

One such Wednesday afternoon in April, the four girls were again sitting on their white-lacquered chairs in the elegant young ladies' room. Even the flies had ceased to buzz about, but crawled lazily on the sugar-bowl because the boredom in the atmosphere weighed like lead on their wings. At the moment when Fannie Moebius— she was the only one who had a certain passion for the business and ambitions always to read the most favorable role—was enunciating with transcendent pathos and a horrible diction, the words, Impitoyable honneur, mortel a mes plaisirs, Que tu me vas couter de pleurs et de soupiris!— at that moment the door opened, and Olga Rado entered.

She must accidentally have left another door open behind, too, for with Olga a breath of air as fresh as a puff of wind swept through the room. The window, which was ajar, flew open, the white mull curtains blew out and fluttered, the pages of the books rustled, the flies buzzed up again around the light, while some hand in the sky tore a tatter of cloud from the face of the sun: a dazzling brightness and a cool breeze filled the room to its darkest corner.

Then the door closed with a loud bang, the window creaked to, the curtains fell back into the room like sacks, and a new cloud blotted out the sun. But none of these things did Metta Rudloff perceive, for she could do nothing but gaze at Olga Rado, could not take her eyes or her mind from her—not for a long, long time.

Olga was very tall and very slender. Her face was beautiful and boldly chiseled. Her smooth, rich, dark hair exposed much of her high and admirably modelled forehead. Her thin black brows drew together at the top of her nose, which gave her sharp, metallic-gray eyes an almost threatening expression. Her speech was crisp and hard. But her voice had a deep, soft, cello quality. It made a striking contrast.

There was something in her manner of dressing which pleased Metta without her being able to define it. One could not dispose of it with a word like “tasteful” or “elegant” or “smart.” Metta felt dimly— “That is how I should like to dress.”

What constituted this peculiar charm she did not discover until much later. Olga Rado had an almost morbid aversion to everything cheap. A cheap fabric, a cheap tailor was a torture to her. Moreover, she practised, as she once confided to Metta much later, with her most bewitching smile, “the very honorable principle of preferring to owe a bill to a millionaire, rather than to some poor little starving dressmaker.” Accordingly, she patronized only the most exclusive shops.

As she entered, Emmie Moebius made an abortive attempt at a solemn introduction, which Olga cut short with a curt, “Yes, yes, fine! And so on and so forth!” Whereupon she took each hasty hand in her large, slender, cool palm, with a “please, don't put yourselves out.” Then she sat down in the rocking-chair, a little to one side, picked up Fannie's fat, little, black dog, which barked like mad about her, wagging its tail, and set it on her knee.

Fannie went on reading. Perhaps she meant to impress her cousin with these serious and learned exertions. Metta was compelled to keep her eyes on her book and her back to Olga. She could only hear the rocker creaking back and forth, a dress rustling softly and an occasional muttered

word to the dog.

Metta felt her throat go dry and her heart throb wildly when her turn came to read. She had never been so nervous in school no matter how unprepared she had come. Every word seemed a snare to her. She would mispronounce everything and make a fool of herself, irrevocably. It was really a crime to know so little French. She would go to her father tomorrow and ask him to let her take French lessons. He would be overjoyed to have her come to him with such a request.

She was relieved when she had stammered her few lines. Then came Erika's turn, and then Fannie again, with all the pathos at her command.

When they were all standing again, putting on their hats in front of the mirror, Metta noticed with an inexplicable joy that she was almost as tall as Olga Rado, much taller than the three fair, plump misses.

In a trio they descended the stairs and walked part of the way together. Erika Hannemann did most of the talking.

From time to time, Olga Rado said, "Isn't it?—No! —Indeed!—Oh!—No?"

Metta was silent.

At last Erika Hannemann said good-bye and turned to the left.

Olga and Metta walked briskly side by side in silence for a while. Metta should long ago have turned off if she wanted to take the shortest way home. She observed with some concern that she kept right on going, but she was much too happy to stop now that Erika Hannemann had finally left them: the air seemed to have become purer and one could stride along more freely. It was a joy to keep up with this lovely, regular pace, and she comforted herself with the thought that nobody knew where she lived anyhow, and that she had just as much right on the street as anybody else.

Metta glanced at every house with a certain anxiety: was it at this one or the next that Olga Rado would stop with a hasty good-bye, and the heavy door close behind her, leaving the street barren and lonely?