

E. M. DELAFIELD



CONSEQUENCES

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Book I

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I

The Game of Consequences

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The firelight flickered on the nursery wall, and the children sat round the table, learning the new game which the nursery-maid said they would like ever so, directly they understood it.

"I understand it already," said Alex, the eldest, tossing her head proudly. "Look, Barbara, you fold the piece of paper like this, and then give it to Cedric, because he's next to you, and I give mine to you, and Emily gives hers to me. That's right, isn't it, Emily?"

"Quite right, Miss Alex; what a clever girl, to be sure. Here, Master Baby, you can play with me. You're too little to do it all by yourself."

"He isn't Baby any more. We've got to call him Archie now. The new little sister is Baby," said Alex dictatorially.

She liked always to be the one to give information, and Emily had only been with them a little while. The children's own nurse would have told her to mind her own business, or to wait till she was asked, before teaching her grandmother, but Emily said complacently:

"To be sure, Miss Alex! and such a big boy as Master Archie is, too. Now you all write down a name of a

gentleman."

"What gentleman?" asked Cedric judicially. He was a little boy of eight, with serious grey eyes and a good deal of dignity.

"Why, any gentleman. Some one you all know."

"I know, I know."

Alex, always the most easily excited of them all, scribbled on her piece of paper and began to bounce up and down on her chair.

"Hurry up, Barbara. You're so slow."

"I don't know who to put."

Alex began to whisper, and Barbara at once said:

"Nurse doesn't allow us to whisper. It's bad manners."

"You horrid little prig!"

Alex was furious. Barbara's priggishness always put her into a temper, because she felt it, unconsciously, to be a reflection on her own infallibility as the eldest.

"Miss Barbara," said Emily angrily, "it's not for you to say what Nurse allows or doesn't allow; *I'm* looking after you now. The idea, indeed!"

Barbara's pale, pointed little face grew very red, but she did not cry, as Alex, in spite of her twelve years, would almost certainly have cried at such a snub.

She set her mouth vindictively and shot a very angry look at Alex out of her blue eyes. Then she wrote something on the slip of paper, shielding it with her hand so that her sister could not read it.

Cedric was printing in large capitals, easily legible, but no one was interested in what Cedric wrote.

There was a good deal of whispering between Emily and little Archie, and then the papers were folded up once more and passed round the table again.

"But when do we see what we've written?" asked Alex impatiently.

"Not till the end of the game, then we read them out. That's where the fun comes in," said Emily.

It was a long while before the papers were done, and most of the children found it very difficult to decide what *he* said to *her*, what she replied, and what the world said. But at last even Barbara, always lag-last, folded her slip, very grimy and thumb-marked, and put it with the others into Emily's apron.

"Now then," giggled the nursery-maid, "pull one out, Master Archie, and I'll see what it says."

Archie snatched at a paper, and they opened it.

"Listen!" said Emily.

"The Queen met Master Archie—whoever of you put the Queen?"

"Cedric!" cried the other children.

Cedric's loyalty to his Sovereign was a by-word in the nursery.

"Well, the Queen met Master Archie in the Park. She said to him, 'No,' and he answered her, 'You dirty little boy, go 'ome and wash your face.' Well, if that didn't ought to be the other way round!"

"I wish it was me she'd met in the Park," said Cedric sombrely. "I might have gone back to Buckingham Palace with her and—"

"Go on, Emily, go on!" cried Alex impatiently. "Don't listen to Cedric. What comes next?"

"The consequences was—whatever's here?" said Emily, pretending an inability to decipher her own writing.

"Well, I never! The consequences was, a wedding-ring. Whoever went and thought of that now? And the world said —"

The nursery door opened, and Alex shrieked, "Oh, finish it—quick!"

She knew instinctively that it was Nurse, and that Nurse would be certain to disapprove of the new game.

"Don't you make that noise, Alex," said Nurse sharply. "You'll disturb the baby with your screaming."

