THE STORY BOOK GIRLS

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Author: Christina Gowans Whyte

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The STORY BOOK GIRLS

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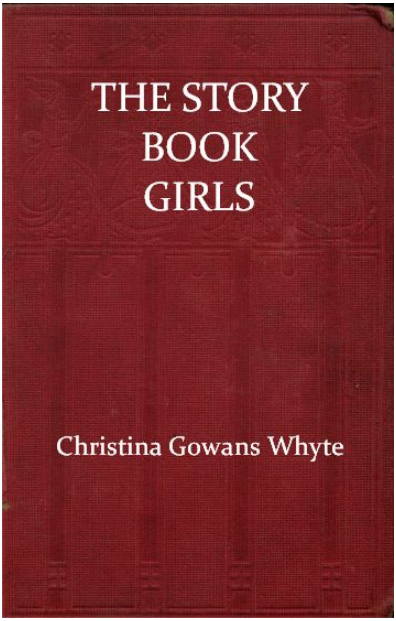

Cover

GOWANS
WHYTE

LONDON
HENRY FROWDE
HODDER & STOUGHTON
1906

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CHAPTER I
Elma Leighton

In a pink and white bedroom where two beds, Elma's and Betty's, seemed the only pink and white things unspotted by multitudinous photographs, Elma Leighton sought sanctuary. Pursued by a tumultuous accusing conscience, which at the same time gracefully extended the uncertain friendliness of hope, for who could say–it might still be "embarr*ass*ment," she opened her little own bright red dictionary.

She prayed a trifling prayer that her self-esteem might be saved, as she turned shakingly the fine India paper of the 50,000 word compressed edition of the most reliable friend she at that moment possessed in the world. Parents commanded. Relations exaggerated. Chums could be spiteful. But friends told the truth; and the dictionary–being invariably just–was above all things a friend.

She wandered to "en," forgetting in the championship of her learning that "m" held priority. She corrected herself with dignity, and at last found the word she wanted.

It was emb*arr*assment.

Woe and desolation! A crimson shameful blush ran up the pink cheeks, her constant anxiety being that they were always so pink, and made a royal progress there. The hot mortification of despair lent it wings. She watched the tide of red creep to the soft curls of her hair as she viewed herself in her own little miniature cheval between creamy curtains, and she saw her complexion die down at last to an unusual but becoming paleness.

She had said "embarr*ass*ment."

Nothing could have been more fatal. It was like a disease with Elma, that instead of using the everyday words regarding which no one could make a mistake–such as "shyness" in this instance–she should invariably plunge into others which she merely knew by sight and find them unknown to herself as talking acquaintances. Cousin Dr. Harry Vincent, Staff Surgeon in His Majesty's Navy, eyeglass in eye, merry smile at his lips ("such a dashing cousin the Leightons have visiting them" was the comment), the sort of person in short that impressed Elma with the need of being very dashing herself, here was the particular of all particulars before whom she had made this ridiculous mistake.

"Now," had said Dr. Harry in the drawing-room when visitors arrived, "come and play something."

Any other girl overcome by Elma's habitual fright when asked to play, would have said, "I'm too shy." Elma groaned as she thought how easy that would have been.

But Dr. Harry's single eyeglass fascinated her as with a demand for showing some kind of culture.

She blinked her eyelids nervously and answered, "My embarr*ass*ment prevents me."

Dr. Harry never moved a muscle of his usually mobile and merry countenance. But the flaming sword of fear cut further conversation dead for Elma. She became subtly conscious that the word was wrong, and fled to her room.

"While I'm here," she said dismally, "I may as well look up 'melodramic.'" This was a carking care left over from a conversation in the morning.

It proved another tragedy.

Being really of a cheerful sunny nature, which never for long allowed clouds to overshadow the bright horizon of her imagination, she acquainted herself thoroughly with the right term.

"One consolation is, I shall never make that mistake again as long as I live. Melodramatic," she repeated with the swagger of familiarity.

Then "emb, emb–Oh! dear, I've forgotten again."

Concluding that embarrassment was a treacherous acquaintance, she decided to drop it altogether.

"After this I shall only be shy," she said with a certain amount of refined pleasure in her own humour.

She regarded her figure dismally in the cheval. Her chubby face had regained its undistinguished pink. She was sorry she could not remain pale, it was so much more distinguished to be pale.

"How long I take to grow up–in every way." She sighed in a reflective manner.

