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The School Queens

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THE SCHOOL QUEENS

BY
L T. MEADE

Author of "Polly, a New-Fashioned Girl,"
"Sue, a Little Heroine," "Daddy's Girl,"
"A Sweet Girl Graduate," etc.



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BIOGRAPHY AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

L. T. MEADE (Mrs. Elizabeth Thomasina Smith), English novelist, was born at Bandon, County Cork, Ireland, 1854, the daughter of Rev. R. T. Meade, Rector of Novohal, County Cork, and married Toulmin Smith in 1879. She wrote her first book, *Lettie's Last Home*, at the age of seventeen and since then has been an unusually prolific writer, her stories attaining wide popularity on both sides of the Atlantic.

She worked in the British Museum, living in Bishopsgate Without, making special studies of East London life which she incorporated in her stories. She edited *Atlanta* for six years. Her pictures of girls, especially in the influence they exert on their elders, are drawn with intuitive fidelity; pathos, love, and humor, as in *Daddy's Girl*, flowing easily from her pen. She has traveled extensively, being devoted to motoring and other outdoor sports.

Among more than fifty novels she has written, dealing largely with questions of home life, are: *David's Little Lad*; *Great St. Benedict's*; *A Knight of To-day* (1877); *Miss Toosey's Mission*; *Bel-Marjory* (1878); *Laddie*; *Outcast Robbin: or, Your Brother and Mine*; *A Cry from the Great City*; *White Lillie and Other Tales*; *Scamp and I*; *The Floating Light of Ringfinnan*; *Dot and Her Treasures*; *The Children's Kingdom: the Story of Great Endeavor*; *The Water Gipsies*; *A Dweller in Tents*; *Andrew Harvey's Wife*; *Mou-setse: A Negro Hero* (1880); *Mother Herring's Chickens* (1881); *A London Baby: the Story of King Roy* (1883); *Hermie's Rose-Buds and Other Stories*; *How it all Came Round*; *Two Sisters* (1884); *Autocrat of the Nursery*; *Tip Cat*; *Scarlet Anemones*; *The Band of Three*; *A Little Silver Trumpet*; *Our Little Ann*; *The Angel of Love* (1885); *A World of Girls* (1886); *Beforehand*; *Daddy's Boy*; *The O'Donnells of Inchfawn*; *The Palace Beautiful*; *Sweet Nancy* (1887); *Deb and the Duchess* (1888); *Nobody's Neighbors*; *Pen* (1888); *A Girl from America* (1907).

THE SCHOOL QUEENS

CHAPTER I

THE FASCINATING MAGGIE

Cicely Cardew and her sister Merry were twins. At the time when this story opens they were between fifteen and sixteen years of age. They were bright, amiable, pretty young girls, who had never wanted for any pleasure or luxury during their lives. Their home was a happy one. Their parents were affectionate and lived solely for them. They were the only children, and were treated—as only children often are—with a considerable amount of attention. They were surrounded by all the appliances of wealth. They had ponies to ride and carriages to drive in, and each had her own luxurious and beautifully furnished bedroom.

It was Mr. Cardew's wish that his daughters should be educated at home. In consequence they were not sent to any school, but had daily masters and governesses to instruct them in the usual curriculum of knowledge. It might be truly said that for them the sun always shone, and that they were carefully guarded from the east wind. They were naturally bright and amiable. They had their share of good looks, without being quite beautiful. They had not the slightest knowledge of what the world meant, of what sorrow meant, or pain. They were brought up in such a sheltered way that it seemed to them that there were no storms in life. They were not discontented, for no one ever breathed the word in their presence. Their requests were reasonable, for they knew of no very big things to ask for. Even their books were carefully selected for them, and their amusements were of a mild and orderly character.

Such were the girls when this story opens on a bright day towards the end of a certain July. Their home was called Meredith Manor, and Merry was called after an old ancestor on their mother's side to whom the house had at one time belonged.