For a moment Alex wondered if the game was to be allowed to proceed, but Barbara, well known to be Nurse's favourite, must needs say to her in an amiable little voice, such as she never used to her brothers and sister:

"Emily's been teaching us such a funny new game, Nurse. Come and play with us."

"I've no time to play, as you very well know, with all your clothes wanting looking over the way they do," Nurse told her complacently. "What's the game?"

Alex kicked Barbara under the table, but without much hope, and at the same moment Cedric remarked very distinctly:

"It is called Consequences, and Archie met the Queen in the Park. I wish it had been me instead."

"Well!" exclaimed Nurse. "That's the way you do when my back's turned, Miss Emily, teaching them such vulgar,

nonsensical games as that. Never did I hear—now give me those papers this minute."

She did not wait to be given anything, but snatched the little slips out of Emily's apron and threw them on to the fire.

"I'm not going to have no Consequences in *my* nursery, and don't you believe it!" remarked Nurse.

But omnipotent though Nurse was, in the eyes of the Clare children, she could not altogether compass this feat.

There were consequences of all sorts.

Cedric, who was obstinate, and Barbara, also obstinate and rather sly as well, continued to play at the new game in corners by themselves, refusing to admit Alex to their society because she told them that they were playing it all wrong. She knew that they were not playing it as Emily had taught them, and was prepared to set them right, although she felt uncertain, in the depths of her heart, as to whether she herself could remember it all. But at least she knew more than Barbara, who was silly and a copy-cat, or than Cedric, who had concentrated on the possibilities the game presented to him of a hypothetical encounter between himself and his Sovereign. The game for Cedric consisted in the ever-lengthening conversation which took place under the heading of what he said to her and what she replied. When Her Majesty proceeded, under Cedric's laborious pencil, to invite him to drive her in her own carriage-and-pair, to Buckingham Palace, Alex said scornfully that Cedric was a silly little boy, and of course the Queen wouldn't say *that*. To which Cedric turned a perfectly deaf ear, and continued slowly to evolve amenities eminently satisfactory to his admiration for Her Majesty. Alex went away, shrugging

her shoulders, but secretly she knew that Cedric's indifference had got the better of her. However much she might laugh, with the other children, or sometimes, even, in a superior way, with the grown-ups, when the children went into the drawing-room, at Cedric's slowness, and his curious fashion of harping upon one idea at a time, Alex was sub-consciously aware of Cedric as a force, and one which could, ultimately, always defeat her own diffused, unbalanced energies. If any one laughed at Alex, or despised one of her many enthusiasms, she would quickly grow ashamed of it, and try to pretend that she had never really been in earnest. In the same way, she would affect qualities and instincts which did not belong to her, with the hope of attracting, and of gaining affection.

But Cedric went his own way, as genuinely undisturbed by Nurse's scoldings and hustlings as by his elder sister's mockery, which had its origin in her secret longing to prove to herself, in spite of her own inmost convictions, that she was the dominant spirit in her little world.

It always made her angry when Cedric left her gibes unanswered, not from a desire to provoke her further, but simply from his complete absorption in the matter in hand, and his utter indifference to Alex's comments.

"Don't you hear what I say?" Alex asked sharply.

"No," said Cedric baldly. "I'm not listening. Don't interrupt me, Alex."

"You're playing it all wrong—you and Barbara. Two silly little babies," she cried angrily and incoherently. "And it's a stupid, vulgar game. Nurse said so."

Although Alex had been the most enthusiastic of them all when Emily had first taught her the game, she had at once begun to think it vulgar when Nurse condemned it.

She would have nothing more to do with "Consequences." It was quite likely that in a few days Barbara would get into one of her priggish, perverse moods, and in a fit of temper with Cedric go and tell Nurse that he was still indulging in the forbidden pastime. Alex thought she might as well be out of it.

