

ELSIE'S FRIENDS

AT

WOODBURN

BY

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Table of Contents

CHAPTER I.

CHAPTER II.

CHAPTER III.

CHAPTER IV.

CHAPTER V.

CHAPTER VI.

CHAPTER VII.

CHAPTER VIII.

CHAPTER IX.

CHAPTER X.

CHAPTER XI.

CHAPTER XII.

CHAPTER XIII.

CHAPTER XIV.

CHAPTER XV.

CHAPTER XVI.

CHAPTER XVII.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CHAPTER XIX.

CHAPTER XX.

CHAPTER XXI.

CHAPTER XXII.

CHAPTER XXIII.

ELSIE'S FRIENDS AT WOODBURN.



CHAPTER I.

The twenty-fourth had been cold and stormy: a keen, biting wind blowing continuously, during the greater part of the day, bringing with it a heavy fall of sleet and snow.

The weather on Christmas Day was an improvement upon that—the wind being less boisterous and the snow-fall only an occasional light flurry, but the sun scarcely showed his face, and as evening drew on the moon shone but fitfully and through skurrying clouds; the ground was white with snow, but as it had drifted badly, the roads were not in condition for sleighing, and Max Raymond and Evelyn Leland made the journey from Woodburn to the Oaks in a close carriage.

Captain Raymond handed Evelyn in. Max took a seat by her side and gallantly tucked the robes about her feet, remarking that it was the coldest night of the season so far.

“Yes,” she said, “but I suppose we shall have still colder weather before the winter is over. This is nothing to some I have known in my old home at the north.”

“Oh no!” returned Max, “I remember it used to be very much colder where we lived when I was a little fellow.”

Eva smiled, thinking he was not nearly grown up yet.

“And hardly a breath of wind reaches us in this close carriage,” she said. “I shouldn’t care if the ride was to be twice as long.”

“No, nor I,” said Max. “But I dare say we’ll have a fine time after we get to the Oaks.”

“Yes; but I am so sorry your father thought best to decline the invitation for Lulu; I shall not enjoy myself half so well without her,” sighed Evelyn.

“I’m sorry too,” Max said: “for I know it was a great disappointment to her when papa told her she was not to go. I don’t know why he refused to let her, but I do know that he always has a good reason when he denies any of us a pleasure.”

Eva said, “Of course; I am quite sure he is the best and kindest of fathers,” and then they began talking of the approaching festivities at the Oaks, and those whom they expected to meet there.

“Do you know who are invited besides ourselves?” asked Max.

“I believe I do,” replied Evelyn. “There are to be two or three sets; little ones—Walter Travilla, and the eldest two of Aunt Rose Lacey’s children—as mates for little Horace and his sister, Rosie Travilla, Lora Howard and myself for Sydney and Maud; you and Ralph Conly, Art and Walter Howard for their brother’s companions, besides Bertram Shaw, a school-friend of the Dinsmore boys, who, for their sakes, has been asked to the Oaks to spend the holidays.”

“Eva,” queried Max, “Do you know exactly what relation Horace Chester Dinsmore and his brother and sisters are to the rest? they seem to call everybody cousin, so far as I’ve noticed; even Grandpa Dinsmore.”

“Yes; I was asking Aunt Elsie about them the other day,” replied Eva, “and she told me their father was own cousin to Grandpa Dinsmore; his father’s brother’s son; and when he died he left them to Grandpa Dinsmore’s care; made him their guardian, I mean, and as Uncle Horace and his wife were kindly willing to have them at the Oaks, they were invited to make it their home till they are grown up. It’s a lovely place, and I know they are very kindly treated, but I can’t help feeling sorry for them because both their parents are dead.”

“Nor I,” said Max, “for no matter how kind other folks may be to you, it isn’t like having your own father or mother. I’m ever so fond of Mamma Vi though,” he added with emphasis, “and just as glad as I can be that papa married her.”

“And that she married him,” put in Eva, laughingly. “I think it was a grand match on both sides; she is so sweet and lovely, and he in every way worthy of her.”

