

Adapted from *The Youngest Girl in the Fifth*

by Angela Brazil

1 “I don’t want your locket or your pencil cases,” said Netta, “I’ve heaps of my own. I know one thing I do want, though, and if you like to trade, you can.”

“Done! Only name it, and it’s yours with my blessing.”

3 “Well, I want your essay—”

4 “My essay! What do you mean?” exclaimed Gwen, as she snatched back her exercise book like a mother clutching her first-born.

“I mean what I say. If you like to hand over ‘Thomas Carlyle’ to me, I’ll take my money back instead, and call us quits. It would be a new experience to win a prize. How amazed everyone would be!”

6 “You surely wouldn’t pass it off as your own?”

7 “Why not?”

8 “Netta! That would be bold, even for you!”

9 “I told you long ago I was no saint. Besides, what’s the harm? It’s a business arrangement. You offered to repay me, and this happens to be the ‘pound of flesh,’ I want. It’s perfectly fair.”

10 “I don’t quite see the fairness myself.”

11 “But it is!” protested Netta rather huffily. “I believe lots of popular authors don’t do all their own writing themselves. They engage secretaries to help them. I’ve even heard of clergymen buying their sermons.”

12 “Oh, oh! Father doesn’t!” Gwen face felt warm.

13 “Well, I didn’t say he did, but I believe it’s done all the same. And if it’s alright for a vicar to read somebody else’s sermon in the pulpit as if it were his own, I can hand in somebody else’s essay. Don’t you see?”

14 “No, I don’t see!” grunted Gwen.

15 “Look here, Gwen Gascoyne, you’ve got to see it! I’ve been uncommonly patient with you, but I don’t quite appreciate the joke of being cheated out of that money. I must either have the money or its equivalent. You can choose yourself which.”

16 Netta’s eyes were flashing, and her mouth was twitching ominously. She was a jolly enough fair-weather comrade, but she could be uncommonly nasty if things went wrong.

17 “Don’t you think it’s unfair to keep me waiting all this time?” she added scathingly.

18 Gwen kicked the desk and groaned.

19 “Well, it just amounts to this: if you don’t choose, I’ll tell Miss Roscoe. Yes, I will! I don’t care a bit that I went into her room too. You broke the china, and you’d get into the worst trouble. It wouldn’t be pleasant for you. I think you’d better hand over Mr. Thomas Carlyle to me, my dear.”

20 “And what am I to do about my own submission, exactly?”

21 “Write another on a different author.”

22 “There’s no time.”

23 “Yes there is, heaps! I don’t want it to be as good as this, of course. Well, are you going to trade, or are you not? I can’t wait here all day!”

- ²⁴ For answer, Gwen held out the exercise book. She was in a desperately tight corner; everything seemed to have conspired against her. She knew Netta and her crazy, reckless moods quite well enough to appreciate the fact that her threat to tell Miss Roscoe was no idle one. When her temper was roused, Netta was capable of anything.
- ²⁵ “Oh! Glad you’ve come to your senses at last!” sneered Netta, as she clutched the precious manuscript and stalked away, slamming the door behind her. Gwen laid her head down on the desk. Her essay – her cherished essay, over which she had taken such superhuman pains, to be torn away from her like this! It was to have brought her such credit from Miss Roscoe, for even if it did not win the prize, it would surely be highly praised.
- ²⁶ Netta in the meantime had put the essay away in her locker with the utmost satisfaction. She felt she had decidedly scored. Neither brilliant nor a hard worker, she had no opportunity of distinguishing herself in the class under ordinary circumstances: here chance had flung into her hand the very thing she wanted. It would not take long to copy the sixteen pages of rather sprawling writing, then “Thomas Carlyle” would be her own.
- ²⁷ To Gwen, not the lightest part of the business was that she was faced with the horrible necessity of writing another essay. Only two days remained. It was impossible to look up any subject adequately, so she chose Dickens, as being an author whose books she knew fairly well, and by way of much brain wracking and real hard labor contrived to give some slight sketch of his life and an appreciation of his genius. She was painfully conscious, however, that the result was poor, the style slipshod, and the general composition lacking both in unity and finish. She pulled a long face as she signed her name to it.
- ²⁸ She felt sicker still on the day when Miss Roscoe returned the essays.
- ²⁹ “I had hoped the average results would be higher,” commented the Principal. “Very few girls have treated the subject with any real effort. There is only one paper worthy of notice – that on Thomas Carlyle by Netta Goodwin, and it is so excellent that it stands head and shoulders above all the others. You thoroughly deserve the prize which I offered, and I have written your name in the book.”
- ³⁰ The class gasped as Netta, with a smile of infinite triumph, marched jauntily up the room to receive her copy of *Browning’s Poems*. Each girl looked at her neighbor in almost incredulous astonishment. Netta Goodwin, of all people in the world, to have won such praise!
- ³¹ Gwen drew her breath hard and clenched her fists till her nails hurt her palms.