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[Authors](#)
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[Eight Cousins](#)

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This Book:
[Contents](#)
[Previous Chapter](#)
[Next Chapter](#)

Chapter 23 - Peace-Making

"Steve, I want you to tell me something," said Rose to Dandy, who was making faces at himself in the glass, while he waited for an answer to the note he brought from his mother to Aunt Plenty.

"Praps I will, and p'raps I won't. What is it?"

"Haven't Arch and Charlie quarrelled?"

"Dare say; we fellows are always having little rows, you know. I do believe a sty is coming on my star-board eye," and Steve affected to be absorbed in a survey of his yellow lashes.

"No, that won't do; I want to know all about it; for I'm sure something more serious than a 'little row' is the matter. Come, please tell me, Stenie, there's a dear."

"Botheration! you don't want me to turn telltale, do you?" growled Steve, pulling his top-knot, as he always did when perplexed.

"Yes, I do," was Rose's decided answer for she saw from his manner that she was right, and determined to have the secret out of him if coaxing would do it. "I don't wish you to tell things to everyone, of course, but to me you may, and you must, because I have a right to know. You boys need somebody to look after you, and I'm going to do it, for girls are nice peacemakers, and know how to manage people. Uncle said so, and he is never wrong."

Steve was about to indulge in a derisive hoot at the idea of her looking after them, but a sudden thought restrained him, and suggested a way in which he could satisfy Rose, and better himself at the same time.

"What will you give me if I'll tell you every bit about it?" he asked, with a sudden red in his cheeks and an uneasy look in his eyes, for he was half ashamed of the proposition.

"What do you want?" and Rose looked up rather surprised at his question.

"I'd like to borrow some money. I shouldn't think of asking you, only Mac never has a cent. since he's set up his old chemical shop, where he'll blow himself to bits some day, and you and uncle will have the fun of putting him together again," and Steve tried to look as if the idea amused him.

"I'll lend it to you with pleasure, so tell away," said Rose, bound to get at the secret.

Evidently much relieved by the promise, Steve set his top-knot cheerfully erect again, and briefly stated the case.

"As you say, it's all right to tell you, but don't let the boys know I blabbed, or Prince will take my head off. You see, Archie don't like some of the fellows Charlie goes with, and cuts 'em. That makes Prince mad, and he holds on just to plague Arch, so they don't speak to one another, if they can help it, and that's the row."

"Are those boys bad?" asked Rose, anxiously.

"Guess not, only rather wild. They are older than our fellows, but they like Prince, he's such a jolly boy; sings so well, dances jigs and breakdowns, you know, and plays any game that's going. He beat Morse at billiards, and that's something to brag of, for Morse thinks he knows everything. I saw the match, and it was great fun!"

Steve got quite excited over the prowess of Charlie, whom he admired immensely, and tried to imitate. Rose did not know half the danger of such gifts and tastes as Charlie's, but felt instinctively that something must be wrong if Archie disapproved.

"If Prince likes any billiard-playing boy better than Archie, I don't think much of his sense," she said severely.

"Of course he doesn't; but, you see, Charlie and Arch are both as proud as they can be, and won't give in. I suppose Arch is right, but I don't blame Charlie a bit for liking to be with the others sometimes, they are such a jolly set," and Steve shook his head morally, even while his eye twinkled over the memory of some of the exploits of the "jolly set."

"Oh, dear me!" sighed Rose, "I don't see what I can do about it, but I wish the boys would make up, for Prince can't come to any harm with Archie, he's so good and sensible."

"That's the trouble; Arch preaches, and Prince won't stand it. He told Arch he was a prig and a parson, and Arch told him he wasn't a gentleman. My boots! weren't they both mad, though! I thought for a minute they'd pitch into one another and have it out. Wish they had, and not gone stalking round stiff and glum ever since. Mac and I settle our rows with a bat or so over the head, and then we are all right."

Rose couldn't help laughing as Steve sparred away at a fat sofa-pillow, to illustrate his meaning; and, having given it several scientific whacks, he pulled down his cuffs and smiled upon her with benign pity for her feminine ignorance of this summary way of settling a quarrel.