What she was thinking was how long she took to become like one of the Story Book Girls.

It is probable that she would never have run to long words, had it not been her dearest desire to grow up like one of the Story Book Girls. It was the desire of every sister in the Leighton family. Each worked on it differently however. Mabel, the eldest, now seventeen, in the present delights of hair going up and skirts letting down, took her ideas of fashion straight from "Adelaide Maud" the elegant one. "Adelaide Maud" wore her hair in coils and sat under heliotrope parasols. Mabel surreptitiously tried that effect as often as five times a day with the family absent.

Jean threw all her ambitions on the sporting carriage of "Madeline" who was a golfer.

Betty determined to wear bangles and play the violin because "Theodora," the youngest of the lot, did that. And Elma based her admiration of "Hermione" on the fact that she had "gone in" for science. Long ago they had christened their divinities. It did not do to recognize latterly that the Dudgeons were known in society by other names altogether. One can do these dreamy, inconsequent things with the most superb pleasure while one's family remains between certain romantic ages; in the case of the Leightons at the moment when Elma ran to her bedroom–between the ages of ten and seventeen. Betty was ten, Elma twelve, Jean fifteen and Mabel seventeen.

It was an axiom with the girls that their parents need not know how they emulated the Story Book Girls. Yet the information leaked out occasionally.

It was also considered bad form to breathe a word to the one elder brother of the establishment. Yet even there one got into trouble.

"Why on earth do you call her Adelaide Maud when her name is Helen?" asked Cuthbert one day bluntly. "Met her at a dance–and she nearly slew me. I called her Miss Adelaide!"

"O–o–o–oh!"

It is impossible to explain the thrill that the four underwent. Cuthbert had met Adelaide Maud!

"Did she talk about us?" asked Elma breathlessly.

"Doesn't know you kids exist," said Cuthbert.

Here was a tumbling pack of cards.

However the idylls of the Story Book Girls soon were built up again.

Four girls at the west end of a town dreamed dreams about four girls at a still further west. They lived where the sun dropped down behind blue mountains in the sunny brilliant summer time. The Story Book Girls were grown up, of "county" reputation, and "sat in their own carriages." The others invariably walked. This was enough to explain the fact that they never met in the quiet so-

ciety of the place. But one world was built out of the two, and in it, the younger girls who did not ride in carriages, created an existence for the Story Book Girls which would have astonished them considerably had they known. As it was, they sometimes noticed a string of large-eyed girls with a good-looking brother, going to church on Sunday, but it never dawned on one of them that the tallest carried a heliotrope parasol in a manner familiar to them, nor that another exhibited a rather extraordinary and highly developed golfing stride. Grown-up girls do not observe those in the transition stages, and just at the fiercest apex of their admiration, the Leightons were certainly at the transient stage. They reviewed their own growing charms with the keenest anxiety. Everybody was hopeful of Mabel who seemed daily to be shedding angularities and developing a presence which might one day be compared with Adelaide Maud's. The time of her seventeenth birthday had drawn near with the family palpitating behind her. Mrs. Leighton remembered that delicious period of her own youth, and was indulgently friendly, "just a perfect dear."

"We are going to make a very pretty little woman of Mabel," she informed her husband. He was a tall man, with a fine intellectual forehead, and handsome, clear-cut features. He stooped slightly, giving an impression of gentleness and great amiability. He answered in some alarm.

"You don't mean that our little baby girl is growing up."

"Elma declares that Mabel reaches her 'frivolity' in May," said Mrs. Leighton sedately. A quiet smile played gently over a face, lined softly, yet cleared of care as one sees the mother face where happy homes exist.

Mr. Leighton groaned sadly and rubbed his finger contemplatively along the smoothed hair which made a gallant attempt at hiding more than a hint of baldness.

"Why can't we keep them babies!"

"Betty thinks we do," said his wife.

"One boy at College, and one girl coming out! It's overwhelming. We were only married yesterday, you know," said poor Mr. Leighton.

It troubled Mrs. Leighton that Mabel insisted on wearing heliotrope. She had white of course for her coming out dress, and among other costumes the choice of colours for a fine day gown. The blue eyes of the Leightons were gifts handed down by a beneficent providence through a long line of ancestors, and one wise mother after another had matched the heavenly radiancy of these wide orbs as nearly as possible in sashes and silks for the children. Therefore Mrs. Leighton begged Mabel to have at least that one day gown in blue.

