

Just Patty

illustrated



Jean Webster

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I

Reform



"T'S a shame!" said Priscilla.

"It's an outrage!" said Conny.

"It's an insult!" said Patty.

"To separate us now after we've been together three years—"

"And it isn't as though we were *awfully* bad last year. Lots of girls had more demerits."

"Only our badness was sort of conspicuous," Patty admitted.

"But we were *very* good the last three weeks," reminded Conny.

"And you should see my new room-mate!" wailed Priscilla.

"She can't be any worse than Irene McCullough."

"She is!—Her father's a missionary, and she was brought up in China. Her name is Keren-happuch Hersey, after Job's youngest daughter. And she doesn't think it's funny!"

"Irene," said Conny gloomily, "gained twenty pounds through the summer. She weighs—"

"But you should see mine!" cried Patty, in exasperation. "Her name is Mae Mertelle Van Arsdale."

"Keren studies every second; and expects me to walk on tiptoe so she can concentrate."

"You should hear Mae Mertelle talk! She said her father was a financier, and wanted to know what mine was. I told her he was a reform judge, and that he spent his time putting financiers in prison. She says I'm an impertinent child," Patty grinned feebly.

"How old is she?"

"She's nineteen, and has been proposed to twice."

"Mercy! Whatever made her choose St. Ursula's?"

"Her father and mother ran away and got married when they were nineteen, and they're afraid she inherited the tendency. So they picked out a good, strict, church school. Mae doesn't know how she's ever going to fix her hair without a maid. She's *awfully* superstitious about

moonstones. She never wears anything but silk stockings and she can't stand hash. I'll have to teach her how to make a bed. She always crosses on the White Star Line."

Patty scattered these details at random. The others listened sympathetically, and added a few of their own troubles.

"Irene weighs a hundred and fifty-nine pounds and six ounces, not counting her clothes," said Conny. "She brought two trunks *loaded* with candy. She has it hidden all over the room. The last sound I hear at night, is Irene crunching chocolates—and the first sound in the morning. She never says anything; she simply chews. It's like rooming with a cow. And I have a sweet collection of neighbors! Kid McCoy's across the hall, and she makes more noise than half-a-dozen cowboys. There's a new French girl next door—you know, the pretty little one with the two black braids."

"She looks rather desirable," said Patty.

"She might be if she could talk, but she only knows about fifty words. Harriet Gladden's rooming with her, as limp and mournful as an oyster, and Evalina Smith's at the end of the corridor. You know what a *perfect* idiot Evalina is."

"Oh, it's beastly!" they agreed.

"Lordy's to blame," said Conny. "The Dowager never would have separated us if she hadn't interfered."

"And I've got her!" wailed Patty. "You two have Mam'selle and Waddams, and they're nice, sweet, unsuspecting lambs; but the girls in the East Wing simply can't sneeze but Lordy—"

"Sh!" Conny warned. "Here she comes."

The Latin teacher, in passing, paused on the threshold. Conny disentangled herself from the mixture of clothes and books and sofa cushions that littered the bed, and politely rose to her feet. Patty slid down from the white iron foot-rail, and Priscilla descended from the top of the trunk.

"Ladies don't perch about on the furniture."

"No, Miss Lord," they murmured in unison, gazing back from three pairs of wide, uplifted eyes. They knew, from gleeful past experience, that nothing so annoyed her as smiling acquiescence.

Miss Lord's eyes critically studied the room. Patty was still in traveling dress.

"Put on your uniform, Patty, and finish unpacking. The trunks go down to-morrow morning."

"Yes, Miss Lord."

"Priscilla and Constance, why aren't you out of doors with the other girls, enjoying this beautiful autumn weather?"

"But we haven't seen Patty for such a long time, and now that we are separated—" commenced Conny, with a pathetic droop of her mouth.

"I trust that your lessons will benefit by the change. You, Patty and Priscilla, are going to college, and should realize the necessity of being prepared. Upon the thorough foundation that you lay here depends your success for the next four years—for your whole lives, one might say. Patty is weak in mathematics and Priscilla in Latin. Constance *could* improve her French. Let us see what you can do when you really try."

She divided a curt nod between the three and withdrew.

