



BY E. A. CAMPBELL,

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CHAPTER I.

CHANGES AND CHANCES.

"**A**ND if here isn't the very girl I want! Here have I been worrying my head till it aches, for a girl fit to send up to the Old Hall, and never gave you so much as a thought, Ruth March, till you walk in upon me, as much as to say, 'Here I am ready to go.' Sit down, girl, for a moment in that corner out of the way till I've got time to tell you all about it."

Mrs. Buckle, the speaker, was generally breathless on Skirley market day, but on this especial day she was more than ordinarily so. Her shop—which was really a "much in little," providing such diverse wares as buns and sweetmeats, tobacco, toys, and fancy work, besides being the only registry office for servants of which the little port boasted—was quite thronged, and Mrs. Buckle, with her two daughters, had more than enough to do in keeping their customers supplied.

Ruth March, a gentle, pleasant-faced girl with a retiring manner, did as she was told; drew her chair into a quiet corner, and watched the busy throng. At the counter were ladies matching silks, and an old country woman buying stout "fingering" of serviceable colours for her knitting; a noisy and very quarrelsome party of children were choosing toys, and exercising a terrorism over a very

meek governess who held the purse-strings, and who was vainly endeavouring to make the two ends of their desires, and the sum of money which she was entrusted to spend for them, meet. A couple of small farmers stood sheepishly at the door, afraid to come forward among so many of the fairer sex, to make known their wants in the direction of shag or "a nice mild bacca." Women and children devoured cakes and buns at the confectionery counter, while a group of red-cheeked country girls, all waiting to be hired, stood giggling and talking loudly in the centre of the shop. Amid this throng, every member of which was known to her, Mrs. Buckle darted in and out. The ladies were supplied with silks, the shy men induced to come forward and state their wishes; with the air of a born directress she demanded of the worried governess the amount of money she wished to spend, divided it by the number of children, whisked away the more expensive toys, leaving only those which were of the ascertained price, hushed the clamour by choosing what she considered fitting for each, and sent them out of the shop satisfied and rejoicing; then, after silencing the centre group with a lofty "Manners, young women!" she found time to turn to Ruth.