when I said anything, meant it, and would stick to it at any cost. I remembered my scornful words about Florrie Richardson, and my boast before the whole class that I always 'kept my word,' and though I was not at all sure that the fulfilment of my

passionate threat would not be fully as tiresome to myself as it would be distressing to Effie, I was firmly resolved that nothing should induce me to speak to my little companion before the month was up.

We met as usual the next morning. Effie overtook me just as we reached school, and began hurriedly explaining how the unfortunate sums had been lost. I knew that what she said was quite true, that in fact I had nothing but my own carelessness to blame for the disaster, but, of course, I made her no answer; and when, wondering a little at my continued silence, and quite forgetting my foolish threat of the previous day, she paused and asked me a direct question, I turned away, and gave her no reply, hurrying into the porch and mixing purposely among a noisy throng of girls. I saw that Effie had not taken my words seriously, so as soon as we were seated in class I wrote on a slip of paper these words, and handed it round to her: 'You didn't keep back the sums, I know; but I said I wouldn't speak to you for a month, and I always keep my word.'

I watched the little girl's face cloud as she read the message. I can see it now—the pretty bowed head covered with sunny curls, and then the gentle brown eyes lifted a moment to mine; I think they were filled with tears. But I only just glanced up, and then plunged directly into my work.

Day after day went by, and still I 'kept my word.' I was not happy; far from it. I persuaded myself that I was exhibiting a grand example of constancy to truth, but my conduct certainly brought me no satisfaction. The simple fact was, that I was not a martyr to truth, but only a slave to my own pride and obstinacy. Effie and I still walked to school together occasionally. I in grim silence, she perfectly understanding that my resolution was fixed, chatting away to me, but expecting no answer.

March was now drawing to a close. The days were getting sunny and cheerful, and plenty of early spring flowers were peeping up in copse and hedge-row. Effie and I had often taken long rambles together on half-holidays, and we had promised ourselves, a few weeks before, that we would walk over one Saturday afternoon to Briermead Wood, where the earliest primroses were always to be found nestling under a sunny bank. But my foolish conduct had quite set aside any such enjoyment. A long expedition together with entire silence on my part could hardly afford either of us much pleasure.

It was Effie's birthday on the last day of the month. She had earnestly begged of me, through one of our school-fellows, to relax a little the fulfilment of my vows, and let the month of silence, which was quite as tedious to me as to herself, come to an end on that day, so that we might spend it happily together. This, however, I resolutely refused to do. Some of the girls laughed at me for 'making such a fuss about a few words,' girls who made and broke resolutions a dozen times a day. These I held in contempt. Others applauded me for my 'pluck,' and encouraged me to hold out to the end, and 'show I had some spirit.' This advice was congenial enough.

But there was one girl who counselled quite differently. Rose Gilham was quite fresh to the school, and no one had seemed much disposed to welcome her kindly. She was poor, and neither pretty nor clever. Rose ventured to plead for little Effie, and entreated me not to let this cold shadow