"We are happy in our work and we dearly love our teachers," chanted Patty, with ironical emphasis, as she rummaged out a blue skirt and middy blouse with "St. U." in gold upon the sleeve.

While she was dressing, Priscilla and Conny set about transferring the contents of her trunk to her bureau, in whatever order the articles presented themselves—but with a carefully folded top layer. The overworked young teacher, who performed the ungrateful task of inspecting sixty-four bureaus and sixty-four closets every Saturday morning, was happily of an unsuspicious nature. She did not penetrate below the crust.

"Lordy needn't make such a fuss over my standing," said Priscilla, frowning over an armful of clothes. "I passed everything except Latin."

"Take care, Pris! You're walking on my new dancing dress," cried Patty, as her head emerged from the neck of the blouse.

Priscilla automatically stepped off a mass of blue chiffon, and resumed her plaint.

"If they think sticking me in with Job's youngest daughter is going to improve my prose composition—"

"I simply *can't* study till they take Irene McCullough out of my room," Conny echoed. "She's just like a lump of sticky dough."

"Wait till you get acquainted with Mae Mertelle!" Patty sat on the floor in the midst of the chaos, and gazed up at the other two with wide, solemn eyes. "She brought five evening gowns cut low, and all her shoes have French heels. And she *laces*—my dears! She just holds in her breath and pulls. But that isn't the worst." She lowered her voice to a confidential whisper. "She's got some red stuff in a bottle. She says it's for her finger nails, but I saw her putting it on her face."

"Oh!—not really?" in a horrified whisper from Conny and Priscilla.

Patty shut her lips and nodded.

"Isn't it dreadful?"

"Awful!" Conny shuddered.

"I say, let's mutiny!" cried Priscilla. "Let's *make* the Dowager give us back our old rooms in Paradise Alley."

"But how?" inquired Patty, two parallel wrinkles appearing on her forehead.

"Tell her that unless she does, we won't stay."

"That would be sensible!" Patty jeered. "She'd ring the bell and order Martin to hitch up the hearse and drive us to the station for the six-thirty train. I should think you'd know by this time that you can't bluff the Dowager."

"There's no use threatening," Conny agreed. "We must appeal to her feeling of—of—"

"Affection," said Patty.

Conny stretched out a hand and brought her up standing.

"Come on, Patty, you're good at talking. We'll go down now while our courage is up.—Are your hands clean?"

The three staunchly approached the door of Mrs. Trent's private study.

"I'll use diplomacy," Patty whispered, as she turned the knob in response to the summons from within. "You people nod your heads at everything I say."

Patty did use all the diplomacy at her command. Having dwelt touchingly upon their long friendship, and their sorrow at being separated, she passed lightly to the matter of their new room-mates.

"They are doubtless very nice girls," she ended politely, "only, you see, Mrs. Trent, they don't match us; and it is extremely hard to concentrate one's mind upon lessons, unless one has a congenial room-mate."

Patty's steady, serious gaze suggested that lessons were the end of her existence. A brief smile flitted over the Dowager's face, but the next instant she was grave again.

"It is very necessary that we study this year," Patty added. "Priscilla and I are going to college, and we realize the necessity of being prepared. Upon the thorough foundation that we lay here, depends our success for the next four years—for our whole lives you might say."

Conny jogged her elbow warningly. It was too patently a crib from Miss Lord.

"And besides," Patty added hastily, "all my things are blue, and Mae has a purple screen and a yellow sofa cushion."

"That is awkward," the Dowager admitted.

"We are used to living in Paradise Al—I mean, the West Wing—and we shall—er—miss the sunsets."

The Dowager allowed an anxious silence to follow, while she thoughtfully tapped the desk with her lorgnette. The three studied her face with speculative eyes. It was a mask they could not penetrate.

"The present arrangement is more or less temporary," she commenced in equable tones. "I may find it expedient to make some changes, and I may not. We have an unusual number of new girls this year; and instead of putting them together, it has seemed wisest to mix them with the old girls. You three have been with us a long time. You know the traditions of the school. Therefore—" The Dowager smiled, a smile partially tinged with amusement—"I am sending you as missionaries among the newcomers. I wish you to make your influence felt."

Patty straightened her back and stared.

"Our influence?"