“My opinion, exactly,” laughed Max. “I am very proud of my father, Eva.”

“I don’t wonder; I am sure I should be in your place,” she said. “Ah see, we are just turning into the grounds! The ride has seemed very short to me. But it’s quite a little journey yet to the house. I admire this winding drive very much. It gives one quite a number of beautiful views, and it’s really obliging in the moon to come out just now from behind that cloud and show us how lovely every thing is looking. I think newly-fallen snow gives such a charming variety to a landscape.

“There’s witchery in the moonlight, too,” she went on, glancing out through the windows, now on this side, now on that. “I don’t wonder Grandma Elsie is so fond of this place where, as she says, she lived so happily with her father and Grandma Rose when she was a little girl, and until she was married.”

At that moment a turn in the road brought the front of the mansion into full view. Lights were gleaming from every window, seeming to promise a warm welcome and an abundance of good cheer, a promise whose fulfillment began presently as the carriage drew up before the door.

“You are the last, my dears, but none the less welcome,” Mrs. Dinsmore said, as she kissed Evelyn and shook hands with Max.

“Thank you, ma’am. I hope you have not kept your tea waiting for us,” returned Eva a little anxiously.

“Oh no, my dear, we had been told not to expect you to tea, so did not wait.”

“And Rosie Travilla has only just come,” said Maud, taking possession of Evelyn and hurrying her away to the room appropriated to their joint use during Eva’s stay.

“These rooms that used to be Cousin Elsie’s have been given up to our use for the present,” she said. “This was her bedroom; there is another adjoining it on that side, and her dressing-room on the other is turned into a bedroom for the time, so that we six girls are all close together, and have her boudoir for our own private little parlor, where we can be quite to ourselves whenever we wish. Isn’t it nice?”

“Yes, indeed!” returned Evelyn.

“Oh Rosie, so you got here before me!” as the latter came running in, followed by Sydney, and greeted her with a hug and kiss.

“Yes; a little. But where’s Lu?”

“The captain thought it best for her to stay at home, and she preferred to do so, since Gracie is so unwell as to need her nursing.”

“How nice and good of her!” cried Sydney; “but I’m ever so sorry not to have her with us, for I like her very much indeed.”

“I love her dearly,” said Evelyn. “I never saw a more warm-hearted, generous girl, and it’s just beautiful to see how she and Gracie love one another; their father and brother, too.”

“I really think the captain might have let Lu come, and I am very sorry for her disappointment,” said Rosie.

“She was disappointed at first,” said Evelyn, “but after Gracie took sick she wouldn’t have come if her father had given permission; she told me so, saying that she couldn’t enjoy herself at all, knowing her darling little sister was suffering without her there to comfort and amuse her.”

“Vi would have done that quite as well, I am sure,” remarked Rosie.

“And so we’re only five instead of six,” said Maud. “Well, we’ll each one of us just have to try to be all the more entertaining to the rest. Your dress and hair are all right, Eva, and let us hurry

out to the parlor, where the others are: for they'll be wanting us to take part in the games."

The door opened as she spoke, and an attractive-looking little girl, about Evelyn's age, looked in. It was Lora Howard, the youngest of the Pine Grove family.

"Come, girls," she said, "we're waiting for you. O Eva, how do you do?"

"What's the game to be?" asked Rosie; "some sort of a romping one to please the little ones, I suppose."

"Yes; either Pussy Wants a Corner, or Blindman's Buff," replied Lora, leading the way to the scene of festivity.

For a time mirth and jollity ruled the hour, the older people joining in the sports of the young, with the double motive of watching over them and adding to their enjoyment; then light refreshments were partaken of. After that the servants were called in, and the head of the family read aloud a short Psalm, offered a brief prayer, giving thanks for the blessings of life and the pleasures of the past day, and asking for the protecting care during the silent watches of the night, of Him who neither slumbers nor sleeps.

Then the good-nights were spoken, and all scattered to their rooms.