She was in trouble often enough in the nursery. Nurse always took Barbara's part against her, and accused her of being violent and over-bearing, and then Lady Isabel, the children's mother, would send for her to her room while she dressed for dinner, and say complainingly:

"Alex, why do you quarrel so with the others? I shall send you to school, if you can't be happy with Barbara at home."

"Oh, don't send me to school, mummy."

"Not if you're good."

"I will be good, really, I will."

"Very well, my child. Now ring for Hawkins, or I shall be late."

"May I stay and watch you put on your diamond things, mummy? Do let me."

And Lady Isabel always laughed, and let her stay, so that Alex eventually went back to the nursery with an elated sense of having been very good, and accorded privileges which never fell to the lot of self-righteous Barbara.

She knew she was her mother's favourite, because she was the eldest, and was often sent for to the drawing-room when there were people there. Barbara, of course, was too

ugly to go much to the drawing-room. Alex would toss her own mane of silky brown curls, and draw herself up conceitedly, as she thought of Barbara's pale face, and thin, attenuated ringlets. Besides, Lady Isabel had said that Barbara really mustn't come down again when "people" were there until her second teeth had put in their tardy appearance. Even Cedric, though acclaimed as "quaint" and "solemn" by his mother's friends, was too apt to make disconcerting comments on their sparkling conversation, and would return to the nursery in disgrace. Alex' only rival for downstairs' favour was little Archie, who was only four, and at present a very pretty little boy. But he was too small for Alex ever to feel jealous of him. The new baby, christened with pomp in the big Catholic Church at the end of the Square, Pamela Isabel, was, so far, a negligible quantity in the nursery world.

She slept in the little room called the inner nursery, most of the day, and was only with the others when they were taken into the Park or to play in the square garden. Then Emily pushed the big pram that contained the slumbering Pamela, and Nurse grasped the hands of Barbara and Archie and dragged them over the crossings.

Cedric, by Nurse's express orders, always walked just in front of her with Alex, and unwillingly submitted to having his hand held by his sister.

"Not that I trust Alex for common sense," Nurse was careful to explain, "not a yard, but so long as they're together I can keep an eye on both and see they don't get under no hansom's feet. That boy's spectacles are too downright uncanny for me to let him cross the road alone."

For Cedric was obliged to wear a large pair of round spectacles, without which he could only see things that were very close to his eyes. He even had another, different, pair for reading, which seemed to Alex an exaggerated precaution, likely to increase Cedric's sense of his own importance.

"Well," said Cedric. "You have a plate, and I haven't."

Alex's plate was an instrument of torture designed to push back two prominent front teeth. It not only hurt her and kept her awake at night, but was very disfiguring besides, and she passionately envied Barbara, who at nine years old still had only gaps where her front teeth should have been.

"Of course," Alex would sometimes declare grandly, repeating what she had heard Lady Isabel say, "Barbara is dreadfully backward. She's such a baby for her age. *I'm* very old for my age."

But she only said this in the drawing-room, where it would provoke kindly laughter or perhaps interested comment. In the nursery, Nurse never suffered any airs and graces, as she called them, and would pounce on Alex and shake her at the least hint of any such nonsense.

"Just you wait till you're sent to a good strict school, my lady, and see what you'll get then," she told her threateningly.

"I'm not going to school. Mummy said I shouldn't go if I was good."

"We shall see what we shall see. Children as think themselves everybody at home, gets whipped when they go to school," Nurse told her severely.

Alex was used to these prognostications. They did not alarm her very much, because she did not think that she would be sent to school. She knew instinctively that her father disapproved of ordinary girls' schools, and that her mother disliked convents, and indeed most things that had to do with religion.

Alex supposed that this was because Lady Isabel was a Protestant! She thought that it was much the nicest religion to belong to, on the whole, since it evidently imposed no obligations in the nature of church-going, and she often wondered why her mother had let all her children be Catholics, instead of Protestants like herself. It certainly couldn't be because father cared which church the children went to, or whether they went at all.