"Your new room-mate," Mrs. Trent continued imperturbably, "is too grown-up for her years. She has lived in fashionable hotels, and under such conditions, it is inevitable that a girl should become somewhat affected. See if you cannot arouse in Mae an interest in girlish sports.

"And you, Constance, are rooming with Irene McCullough. She is, as you know, an only child, and I fear has been a trifle spoiled. It would please me if you could waken her to a higher regard for the spiritual side of life, and less care for material things."

"I—I'll try," Conny stammered, dazed at so suddenly finding herself cast in the unfamiliar rôle of moral reformer.

"And you have next to you the little French girl, Aurelie Deraismes. I should be pleased, Constance, if you would assume an oversight of her school career. She can help you to a more idiomatic knowledge of French—and you can do the same for her in English.

"You, Priscilla, are rooming with—" She adjusted her lorgnette and consulted a large chart.—"Ah, yes, Keren Hersey, a very unusual girl. You two will find many subjects of mutual interest. The daughter of a naval officer should have much in common with the daughter of a missionary. Keren bids fair to become an earnest student—almost, if such a thing were possible, too earnest. She has never had any girl companions, and knows nothing of the give and take of school life. She can teach you, Priscilla, to be more studious, and you can teach her to be more, shall I say, flexible?"

"Yes, Mrs. Trent," Priscilla murmured.

"And so," the Dowager finished, "I am sending you out in my place, as moral reformers. I want the older girls to set an example to the

newcomers. I wish to have the real government of the school a strong, healthy Public Opinion. You three exert a great deal of influence. See what you can do in the directions I have indicated—and in others that may occur to you as you mix with your companions. I have watched you carefully for three years, and in your fundamental good sense, I have the greatest confidence."

She nodded dismissal, and the three found themselves in the hall again. They looked at one another for a moment of blank silence.

"Moral reformers!" Conny gasped.

"I see through the Dowager," said Patty, "She thinks she's found a new method of managing us."

"But I don't see that we're getting back to Paradise Alley," Priscilla complained.

Patty's eyes suddenly brightened. She seized them each by an elbow and shoved them into the empty schoolroom.

"We'll do it!"

"Do what?" asked Conny.

"Pitch right in and reform the school. If we just keep at it—steady—you'll see! We'll be back in Paradise Alley at the end of two weeks."

"Um," said Priscilla, thoughtfully. "I believe we might."

"We'll commence with Irene," said Conny, her mind eagerly jumping to details, "and make her lose that twenty pounds. That's what the Dowager meant when she said she wanted her less material."

"We'll have her thin in no time," Patty nodded energetically. "And we'll give Mae Mertelle a dose of bubbling girlishness."

"And Keren," interposed Priscilla, "we'll teach her to become frivolous and neglect her lessons."

"But we won't just confine ourselves to those three," said Conny. "The Dowager said to make our influence felt over the whole school."

"Oh, yes!" Patty agreed, rising to enthusiasm as she called the school roll. "Kid McCoy uses too much slang. We'll teach her manners. Rosalie doesn't like to study. We'll pour her *full* of algebra and Latin. Harriet Gladden's a jelly fish, Mary Deskam's an awful little liar, Evalina Smith's a silly goose, Nancy Lee's a telltale—"

"When you stop to think about it, there's something the matter with everybody," said Conny.

"Except us," amended Priscilla.

"Y—yes," Patty agreed in thoughtful retrospection, "I can't think of a thing the matter with us—I don't wonder they chose us to head the reform!"

Conny slid to her feet, a bundle of energy.

"Come on! We'll join our little playmates and begin the good work—Hooray for the great Reform Party!"

They scrambled out of the open window, in a fashion foreign to the dictates of Thursday evening manner class. Crowds of girls in blue middy blouses were gathered in groups about the recreation ground. The three paused to reconnoiter.

"There's Irene, still chewing." Conny nodded toward a comfortable bench set in the shade by the tennis courts.

"Let's have a circus," Patty proposed. "We'll make Irene and Mae Mertelle roll hoops around the oval. That will kill 'em both with one stone—Irene will get thin, and Mae Mertelle girlish."

