

## Keeping my Word.

## IN THREE PARTS.

('Sunday at Home.')

## CHAPTER I.

It was a bleak afternoon in early January; school-hours were just over at Miss Marshman's, and some of the girls were gathered round the school-room fire, ready to start for home, but delayed by the heavily falling sleet. Of course we were all chattering very eagerly together, glad to be relieved from the stern silence of study.

'How are you getting on with your comforter, Effie?' enquired one of the elder pupils of a sweet, shy-looking little girl at my side. Effie Conington was the youngest in our class, and such an engaging little creature that she was quite the pet of the school.

'I haven't done any more since you saw it, Hester,' was the reply. 'I showed it to Florrie Richardson, and she laughed at it, and said the needles were too big, and the stitches were crooked, and the wool was an ugly, old-fashioned color. Florrie can knit much better than that, she says, and will show me how to do it in a pretty new stitch. She has promised to bring me some lovely coral wool. Isn't it kind of her!'

The words were spoken very simply and trustfully, but several of the girls standing near tittered as Effie spoke, and Hester made no answer. I knew quite well what they meant, and more outspoken and indignant than the rest I burst out scornfully, 'Much coral wool you'll ever get from Florrie Richardson, Effie! Don't you know her better than that? She's always finding fault with other people and making fine promises, but she doesn't keep her word. Go on with your own wool and pins like a wise little girl, and don't listen to Florrie's tales and promises, or have anything to say to her. I hate people who don't keep their word.'

I spoke hotly and thoughtlessly, of course, for I did not for a moment really mean to say that I deliberately 'hated' my school-fellow because of her falling; but I had always had a great contempt for the fault which I thus so sweepingly condemned, for I had been brought up with the very strictest regard for truth and honor, an advantage which had very likely not fallen to the lot of Florrie Richardson. Little Effie opened her brown eyes wider at my words, and even ventured to defend her friend of whom I had spoken so slightly.

'Oh, Ruth,' she said, 'don't say so, Florrie is very kind to me. If she doesn't always keep her promises it is only because she forgets.'

'Forgets, indeed,' I retorted. 'Forgets, nonsense. If she says a thing she should remember it, and carry out what she has given her word for, come what may. I'd never say I'd do anything and not stick to it.'

Effie was silent, but one of the other girls suggested that I was putting it too strongly.

'One might promise,' she said, 'to do something very foolish or very wrong, and we ought not then to keep our word, I suppose.'

'Yes, we should,' I returned, stoutly defending my position. 'If we'd promised, it couldn't be wrong to keep it. If we didn't keep our word we should tell a lie, and that must be wrong. A promise is a promise, and it ought to be kept. None of you girls

can say I tell you anything I don't mean, out and out!'

With this rather boastful conclusion I turned away from my companions. The wintry storm had ceased, and all the day pupils were preparing to start for home. Of course I felt I had had quite the best of the argument, and as I was nearly the eldest, and generally at the head of my class, besides being somewhat domineering towards the others, no one dared to challenge my opinions any further.

I buttoned Effie's cloak, gave her her books and her knitting, and we set off together; Effie and I always went to and from school in company though we were not sisters, or even neighbors. Mrs. Conington had been an old friend of mother's many years ago. Just lately she had been left a widow in very poor circumstances, and had taken a little house in our village that she might be near to us; mother had warmly welcomed her former friend, and tried in every way to cheer her loneliness and brighten her somewhat heavy burden.

Effie was her only child, a sweet, affectionate, gentle little thing, whom everybody loved, and who was the one bright star of hope and happiness in her mother's darkened life. She was some years younger than I, and very submissive and quiet. It was easy to learn to love her very dearly, and she was far too meek to resent my somewhat patronizing care, or to dispute my authority which I was rather too fond of extending to unnecessary trifles. She looked up to me, too, the little innocent, trustful creature, as if I was a perfect paragon of all the virtues, which was, unfortunately, very wide of the truth.

As we walked briskly home through the deepening twilight Effie began chatting again about the work on which her heart was set.

