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## The First Chaperone

(By Ella W. Peattie.)  
But what a queer little thing she is—that fourth chaperone! I can't think how she came to be asked. In the company of Mrs. Pierpont Clayton and Mrs. Kilpatrick and that stunning Mrs. Beach, with the English accent and the red hair and the wonderful frocks, she's quite too pitiful.

"But why do you call her the 'fourth chaperone,' Alice? Perhaps she's the first."  
"No, she isn't. I know all about it. Dick Sunderland told me. When it was decided that the boys should move out of the fraternity house and give it up to us girls, not only for the night of the junior hop, but for the next nights as well, so as to take in the glee-club concert and everything, it was thought best to have more than two chaperones. One might fall ill or something, and that would give the remaining one rather too much to do. So Mrs. Beach was asked—the boys just barely got her in time. The Beta Upsilon were wild to get her. And then it seemed well to have a fourth. Chaperones go best in pairs, I suppose. So they were casting about for some one, and Dick Sunderland asked Royal Walden if his mother couldn't come. You know she's a writer. The boys said Royal seemed a little embarrassed, but there was really nothing for him to do but write and ask his mother, since she had been proposed. And lo and behold she accepted, and here she is—the oddest little creature that ever tried to chaperone sixteen up-to-date dancels!"

"Well," said Florence Evelyn, meditatively, "I thought she looked very sweet and girlish."  
"Sweet and girlish!" broke in Alice Castleberry, impatiently, shaking her hair down about her shoulders. "What qualities are those for a chaperone—"  
But some one knocked at the door then, and without waiting for an answer, flung it open. It was Edith Hawtry.

"O girls," she said, "I forgot I had to be sewed up in this gown, and I haven't brought so much as a spool of thread with me! Isn't it ridiculous?"  
"No—only natural—for you, my dear," said Florence Evelyn. "Come in, beauty, and I'll be your maid. I have always been your maid, it seems to me. Who's going with you to the hop?"

"Why, Royal Walden. Have you met him? He's a sophomore—this is his first hop. He's in a great state of excitement. I don't believe he's known quite so much in society as some of the fellows. But he's a bright fellow, and handsome, too."  
"His mother is one of the chaperones, I believe."

The girl flushed a little. "Yes, she is. Royal is just a trifle annoyed about it. That is, he says it's out of his mother's line, rather. She's always lived very quietly. Her writing has kept her very busy."

There was a rustling of silken skirts in the corridor, and the girls, turning to look, saw the fourth chaperone making her way down the hall. She was gowned in baby blue crape, which matched the blue of her eyes, and about her neck was an old-fashioned necklace of garnets. In her hair, where the silver shone among the rich brown, was one red rose. She looked into the room with a

smile, half-paused as if about to offer assistance, flushed and went on. They saw her examining the pictures of graduated and forgotten classes, moving about from one to another with soft rustlings.

"It's just like her to be dressed as hour too soon," whispered Alice. "I knew as soon as I saw her that she was one of the kind of women who are dressed an hour too soon. They are a reproach and a public nuisance."

Edith gave a nod of thanks to Florence for her services, and gathered her voluminous draperies about her. "You'll be an hour behind time, honey," she said, "if you don't concentrate on the subject in hand," as Miss Reynolds used to say."

She ran on down the corridor and paused for a moment beside the fourth chaperone.

"I'm afraid you'll think us all very lazy, or very vain," she said, lightly. "You'll find we are much longer than you about making our toilets."  
"Why should you hasten?" asked the other, in a voice which it seemed to the girl was as full of excitement as her own. "A good part of the fun of a party is in the getting ready, isn't it?"

"Now that's just what I have always said!" cried Edith.

After Edith had gone on the little chaperone rested against the cushions and listened. From the different rooms came the sound of girlish voices—the voices that belong to that expectant and enchanting hour before the party. After a time the doors began to open and the occupants to exchange visits, consulting together about the last touches to their costumes. They had that frank vanity which belongs to youth and happiness and they atoned for it with their even more ardent admiration of each other. None of them noticed that the little chaperone had eyes as excited and as glowing as their own. They hardly noticed her at all.

