A GIRL OF TO-DAY

BY

ELLINOR DAVENPORT ADAMS

“FRANCES CAUGHT SIGHT OF A DARK FIGURE ADVANCING.”

CONTENTS.

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CHAPTER I.
BROTHER AND SISTER.

ERE you are, then, Sis! Here you are—at last!"

The final words, spoken in a tone of complete satisfaction, accompanied a daring dive of hand and arm through the open window of the still moving railway-carriage.

"You ridiculous boy! We are only five minutes behind time!" Frances seized the intruding hand in a firm grip; and, as the train stopped, leaned out of the window to bestow a sisterly hug. "Its good to see you, dear! How brown and jolly you look! The country agrees with you, Austin; I thought it would."

"Well, I don't know. It was fearfully slow here at first, after Allerton. Of course, now—. Oh, come along, Frances! I've heaps to tell you, once we're on the road. I wouldn't bring the trap, because I wanted time for a good talk all to ourselves; and I knew the mile walk from the station to Woodend wouldn't frighten you. Toss out the parcels! I suppose you've a few dozen. What, only one? Hallo! they've taught you something at school."

Frances nodded her head reflectively. "Much you know about that yet, my son. Wait awhile, and I'll enlighten you!"

Delivering herself of this promise,—which was received by the boy with an impudent little shrug,—the girl sprang to the platform in a style strongly suggestive of past triumphs in her school gymnasium, and then proceeded to catch her brother by the shoulders and give him what she called "a proper look-over".

Austin stood the examination well. Though slightly built, he was broad of chest and straight of limb; his blue eyes were bright and clear; and the weakness of his mouth was usually discounted by the sunny smile which readily parted his lips. Nearly three years younger than his sister, and accustomed to look to her for companionship, guidance, and encouragement, Austin had found the months of their separation so real a trial that his joy in their present meeting was particularly demonstrative. He remembered in a flash of thought half a score of promising projects which had been allowed to lapse until Frances should come home from Haversfield College. And now Frances was here in front of him, and surveying him with the steady gray eyes he knew and truly loved—Frances herself, no whit spoiled by her two terms at the famous school for girls, though in Austin's mind there had lurked some fears of long skirts, hair "done up", and—worse than all!—airs of condescending superiority and adult wisdom.

Frances did not look at all grown-up. She was just a healthy, happy lass of barely fourteen years; frankly preferring short frocks to long ones, and in no haste for the time when hair-dressing should become a troublesome solemnity. So far, life had made small demands on her individuality. At home, she had known no special duty except the care of Austin, who had been rather delicate in early childhood; at school, she had been one of many, fairly successful in her work, more than fairly successful at games and bodily exercises, and perhaps showing promise chiefly in a susceptibility to all those influences which tend to widen a young girl's sympathies and draw out her intelligence. Frances had been fortunate in her recent experience—Haversfield is an excellent nursery for the best kind of girlhood. Its many house-mistresses are chosen by the Principal with extreme care; and Frances had been

under the charge of Miss Cliveden, a clever, cultivated, and liberal-minded woman, whose training was quite as valuable for heart as for head. The brightest-witted, most thoughtful, and most generous pupils of Haversfield were proud to call themselves "Miss Cliveden's girls".

"Is Mamma all right?" inquired Frances, releasing her brother after a little satisfied shake.

"Right as she can be. Ten deep in tea-drinkings, and particular friends with all the world. No, not with all the world—with the most particular world of Woodend. She's 'At Home' this afternoon, you know. First and third Thursdays, and all that twaddle—"

"Austin!" laughed Frances, faintly reproachful.

"Well, it is! Fancy a lot of women staring at each other over tea-cups and cake, and two odd men tripping about among the crew and wishing themselves at Kamschatka!"

"Who are the two?"

"Any tame sparrows caught in the trap."

"You ought to watch them, and learn what you've to grow up to."

"Catch me!"

"But Mamma is well?" persisted Frances. "And she likes Woodend, and her new house—you're sure?"