"I begin to be sorry I said you might have what you liked," she said dismally. "Heliotrope will make you look like your grandmother."

"Oh no it won't," clamoured Jean. "It will only make her look like Adelaide

Maud."

"Traitor," was the expression on three faces.

Sporting Jean had really rather a dislike to the garden-party smartness of Adelaide Maud, and occasionally prejudice did away with honour.

"I'm joking," she said penitently. "Do let her wear heliotrope, mummy."

Mrs. Leighton sighed amiably yet disappointedly, but at last gave Mabel permission to wear heliotrope. They had patterns from Liberty's and Peter Robinson's and Woolland's in London, and a solid week of rapture ensued while Mabel saw herself gowned in a hundred gowns and fixed on none.

They sat over the patterns one day with Mrs. Leighton in attendance. Mabel's choice lay between fifteen different qualities of heliotrope.

"I shall have this," she said one minute, and "No, this" the next.

"Patterns not returned within ten days will be charged for," quoted Jean.

Just then a certain rushing sound of light wheels could be heard. Each girl glanced quickly out of the window. The clipity-clop of a pair of horses might be clearly distinguished; and through the green trees skirting the bottom of the garden, appeared patches of colour.

Two Story Book Girls drove past, Adelaide Maud and Theodora. Theodora was sitting in any kind of costume–what did *her* costume matter?

Adelaide Maud was in blue.

The girls gazed breathlessly at one another.

"I think you must really now make up your mind," said Mrs. Leighton patiently, whose ears were not attuned so perfectly to distinction in carriage wheels.

Mabel glanced round for support.

"Oh, mummy," said she very sweetly, "I do believe you were right. I shall have blue after all."

That was a few weeks before the great day when Mabel attained her "frivolity" and put up her hair. Cousin Harry's being with them gave an air of festivity to the occurrence, and curiously enough, Mrs. Leighton's drawing-room filled with visitors on that afternoon as though to celebrate the great occasion.

Throughout her life Elma never forgot to link the delight of that day, when for the first time they all seemed to grow up, with the despair of her sallies in Cousin Harry's direction.

When she did trail back to the drawing-room, crushed yet educated, she found Mabel with carefully coiled hair standing in a congratulatory crowd of people, looking more like Adelaide Maud than one could have considered possible.

"Such excitement," whispered Jean, "Mrs. Maclean has brought her nephew and he knows the Story Books."

It put immediate thoughts of having to explain to Cousin Harry out of

Elma's mind.

"Oh, do you know," she said excitedly to him, "I want one thing most awfully. I want to know Mr. Maclean so well in about five minutes as to ask him a fearfully particular question."

Dr. Harry, who, as he always explained to people, was continually nine hundred and ninety-nine days at sea without meeting a lady, could be counted on doing anything for one once he had the chance of being ashore. Even a half-grown lady of Elma's type.

"Mr. Maclean shall stand on his head inside of three minutes," he promised her.

Elma noticed a new twinkle in his eye. It enabled her to take her courage in both hands and confess to him.

"I'm always trying to use long words, Cousin Harry. It's like having measles every three minutes. It was awfully nice of you not to laugh. I went to look it up, you know."

Nothing pleased Elma so much as the naturalness with which she made this confession. She felt more worldly and developed than she could have considered possible.

Cousin Harry roared.

"Try it on the Maclean man," he said.

But Mr. Leighton had that guest in tow, and they talked art and politics until tea appeared. Elma did all she could in connection with the passing of cups to get near him, but Cuthbert and Harry and Mr. Maclean were too diligent themselves. She saw Mr. Maclean's eyes fixed on Mabel when she at last gained her opportunity. Mabel had gone in a very careful manner, hair being her chief concern, to play a Ballade of Chopin, and this provided an excellent moment for Elma to sidle into a chair close to Mr. Maclean. It was pure politeness, she observed, which allowed anyone to stare as much as one liked while a girl played the piano. Mr. Maclean was quite polite.

Mabel had the supreme talent which already had made a name for the Leighton girls. She could take herself out of trivial thoughts and enter a magic world where one dreamed dreams. Into this new world she could lift most people with the first touch of her fingers on the keys of the piano.

Elma's thoughts soared with the others, and Mabel played till a little rebellious lock of the newly arranged plaits fell timorously on her neck. She closed with a low beautiful chord.

Mr. Maclean sighed gently.

Elma leant towards him.

"You know the–er–Dudgeons, don't you? Do you know the eldest?"