Then presently there was a great noise in the hall below. The escorts had arrived. The carriages were without. There was a last look in the mirrors, a final gathering up of fans, gloves and cloaks, and down the stairs, like a flock of strong-winged birds, swept the girls.

"Dear me," ejaculated the languid Mrs. Beach, "how violent they are!" And she trailed slowly after them.

Mrs. Clayton and Mrs. Kilpatrick had already gone down. It was only the little incidental chaperone who lingered. She stood leaning over the banister, listening with a curious poignant happiness to the laughter and the talking that came up to her. Then she heard Mrs. Beach say:

"I can't imagine why she is waiting. She's been ready this hour or more."

The fourth chaperone flushed scarlet at having caused annoyance, and came down the polished stairs cautiously in her new slippers, holding to the banisters as a timid child does; and the company waiting in the drawing-room turned as by common consent to look at her.

Richard Sunderland went to meet her, and wondered to find her slim hand trembling as she leaned with gratitude on his arm.

At the ballroom she was swept along in the rout. There was a temporary entrance framed with screens in such a fashion that it looked like the mouth of a cornucopia and the little chaperone, sitting demurely where she had been placed, was fascinated by this, which seemed to pour out girls as if they had been flowers or confections. In all the more delicate colors of the fields, of the clouds, of the sea, they came on "so many, and so many, and such glee."

The long hall—it was the gymnasium on less splendid days—was trimmed with ropes of greenery blended with the college colors. And all about the hall ran the booths which the fraternity men and different coteries of "independents" had put up.

To these the groups of friends were to return after each dance, and in these the chaperons sat in sociable groups. There were ceremonies of a sort—the presentation of delegates from each booth to the wives of the president and the faculty of the university; then the grand march with many elaborations under mellowing and changing lights of violet and rose, sea-green and yellow; then the forming of all the marchers into the initial of the university—and then, swiftly, the breaking up of all into the first waltz.

Some of the "faculty ladies" had heard that Helen Walden was there, and they came over to the booth to call. It was not a new thing for this quiet woman to have people tell her that she had brought them comfort, and had taught them the meaning of certain things. All her isolated life she had been privileged to know that sort of intimacy.

Her letter-boxes held treasures of correspondence never mentioned by her. The rich stream of sympathy that flowed from her pen and that brought to her rare if impersonal devotion, was a thing apart from her actual life. A constitutional timidity, an inherited awkwardness, or lack of facility, and the absence of social training had kept her body ever lagging after her soul in grace. Words came easily to her pen, but not to her tongue.

But after the faculty ladies had left her, and she sat unnoticed by the other ladies of her booth, who were receiving old friends, her usual sense of loneliness returned to her. It was not sadness precisely, for she did not

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mind feeling that she was alone. And she gave herself up once more to the dreams and the memories that had been haunting her ever since she had received the invitation to be present at the junior hop—an event counting for nothing in the lives of the women about her.

All through the ball the silent fourth chaperone sat dreaming.

She saw in the magic mirror of memory the pretentious but comfortable house where her girlhood had been spent—that house with its imposing exterior, its lack of fires, of service, of conveniences within. She remembered the bare bed-room, deprived of all girlish luxuries.

Here, when school had been denied her, and heavy burdens of housekeeping and child-tending and sewing had been put upon her, she used to come in the chill evenings, and cowering down under the old army blankets, study and read. There was no one to guide her. She took what came to hand. She made the most of everything. And, study over, her girlishness reassured itself, and curling down between the cold sheets, she indulged in certain favorite trivial fancies.

