

Girl of Enlightenment

by Sara Lewis

Longview Boarding School, London, England, 1810

When Margaret came, she was laughing. It was raining in London that day, and the grey rain blended perfectly with the dull grey streets on which it fell. Margaret stood out like a torch against the dreary scenery. She was clad only in a white shirt and, scandalously, black pants, but it was her eyes and her face that gave her light. She was running, but it seemed that she was running only for the pleasure of running, not for the purpose of escaping the rain. Her long black hair, a mass of tangled curls, streamed out behind her. Her cheeks were red, and her eyes were sparkling – oh yes, there was no doubt that Margaret was pretty.

She came up to us, the proper young ladies of society who would be her classmates, and though she made not a sound it seemed that she was laughing at us. Margaret's eyes were always laughing – at us or with us I could never tell. "What are you all staring at?" were her first words of introduction, although they were spoken quite merrily. She looked a very wild, if beautiful, creature with raindrops adorning her midnight hair like diamonds, and her lips a perfect rose red.

And we, the proper young ladies of Longview, despised her. There was nothing ladylike about her – nothing society would approve of. And our goal, as the Ladies of Longview, was to achieve the approval of society. Margaret scorned society, challenged it, ignored its dictates frequently and without qualms. And on that first day when she came, as she stood there laughing at us, I, Anita Jennings, star pupil and social leader of Longview, decided that she would never be one of us.

During her first week at Longview Margaret made every possible attempt to tear up the traditions and expectations of the school, succeeding wholly in shocking, if not convincing, us. She continued to wear pants, calmly facing down any person who dared to comment on her wardrobe with a killing glance of scorn. She sauced the teachers, committed the unforgivable crime of playing ball with the boys from the school across the street, and when I complained about these things she had the nerve to stick out her tongue at me!

I went beyond dislike and informed my diary I hated her. She was attacking my ideals, and I did not want to reevaluate my lifelong aspirations to be a proper lady. But worse than that, the upstart girl had threatened the safety of my domain – both academically, for Margaret was nothing if not smart, and socially. Oh, that flock of obedient girls never murmured a treasonous word, but I couldn't help but notice the many longing glances that were cast Margaret-ward. But if the girls had a secret respect for her, they were duly shocked by her, and so assisted me in drawing up a document telling Margaret of all her shortcomings as a lady, which was left on her desk.

When Margaret had finished reading it that day after classes, I again had the uncomfortable feeling that she was laughing at us. Her dark eyes were far too deep – who knew what mocking mirth could hide in those depths?

If we had supposed Margaret would be reformed with this measure, we were much mistaken. Instead she took the document firmly in her hands and ripped, and ripped, and ripped again, until our project was only a thousand shreds of ink-stained paper. “Hasn’t it occurred to you ninnies yet that I don’t want to be a proper lady?” she demanded, in perfectly good humour. Margaret was always branding us ninnies and the like, without seeming to actually dislike us in the least.

“You are disgraceful,” I spat at her, through teeth clenched with rage.

Margaret regarded me with apparent amusement. “*You* think I’m disgraceful,” she agreed pleasantly, “but *I* don’t, so why should I bother worrying about it?” Why did she always have to close her little speeches with aggravating questions like that? Somehow I could never invent clever answers.

My response to this, and thus the response of the girls, was to shun Margaret completely. We had already been somewhat shy of her company, but now we carried it out flawlessly. We never spoke to her, not even in criticism. We ignored her in class and never so much as looked at her anywhere. Thus Margaret, in a school of seventy pupils, led a solitary existence.

One night, confident in my victory, I made a pilgrimage up the stairs to Margaret’s room at the very top of Longview. My mission was simply and cruelly to rub it in.

Margaret was lying on her bed when I arrived. It was rather late, and the moonlight was streaming in her window, casting eerie shadows across her face. Her hair was arrayed around her, its blackness sharply contrasting with her pale face.

“Aren’t you lonely up here all by yourself?” I inquired, intending to hurt her.

“Aren’t you lonely in that babbling sea of nonsensical schoolgirls?” returned Margaret promptly, not in the least injured.

Margaret sat up and faced me. From death-like white, a faint glow had come to her cheeks. She suddenly seemed much older than thirteen, and her eyes were bitterly triumphant.

“I’m probably going to be lonely in my life,” she announced, and I realized from her tone that she respected me, her enemy. “I’m not now, because I don’t care for your company, and all you speak of is the best manners and the latest fashions. But I will be, because I’m not going to obey the world. My brother means to have me married in a few years, by the time I’m sixteen, because I’m so very pretty. When I was small I liked to be

called pretty, but now I don't. It gives me a dreadful lurking feeling that I'm going to be someone's pretty wife, and be stuck all my life having company to tea."

The idea of Margaret entertaining company nearly made me laugh, but Margaret kept talking.

"I want to live my own life. I want to travel everywhere, and not in a carriage with a gentleman. I want to join the military – *don't* laugh, Anita, though I know it's funny – and I want to walk across a desert and I want to go to university and get a scholarship in math, and I want to *learn* things, Anita, real things, not how to entertain company at tea. In short," said Margaret, laughing a little at herself, and looking an exuberant thirteen again, "I have ambitions."

Margaret left Longview two days later, after she defended a young girl an instructor was attempting to strap by strapping him instead. This was the final straw and she was expelled.

It was raining in London when Margaret left. The streets were dull and grey, and the populace appeared somewhat discouraged with life in their Great Empire. Margaret ran through the rain with the air of someone who delights to be wet. Just before she disappeared out of my sight, she turned and offered a little wave, and I saw that Margaret left as she came, laughing.

For twenty years I thought very little of the strange girl whose life had briefly intertwined with mine. I married, had two sons, entertained plenty of company to tea, and was generally a contented and proper lady of society. But one day, two decades after I met Margaret, a short notice in the paper caught my eye. It was the curt obituary of Miss Margaret Jane Rochester, aged 33, who had formerly resided at 62 Wellington Avenue, London. No further information was offered.

Yet again Margaret had shocked me. All of her thirteen-year-old ambitions came flooding back to me. Had she adventured with the military, traveled across a desert, attained a scholarship in math? And now she was dead – a cold word for a laughing, starry-eyed young beauty who always ran through the rain in sheer delight.

Suddenly I tossed the paper aside and stood up, feeling quite bold and reckless. It was raining in London, to all but me a dull, dreary rain. But to me it seemed rather that the rain was dancing on the rooftops, enjoying itself as it careened towards the ground. I threw open the door and stepped out, not troubling my mind with silly cares such as a hat or coat. The rain splashed merrily on my face and sunk its cool refreshing drops into my hair. Seized anew by the bold desire, I gasped in a cold breath of fresh air and started to run, laughing almost without realizing it, through the rain.