"Oh, I suppose so!" exclaimed Austin, showing signs of impatience.

“She left Allerton for your sake, and I think you ought to remember that.”

“Don’t preach!”

“Don’t you be ridiculous,” said Frances sharply. “I’ve no patience with boys who call every sensible word ‘preaching’.”

“I’ve no patience with girls who are everlastingly ‘sensible’.”

Frances’s frowns vanished, and smiles came instead. Her sisterly prerogative of “preaching” was so seldom exercised that Austin usually took her mild rebukes like a lamb. His laugh echoed hers just now, and he gave an affectionate hug to the arm he clung to. Brother and sister were walking at a good pace along the straggling white road to the village.

“Never mind, Sis. You shall preach as much as you like—to-day. And Mater is really all right—she must be. She has loads of friends already.”

“Loads! In a tiny place like this!” commented Frances, gazing about her. On either hand stretched the green meadows, watered by brooks filled with recent rain; in front, the country spread smiling and serene under the brilliant sun of late July. Immediately before them, the road dipped into a shallow wooded valley, studded on both sides with houses of every degree. Farther off, above the trees of Fencourt Park (the home of Woodend’s chief landlord), could be descried the broken ridges of Rowdon Common. All these interesting facts were duly pointed out by Austin, with the justifiable airs and pride of a resident; while Frances, as a new-comer, merely listened or asked sagacious questions.

“That’s where we hang out,” remarked the boy elegantly, while waving his hand towards a long, picturesquely-built house on the opposite side of the valley. “It’s a tidy crib, with lots of room.”

“A crib—with lots of room! A pretty confusion of terms, young man.”

“I’ve bagged a jolly place for larks,” continued Austin eagerly. “There’s a stove in it and a splendid big table, and a bath-room next door, which will just do for our photography.”

The boy’s face, uplifted to his sister’s, was full of the happy enthusiasm which feels itself secure of sympathy; and Frances’s heart beat high with pleasure because her welcome home was of this joyful sort. For the absent school-girl, like her brother, had known some fears—lest the six months’ parting should have taught Austin to do without her. The boy had proved a poor correspondent; and it was not easy for Frances with her warm, unselfish temperament, to realize that unanswered letters did not necessarily signify failing affection.

“That’s the church—it’s splendid for photographing, if only one could get the lines of the tower straight. And there’s the rectory alongside. The Rector’s very old; but a good sort, like the curate.”

“The curate is Mr. Carlyon, your tutor, isn’t he? Oh, Austin, do you like having lessons with him?” asked Frances, with intense interest. Her reverence for knowledge had grown of late, and she wanted, not unnaturally, to find out whether in this direction Austin’s steps had progressed with her own.

“I like it well enough. You see,” he added awkwardly, “I’m not exactly a grind; one must use one’s wits, but I think mine go best

with my hands. Only, Carlyon was a swell at Oxford, and he's got a way of making one think one wouldn't mind being a swell too."

Frances looked relieved and quite contented.

"Then he knows a straight ball when he sees one," Austin continued, "and he's a crack with his bat. Then when lessons are on, he doesn't drone away everlastingly about dead-and-gone chaps. There's one of his cranks we all approve of, somehow."

"What is it?"

"We've half an hour every day for what he chooses to call 'current events'. Carlyon tells us what's going on in the world, reads bits out of papers and talks them over, and gives marks to the fellows who remember best."

"Oh, Austin! I hope you get most marks!" interrupted Frances, with the utterly unreasonable ambition of a sister. Austin felt that he was wanting, and replied grumpily:

"Hang it, I'd like to know what chance I have! The other chaps hear things at home. Mater won't let me look at a paper, and never talks to me about what she reads herself."

"Never mind," said Frances, "I'll hunt out the news for you, and read the things up, and send you off all ready crammed. I shall like doing it."

"I know you will," groaned Austin. "I say, Frances, you'll shine like the sun at our 'symposia'—I hope you like that pretty word, Ma'am!"

"What are your symposia?" chuckled Frances, beginning to think Woodend couldn't be so much behind Haversfield itself.