"What droll things boys are!" she said, with a mixture of admiration and perplexity in her face, which Steve accepted as a compliment to his sex.

"We're a pretty clever invention, miss, and you can't get on without us," he answered, with his nose in the air. Then, taking a sudden plunge into business, he added, "How about that bit of money you were going to lend me? I've told, now you pay up."

"Of course I will! How much do you want?" and Rose pulled out her purse.

"Could you spare five dollars? I want to pay a little debt of honour that is rather pressing," and Steve put on a mannish air that was comical to see.

"Aren't all debts honourable?" asked innocent Rose.

"Yes, of course; but this is a bet I made, and it ought to be settled up at once," began Steve, finding it awkward to explain.

"Oh, don't bet, it's not right, and I know your father wouldn't like it. Promise you won't do so again; please promise!" and Rose held fast the hand into which she had just put the money.

"Well, I won't. It's worried me a good deal, but I was joked into it. Much obliged, cousin, I'm all right now," and Steve departed hastily.

Having decided to be a peace-maker, Rose waited for an opportunity, and very soon it came.

She was spending the day with Aunt Clara, who had been entertaining some young guests, and invited Rose to meet them, for she thought it high time her niece conquered her bashfulness and saw a little of society. Dinner was over, and everyone had gone. Aunt Clara was resting before going out to an evening party, and Rose was waiting for Charlie to come and take her home.

She sat alone in the elegant drawing-room, feeling particularly nice and pretty, for she had her best frock on, a pair of gold bands her aunt had just given her, and a tea-rose bud in her sash, like the beautiful Miss Van Tassel, whom everyone admired. She had spread out her little skirts to the best advantage, and, leaning back in a luxurious chair, sat admiring her own feet in new slippers with rosettes almost as big as dahlias. Presently Charlie came lounging in, looking rather sleepy and queer, Rose thought. On seeing her, however, he roused up and said with a smile that ended in a gape

"I thought you were with mother, so I took forty winks after I got those girls off. Now, I'm at your service, Rosamunda, whenever you like."

"You look as if your head ached. If it does, don't mind me. I'm not afraid to run home alone, it's so early," answered Rose, observing the flushed cheeks and heavy eyes of her cousin.

"I think I see myself letting you do it. Champagne always makes my headache, but the air will set me up."

"Why do you drink it, then?" asked Rose, anxiously.

"Can't help it, when I'm host. Now, don't you begin to lecture: I've had enough of Archie's old-fashioned notions, and I don't want any more."

Charlie's tone was decidedly cross, and his whole manner so unlike his usual merry good-nature, that Rose felt crushed, and answered meekly

"I wasn't going to lecture, only when people like other people, they can't bear to see them suffer pain."

That brought Charlie round at once, for Rose's lips trembled a little, though she tried to hide it by smelling the flower she pulled from her sash.

"I'm a regular bear, and I beg your pardon for being so cross, Rosy," he said in the old frank way that was so winning.

"I wish you'd beg Archie's too, and be good friends again. You never were cross when he was your chum," Rose said, looking up at him as he bent toward her from the low chimney-piece, where he had been leaning his elbows.

In an instant he stood as stiff and straight as a ramrod, and the heavy eyes kindled with an angry spark as he said, in his high and mighty manner

"You'd better not meddle with what you don't understand, cousin."

"But I do understand, and it troubles me very much to see you so cold and stiff to one another. You always used to be together, and now you hardly speak. You are so ready to beg my pardon I don't see why you can't beg Archie's, if you are in the wrong."

"I'm not!" this was so short and sharp that Rose started, and Charlie added in a calmer but still very haughty tone: "A gentleman always begs pardon when he has been rude to a lady, but one man doesn't apologize to another man who has insulted him."

"Oh, my heart, what a peppercorn!" thought Rose, and, hoping to make him laugh, she added slyly: "I was not talking about men, but boys, and one of them a Prince, who ought to set a good example to his subjects."