Mr. Cardew was a merchant-prince. Mrs. Cardew belonged to an old county family. If there was one thing in the world that Cicely and Merry thought nothing whatever about, it was money. They could understand neither poverty nor the absence of gold.

The little village near Meredith Manor was a model place, 2 for Mr. Cardew, to whom it belonged, devoted himself absolutely to it. The houses were well drained and taken great care of. Prizes were offered for the best gardens; consequently each cottager vied with the other in producing the most lovely flowers and the most tempting fruits. The village consisted entirely of Mr. Cardew's laborers and the different servants on his estate. There were, therefore, no hardships for the girls to witness at Meredith village. They were fond of popping in and out of the cottages and talking to the young wives and mothers, and playing with the babies; and they particularly enjoyed that great annual day when Mr. Cardew threw open the grounds of Meredith to the entire neighborhood, and when games and fun and all sorts of amusements were the order of the hour.

Besides the people who lived in the village, there was, of course, the rector, who had a pretty, picturesque, old brown house, with a nice garden in one corner of the grounds. He had a good-natured, round-faced, happy wife, and a family of four stalwart sons and daughters. He was known as the Reverend William Tristram; and, as the living was in the gift of the Meredith family, he was a distant connection of Mrs. Cardew, and had been appointed by her husband to the living of Meredith at her request.

The only playfellows the girls had ever enjoyed were the young Tristrams. There were two boys and two girls. The boys were the younger, the girls the elder. The boys were not yet in their teens, but Molly and Isabel Tristram were about the same age as the young Cardews. Molly was, in fact, a year older, and was a very sympathetic, strong-minded, determined girl. She and her sister Isabel had not been educated at home, but had been sent to foreign schools both in France and Germany; and Molly, in her heart of hearts, rather looked down upon what she considered the meager attainments of the young Cardews and their want of knowledge of the world.

"It is ridiculous!" she was heard to say to Isabel on that very July morning when this story opens. "Of course they are nice girls, and would be splendid if they could do anything or knew what to do; but, as it is, they are nothing whatever but half-grown-up children,

with no more idea of the world than has that baby-kitten disporting itself at the present moment on the lawn."

"Oh, they're right enough," said Isabel. "They will learn by-and-by. I don't suppose Mr. and Mrs. Cardew mean to keep them always shut up in a nutshell."

"I don't know," replied Molly. "Mr. and Mrs. Cardew are like no other people. I have heard father say that he thinks it a great pity that girls should be so terribly isolated."

"Well, as to that," replied Isabel, "I wouldn't be in their shoes for creation. I have so enjoyed my time at Hanover and in France; and now that we are to have two years at 3 Aylmer House, in Kensington, I cannot tell you how I look forward to it."

"Yes, won't it be fine?" replied Molly. "But now we had better go up at once to Meredith Manor and ask the girls if we may bring Maggie Howland with us this afternoon. Father has sent the pony-trap to the station to meet her, and she may arrive any moment."

"All right," said Isabel; "but one of us had better stay at home to receive her. You, Molly, can run up to the Manor and ask the girls if we may bring our visitor."

"All right," replied Molly. Then she added "I wonder if Maggie is as fascinating as ever. Don't you remember, Belle, what a spell she cast over us at our school at Hanover? She was like no one else I ever met. She seems to do what she likes with people. I shall be deeply interested to know what she thinks of Cicely and Merry."

"Thinks of them!" replied Isabel. "It's my opinion she won't tolerate them for a minute; and we are bound to take her with us, for of course they will give permission."

"Well," said Molly, "I'll be off at once and secure that permission. You' look after Maggie—won't you, Isabel?—and see that her bedroom is all right." As Molly spoke she waved her hand to her sister, then departed on her errand.

She was a bright, fairly good-looking girl, with exceedingly handsome eyes and curling dark-brown hair. She was somewhat square in build and athletic in all her movements. In short, she was as great a contrast to the twin Cardew girls as could be found. Nevertheless

she liked them, and was interested in them; for were not the Cardews the great people of the place? There was nothing of the snob about Molly; but it is difficult even for the most independent English girl to spend the greater part of her life in a village where one family reigns as sovereign without being more or less under its influence.

