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I Say No



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Book the first
AT SCHOOL

Chapter I
THE SMUGGLED SUPPER

Outside the bedroom the night was black and still. The small rain fell too softly to be heard in the garden; not a leaf stirred in the airless calm; the watch dog was asleep, the cats were indoors; far or near, under the murky heaven, not a sound was stirring.

Inside the bedroom the night was black and still.

Miss Ladd knew her business as a schoolmistress too well to allow night lights; and Miss Ladd's young ladies were supposed to be fast asleep, in accordance with the rules of the house. Only at intervals the silence was faintly disturbed, when the restless turning of one of the girls in her bed betrayed itself by a gentle rustling between the sheets. In the long intervals of stillness, not even the softly audible breathing of young creatures asleep was to be heard.

The first sound that told of life and movement revealed the mechanical movement of the clock. Speaking from the lower regions, the tongue of Father Time told the hour before midnight.

A soft voice rose wearily near the door of the room. It counted the strokes of the clock—and reminded one of the girls of the lapse of time.

“Emily! Eleven o’clock.”

There was no reply. After an interval the weary voice tried again, in louder tones:

“Emily!”

A girl, whose bed was at the inner end of the room, sighed under the heavy heat of the night—and said, in peremptory tones, “Is that Cecilia?”

“Yes.”

“What do you want?”

“I’m getting hungry, Emily. Is the new girl asleep?”

The new girl answered promptly and spitefully, “No, she isn’t.”

Having a private object of their own in view, the five wise virgins of Miss Ladd’s first class had waited an hour, in wakeful anticipation of the falling asleep of the stranger—and it had ended in this way! A ripple of laughter ran round the room. The new girl, mortified and offended, entered her protest in plain words.

“You are treating me shamefully! You all distrust me, because I am a stranger.”

“Say we don’t understand you,” Emily answered, speaking for her schoolfellows; “and you will be nearer the truth.”

“Who expected you to understand me, when I only came here today? I have told you already my name is Francine de Sor. If want to know more, I’m nineteen years old, and I come from the West Indies.”

Emily still took the lead. “Why do you come here?” she asked. “Who ever heard of a girl joining a new school just before the holidays? You are nineteen years old, are you? I’m a year younger than you—and I have finished my education. The next big girl in the room is a year younger than me—

and she has finished her education. What can you possibly have left to learn at your age?”

“Everything!” cried the stranger from the West Indies, with an outburst of tears. “I’m a poor ignorant creature. Your education ought to have taught you to pity me instead of making fun of me. I hate you all. For shame, for shame!”

Some of the girls laughed. One of them—the hungry girl who had counted the strokes of the clock—took Francine’s part.

“Never mind their laughing, Miss de Sor. You are quite right, you have good reason to complain of us.”

Miss de Sor dried her eyes. “Thank you—whoever you are,” she answered briskly.

“My name is Cecilia Wyvil,” the other proceeded. “It was not, perhaps, quite nice of you to say you hated us all. At the same time we have forgotten our good breeding—and the least we can do is to beg your pardon.”

This expression of generous sentiment appeared to have an irritating effect on the peremptory young person who took the lead in the room. Perhaps she disapproved of free trade in generous sentiment.

“I can tell you one thing, Cecilia,” she said; “you shan’t beat ME in generosity. Strike a light, one of you, and lay the blame on me if Miss Ladd finds us out. I mean to shake hands with the new girl—and how can I do it in the dark? Miss de Sor, my name’s Brown, and I’m queen of the bedroom. I—not Cecilia—offer our apologies if we have offended you. Cecilia is my dearest friend, but I don’t allow her to take the lead in the room. Oh, what a lovely nightgown!”

The sudden flow of candle-light had revealed Francine, sitting up in her bed, and displaying such treasures of real

Book the second
IN LONDON

Chapter XII
MRS. ELLMOTHER

The metropolis of Great Britain is, in certain respects, like no other metropolis on the face of the earth. In the population that throngs the streets, the extremes of Wealth and the extremes of Poverty meet, as they meet nowhere else. In the streets themselves, the glory and the shame of architecture—the mansion and the hovel—are neighbors in situation, as they are neighbors nowhere else. London, in its social aspect, is the city of contrasts.

Toward the close of evening Emily left the railway terminus for the place of residence in which loss of fortune had compelled her aunt to take refuge. As she approached her destination, the cab passed—by merely crossing a road—from a spacious and beautiful Park, with its surrounding houses topped by statues and cupolas, to a row of cottages, hard by a stinking ditch miscalled a canal. The city of contrasts: north and south, east and west, the city of social contrasts.

Emily stopped the cab before the garden gate of a cottage, at the further end of the row. The bell was answered by the one servant now in her aunt's employ—Miss Letitia's maid.

Personally, this good creature was one of the ill-fated women whose appearance suggests that Nature intended to

make men of them and altered her mind at the last moment. Miss Letitia's maid was tall and gaunt and awkward. The first impression produced by her face was an impression of bones. They rose high on her forehead; they projected on her cheeks; and they reached their boldest development in her jaws. In the cavernous eyes of this unfortunate person rigid obstinacy and rigid goodness looked out together, with equal severity, on all her fellow-creatures alike. Her mistress (whom she had served for a quarter of a century and more) called her "Bony." She accepted this cruelly appropriate nickname as a mark of affectionate familiarity which honored a servant. No other person was allowed to take liberties with her: to every one but her mistress she was known as Mrs. Ellmother.

"How is my aunt?" Emily asked.

"Bad."

"Why have I not heard of her illness before?"

"Because she's too fond of you to let you be distressed about her. 'Don't tell Emily'; those were her orders, as long as she kept her senses."

"Kept her senses? Good heavens! what do you mean?"

"Fever—that's what I mean."

"I must see her directly; I am not afraid of infection."

"There's no infection to be afraid of. But you mustn't see her, for all that."

"I insist on seeing her."

"Miss Emily, I am disappointing you for your own good. Don't you know me well enough to trust me by this time?"

"I do trust you."

"Then leave my mistress to me—and go and make yourself comfortable in your own room."

This remonstrance was received in silence. Mrs. Ellmother's great gaunt figure still blocked up the doorway.

"If you force me to it," Emily said, quietly, "I must go to the doctor, and ask him to interfere."

"Do you mean that?" Mrs. Ellmother said, quietly, on her side.

"I do mean it," was the answer.

The old servant suddenly submitted—with a look which took Emily by surprise. She had expected to see anger; the face that now confronted her was a face subdued by sorrow and fear.

"I wash my hands of it," Mrs. Ellmother said. "Go in—and take the consequences."

Chapter XIII MISS LETITIA

Emily entered the room. The door was immediately closed on her from the outer side. Mrs. Ellmother's heavy steps were heard retreating along the passage. Then the banging of the door that led into the kitchen shook the flimsily-built cottage. Then, there was silence.

The dim light of a lamp hidden away in a corner and screened by a dingy green shade, just revealed the closely-curtained bed, and the table near it bearing medicine bottles and glasses. The only objects on the chimney piece were a clock that had been stopped in mercy to the sufferer's irritable nerves, and an open case containing a machine for pouring drops into the eyes. The smell of fumigating pastilles hung heavily on the air. To Emily's excited imagination, the

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