But Charlie would not relent, and tried to turn the subject by saying gravely, as he unfastened the little gold ring from his watch-guard

"I've broken my word, so I want to give this back and free you from the bargain. I'm sorry, but I think it a foolish promise, and don't intend to keep it. Choose a pair of earrings to suit yourself, as my forfeit. You have a right to wear them now."

"No, I can only wear one, and that is no use, for Archie will keep his word I'm sure!" Rose was so mortified and grieved at this downfall of her hopes that she spoke sharply, and would not take the ring the deserter offered her.

He shrugged his shoulders, and threw it into her lap, trying to look cool and careless, but failing entirely, for he was ashamed of himself, and out of sorts generally. Rose wanted to cry, but pride would not let her, and, being very angry, she relieved herself by talk instead of tears. Looking pale and excited, she rose out of her chair, cast away the ring, and said in a voice that she vainly tried to keep steady

"You are not at all the boy I thought you were, and I don't respect you one bit. I've tried to help you be good, but you won't let me, and I shall not try any more. You talk a great deal about being a gentleman, but you are not, for you've broken your word, and I can never trust you again. I don't wish you to go home with me. I'd rather have Mary. Good-night."

And with that last dreadful blow, Rose walked out of the room, leaving Charlie as much astonished as if one of his pet pigeons had flown in his face and pecked at him. She was so seldom angry, that when her temper did get the better of her it made a deep impression on the lads, for it was generally a righteous sort of indignation at some injustice or wrong-doing, not childish passion.

Her little thunderstorm cleared off in a sob or two as she put on her things in the entry-closet, and when she emerged she looked the brighter for the shower. A hasty good-night to Aunt Clara now under the hands of the hairdresser and then she crept down to find Mary the maid. But Mary was out, so was the man, and Rose slipped away by the back-door, flattering herself that she had escaped the awkwardness of having Charlie for escort.

There she was mistaken, however, for the gate had hardly closed behind her when a well-known tramp was heard, and the Prince was beside her, saying in a tone of penitent politeness that banished Rose's wrath like magic

"You needn't speak to me if you don't choose, but I must see you safely home, cousin."

She turned at once, put out her hand, and answered heartily

"I was the cross one. Please forgive me, and let's be friends again."

Now that was better than a dozen sermons on the beauty of forgiveness, and did Charlie more good, for it showed him how sweet humility was, and proved that Rose practised as she preached.

He shook the hand warmly, then drew it through his arm and said, as if anxious to recover the good opinion with the loss of which he had been threatened

"Look here, Rosy, I've put the ring back, and I'm going to try again. But you don't know how hard it is to stand being laughed at."

"Yes, I do! Ariadne plagues me every time I see her, because I don't wear ear-rings after all the trouble I had getting ready for them."

"Ah, but her twaddle isn't half as bad as the chaffing I get. It takes a deal of pluck to hold out when you are told you are tied to an apron string, and all that sort of thing," sighed Charlie.

"I thought you had a 'deal of pluck,' as you call it. The boys all say you are the bravest of the seven," said Rose.

"So I am about some things, but I cannot bear to be laughed at."

"It is hard, but if one is right won't that make it easier?"

"Not to me; it might to a pious parson like Arch."

"Please don't call him names! I guess he has what is called moral courage, and you physical courage. Uncle explained the difference to me, and moral is the best, though often it doesn't look so," said Rose thoughtfully.

Charlie didn't like that, and answered quickly, "I don't believe he'd stand it any better than I do, if he had those fellows at him."

"Perhaps that's why he keeps out of their way, and wants you to."

Rose had him there, and Charlie felt it, but would not give in just yet, though he was going fast, for somehow, in the dark he seemed to see things clearer than in the light, and found it very easy to be confidential when it was "only Rose."

"If he was my brother, now, he'd have some right to interfere," began Charlie, in an injured tone.

"I wish he was!" cried Rose.

"So do I," answered Charlie, and then they both laughed at his inconsistency.

The laugh did them good, and when Prince spoke again, it was in a different tone pensive, not proud nor perverse.