'Do you really think, Ruth,' she said, 'that I had better go on with my comforter just as it is? I've done a good piece, you know, and I want to get it finished. It's for poor old Cram, the carrier. He's got such a bad cough, and mother thought it would help to keep the wind out when he has to ride such a long, long way on cold nights. But, Florrie,' she added, 'said it was such a dingy-looking thing.'

'If Florrie brings you the wool you shall undo all yours and begin afresh, Effie,' I said, 'but take my word for it, you'll never get any coral wool or anything else from Florrie Richardson. She'll just forget all about it. Her promises are not worth listening to, for she hardly ever keeps her word. I think it's very wicked,' I went on, indignantly, 'very wicked and untruthful to talk like that, and never mean half you say. I'd never go back from anything I'd once said; good or bad, I'd go through with it.'

Effie looked a little grave and doubtful at my last words, but if she had some dim idea that her oracle of wisdom might possibly be saying something very foolish, she made no remark, and a few minutes after we parted at her door.

My prediction was quite correct. Florrie Richardson never gave Effie either the wool, or the promised help with her work. I forbade Effie to speak of the matter to our school-fellows, and probably, as I had expected, the hastily-given promise never again crossed the mind of the kindly but thoughtless little girl. I listened to Effie's words of disappointment with a calm, I-told-you-so air, and encouraged my little friend in her diligent labor of love; in due time the comforter was finished and defied the

cutting east wind, as it curled cosily round the old carrier's throat.

One morning we were all specially hard at work over the review of our month's study, a sort of preparatory examination.

Slate and pencil in hand, we were all eagerly busy answering as fully and correctly as we could in the brief time allotted to us, a few test questions. I had set my heart on getting the arithmetic prize in the autumn, and very much of my chance of success would depend on my careful working of the sums now before the class. I gave the closest attention to my task, and as I was quick at figures, arithmetic being one of my favorite studies, I soon finished all the sums to my entire satisfaction. When our exercises were collected and piled up together at the close of the day for examination and correction, I was in high spirits, and felt quite secure of a good report of my work.

Effie gathered up the slates from our class, and I gave mine, among others, into her charge to carry to their place at the head-mistress's desk. She was as warmly interested in my success as I was myself, and I whispered to her as she came to my side, 'I've got on finely, Effie, I'm pretty sure of the top this month, anyway. Take the slates carefully, and mind they don't smear.'

Effie finished the duties of clearing the table, the share of the youngest in the class, carried all the finished exercises to their place, packed up the lesson-books on their shelves and cleaned and laid aside on the lockers all the slates that were done with. Then we started for home in a state of high good humor.

I dearly loved to have my own way; having once set my heart on carrying out a particular project, I was quite ready to 'go through fire and water' to accomplish my purpose. I had made no secret of my determination to secure the coveted prize, and I knew that I had but one serious rival in the class who was likely to oppose me. This was Norah Manton, a girl two years younger than myself, and to whom I had, for some unaccountable reason, taken a great dislike. She was an unusually clever child, and it was probably nothing but envy that lay at the root of my foolish aversion. This girl happened to be a special friend of Effie's; she was near her own age, and sat next her in class. Norah, however, had been a few marks behind me in arithmetic last month, and as I was sure my sums were perfectly worked this time, I felt there was little to fear about the result.

'Norah is coming to fetch me to-morrow to see her sister's beautiful pictures,' said Effie, as we went home. 'She has finished two big ones to go up to London for exhibition, and Norah thought I should like to see them. Isn't it good of her. They have a great house, haven't they, Ruth, and lots of pictures?' Effie enquired innocently, taking for granted that I should be interested in what gave her so much pleasure.

'Yes, I suppose so,' I answered rather shortly. 'The Mantons are only stuck-up people, Effie. Mr. Manton was nothing much in business.'

It was a spiteful, unkind remark, and Effie looked surprised at the words, and a little hurt, as well she might. The fact was I was jealous of anyone else patronizing Effie, and secretly rather put out because Norah did not ask me to her house.

'But don't you think Norah's very good and kind?' said Effie, timidly. 'I don't know anything about her father, but I'm sure Norah isn't a bit stuck up. She helps me