Mr. Tristram, too, was a very great friend of Mr. Cardew's; and Molly's fat, round, good-natured mother, although a little afraid of Mrs. Cardew, who was a very stately lady in her way, nevertheless held her in the greatest respect and admiration. It was one of the rules of the house of Tristram that no invitation sent to them from Meredith Manor should be refused. They must accept that invitation as though it were the command of a king.

The girls, brought up mostly at foreign schools, had in some ways wider ideas of life than had their parents. But even they were more or less influenced by the fact that the Cardews were the great people of the place.

The day was a very hot one; rather oppressive too, with thunder-clouds in the distance. But Molly was very strong, and did not feel the heat in the least. The distance from the rectory to the Manor was a little over a mile. In addition, it was all uphill. But when you passed the village—so exquisitely neat, such a model in its way—you found yourself entering a road shaded by overhanging elm-trees. Here it was cool even on the hottest summer day. There were deep pine-woods at each side of the road, and the road itself had been cut right through a part of the forest, which belonged to the Meredith estate. After going uphill for nearly three-quarters of a mile you arrived at the handsome wrought-iron gates which led to the avenue that brought you to the great front door of Meredith Manor.

Molly often took this walk, but she generally did so in the company of her sister Isabel. Isabel's light chatter, her gay, infectious laughter, her merry manner, soothed the tedium of the road. To-day Molly was alone; but by no means on this account did she feel a sense of weariness; her mind was very busy. She was greatly excited at the thought of seeing Maggie Howland again. Maggie had made a remarkable impression on her. She made that impression on all

her friends. Wherever she went she was a leader, and no one could quite discover where her special charm or magnetism lay; for she was decidedly plain, and not specially remarkable for cleverness—that is, she was not remarkable for what may be termed school-cleverness. She was indifferent to prizes, and was just as happy at the bottom of her form as at the top; but wherever she appeared girls clustered round her, and consulted her, and hung on her words; and to be Maggie Howland's friend was considered the greatest honor possible among the girls themselves at any school where she spent her time.

Maggie was the daughter of a widow who lived in London. Her father had died when she was a very little girl. He was a man of remarkable character. He had great strength of will and immense determination; and Maggie, his only child, took after him. She resembled him in appearance also, for he was very plain of face and rather ungainly of figure. Maggie's mother, on the other hand, was a delicate, pretty, blue-eyed woman, who could as little manage her headstrong young daughter as a lamb could manage a young lion. Mrs. Howland was intensely amiable. Maggie was very good to her mother, as she expressed it; and when she got that same mother to yield to all her wishes the mother thought that she was doing the right thing. She had a passionate love for her daughter, although she deplored her plain looks, and often told the girl to her face that she wished she had taken after her in personal appearance. Maggie used to smile when this was said, and then would go away to her own room and look at her queer, dark face, and rather small eyes, and determined mouth, and somewhat heavy jaw, and shake her head solemnly. She did not agree with her mother; she preferred being what she was. She liked best to take after her father.

It was Maggie Howland who had persuaded Mr. Tristram, during a brief visit which he had made to town at Christmas, to send his daughters to Aylmer House. Maggie was 5 fond of Molly and Isabel. With all her oddities, she had real affection, and one of her good qualities was that she really loved those whom she influenced.

Mr. Tristram went to see Mrs. Ward, the head-mistress of that most select establishment for young ladies at Kensington. Mrs. Ward was all that was delightful. She was a noble-minded woman

of high aspirations, and her twenty young boarders were happy and bright and contented under her influence.

Maggie joined the school at Easter, and spent one term there, and was now coming on a visit to the rectory.

"I wonder what she will have to tell us! I wonder if she is as fascinating as ever!" thought Molly Tristram as she hurried her steps.