He nodded.

”Is Mabel like her?” she asked anxiously.

”Mabel,” said Mr. Maclean.

”Yes, Mabel. Is she–almost–as pretty, do you think?”

”Mabel is a thousand times more pretty than Miss Dudgeon,” said Mr. Maclean.

”Oh, Mr. Maclean!” said Elma.

He could not have understood her sigh of rapture if he had tried to. At that moment his thoughts were not on Elma.

She was quite content.

She sank back on the large easy chair which she had appropriated, and she felt as though she had brought up a large family and just at that moment seen them settled in life.

”Oh, I do feel heavenly,” she whispered to herself. ”Mabel is prettier than Adelaide Maud.”

”I beg your pardon?” asked Mr. Maclean.

”Oh, nothing–nothing,” said Elma. ”I don’t even care about emb–emb–Do you mind if I ask you?” she inquired. ”Is it embarr*ass*ment or emb*arr*assment?”

”Emb*arr*assment,” said Mr. Maclean.

”Thank you,” said Elma. ”I don’t care whether I’m embarrassed now or not, thank you.”

CHAPTER II
Miss Annie

Of course one had to go immediately and tell all this to Miss Annie.

Miss Annie lived with her sister in a charming verandahed house, hidden in wisteria and clematis, and everything was delightful in connection with the two sisters except the illness which made a prisoner of Miss Annie. Miss Annie lay on a bed covered with beautiful drawn thread work over pink satinette and wore rings that provoked a hopeless passion in Elma.

Whenever she considered that one day she might marry a duke, Elma pictured herself wearing Miss Annie’s rings.

From the drawn thread work bed Miss Annie ruled her household, and

casually, her sister Grace. It never appeared that Miss Annie ruled Miss Grace however; nothing being more affectionate than the demeanour of the two sisters. But long ago, the terrifying nature of Miss Annie's first illness made such a coward of poor, sympathetic Miss Grace, that never had she lifted a finger, or formed a frown to reprove that dear patient, or prevent her having her own way. The nature of Miss Annie's illness had always been a source of great mystery to the Leighton girls. It was discussed in a hidden kind of way in little unintelligible nods from grown up to grown up, and usually resolved itself into the important phrase of "something internal." Old Dr. Merryweather, years ago, had landed himself into trouble concerning it. "A poor woman would get on her feet and fight that tendency of yours," he had said to Miss Annie. "Money simply encourages it. You will die on that bed if you don't fight a little, Miss Annie." Miss Annie had replied that in any case her bed was where she intended to die, and forthwith procured quite sweetly and pathetically, yet quite determinedly, another doctor. That was over twenty years ago; but Miss Grace still passed Dr. Merryweather in the street with her head down in consequence. She did all she could to provide the proper distraction for Miss Annie, by encouraging visitors and sacrificing her own friends to the leadership of her sister. Miss Annie had always shone in a social sense, and she let none of her talents droop merely because she was bedridden. It was considered a wonderful thing that she should manage the whole household, to the laying down or taking up of a carpet in rooms which she never saw. Gradually, on account of this wonderful energy of Miss Annie's, Miss Grace acquired a reputation for ineptitude to which her sister constantly but very gracefully alluded. "Poor Grace," she sighed. "Grace takes no interest in having things nice."

It was Miss Grace however who, in her shy old-fashioned manner, showed interest in the blue-eyed, fair-haired Leighton children, and introduced them to her sister when they were practically babies. She decoyed them into the house by biscuits covered with pink icing, which none of them ever forgot, or allowed themselves to do without. Even Mabel, with her hair up, accepted a pink biscuit at her first tea there after that great occasion. They always felt very small delicious children when they went to Miss Annie's. They had acquired, through Miss Annie, a pleasant easy manner of taking the nervous fussy attentions of Miss Grace. It was astonishing how soon they could show that in this establishment of magnificence, Miss Grace did not count. She was immaterial to the general grandeur of the verandahed palace belonging to Miss Annie. They were always on their best behaviour in the house where not only a footman, but an odd man were kept, and Elma, at the age of seven, had been known to complain to Mrs. Leighton when a housemaid was at fault, "We ought to have a man to do this!" Indeed there seemed only one conclusion to it with Elma: that after know-

ing exactly what it was to call on people who had men servants, in her youth, when she grew up she should be obliged to marry a duke. The duke always met her when she waited for Miss Grace in the drawing-room. He had a long curling moustache, and wore his hair in waves on either side of a parting, very clamped down and oily, like Mr. Lucas, the barber. It was years before she sacrificed the curling moustache to a clean-shaven duke, and shuddered at the suggestion of oil in his hair.