“Why, on Saturday mornings Carlyon takes his boys, and his sister takes her girls, and we’ve a meeting in the big rectory dining-room. Then the lot of us talk like fits about those blessed ‘current events’ our respected teachers have been driving into us all the week. It’s prime fun, once we get started. Carlyon and his sister do the starting. When they’re on opposite sides, we’ve rare larks; for they pitch into one another like mad—quite civilly, you know. Then we chaps and Miss Carlyon’s crew follow suit, and go for one another in fine style. Gracious! You should have heard Max Brenton and Florry Fane last Saturday! It was our breaking-up day, and we had an extra grand symposium. Max and Florry are no end good at argufying.”

Frances heard the names of these friends of Austin with the pleasant anticipations natural to a sociable girl just about to make trial of a new home, new surroundings, new companions. She hoped this “Max and Florry” would be “good” for something besides “argufying”—good for comradeship of the only kind possible to a nature whose characteristics were deep-rooted and strong. Half-hearted alliances were outside Frances’s comprehension; her love and trust must be given freely and fully, or not at all.

“In her last letter Mamma told me I was to be one of Miss Carlyon’s girls after the holidays. That will seem funny at first, now that I have got used to a big school. It was nice at Haversfield, Austin. I want to stay with Mamma and you, of course, else I should like to go back. Miss Cliveden—my house-mistress—was so jolly. She used to make one feel as if one wanted to be of some good, if one could.”

“You can be of lots of good here,” said Austin comfortably. “It’s no sense a fellow having a sister if she’s away at school. Max says if he had a sister he’d think himself lucky, for she would be able to teach him how to make a bed properly. That’s a thing he often needs to do for his worst cases, and he does not quite understand it.”

“What do you mean?”

Austin declined to explain. At the moment he was too much occupied with his own affairs to have leisure for Max’s. He was eager to convince Frances that she could be of supreme use to him personally; and Frances, before whose eyes had lately gleamed a vision of a wider range for her girlish energies, listened, and sympathized, and promised, as only the best of sisters could. She was quite sure that Austin wanted her most of all. He always had wanted her, and she never had disappointed him.

They had been brought up together, and educated by the same governesses and tutors until a few months before this story opens. Then Austin’s childish delicacy had for the first time threatened to become serious, and his mother had carried him off to London for distinguished medical advice. For years Mrs. Morland’s home had been in Allerton, a large provincial town to which she had first been attracted because it was the dwelling-place of an old friend, who had since passed away. The London doctors recommended a country life for Austin; and, after some weeks of search for a suitable spot, Mrs. Morland fixed on Woodend, a village which had everything desirable in the way of soil, air, and scenery. Her household gods were removed from Allerton to Woodend in the course of a bright April, and she and her son settled down in the pretty home she had bought and furnished.

During all this time of unrest, Frances had been quietly at work at Haversfield, where she had been sent in order that her education might not be interrupted. She had spent the Easter holidays with a school friend, because at the time her mother was superintending the removal to Woodend, and Austin was paying a visit to a Scotch cousin.

If Mrs. Morland had guessed under what influences her daughter would come, she certainly would not have sent her to Haversfield. Not only had she no regard for the "learned lady", but she set no value at all upon the womanly accomplishments which were unable to secure social prestige. Miss Cliveden's definition of "society" would have astonished Mrs. Morland; and her gospel of labour, preached with her lips and in her life, would have seemed to Frances's mother uniquely dull and quixotic.

Miss Cliveden taught her girls to love work, to love it best when done for others, and to reverence all work truly and faithfully accomplished. The nobility of honest labour was her favourite theme, and the allurements of altruistic toil the highest attraction she could hold out to her young scholars. As her pupils were all in the upper forms of the college, Frances was one of the youngest of them, and Miss Cliveden took a great liking for the frank-hearted, winning lass. Thrown chiefly among the elder girls, Frances soon caught their spirit and shared their ambitions, while remaining in ways and thoughts a thorough child.