She had now reached that point in the avenue which gave a good view of the old Manor, with its castellated walls and its square towers at each end. The gardens were laid out in terraces after an old-world fashion. There was one terrace devoted to croquet, another to tennis. As Molly approached she saw Cicely and Merry playing a game of croquet rather languidly. They wore simple white frocks which just came down above their ankles, and had white washing-hats on their heads. Their thick, rather fair hair was worn in a plait down each young back, and was tied with a bunch of pale-blue ribbon at the end.

"Hello!" shouted Molly.

The girls flung down their rackets and ran joyfully to meet her.

"Oh, I am so glad you have come!" said Cicely. "It's much too hot to play tennis, and even croquet is more than we can manage. Are you going to stay and have lunch with us, Molly?"

"No," replied Molly; "I must go back immediately."

"Oh dear! I wish you would stay," continued Merry. "We could go and sit in the arbor, and you could tell us another fascinating story about that school of yours at Hanover."

"Yes, yes," said Cicely; "do stay—do, Molly! We want to hear a lot more about that remarkable girl Maggie Howland."

"I can't stay," said Molly in a semi-whisper; "but I tell you what, girls." She seized a hand of both as she spoke. "I have come with news."

"What?" "What?" asked the twins eagerly.

"There's very seldom much news going on here," said Cicely. "Not that we mind—not a little bit; we're as happy as girls can be."

"Of course we are," said Merry. "We haven't a care in the world."

"All the same," said Cicely, "tell us your news, Molly, for you do look excited."

"Well," said Molly, who enjoyed the pleasure of giving her friends a piece of information which she knew would interest them intensely, "you know we are to come up here this afternoon to have tea and buns, aren't we?"

"Oh, don't talk in that way!" said Merry. "One would suppose you were school children, when you are our darling, dear friends."

"Our only friends," said Cicely. "You are the only girls in the world father allows us to be the least bit intimate with."

"Oh, well," said Molly, "of course Belle and I are very fond of you both, naturally."

"Naturally!" echoed Cicely. But then she added, "How queer you look, Molly, as though you were keeping something back!"

"Well, yes, I am," said Molly; "but I'll have it out in a minute."

"Oh, please, be quick!" said Merry. "Anything a little bit out of the common is very interesting.—Isn't it, Cicely?"

"Very," said Cicely; "more particularly in the holidays. When we are busy with our lessons things don't so much matter, you know.—But do be quick, Molly; what is it?"

"Well," said Molly, "you've asked us to spend the afternoon with you."

"Of course, and you're both coming, surely?"

"We are—certainly we are—that is, if you will allow us to bring"—

"To bring"—interrupted Cicely. "Oh Molly, do speak!"

"Well, I will; only, don't jump, you two girls. To bring Maggie Howland!"

Cicely's face grew very pink. Merry, on the contrary, turned a little pale. They were both silent for a brief space. Then Merry said excitedly, "Maggie Howland—the Maggie Howland?"

"Yes, *the* Maggie Howland; the one who has got the power, the charm, the fascination."

"Oh, oh!" said Cicely. "But why is she with you? How has it happened?"

"She is not absolutely with us yet; and as to how it happened I cannot exactly tell you. We had a telegram from her late last night asking if she might come to-day to spend a week or fortnight, and of course we wired back 'Yes.' We are delighted; but of course you may not like her, girls."

"Like her! like her!" said Cicely; "and after all you have said too! We shall be certain to more than like her."

"She's not a bit pretty, so don't expect it," said Molly.

"We were brought up," said Merry a little stiffly, "not to regard looks as anything at all."

"Nonsense!" replied Molly. "Looks mean a great deal. I'd give I don't know what to be beautiful; but as I am not I don't mean to fret about it. Well, Maggie's downright plain; in fact—in fact—almost ugly, I may say; and yet—and yet, she is just Maggie; and you are not five minutes in 7 her society before you'd rather have her face than any other face in the world. But the immediate question is: may she come this afternoon, or may she not?"

"Of course—of course she may come," said Cicely; "we'll be delighted, we'll be charmed to see her. This *is* pleasant news!"

"I think, perhaps," said Merry, "we ought to go and ask mother. Don't you think so, Cis?"