The only person in the house who did seem to care was Nurse, who took Alex and Barbara and Cedric to High Mass at the Oratory every Sunday, where there was a front bench reserved for them, with little cards in brass frames planted at intervals along the ledge in front of them, bearing the name of Sir Francis Clare.

Nurse put Barbara on one side of her and Alex on the other, and Cedric on the outside, and was very particular about their kneeling down and standing up at the right moment, and keeping the prayer-books open in front of them. Alex and Barbara each had a *Garden of the Soul*, but Cedric was only allowed *Holy Childhood* which had pictures and anecdotes illustrative of Vice and Virtue at the end.

Alex knew all the anecdotes by heart, and preferred her own grown-up-looking book with its small, close print. She had long since discovered that the one matter over which

Nurse could be hoodwinked was print, and that she might quite safely indulge herself in the perusal of the pages devoted to the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony, or to a mysterious ceremony called Churching after Child-birth, during the many dull portions of the long service.

The only part of Church that held possibilities was when the little bell rang at the Elevation, and every one bent his or her head as far down as it would go over the bench. Alex always looked up surreptitiously, then, to see if by any chance a miracle was taking place, or to watch Cedric's invariable manoeuvre of hanging on to the ledge by his teeth and hands and trying to raise his feet from the floor at the same time.

Nurse was always piously bent double, her face hidden in her cotton gloves, breathing stertorously with Barbara on the other side devotedly imitating her, even to the production of strange sounds through her own tightly-compressed lips.

After that, Alex always knew that the end of Church was near, and that as soon as the priest had taken up his little square headgear and faced the congregation for the last time, Nurse would begin to poke her violently, as a sign that she was to get up and to make Cedric pick up his cap and his gloves.

Then came the genuflection as they filed out between the benches, and Nurse was always very particular that this should be done properly, frequently pressing a heavy hand on Alex's shoulder until her knee bumped painfully against the stone floor. The final ceremony connected with the children's religion took place at the door, when Cedric had

to make his way through rustling skirts and an occasional pair of black trousers to the big stone basin of holy water. Into this, standing on tiptoe with immense difficulty, he plunged as much of his hand as was necessary to satisfy the sharp inspection of Nurse when he returned, proffering dripping fingers to her and to his sisters.

The last perfunctory sign of the cross made then, the worst of Sunday, in Alex's opinion, was over.

Roast beef and Yorkshire pudding for dinner was pleasant. Mademoiselle did not come in the afternoon, and Nurse generally went out and left Emily in charge. In the summer she took the children to sit in the Square garden—the Park on Sundays was not allowed—and in the winter they always walked as far as the Albert Memorial, for which Cedric entertained a great admiration.

Sunday was Lady Isabel's At Home day and the children, except during the season, always went down to the drawing-room after tea, Alex and Barbara in pale, rose-coloured frocks with innumerable frills at throat and wrists, and a small pad fastened under each skirt so that it might stand well out at the back. Cedric, like most other little boys of his age and standing, was forced to wear a Lord Fauntleroy suit, from which his cropped bullet head and spectacles emerged incongruously.

The half-hour in the drawing-room was not enjoyed by the others as it was by Alex, especially if there were many visitors. She would lean against Lady Isabel confidently, and hear people say how like she was to her mother, which always delighted her. Her mother looked so pretty, sitting on the sofa with her fringe beautifully curled and a lovely dress

that was half a teagown, the tight bodice coming down into a sharp point in front and behind, and the skirt falling into long folds, with a train sweeping the ground, and huge loops and bows of soft ribbon draping it cross-wise.

Barbara was incurably shy, and poked her head when she was spoken to, but very few people took as much notice of her as of talkative Alex or pretty little Archie, who was all blue ribbons and fearless smiles. And before very long Lady Isabel was sure to say:

"Now, you'd better run back to the nursery, hadn't you, darlings? or Nurse will be comin' down in search of you. I've got the most invaluable old dragon for them," she generally added to her friends. "She's been with us since Alex was a baby, and rules the whole house."