The despair of her life stood in the corner of the white and gold drawing-room. It was an enormous Alexander harmonium. Once, in an easy moment, on conversing affably with her duke in a whisper, she had suggested to him that Miss Grace might let her play on this instrument. Miss Grace, coming in then, was in time to see her lips moving, and considered that the sweet child worked at her lessons. Elma was too sincere to deceive her. "I was talking to myself and wondering if you would let me play on the harmonium."

She should never forget the frightened hurt look on Miss Grace's face.

"Never ask me that again, dear child. It was hers–when she was able to–to—-" Miss Grace could go no further.

The blue eyes filling with frightened tears in front of her alarmed the gentlest soul in the world.

"But, my pet," she said very simply, "there's my own piano."

Could one believe it? Off came all the photograph frames, and the large Benares vases on China silk, brought years ago from the other side of the world by Miss Grace's father, and Elma played at last on a drawing-room grand piano. Mrs. Leighton's remained under lock and key for any one below a certain age, and only the schoolroom upright belonged to Elma. What joy to play on Miss Grace's long, shiny, dark, ruddy rosewood! She must have the lid full up, and music on the desk. Miss Grace made a perfect audience. Elma regretted sincerely the fact that her legs stuck so far through her clothes, so that she could not trail her skirts to the piano and arrange them as she screwed herself up on the music stool. However, what did a small thing like that matter while Miss Grace sat with that surprised happy look on her face, and let her play "anything she liked"? Anything Elma liked, Miss Grace liked. In fact, Miss Grace discovered in her gentle, amiable way, a wonderful talent in the child. It formed a bond between the two which years never broke. Miss Grace would sit with her knitting pins idle in her lap, and a far-away expression in the thin grey colour of her eyes. Elma thought it such a pity Miss Grace wore caps when she looked so nice as that. She would think these things and forget about them and think of them again, all the time her fingers caressed the creamy coloured keys, and made music for Miss Grace to listen to. Then exactly at four o'clock, Miss Grace seemed to creep back to her cap again, and say that tea would be going in and they must "seek Miss

Annie."

Miss Annie poured tea from the magnificent teapot, which the footman carried in on a magnificent silver tray. She reclined gracefully in bed, reaching out a slender arm covered with filmy lace to do the honours of the tea table. Crumpets and scones might be passed about by Miss Grace. In a very large silver cake basket, amongst very few pieces of seed cake (Miss Annie took no other) Elma would find a pink biscuit. After that the ceremony of tea was over. It was wonderful to see how Miss Annie poured and talked and managed things generally. Elma could play to Miss Grace, but politeness somehow demanded that she should talk to Miss Annie.

Elma had always, more than any of the Leighton children, amused Miss Annie. The little poses, which Miss Grace, with wonderfully sympathetic understanding, had translated into actual composition in music, the poses which caused Elma to be the butt of a robustly humorous family, crushing her to self-consciousness and numbness in their presence, Miss Annie had the supreme wisdom never to remark upon. Had not Miss Grace and she enjoyed secretly for years Elma's first delightful blunder?

"My father and mother are paying a visit to the necropolis. They are having a lovely time. Oh! is that wrong? I'm sure it is. It's London I mean."

They had known then not to laugh, and they never did laugh. The little figure, with two fierce pigtails tied radiantly with pink bows, the blue eyes, and very soft curling locks over the temples, how could they laugh at these? Instead they took infinite pains over Elma's long words. Miss Annie herself invariably either felt "revived" or "resuscitated" or polished things of that description. It pleased her that such an intensely modern child should be sensitive to refinement in language. For a time Elma became famous as a conversationalist, and was known in her very trying family circle as Jane Austen or "Sense and Sensibility." The consequences of her position sent her so many times tearful to bed, that at last she put a severe curb on herself, and never used words that had not already been sampled and found worthy by her family. The afternoons at Miss Annie's, however, where she could remove this curb, became very valuable. The result was that while things might be "scrumptious" or "awfully nice" or "beastly" at home, they suddenly became "excellent" or "delightful" or "reprehensible," in that cultured atmosphere. Only one in the world knew the two sides to Elma, and that was her dear and wonderful father. She was never ashamed of either pose when completely alone with that understanding person. Her mother could not control the twitching at the lips which denotes that a grown-up person is taking one in and making game of one. Elma's father laughed with the loud laugh of enjoyment. It was the laughter Elma understood, and whether or not a mistake of hers had caused it, she ran on to wilder indiscretions merely that she might

hear it again. Oh! there was nobody quite so understanding as her father.