"Of course we ought," said Cicely. "I forgot that. Just stay where you are, Molly, and I'll run to the house and find mother. It's only to ask her, for of course she will give leave."

Cicely ran off at once, and Merry and Molly were left alone.

"I know you'll be delighted with her," said Molly.

"It will be very delightful to see her," replied Merry.

"You must expect to be disappointed at first, all the same," continued Molly.

"Oh, looks do not matter one scrap," said Merry.

"Isabel and I are going to her school; you know that, don't you, Merry?"

"Yes," said Merry with a sigh. "What fun you do have at your different schools! Don't you, Molly?"

"Well, yes," said Molly rather gravely; "but it isn't only the fun; we see a lot of the world, and we mix with other girls and make friends."

"Mother prefers a home education for us, and so does father," remarked Merry. "Ah! here comes Cicely. She is flying down the terrace. Of course mother is delighted."

This proved to be the case. Mrs. Cardew would welcome any girl introduced to her daughters through her dear friend Mr. Tristram. She sent a further invitation for the three young people to remain to an impromptu supper, which was pleasanter than late dinner in such hot weather, and asked if Mr. and Mrs. Tristram would join them at the meal.

"Hurrah!" cried Molly. "That will be fun! I must be off now, girls. We'll be with you, all three of us, between four and five o'clock."

CHAPTER II.

SPOT-EAR.

Isabel took great pains arranging Maggie Rowland's bedroom. At the Castle (or Manor) there were always troops of servants for every imaginable thing; but at the rectory the servants were few, and the girls did a good many odds and ends of work themselves. They were expected to dust and keep in perfect order their exceedingly pretty bedrooms, they were further required to make their own beds, and if a young visitor arrived, they were obliged to wait on her and see to her comfort. For the Tristrams had just an income sufficient to cover their expenses, with nothing at all to put by. Mr. Tristram had his two little boys to think of as well as his two girls. His intention was to give his children the best education possible, believing that such a gift was far more valuable to them than mere money. By-and-by, when they were old enough, the girls might earn their own living if they felt so inclined, and each girl might become a specialist in her way.

Molly was exceedingly fond of music, and wished to excel in that particular. Isabel, on the contrary, was anxious to obtain a post as gymnasium teacher with the London County Council. But all these things were for the future. At present the girls were to study, were to acquire knowledge, were to be prepared for that three-fold battle which includes body, soul, and spirit, and which needs triple armor in the fight.

Mr. Tristram was a man of high religious principles. He taught his children to love the good and refuse the evil. He wanted his girls to be useful women by-and-by in the world. He put usefulness before happiness, assuring his children that if they followed the one they would secure the other.

Belle, therefore, felt quite at home now as she took out pretty mats and laid them on little tables in the neat spare room which had been arranged for the reception of Maggie Howland. She saw that all the appointments of the room were as perfect as simplicity and cleanliness could effect, and then went out into the summer garden to pick some choice, sweet-smelling flowers. She selected roses and

carnations, and, bringing them in, arranged them in vases in the room.

Hearing the sound of wheels, she flew eagerly downstairs and met her friend as she stepped out of the little governess-cart.

"Well, here I am!" said Maggie. "And how is Belle? How good-natured of you all to have me, and how delightful it is to smell the delicious country air! Mother and I find town so hot and stuffy. I haven't brought a great lot of luggage, and I am not a bit smart; but you won't mind that — will you, dear old Belle?"

"You always talk about not being smart, Maggie; but you manage to look smarter than anyone else," said Isabel, her eager brown eyes devouring her friend's appearance with much curiosity. For Maggie looked, to use a proverbial phrase, as if she had stepped out of a bandbox. If she was plain of face she had an exceedingly neat figure, and there was a fashionable, trim look about her which is uncommon in a girl of her age; for Maggie was only just sixteen, and scarcely looked as much. In some ways she might almost have been a French girl, so exceedingly neat and *comme il faut* was her little person. She was built on a *petite* scale, and although her face was so plain, she had lovely hands and beautiful small feet. These feet were always shod in the most correct style, and she took care of her hands, never allowing them to get red or sunburnt. 9

"Where's Molly?" was her remark, as the two girls, with their arms twined round each other, entered the wide, low hall which was one of the special features of the old rectory.