"Oh, don't send them away!" one of the visiting ladies would exclaim politely. "*Such* darlings!"

"Oh, but I must! Their father won't *hear* of my spoilin' them. Now run along, infants."

Cedric and Barbara were only too ready to obey, though it was understood that Lady Isabel's "run along" only meant a very ceremonious departure from the room, Barbara taking little Archie by the hand and leading him to the door, where they both dropped the obeisance considered "picturesque," and Cedric making an unwilling progress to execute his carefully practised bow before each one of the ladies scattered about the big room.

If Alex, however, was enjoying herself, and getting the notice that her soul loved, she always said in a pleading whisper, loud enough to be heard by two or three people besides her mother:

"Oh, do let me stay with you a little longer, mummy. Don't send me upstairs yet!"

"How sweet! Do let her stay, dear Lady Isabel."

"You mustn't encourage me to spoil her. She ought to go up with the others."

"Just for this once, mummy."

"Well, just for this once, perhaps. After all," said Lady Isabel apologetically, "she *is* the eldest. She'll be comin' out before I know where I am!"

And Alex would enjoy the privilege of being the eldest, and sit beside her mother, listening to the conversation, and sometimes joining in with remarks that she thought might be acclaimed as amusing or original, or even merely precocious. No wonder that the nursery greeted her return with disdain. Even Emily called her "drawing-room child," and by her contempt brought Alex' ready tears of mortified vanity to the surface. But it was much worse on the rare Sunday afternoons when Nurse was in, when she would greatly resent the slight to Barbara if she was sent up from the drawing-room before her sister.

"Working on your mamma to spoil you like that, just because you're a couple of years older!" Nurse would say, pulling the comb fiercely through Alex' hair as she went to bed.

"I'm three whole years older."

"Don't you contradict me like that, Alex. I'm not going to have any showing-off up here, I can tell you. You can keep those airs and graces for your mamma's friends in the drawing-room."

Alex generally went to bed in tears.

If Nurse had not been scolding her, then Barbara had been quarrelling with her. They always quarrelled whenever Barbara ventured to differ from Alex and take up an attitude of her own, or still more when Barbara and Cedric made an alliance together and excluded Alex's autocratic ruling of their games.

"But it is for your good," she would tell them passionately. "I want to show you a better way. It'll be much more fun if you do it my way—you'll see."

But they did not want to see.

Their obstinacy always brought to Alex the same sense of incredulous, resentful fury. How *could* they not want to be shown the best way of doing things, when she knew it and they didn't? And, of course, she always did know it. Was she not the eldest?

It was not till Alex was almost thirteen that her belief in her own infallibility as eldest received a rude shock.

She nearly killed Barbara.

It was the first week of August, and Sir Francis and Lady Isabel had gone to Scotland. The children were going to the sea with Nurse on the following day, and took advantage of her state of excitement over the packing, and the emptiness of the downstairs rooms, to play at circus on the stairs. Emily only said, "Now don't go hurting yourselves, whatever you do, or there'll be no seaside tomorrow," and then went back to amuse Pamela, who was crying and restless from the heat.

"I'll tell you what!" said Alex. "We'll have tight-rope dancing. I'm tired of learned pigs and things like that—" This last impersonation having been perseveringly rendered by

Cedric with much shuffling and snorting over a pack of cards.

"Give me the skipping-rope, Barbara."

"Why?" said Barbara, whining.

"Because I say so," replied her sister, stamping her foot.
"I've got an idea."

"It's my skipping-rope."

"But if you don't give it to me we can't have the tight-rope dancing," said Alex in despair.

"I don't care. Why should you do tight-rope dancing with my skipping-rope?"

"You shall do it first—you shall do it all yourself, if you'll only let me show you," Alex cried in an agony of impatience.

On this inducement Barbara slowly parted with her skipping-rope, and let Alex knot it hastily and insecurely to the newel post on the first landing above the hall.

"Now just get up on to the post, Barbara, and I'll hold the other end of the rope like this, and you'll see—"

"But I can't, I should fall off."