He invariably sent his compliments to Miss Annie, and one day, to explain why she went there continually, she told him how she played on Miss Grace's piano. He was greatly pleased, delighted in fact, and immediately wanted her to do the same for him. Elma's sensitive soul saw the whole house giggling at herself, and took fright as she always did at the mere mention of the exhibition of her talents.

"I can't, when Miss Grace isn't there," she had exclaimed, and neither she nor anybody else could explain why this should be, except Mr. Leighton himself, who looked long and with a new earnestness at his daughter, and never omitted afterwards in sending his compliments to the two ladies to mention Miss Grace first.

Mabel was entirely different in the respect of playing before people. She played as happily and easily to a roomful as she did alone. She blossomed out with the warmth of applause and admiration as a rose does at the rising of the sun.

"Mabel is prettier than Miss Dudgeon," said Elma to Miss Annie on the day when she described the great "coming out" occasion.

Miss Annie arrested the handsome teapot before pouring further.

"What! anybody more pretty than Miss Dudgeon?" she asked. "That is surely impossible."

"Mr. Maclean said so," said Elma.

"And who is Mr. Maclean?" asked Miss Annie.

"Oh–Mr. Maclean–Mr. Maclean is just Mrs. Maclean's nephew. But he knows Miss Dudgeon, and he looked a long time at Mabel and said she was prettier."

"You must not think so much of looks, Elma," said Miss Annie reprovingly. "Mabel is highly gifted, that is of much more consequence."

"Is it?" asked Elma. "Papa says so, though he won't believe any of *us* can be gifted. He thinks there's a great deal for us to learn. It's very de–demoralizing."

"Demoralizing?" asked Miss Annie.

"Yes, isn't it demora-lizing I mean, Miss Annie?" Elma begged in a puzzled manner.

Miss Annie daintily separated half a slice of seed cake from the formal pieces lying in the beautiful filigree cake basket.

"I do not think it is 'demoralizing' that you mean, dear. 'Demoralizing' would infer that your father, by telling you there was a great deal to learn, kept you from learning anything at all, upset you completely as it were."

Miss Annie was as exact as she could be on these occasions, when she took the place of the little bright red dictionary.

This time her information seemed to please Elma immensely. Her eyes immediately shone brilliantly.

"Oh, Miss Annie," she said, "it must be 'demoralizing' after all. That's just how I feel. Papa tells me, and I see the great big things to be done, and it doesn't seem to be any use to try the little things. Like Mozart's Rondos! They *are* so silly, you know. And when you see people like Mr. Sturgis painting big e–e–elaborate pictures, I simply can't draw at school at all."

Miss Grace leant forward on her chair, pulling little short breaths as though not to lose, by breathing properly, one word of this. She considered it marvellous that this young thing should invariably be expressing the thoughts which had troubled her all her life, and never even been properly recognized by herself, far less given voice to. It enabled her on many occasions to see clearly at last, and to be able, by the light of her own lost opportunities, to give counsel to Elma.

Miss Annie's eyes only looked calmly amused. It was an amusement to which Elma never took exception, but to-day she wanted something more, to prevent the foolishness which she was afraid of experiencing whenever she made a speech of this nature. Miss Annie only toyed with a silver spoon, however, looking sweet and very kindly at Elma, and it was Miss Grace who finally spoke.

She had recovered the shy equanimity with which she always filled in pauses for her sister.

"You must not allow the fine work of others to paralyze your young activities," Miss Grace said gravely. "Mr. Sturgis was young himself once, and no doubt at school studied freehand drawing very diligently to be so great as he is now."

"Oh, no," said Elma, "that's one of the funny parts. Mr. Sturgis doesn't approve of freehand drawing at all. He says it's anything but freehand, he says it's–it's–oh! I mustn't say it."

"Say it," said Miss Annie cheerfully.

"He says it's rotten," said Elma.

There was something of a pause after this.

"And it's so funny with Mabel," said Elma. "Mabel never practises a scale unless mamma goes right into the room and hears her do it. But Mabel can read off and play Chopin. And papa takes me to hear Liszt Concertos, and I can't play one of them."