She saw herself at school among charming well bred girls,—such girls as she did not now and was never to know in her own childhood,—and shared with one of them a delightful room in an ivy-grown dormitory. She pictured the routine of the school-day, the clean, honest, hearty delight of the study hours, the attractions to certain professors, the aversion from others. She went the length of picturing these individuals till she knew even their eccentricities. She dreamed of the festivities. What mysteries of preparation! What teasing expectation! What splendid escorts! What gaiety and music and conversation and bewitchment!

And the girl who dreamed it all had never so much as known what it was to have a party frock—or an invitation to a party, for the matter of that.

Then came marriage and happiness and responsibility of another sort, and still poverty, and the incentive to work because others needed the shelter of the home that John Walden had built for her. Then, almost without her knowledge, she had begun to write. And the thoughts born in solitude, the dreams and the disappointments, came to help her.

She had talent. She was born with that something which may, for lack of a better term, be called taste. So her writing found its place. At last what she had taken up almost carelessly became a necessity to her. Moreover, there was never a time when her roof did not shelter one or several relatives or friends. And her own dear children came to increase the need for her labor. So she had gone on from year to year, keeping close to the immediate duty, and still beating down the vagrant love of joy which had, curiously enough, been born in her who seemed so grave.

It was her money which had sent Royal, her eldest, to college. The old house in Hopperville had therefore known its close economies. But Royal understood. He was grateful. He was trying to deserve it. And it was encouraging to know that everybody liked him, that he had "made" one of the best fraternities, and that he had held his own in his classes, not so much by force of brilliancy as by steadfast determination not to disappoint his father and mother.

And now at last here was the junior hop, as others called it—the party beautiful, as Helen Walden thought of it. It had not come at eighteen for her. It had come after forty—and the wonder of it was that it seemed to have accumulated glory every year, till now it swam before her a fair vision.

To the others it was a passing thing. But the fourth chaperone knew that for her it would abide. Her own austere youth was forgotten now in this new vision and understanding of youth. For these six hundred rhythmic figures in the fairy rout seemed merged in one enchanting and joyous composite. Here was girlhood in its triumph. The little chaperone was suffused with happiness.

The hours passed slowly for some of the other watchers, but swiftly for this one. The night was almost spent, and still she was wandering in the fields of dream. And it was time to go home. They drove back gaily.

Then while they rested the girls occupying the seats, the boys sitting Turk-wise on the floor, they sang their good-night songs. Into their voices the languor and half-sadness that came with the closing of a long-planned-for joy crept unconsciously. The girls blended their voices softly, and the mandolins made a sweet accompaniment. Helen Walden sat among them, conscious of a growing sense of fellowship. The dreams were coming nearer, changing and taking

to themselves more substantial character. Edith Hawtry, more lovely now than at the beginning of the evening, sat close beside her. Alice Castleberry regarded her with a friendly curiosity, Florence Evelyn openly sought her. The young men turned their glances toward her, too, as she sat there in the firelight, radiant with an almost mystical look of youth, her soft contralto mingling with the other voices.

"Well," said Dick Sunderland, at last, "it's time to go home, boys. Breakfast at eleven, mind, and no one to be late! And I wonder," he paused and looked round him at the fire-lit faces, "I wonder who of all of us has enjoyed the junior hop the most?"

There might have been a noisy response, but for some reason there was not. There came instead an instant's pause, and then the vibrating tones of the little fourth chaperone.

"I have!" she declared, with the impulsive tones of one making a confidence. "I have enjoyed it the most of all! For you see, in a way, it was my first party."

The fire crackled, but no one spoke. They were looking at her as she smiled at them, it seemed, young as themselves, with a sudden youth of the spirit.

"I dreamed of it all my girlhood—dreamed of such a time as this. Dreamed of being the very core of it, because I was a student, you know, and was entitled to it. But it never came. Hardly any of the particular things of which I dreamed came, though other things did that brought happiness. And sometimes there was happiness even in the things that others thought were only sorrows. But still, no matter how old I grew, the dream of the beautiful party kept haunting me. It seemed as if it would have to be mine, after all. And that is why, though I knew I was unfitted for it in a way, that I accepted your invitation and came here to act as chaperone—I who was never chaperoned, and who, in my old-fashioned, country way can hardly be said to believe in anything of the kind."