Hoop-rolling was a speciality of St. Ursula's. The gymnasium instructor believed in teaching girls to run. Eleven times around the oval constituted a mile, and a mile of hoop-rolling freed one for the day from dumb-bells and Indian clubs. The three dived into the cellar, and returned with hoops as tall as themselves. Patty assumed command of the campaign and issued her orders.

"Conny, you take a walk with Keren and shock her as much as possible; we must break her of being precise. And Pris, you take charge of Mae Mertelle. Don't let her put on any grown-up airs. If she tells you she's been proposed to twice, tell her you've been proposed to so many times that you've lost count. Keep her snubbed all the time. I'll be elephant trainer and start Irene running; she'll be a graceful gazelle by the time I finish."

They parted on their several missions. St. Ursula's peace had ended. She was in the throes of reform.

On Friday evening two weeks later, an unofficial faculty meeting was convened in the Dowager's study. "Lights-out" had rung five minutes before, and three harried teachers, relieved of duty for nine blessed hours while their little charges slept, were discussing their troubles with their chief.

"But just what have they done?" inquired Mrs. Trent, in tones of judicial calm, as she vainly tried to stop the flood of interjections.

"It is difficult to put one's finger on the precise facts," Miss Wadsworth quavered. "They have not broken any rules so far as I can discover, but they have—er—created an atmosphere—"

"Every girl in my corridor," said Miss Lord, with compressed lips, "has come to me separately, and begged to have Patty moved back to the West Wing with Constance and Priscilla."

"Patty! *Mon Dieu!*" Mademoiselle rolled a pair of speaking eyes to heaven. "The things that child thinks of! She is one little imp."

"You remember," the Dowager addressed Miss Lord, "I said when you suggested separating them, that it was a very doubtful experiment."

Together, they exhaust their effervescence on each other; separated—"

"They exhaust the whole school!" cried Miss Wadsworth, on the verge of tears. "Of course they don't mean it, but their unfortunate dispositions—"

"Don't mean it!" Miss Lord's eyes snapped. "Their heads are together planning fresh escapades every moment they are not in class."

"But what have they done?" persisted Mrs. Trent.

Miss Wadsworth hesitated a moment in an endeavor to choose examples from the wealth of material that presented itself.

"I found Priscilla deliberately stirring up the contents of Keren's bureau drawers with a shinny stick, and when I asked what she was doing, she replied without the least embarrassment, that she was trying to teach Keren to be less exact; that Mrs. Trent had asked her to do it."

"Um," mused the Dowager, "that was not my precise request, but no matter."

"But the thing that has really troubled me the most," Miss Wadsworth spoke diffidently, "is a matter almost a blasphemy. Keren has a very religious turn of mind, but an unfortunate habit of saying her prayers out loud. One night, after a peculiarly trying day, she prayed that Priscilla might be forgiven for being so aggravating. Whereupon Priscilla knelt before her bed, and prayed that Keren might become less self-righteous and stubborn, and more ready to join in the sports of her playmates with generosity and openness of spirit. They carried on—well, really, one might almost call it a praying match."

"Shocking!" cried Miss Lord.

"And little Aurelie Deraismes—they have been drilling the child in—er—idiomatic English. The phrase that I overheard her repeating, seemed scarcely the expression that a lady would use."

"What was it?" inquired the Dowager, with a slightly expectant note.

"I'll be *gum-swizzled*!"

Miss Wadsworth colored a deep pink. It was foreign to her nature even to repeat so doubtful an expression.

The Dowager's lips twitched. It was a fact, deplored by her assistants, that her sense of humor frequently ran away with her sense of justice. A very naughty little girl, if she managed to be funny, might hope to escape; whereas an equally naughty little girl, who was not funny, paid the full penalty of her crime. Fortunately, however, the school at large had not discovered this vulnerable spot in the Dowager's armor.

"Their influence," it was Miss Lord who spoke, "is demoralizing the school. Mae Van Arsdale says that she will go home if she has to room any longer with Patty Wyatt. I do not know what the trouble is, but—"

"I know it!" said Mademoiselle. "The whole school laughs. It is touching the question of a *sweetch*."

"Of what?" The Dowager cocked her head. Mademoiselle's English was at times difficult. She mixed her languages impartially.