The little ones were carried off by Mrs. Dinsmore and their nurses; the five young girls retreated to the suite of rooms set apart to their use, and the lads—seven in number—trooped up the broad stairway leading to the second story.

“You and I are to be bed-fellows, Max, and to share the same room with Art and Walter Howard,” said Frank Dinsmore. “You see we have to crowd a little—there being such a lot of us—but it’ll be all the jollier, don’t you think, boys?”

He had led the way, as he spoke, into a most inviting-looking room, large enough to seem far from crowded, even with the two double beds filling opposite corners.

“Yes, yes, indeed!” the others responded, in chorus, Art adding: “The more the merrier, and we’ll have no end of a good time, if I’m not mightily mistaken.”

A door of communication with another room stood wide open, and through it they could see the three older lads, gathered about a blazing wood fire.

“Walk in, boys,” called Chester, addressing Max and his companions, as he saw them sending curious glances in that direction.

“We’re expected to go to bed, aren’t we?” queried Max in reply, coming in last, and speaking with some hesitation.

“We’re not at boarding-school, my lad,” laughed Chester, “and no one has given orders as to the exact hour for retiring, so far as I am aware.”

“Of course not,” said his brother, “Cousin Horace and Cousin Sue are not of the sort to be over strict with a fellow, and would never think of laying down the law to visitors, any way.”

“And it’s not late,” added Walter, accepting the chair Chester had set for him.

“Come on, Max, we’re a respectable crowd, and won’t damage your morals,” said Ralph, lighting a cigar and beginning to smoke it.

“I should hope not,” said Chester, “and I presume if any such danger had been apprehended he would hardly have been allowed to come to the Oaks.”

“Are his morals supposed to be more easily damaged than those of the common run of fellows?” asked Bertram Shaw, regarding Max with a sneering, supercilious stare.

“I am inclined to think they are,” said Ralph.

“Come, come, now, I’m not going to have Max made uncomfortable,” interposed Chester, good-naturedly. “He’s my guest, you know. Here, sit down, laddie, it’s early yet,” pushing forward a chair as he spoke, “have a cigar?”

“No thank you,” returned Max pleasantly; “I tried one once and got enough of it. I never was so sick in my life.”

“Oh, that’s nothing unusual for a first trial; likely it wouldn’t have the same effect again,” said Bertram.

“Better take one; you’ll seem twice the man if you smoke that you will if you don’t.”

The box of cigars had been passed around to all, and each of the other boys had taken one, but Max steadily refused.

“My father says it is very injurious to boys, and will stunt their growth,” he gave as a reason; adding, with a laugh, “and it’s my ambition to be as tall as he is, and like him in every way.”

“Very right,” remarked Frank, “but do you mind the smoke?”

“Oh no, not at all.”

But the next minute he saw something that he did mind. A table was drawn into the middle of the room and a pack of cards and a bottle of wine produced from some hiding-place and set upon it, while Chester invited them all to draw up their chairs and have a glass and a game.

The others accepted without hesitation, but Max rose and, with burning cheeks and fast-beating heart, uttered a protest.

“Oh, you can’t be going to drink and gamble, surely! What would Uncle Horace say if he knew such things were going on in his house?”

“No, my son,” said Chester, laughingly, “we’re not going to do either; we’ll not play for money, so it won’t be gambling, and the wine isn’t strong enough to make a fellow drunk; no, nor anywhere near it. So you needn’t be afraid to join us.”

“No, thank you,” returned Max firmly. “I can not think it right or safe to drink even wine, or to play cards, whether you put up a stake or not.”

“No, ’twouldn’t be safe for you, I presume,” sneered Ralph. “He’s awfully afraid of his governor, lads; so we’d best not try to persuade him.”

“Do you mean my father?” demanded Max, a trifle hotly.

“Of course, my little man; whom else should I mean?”

“Then I want you to understand that I never would be so disrespectful to my father as to call him that!”

“It’s not so bad,” laughed Chester, while Bertram frowned and muttered something about a “Muff and a spooney,” and Frank said, “Come now, Max, sit down and have a game with us. Where’s the harm?”

