

CHAPTER I.



It was breaking-up day at the end of the summer term. The lists had been read and the anxious young minds were now at rest. Everybody knew who had won the prizes. In the sixth form five had been offered, and of these three had been won by Edith Winter, the cleverest girl in the school, and the most hard-working. She was so used to success that she took it very quietly. She was glad for her mother's sake, for the Winters were not rich and Edith was going to be a high-school mistress. She had gained a scholarship, and presently she was going to Bedford College. She was waiting now in the headmistress's study to say good-bye to her. There were two other girls also waiting. One of these, Margaret Raven, had gained a prize for drawing. She might have had more than one, but she was given to making pictures in her lesson books when she should have been studying, and caricaturing the lecturer when she should have been attending to her discourses. The other girl was Beattie Margetson, who had been second in two or three subjects, last in others, and first in English composition. The prize had been given for an essay, and Beattie's was the only one which had any originality.

The three girls regretted parting. They were making the usual promises of frequent correspondence when Miss Williams came in.

Miss Williams was a middle-aged woman, tall, thin, and pale. She had a large nose and a pointed chin. She saw everything, always caught the offender at the critical moment, and had a memory for names and faces that was something extraordinary. Hundreds of girls had passed through her school during the ten years she had been head-mistress, but she remembered every one of them, and those who met her in later life never failed to find her prompt to recognise, full of interest, and mindful of every detail of their past. She was popularly supposed to disapprove of the existence of men, and it was observed that she always got a woman to distribute the prizes if possible; it was also said that she regarded marriage as the refuge of weak women unable to make their own lives, and that her disappointment when the second mistress, Miss Cuxon, became engaged to a lawyer, was so great, that she would hardly speak to her during the remainder of her time at the school, and never on the subject of her approaching marriage. Also that the only present she gave her when the event took place

was a book on woman's rights. But these were school-girl notions, and many of the young ladies would have been utterly incredulous if they had been told that twenty years ago Miss Williams had been engaged to a smart young officer in an Indian regiment. He was shot through the heart, and that of Miss Williams may be said to have been broken by the same bullet. Thenceforward it ached so much that to divert her attention from the pain she began to develop her mind. And she did this so successfully that people said she had no feelings. Her pupils were all more or less afraid of her, but they had a great respect for her, and her power over them was immense. She had no favourites, and was not supposed to care for any of the girls much, but if there was one who had found out the weak spot which even she doubtless possessed, it was Beattie Margetson.

Why, there is no knowing, unless it was because Beattie, whose bump of reverence was undeveloped, did not regard Miss Williams with awe as the others did. Beattie had a very bright smile, and she always smiled at Miss Williams when that lady, walking down the big schoolroom, passed her desk. Once, when as occasionally happened, she was a ringleader of mischief and was reported to the head-mistress and summoned to the study to receive a lecture which would have reduced most of the other girls to tears, she looked up at the stern lady with what the girls called, "those eyes," and said, "I'm very sorry, I see now it was horrid of me. But, dear Miss Williams, when you were my age wouldn't you have been tempted to annoy Miss Tewes? She is such an aggravating person." And then she suddenly dimpled and laughed, till Miss Williams laughed too.

For everyone disliked Miss Tewes, who was very conceited, very dictatorial, and though undoubtedly clever, had what Miss Cuxon called "A school-board mind."

Beattie was very pretty. She owed some of her undoubted popularity to this fact and to her utter absence of vanity. She had curly brown hair, dimples, a lovely mouth, a complexion which denoted perfect health, and "those eyes," large, grey, changing in expression, and with wonderful long dark lashes. "When Beattie looks at you with those eyes you can't help doing what she wants," the girls used to say. Then she was funny, not witty perhaps, but quaint, original, and impulsive. No one was ever bored by Beattie. Miss Cuxon used to accuse her of being "giddy." Once when Beattie was sitting with Mary Greyle, the most solemn girl in the class, she declared she would make her laugh before the first lesson was over, and so she did. Mary's fat shoulders were soon shaking, and she emitted a curious sort of snort when she could not control herself which attracted Miss Cuxon's attention. Mary reddened and looked ashamed when she caught Miss Cuxon's eye, so that lady who knew the offender turned her attention to Beattie who was sitting

with a perfectly serious face. "Beatrice," she said, "I am afraid you are very giddy." Beatrice opened her eyes wide with surprise and shook her head. "Oh no, Miss Cuxon," she said, so quietly that Miss Cuxon was fain to believe she had not understood her. "I feel quite well, thank you." And Miss Cuxon turned without another word to the map of Central Africa.

Fraulein, a tall severe woman, who was nevertheless very sentimental at times, would stare at her while she was saying her list of exceptions to certain plural forms, and actually once allowed her to miss out "*Dasz dach, dasz dorf and dafz ei*," because she was thinking what a picture she made. The German lesson followed the gymnasium, and Beattie usually had ruffled hair and rosy cheeks after her performances on the giant stride and the horizontal bar. Madame too, who had had daughters and buried then in sunny Normandy, once called her back when the French lesson was over and asked her to kiss her. And the next week Beattie went to tea with Madame and ate *éclairs* and heard about Marie and Augustine, and loved Madame ever after, so that she actually prepared her French translation, instead of leaving it till the last minute and then asking Edith to tell her which were the difficult words. For Miss Beattie was not good at her lessons. She had plenty of ability, but when she got home from school she did as she liked and she did not like to prepare her work. When the examinations drew near she learnt pages and pages by heart, walking up and down her bedroom and fortifying herself with toffee drops. By the first week of the holidays what she had learnt was forgotten. Yet, when she did get a prize her popularity was evident from the clapping she received. And everybody was sorry that she was going to leave school; not least, Miss Williams.

"Well, girls," she said as she came into her study. "I shall look forward to seeing you all again at the distribution. We hope to have one of the ladies of the royal family to give away the prizes."

"I am afraid I shan't be there," said Margaret, "I am going to Paris after the holidays."

"To prosecute your studies in art? Well, Margaret, I hope the school will be proud of you in the future. We have so many of our girls contributing to the good of the world. I trust you will not quite give up your mathematics. You have a distinct gift for Euclid and algebra, as well as for drawing." And she regarded the strong, clever face of her pupil with approval, as she shook hands with her. "Good-bye, Margaret, I wish you every success."

Margaret escaped, to await the others in the cloak-room, and the head-mistress turned to Edith.

"As for you, Edith," she said, "I can only hope you will go on as you have begun. There is, as you know, nothing which claims my sympathy and interest so much as education. That one who has been so careful in acquiring knowledge will be capable of imparting it I