The firelight, or the hour, or the long hours of dreams, or the atmosphere of reluctantly relinquished delight, had moved her out of her habitual and utter confidence and friendliness which distinguished her writing and made it as a cordial human voice speaking to each reader, she expressed her thoughts.

Royal might have been offended, —it is easy for boys to take offence at what their mothers do,—but for the first time, perhaps, he really understood her. He had a perception of her long service for others, or her hidden dreams and little, dear personal selfishness never indulged in. He saw, as the others saw, a lovely woman, simple as a child, rich with sacrifice, speaking out of a friendly heart the absolute truth.

It was Edith Hawtry who rose and ran to the table where an armful of American Beauty roses lay fresh from their wrappings—roses which had come too late to be carried to the ball. She brought them and laid them in Helen Walden's arms.

"Debutantes carry flowers," she said, her voice thrilling. So, laughing, the others brought flowers, too, and heaped the slim arms full, and stood round her while they sang, "Good Night, Lady," with slow cadences.

Then the boys made their way reluctantly into the sharp frost of the night, and the girls went up the stairs together, Florence Evelyn with her arm about Mrs. Walden's waist. At the bedroom door she kissed her.

"No party is so beautiful as a first party," she whispered.

The other girls all came to make their good-nights, and they bent on Helen Walden an intimate and affectionate regard. She felt streams of love pouring toward her. The good-night words of the boys rang in her ears—words of quickly won and honest friendship. Royal's kiss was still on her cheek. Her heart beat happily, and as she laid her burden of flowers in the jar of water that had been brought her, she looked up to see Cecily Beach watching her with her languid gaze.

Mrs. Beach was a woman who could at times be cruel. She had a swift satire that pierced like a rapier. But she had a nobler side, too. And now she put out her hand with a swift gesture. Helen Walden placed her own slender hand within it, and the two stood so for a moment in a silent pledge of good will.

"I envy you," Cecily Beach said, with feeling. "I envy you for a hundred reasons that you would not understand even if I cared to explain. You are a very happy woman. And you have something in you that will keep you from ever being anything else! Now let me confess that I was very weary, and I would not have come here to please these young people only that I wanted to meet you. And yet I was afraid to meet you!"

"Me?" cried Mrs. Walden, incredulously. "Afraid of me?"

"I needed you—and I wanted to let you see it, but could not think how I should do it. Now—now, I am no longer afraid. Will you be my friend?"

Helen Walden, the dreamer, looked up to see the most beautiful and imperious woman she had even known standing there before her wistfully. A sudden sense of power—true and sweet power—swept over her. The course of timidity seemed lifted forever. She felt as if it would never descend upon her again to paralyze her impulses and cheat her of delight. Her morbid shame at her lack of

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schooling, her consciousness of her old-fashioned ways for the first time appeared contemptible. She stood, rich in life's experience, eager for friendship, ready for the fulfilment of her dreams. She held out both hands with impulsiveness.

"Oh," she said, "by all means let us take every good thing that life can bring! I have never been afraid of so row. Now I am not going any longer to be afraid of joy."—The Companion.

### Good Listeners

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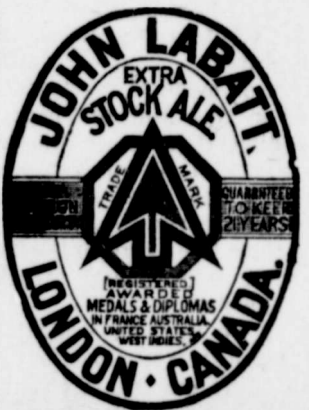
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Part 2. The Bird.  
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Ah! well, we will leave the rest unsaid;  
Some things it is better to pass.

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