"Don't be such a little muff; I'll hold you on."

"No, no—I'm frightened. Let Cedric do it."

"No," said Cedric. "I'm being a learned pig." He went down the short flight of stairs and sat firmly down upon the tiled floor with the pack of cards out-spread before him.

"Now come on, Barbara," Alex commanded her; "I'll hold you."

Between hoisting and pulling and Barbara's own dread of disobeying her, Alex got her sister into a kneeling position on the broad flat top of the newel post.

"Now stand up, and then I'll hold out the rope. You'll be the famous tight-rope dancer crossing the Falls of Niagara."

"Alex, I'm frightened."

"What of, silly? If you did fall it's only a little way on to the stairs, and I'll catch you. Besides, you'll feel much safer when you're standing up."

Barbara, facing the stairs, and with her back to the alarming void between her perch and the hall-floor, rose trembling to her feet.

"You look splendid," said Alex. "Now then!" She jerked at the rope, and at the same instant Barbara screamed and tried to clutch at her.

Alex caught hold of her sister's ankles, felt Barbara's weight slip suddenly, and screamed aloud as a shriek and crash that seemed simultaneous proclaimed Barbara's fall backwards into the hall.

Cedric and Barbara in a confused struggling heap on the floor—doors opening upstairs and in the basement—the flying feet of the servants—all was an agonized nightmare to Alex until Barbara, limp and inert on Nurse's lap, suddenly began to scream and cry, calling out, "My back! my back!"

They hushed her at last, and Nurse carried her into the boudoir, which was the nearest room, and laid her down on the broad sofa. Then Alex became aware of a monotonous sound that had struck on her ear without penetrating to her senses ever since the accident happened.

"My spectacles are broken. You've broken my spectacles," reiterated a lamentable voice.

"You horrid, heartless little boy, Cedric! When poor Barbara—" Sobs choked her.

"I like that!" said Cedric. "When it was all you that made her fall at all—and break my spectacles."

"What's that?" said Nurse, miraculously reappearing. "All you, was it? I might have known it, you mischievous wicked child. Tell me what happened, this minute."

But Alex was screaming and writhing on the floor, feeling as though she must die of such misery, and it was Cedric who gave the assembled household a judicial version of the accident.

The doctor came and telegrams were sent to Scotland, which brought back Lady Isabel, white-faced and tearful, and Sir Francis, very stern and monosyllabic.

"Father, my spectacles are broken," cried Cedric earnestly, running to meet them, but they did not seem to hear him.

"Where is she, Nurse?" said Lady Isabel.

"In the boudoir, my lady, and better, thank Heaven. The doctor says her back'll get right again in time."

Alex, hanging shaking over the balustrade, saw that Nurse was making faces as though she were crying. But when she came upstairs, after a long time spent with Lady Isabel in the boudoir, and saw Alex, her face was quite hard again, and she gave her a push and said, "It's no use crying those crocodile tears now. You should have thought of that before trying to kill Barbara the way you did."

"I didn't, I didn't," sobbed Alex.

But nobody paid any attention to her.

Good-natured Emily was sent away, because Nurse said she wasn't fit to be trusted, and Cook, who was Emily's aunt, and very angry about it all, told Alex that it was all her fault if poor Emily never got another place at all. Everything was Alex' fault.

There was no going to the seaside, even after Barbara was pronounced better. But Lady Isabel, who, Nurse said, had been given a dreadful shock by Alex' wickedness, was going into the country, and would take Archie and the baby with her, if they could get a new nursery-maid at once.

"And me and Cedric?" asked Alex, trembling.

"Cedric doesn't give me no trouble, as you very well know, and he'll stay here and help me amuse poor little Barbara, as has always got on with him so nicely."

"Shall I stay and play with Barbara too?"

"She's a long way from playing yet," Nurse returned grimly. "And I should think the sight of you would throw her into a fit, after what's passed."