“Don’t urge him,” sneered Ralph, “he’s afraid of a flogging. He knows he’d catch it, and the captain looks like a man that wouldn’t mince matters if he undertook to administer it.”

Max’s face flushed more hotly than before, but he straightened himself and looked his tormentor full in the eye as he answered: “I don’t deny that I should expect a flogging if I should weakly yield and do what my conscience tells me is wrong, even if my father had not forbidden it, as he has; but I’m not ashamed to own that I love my father so well that the pained look I should see in his face when he learned that his only son had taken to such wicked courses, would be worse to me than a dozen floggings. Good-night to you all,” and he turned and left the room.

“Coward!” muttered Ralph, as the door closed on him.

“Any thing else than that, I should say,” remarked Chester. “I think he has just shown himself the bravest of us all. Moral courage, we all know, is courage of the highest kind.”

“Yes, boys, I am sure he’s in the right, and I, for one, shall follow his example,” said Arthur, rising; and with a hasty good-night, he too disappeared.

Walter and Frank exchanged glances.

“I think myself we might be at better business,” remarked the one.

“That’s so!” assented the other, and they, too, withdrew to the next room.

Max had taken a tiny volume from his pocket and was seated near the light, reading.

“What have you there, old fellow?” asked Frank, stepping to his side, laying a hand on his shoulder, and bending down to look. “A Testament, I declare!”

The tone expressed astonishment, not unmixed with derision.

Max’s cheek flushed again, but he replied without hesitation, and in his usual pleasant tones, “Yes, I promised papa I would always read at least one verse before going to bed at night.”

“And say your prayers, too, I suppose?”

Max felt very much as if he were called to march up to the cannon’s mouth, as a glance showed him that not Frank only, but the other two boys also, were standing regarding him with mingled curiosity and amusement. His heart quailed for a moment, but the remembrance of what his father had once told him of his having to pass through such ordeals in his youthful days, gave him courage to emulate that father’s example and stand to his colors in spite of the ridicule that seemed so hard to face.

“And God’s eye is on me, his ear open to hear what I say,” was the next thought; “I will not dishonor either my earthly or my heavenly father.”

All this passed through his mind in a second of time, and he hardly seemed to pause before he answered in a firm, steady voice, “Yes; I did promise that too; and even if I had not, I should do it. Don’t you think, you fellows, it would be mean and ungrateful for a boy that is so well off as I am, and has been having such a splendid time all day long, to tumble into his bed without so much as saying thank you to the One he owes it all to?”

“Does look like it when you put it so,” muttered Arthur.

“And then,” proceeded Max, “who is there to take care of us while we and every body else are all fast asleep? May be we’ll wake in the morning all right if we don’t take the trouble to ask God to keep us alive and safe, for He’s always a great deal better to us than we deserve, but don’t you think it’s wise to ask him?”

“I reckon,” said Frank, forcing a laugh, for Max’s seriousness was rather infectious: “we’ll not hinder you any way, old boy, and while you are in the way of asking for yourself, you can just include the rest of us, if you like.”

“How old are you Max?” queried Arthur.

“Thirteen.”

“And I, though four years older, am not half the soldier you are.”

Max shook his head. "I am not brave at all; it was awfully hard to speak out against the cards and wine, and I did hope I'd have this room to myself till—till I'd got through with reading and—and the rest of it."

"Of course; but you went through the fight and stuck manfully to your colors for all your fright. I say, old fellow, you're worthy to be the son of a naval officer."

"Thanks," said Max, flushing with pleasure; "I wouldn't be worthy of my father if I couldn't brave more than I have to-night."

"Well, go ahead and finish up your devotions; we'll not disturb you," said Frank, turning away and beginning to undress for bed.

The Howards followed his example, all three keeping very quiet while Max was on his knees.

They had all been brought up under religious influences, and while not controlled by them as Max was, yet felt constrained to respect his firm adherence to duty and the right.

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