By the time Mrs. Morland was comfortably settled in Woodend, she began to grow tired of petting and coddling a wayward, restless boy. Scotland and the country air had brought Austin back to fair health, and his bright eyes and rosy cheeks assured his mother that her sacrifice had not been in vain. Mrs. Morland loved ease of

mind and body. She thought it time her boy should return to his lesson-books, and that Frances—so soon as her second term at Haversfield should be over—should come home to help him.

The terms of his father's will had decreed that Austin should be educated privately. Mr. Morland had disliked public schools. His wife regretted the social disadvantage, but could not overrule her husband's decision; and she began to face the trouble of looking out for a new tutor. Before she had looked long, she discovered that Mr. Carlyon, the young curate of Woodend church, took pupils; and Austin became one of them for the greater part of the summer term.

"What sort of place is Woodend?" asked Frances.

"Oh, well—nice enough. Some jolly fellows among the boys, and plenty of girls to match. I dare say you'll like Florry Fane, anyhow. She has lots of pluck, and doesn't bounce, though she's no end clever. Then there's roly-poly Betty Turner—and May Gordon—and the First Violin."

"Who's the First Violin?"

"We've a boys' and girls' band, and she's the leader. Everybody calls her the First Violin. She hardly moves without her fiddle; and she *can* play."

"What about your fiddle? Haven't you joined the band, lazy imp?"

"Had to; Miss Carlyon wouldn't let me off. Besides, it's good fun. We've a master to train us, and he gives me lessons alone as well. I practise sometimes," added Austin hastily, "so you needn't worry."

Frances felt on this golden afternoon even less inclined than usual to “preach”, so she let the fiddle pass.

“Are there any poor folks in the village?” she inquired.

“Crowds!—at least, Max says so. He’s always abusing Sir Arthur Fenn—chap who lives at Fencourt, the biggest place about. That’s to say, Fencourt and most of Woodend belong to him; but he’s hardly ever here. He’s got a grander place somewhere, and that’s why he doesn’t care much about this one, and won’t do much for the people.”

“What a shame!”

“I don’t know,—they’re such a rough lot, no decent folk would want to go near them.”

“I should!” declared Frances warmly. “I’d love to try to help people who were very poor and miserable.”

“Gracious!” cried Austin, laughing merrily. “I declare, you’re as bad as Max. He’ll show you the way about, if you want to be mixed up in charity soup and blankets!”

“Why!—what should a boy know about such things?” said Frances, laughing too.

“Max isn’t *a* boy, as you’ll soon discover. He’s *the* boy. The one and only Max Brenton. My grammar doesn’t amount to much, but I know Max is of the singular number.”

“Who is he?”

“He’s the son of Doctor Brenton—the one and only son of the one and only doctor!”

“Is Dr. Brenton as singular as Max?”

“More so, my dear!—yes, if possible, more so!” returned Austin, grimacing expressively. “You see, they’ve brought each other up, and it’s sort of mixed which is which. So they’re ‘the old Doc’ and ‘the young Doc’ to all Woodend,—and a jolly good sort they both are!” continued the boy heartily. “If Max weren’t always so fearfully busy, he’d be the chummiest chum a fellow could want.”

“What is he so busy about?” asked Frances, enjoying the description of this mysterious Max.

“Why—soup and blankets!”

“Nonsense!”

“Fact.”

“You are a provoking scamp!”

“Respected student of distinguished Haversfield (as Florry would say), if you put me on to construe for an hour I couldn’t ‘render into tolerable English’ the sayings and doings of Max Brenton—the one and only Max Brenton! He’s not to be understood. You must just take him as you find him; and if you don’t meet him to-day, hope you’ll come across him to-morrow. And now, don’t you want to know if the tennis-court is in good order, and if you’re going to have cake for tea?”

Frances laughed, and yielded herself up to home matters. For a time the brother and sister exchanged question and answer at a great rate, and held a lively discussion as to the possibilities of Elveley. Austin was full of talk about his chosen playroom and its entrancing conveniences. Frances planned the arrangement of