"She has gone up to see the Cardews."

"Who are the Cardews?"

"Why, surely, Mags, you must have heard of them?"

"You don't mean," said Maggie with a laugh, and showing a gleam of strong white teeth, "the two little ladies who live in a bandbox?"

"Oh, you really must not laugh at them," said Isabel, immediately on the defensive for her friends; "but they do lead a somewhat exclusive life. Molly has gone up to the Castle, as we always call Mer-edith Manor, to announce your arrival, and to ask permission to

bring you there to a tennis-party this afternoon; so you will soon see them for yourself. Now, come in and say good-morning to the mother; she is longing to see you."

"Hello, Peterkins!" called out Maggie at that moment, as a small boy with a smut across his face suddenly peeped round a door.

"I'm not Peterkins!" he said angrily.

Maggie laughed again. "I am going to call you Peterkins," she said. "Is this one of the little brothers, Belle?"

"Yes.—Come here at once, Andrew, and speak to Miss Howland."

The boy approached shyly. Then his eyes looked up into the queer face of the girl who looked down at him. The sulkiness cleared away from his brow, and he said, in an eager, hurried, half-shy, half-confidential way, "I say, do you like rabbits?"

"Dote on 'em," said Maggie.

"Then I'm your man, and I don't mind being Peterkins to you; and will you—will you come and see mine? I've got Spot-ear, and Dove, and Angelus, and Clover. And Jack, he has five rabbits, but they're not near as nice as mine. You'll come and see my rabbits, won't you, Miss—Miss---"

"Oh, I am Maggie," said the girl. "I'll come and see your rabbits, Peterkins, in a minute; and I won't look at Jack's; but you must let me talk to your mother first."

"There you are, Maggie," said Belle when the boy had disappeared; "fascinating Andrew in your usual way; and Jack will be just furious, for he's the elder, you know, and he has a temper, and you mustn't set one of them against the other—promise you won't."

"Trust me," said Maggie. "Peterkins is a nice little fellow, and I'll manage Jackdaw too."

"You don't mean to say you'll call them by those names?"

"Yes, yes. I always have my own way with people, as you know."

"Indeed I do. Oh, come along, you queer creature. Here's the darling mums. Mother dearest, here is Maggie Howland." 10

"Delighted to see you, my dear," said Mrs. Tristram. "I hope you are not tired after your journey from town."

"Not in the least, thank you, Mrs. Tristram," said Maggie, speaking in a voice of very peculiar quality; it was sweet and rich and full of many intonations. She had the power of putting a world of meaning into the most commonplace expressions.

Mrs. Tristram had not seen Maggie before, and it was Mr. Tristram who had been completely bowled over by the young lady just at Christmas-time.

"I bid you a hearty welcome to the rectory," said the good clergyman's wife, "and I hope you will have a pleasant time with my children."

"I'll have a fascinating time," said Maggie. "I'm just too delighted to come. It was sweet of you to have me; and may I, please, give you a kiss?"

"Of course you may, dear child," said Mrs. Tristram.

Maggie bestowed the kiss, and immediately afterward was conducted to her room by the worshipping Belle.

"I do hope you'll like it," said Belle in an almost timorous voice. "I prepared it for you myself."

"Why, it's sweet," said Maggie, "and so full of the country! Oh, I say, what roses! And those carnations—Malmaisons, aren't they? I must wear a couple in this brown holland frock; they'll tone with it perfectly. What a delicious smell!"

Maggie sniffed at the roses. Belle lounged on the window-seat.

"Molly will be jealous," she said. "Think of my having you these few moments all to myself!"

"I am delighted to come, as you know quite well," replied Maggie. "It's all right about school, isn't it, Belle?"

"Yes, quite, quite right. We are to join you there in September."

"It's a perfectly splendid place," said Maggie. "I will describe it to you later on."