"You see, it's hard upon me that I have no brothers and sisters. The others are better off and needn't go abroad for chums if they don't like. I am all alone, and I'd be thankful even for a little sister."

Rose thought that very pathetic, and, overlooking the uncomplimentary word "even" in that last sentence, she said, with a timid sort of earnestness that conquered her cousin at once

"Play I was a little sister. I know I'm silly, but perhaps I'm better than nothing, and I'd dearly love to do it."

"So should I! and we will, for you are not silly, my dear, but a very sensible girl, we all think, and I'm proud to have you for a sister. There, now!" and Charlie looked down at the curly head bobbing along beside him with real affection in his face.

Rose gave a skip of pleasure, and laid one seal-skin mitten over the other on his arm, as she said happily

"That's so nice of you! Now, you needn't be lonely any more, and I'll try to fill Archie's place till he comes back, for I know he will, as soon as you let him."

"Well, I don't mind telling you that while he was my mate I never missed brothers and sisters, or wanted anyone else; but since he cast me off, I'll be hanged if I don't feel as forlorn as old Crusoe before Friday turned up."

This burst of confidence confirmed Rose in her purpose of winning Charlie's Mentor back to him, but she said no more, contented to have done so well. They parted excellent friends, and Prince went home, wondering why "a fellow didn't mind saying things to a girl or woman which they would die before they'd own to another fellow."

Rose also had some sage reflections upon the subject, and fell asleep thinking that there were a great many curious things in this world, and feeling that she was beginning to find out some of them.

Next day she trudged up the hill to see Archie, and having told him as much as she thought best about her talk with Charlie, begged him to forget and forgive.

"I've been thinking that perhaps I ought to, though I am in the right. I'm no end fond of Charlie, and he's the best-hearted lad alive; but he can't say No, and that will play the mischief with him, if he does not take care," said Archie in his grave, kind way.

"While father was home, I was very busy with him, so Prince got into a set I don't like. They try to be fast, and think it's manly, and they flatter him, and lead him on to do all sorts of things play for money, and bet, and loaf about. I hate to have him do so, and tried to stop it, but went to work the wrong way, so we got into a mess."

"He is all ready to make up if you don't say much, for he owned to me he was wrong; but I don't think he will own it to you, in words," began Rose.

"I don't care for that; if he'll just drop those row-dies and come back, I'll hold my tongue and not preach. I wonder if he owes those fellows money, and so doesn't like to break off till he can pay it. I hope not, but don't dare to ask; though, perhaps, Steve knows, he's always after Prince, more's the pity," and Archie looked anxious.

"I think Steve does know, for he talked about debts of honour the day I gave him - " There Rose stopped short and turned scarlet.

But Archie ordered her to "fess," and had the whole story in five minutes, for none dared disobey the Chief. He completed her affliction by putting a five-dollar bill into her pocket by main force, looking both indignant and resolute as he said

"Never do so again; but send Steve to me, if he is afraid to go to his father. Charlie had nothing to do with that; he wouldn't borrow a penny of a girl, don't think it. But that's the harm he does Steve, who adores him, and tries to be like him in all things. Don't say a word; I'll make it all right, and no one shall blame you."

"Oh me! I always make trouble by trying to help, and then letting out the wrong thing," sighed Rose, much depressed by her slip of the tongue.

Archie comforted her with the novel remark that it was always best to tell the truth, and made her quite cheerful by promising to heal the breach with Charlie as soon as possible.

He kept his word so well that the very next afternoon, as Rose looked out of the window, she beheld the joyful spectacle of Archie and Prince coming up the avenue, arm-in-arm, as of old, talking away as if to make up for the unhappy silence of the past weeks.

Rose dropped her work, hurried to the door, and, opening it wide, stood there smiling down upon them so happily, that the faces of the lads brightened as they ran up the steps eager to show that all was well with them.

"Here's our little peace-maker!" said Archie, shaking hands with vigour.

But Charlie added, with a look that made Rose very proud and happy, "And my little sister."