"You can't stretch the chords yet, dearie," said Miss Grace.

"No, but it's very demor–what was it I said?" she asked Miss Annie anxiously.

"Demoralizing," said Miss Annie.

"And there's paralyzing too," said Elma gratefully. "That's exactly how I feel."

She sat nursing one of her knees in a hopeless manner, until it struck her that neither Miss Annie nor Miss Grace liked to see her in this attitude. Nothing was ever said on these occasions, but invariably one knew that in order not to get on the nerves of Miss Annie, one must sit straight and not fidget. Elma sat up therefore and resumed conversation.

"Mabel says it is nothing to play a Liszt Concerto," said Elma hopelessly.

"Is Mabel playing Liszt?" asked Miss Grace in astonishment.

"Mabel plays anything," sighed Elma.

"That is much better than being prettier than Miss Dudgeon," said Miss Annie.

She took up a little book which lay near her. It was bound in white vellum and had little gold lines tooled with red running into fine gold clasps. Two angel heads on ivory were inserted in a sunk gold rim on the cover. Miss Grace saw a likeness in the blue eyes there to the round orbs fastened on it whenever Elma had to listen to the wisdom of the white book. The title, *The Soul's Delineator*, fascinated her by its vagueness. She had never cared to let Miss Annie know that in growing from the days when she could not even spell, the word "delineator" had remained unsatisfactory as a term to be applied to the soul. There was The Delineator of fashions at home–a simple affair to understand, but that it should be applied to the "ivory thoughts" of Miss Annie seemed confusing. Miss Annie moved her white fingers, sparkling with the future duchess's rings, in and out among the gilt-edged pages. Then she read.

"The resources of the soul are quickened and enlivened, not so much by the education of the senses, as by the encouragement of the sensibilities, i.e. these elements which go to the making of the character gentle, chivalrous, kind; in short, the elements which provoke manners and good breeding."

Miss Annie paused. Her voice had sustained a rather high and different tone, as it always did when she read from the white book.

"Mabel has very nice manners, hasn't she?" asked Elma anxiously.

"Do you know that you have said nothing at all about the Story Book Girls to-day, and everything about Mabel," said Miss Annie. "I quite miss my Story Books."

Elma's eyes glowed.

Miss Annie had marked the line where the dream life was becoming the real life. Elma, in two days, had transferred her *mise en scene* of the drama of life from four far-away people to her own newly grown-up sister. It was a devotion which lasted long after the days of dreaming and imagining had passed for the imaginative Elma, this devotion and admiration for her eldest sister.

In case she should not entertain Miss Annie properly, she ran back a little, and told her how it was that Mabel had got a blue gown after all. It was delightful

to feel the appreciation of Miss Annie, and to watch the wrinkles of laughter at her eyes.

Exactly at five o'clock however Miss Grace began to look anxiously at Miss Annie, and Miss Annie's manner became correspondingly languid.

"You tire your dear self, you ought not to pour out tea," said Miss Grace in the concerned tone with which she always said this sentence at five o'clock in the afternoon.

Saunders came noiselessly in to remove, and Elma bade a mute good-bye.

"You tire yourself, dear," said Miss Grace to Miss Annie once more, as she and Elma retired to the door.

"I must fulfil my obligations, dear," said Miss Annie.

She nodded languidly to Elma, and Elma thought once again how splendid it was of Miss Annie to be brave like this, and wondered a trifle in her enthusiastic soul why for once Miss Grace did not pour out tea for her sister.

CHAPTER III
The Flower Show Ticket

"I call it mean of Mabel."

Jean sat in a crinkled heap on her bedroom floor, and pulled bad-temperedly with a wire comb at straight unruly hair. It had always annoyed Mabel that Jean should use a wire comb, when it set her "teeth on edge even to look at it."

Mabel however was out of the way, well out of it, they decided, and Elma and Betty had invaded the room belonging to the elder two in order to condole with Jean.

"Mabel could easily have got another ticket–and said she didn't want it! Didn't want it, when we're dying to go! And then off she goes, looking very prim and grown-up, with Cousin Harry."

Jean threw her head back, and began to gather long heavy ends in order for braiding.

"Just wait till I grow up! I shall soon take it out of Mabel," she said.

"Oh, girls, girls!"

Mrs. Leighton's voice at the door was very accusing.

"Well, mummy, it was mean. We've always gone together before, and now