"But what will happen to me, Nurse?" sobbed Alex.

"Your Papa will talk to you," said Nurse.

Such a thing had never happened to any of the children before, but Alex, trembling and sick from crying, found herself confronting Sir Francis in the dining-room.

"I am going to send you to school, Alex," he told her. "How old are you?"

"Twelve."

"Then I hope," said Sir Francis gravely, "that you are old enough to understand what a terrible thing it is to be sent from home in disgrace for such a reason. I am told that you have the deplorable reputation of originating quarrels with

your brothers and sister, who, but for you, would lead the normal existence of happily-circumstanced children."

Alex was terrified. She could not answer these terrible imputations, and began to cry convulsively.

"I see," said Sir Francis, "that you are sensible of the appalling lengths to which this tendency has led you. Even now, I can scarcely believe it—a harmless, gentle child like your little sister, who, I am assured, has never done you wilful injury in her life—that you should deliberately endanger her life and her reason in such a fashion."

He paused, as though he were waiting for Alex to speak, but she could not say anything.

"If your repentance is sincere, as I willingly assume it to be, your future behaviour must be such as to lead us all, particularly your poor little sister, to forget this terrible beginning."

"Will Barbara get well?"

"By the great mercy of Heaven, and owing to her extreme youth, we are assured by the doctor that a year or two will entirely correct the injury to the spine. Had it been otherwise, Alex—" Sir Francis looked at his daughter in silence.

"When thanking Heaven for the mercy which has preserved your sister's life," he said gently, "I hope you will reflect seriously upon redeeming this action by your future conduct."

"Oh, I'm sorry—oh, shall you ever forgive me?" gasped Alex, amongst her sobs.

"I do forgive you, my child, as does your mother, and as I am convinced that little Barbara will do. But I cannot, nor

would I if I could, avert from you the consequence of your own act," said her father.

Barbara did forgive Alex, in a little, plaintive, superior voice, as she lay very white and straight in bed. She was to stay quite flat on her back for at least a year, the doctor said, and she need do no lessons, and later she would be taken out in a long flat carriage that could be pushed from behind, then she would be able to walk again, and her back would be quite straight.

"If she'd been a hunchback, we might have played circus again, and I could have been the learned pig," said Cedric reflectively.

Alex went to school at the end of September.

And that was her first practical experience of the game of Consequences, as played by the freakish hand of fate.

II

School

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Alex' schooldays were marked by a series of emotional episodes.

In her scale of values, only the personal element counted for anything. She was intelligent and industrious at her classes when she wished to gain the approbation of an attractive class-mistress, and idle and inattentive when she wanted to please the pretty girl with yellow hair, who sat next her and read a story-book under cover of a French grammar.

Alex did not read; she wanted to make the yellow-haired girl look at her and smile at her. She thought Queenie Torrance beautiful, though her beauty did not strike Alex until after she had fallen a helpless victim to one of those violent, irrational attractions for one of her own sex, that are apt to assail feminine adolescence.

"I hope that you will find some nice little companions at Liège," Sir Francis had gravely told his daughter in valediction, "but remember that exclusive friendships are not to be desired. Friendly with all, familiar with none," said Sir Francis, voicing the ideal of his class and of his period.

As well tell a stream not to flow downhill. Nothing but the most exclusive and inordinate of attachments lay within the scope of Alex' emotional capacities. She was incapable alike of asking or of bestowing in moderation.

Theoretically she would tell herself that she would give all, trust, confidence, love, friendship, and ask for nothing in return. Practically she suffered tortures of jealousy if the loved one addressed a word or smile to any but herself, and cried herself to sleep night after night in the certainty of loving infinitely more than she was loved.

The material side of her life as a *pensionnaire* at the Liège convent made very little impression upon her, excepting in relation to the emotional aspect, of which she was never unaware.