"A sweetch—some hair—to make pompadour. Last week when they have tableaux, Patty has borrowed it and has dyed it with blueing to make a beard for Bluebeard. But being yellow to start, it has become green, and the color will not wash out. The sweetch is ruin—entirely ruin—and Patty is desolate. She has apologize. She thought it would wash, but since it will not wash, she has suggest to Mae that she color her own hair to match the sweetch, and Mae lose her temper and call names. Then Patty has pretend to cry, and she put the green hair on Mae's bed with a wreath of flowers around, and she hang a stocking on the door for crape, and invite the girls to come to the funeral, and everybody laugh at Mae."

"It's just as well," said the Dowager, unmoved. "I do not wish to favor the wearing of false hair."

"It's the principle of the thing," said Miss Lord.

"And that poor Irene McCullough," Mademoiselle continued the tale, "she dissolves herself in tears. Those three insist that she make herself thin, and she has no wish to become thin."

"They take away her butter-ball," corroborated Miss Wadsworth, "before she comes to the table; they make her go without dessert, and they do not allow her to eat sugar on her oatmeal. They keep her exercising every moment, and when she complains to me, they punish her."

"I should think," the Dowager spoke with a touch of sarcasm, "that Irene were big enough to take care of herself."

"She has three against her," reminded Miss Lord.

"I called Patty to my room," said Miss Wadsworth, "and demanded an explanation. She told me that Mrs. Trent thought that Irene was too fat, and wished them to reduce her twenty pounds! Patty said that it was hard work, they were getting thin themselves, but they realized that they were seniors and must exert an influence over the school. I really think she was sincere. She talked very sweetly about moral responsibility, and the necessity of the older girls setting an example."

"It is her impudence," said Miss Lord, "that is so exasperating."

"That's—just Patty!" the Dowager laughed. "I must confess that I find all three of them amusing. It's good, healthy mischief and I wish there were more of it. They don't bribe the maids to mail letters, or smuggle in candy, or flirt with the soda-water clerk. They at least can be trusted."

"Trusted!" gasped Miss Lord.

"To break every minor rule with cheerful unconcern," nodded the Dowager, "but never to do the slightest thing dishonorable. They have kind hearts and the girls all love them—"

A knock sounded on the door with startling suddenness, and before anyone could reply, the door burst open and Keren-happuch appeared on the threshold. She was clutching with one hand the folds of a brilliant Japanese kimono, the other she reserved for gestures. The kimono was sprinkled with fire-eating dragons as large as cats; and to the astonished spectators, Keren's flushed face and disheveled hair seemed to carry out the decorative scheme. The Dowager's private study was a sacred spot, reserved for interviews of formality; never had a pupil presented herself in such unceremonious garb.

"Keren!" cried Miss Wadsworth. "What has happened?"

"I want a new room-mate! I can't stand Priscilla any longer. She's been having a birthday party in my room—"

"A birthday party?" Mrs. Trent turned questioningly to Miss Wadsworth.

She nodded unhappily.

"Yesterday was Priscilla's birthday, and she received a box from her aunt. This being Friday night, I gave her permission—"

"Certainly." The Dowager turned to the tragic figure in the center of the floor. "It is Priscilla's room as much as yours and—"

Keren plunged into a sea of words. The four leaned forward in a strained endeavor to pluck some sense from the torrent.

"They used my bed for a table because it wasn't against the wall, and Patty tipped a pot of chocolate over in the middle of it. She said it was an accident—but she did it on purpose—I know she did! And because I objected, Priscilla said it wasn't polite to notice when a guest spilled anything, and she tipped a glass of current jelly on my pillow, to make Patty feel comfortable. That was the polite thing for a hostess to do, she said; they learned it last year in manner class. And the chocolate soaked right through, and Conny Wilder said it was fortunate I was thin, because I could sleep in a curve around it; if it had happened to Irene McCullough, she would have had to sleep in it, because she's so big she takes up the whole bed. And Priscilla said I could be thankful tomorrow's Saturday when we get clean sheets; it might have happened so that I would have had to sleep in that puddle of chocolate a whole week. And then the "Lights-out" rang, and they left me to clean up, and the housekeeper's gone to bed, and I can't get any fresh bed clothes, and I