To the end of her days, the clean, pungent smell of a certain polish used upon the immense spaces of bare *parquet ciré* all over the building, would serve to recall the vivid presentment of the tall Belgian *postulante* whose duty it was to apply it with a huge mop, and whom, from a

distance only to be appreciated by those who know the immensity of the gulf that in the convent world separates the novice from the pupils, Alex had worshipped blindly.

And the acrid, yet not unpleasant taste of *confiture* thinly spread over thick slices of brown bread, would remind her with equal vividness of the daily three o'clock interval for *goûter*, with Queenie Torrance pacing beside her in the garden quadrangle, one hand of each rolled into her black-stuff apron to try and keep warm, and the other grasping the enormous double *tartine* that formed the afternoon's refecton.

Even the slight, steady sound of hissing escaping from a gas jet of which the flame is turned as high as it will go, stood to Alex for the noisy evening recreation, spent in the enforced and detested amusement of *la ronde*, when her only preoccupation was to place herself by the object of her adoration, for the grasp of her hand in its regulation cotton glove, as the circle of girls moved drearily round and round singing perfunctorily.

The tuneless tune of those *rondes* remained with Alex long after the words had lost the savour of irony with which novelty had once invested them.

"Quelle horrible attente
D'être postulante....
Quel supplice
D'être une novice
Ah! quel comble d'horreur
Devenir soeur de chœur...."

Alex' symbols were not romantic ones, but there was no romance in the life of the Liège convent, save what she

brought to it herself. Even the memory of the great square *verger*, in the middle of gravelled alleys, brought to her mind for sole token of summer, only her horror of the immense pale-red slugs that crawled slowly and interminably out and across the paths in the eternal rains of the Belgian climate. Nothing mattered but people.

And of all the people in the world, only those whom one loved.

Thus Alex' sweeping, unformulated conviction, holding in it all the misapplication of an essential force, squandered for lack of a sense of proportion.

She despised herself secretly, both for her intense craving for affection and for her prodigality in bestowing it. She was like a child endeavouring to pour a great pailful of water into a very little cup.

Waste and disaster were the inevitable results.

The real love of Alex' young enthusiasm, fair-haired Queenie Torrance, was preceded by her inarticulate, unreasoned adoration for the Belgian *postulante*. But the Belgian *postulante* was never visible, save at a distance, so that even Alex' unreasonable affections found nothing to feed upon.

There was a French girl, much older than herself, for whom Alex then conceived an enthusiasm. Marie-Angèle smiled on her and encouraged the infatuation of the curiously un-English little English girl. But she gave her nothing in return. Alex knew it, and recklessly spent all her weekly pocket-money on flowers and sweets for Marie-Angèle, thinking that the gifts would touch her and awaken in her an affection that it was not her nature to bestow,

least of all on an ardent and ungainly child, six years her junior. Alex shed many tears for Marie-Angèle, and years later read some words that suddenly and swiftly recalled the girl who passed in and out of her life in less than a year.

"I love you for your few caresses,
I love you for my many tears"

The lines, indeed, were curiously typical of the one-sided relations into which Alex entered so rashly and so inevitably throughout her schooldays.

She was fifteen, and had been nearly three years at Liège, when Queenie Torrance came. She was Alex' senior by a year, and the only other English girl in the school at that time. Alex was told to look after her, and went to the task with a certain naïve eagerness, that she always brought to bear upon any personal equation. In an hour, she was secretly combating an enraptured certainty, of which she felt nevertheless ashamed, that she had found at last the ideal object on whom to expend the vehement powers of affection for which she was always seeking an outlet.

Queenie was slight, very fair, with a full, serious oval face, innocent grey eyes set very far apart, and the high, rounded forehead and small, full-lipped mouth, of a type much in vogue in England at the time of the Regency. This was the more marked by the thick flaxen hair which fell back from her face, and over her shoulders into natural heavy ringlets. She was not very pretty, although she was often thought so, but she was charged with a certain animal magnetism, almost inseparable from her type. Half the girls in the school adored her. Queenie, already attractive to men, and sent to the convent in Belgium in reality on that