

**THE
SCANDALOUS
LADIES
FOOTBALL CLUB**

Also by Frances Quinn

The Smallest Man
That Bonesetter Woman
The Lost Passenger

FRANCES QUINN

THE
SCANDALOUS
LADIES
FOOTBALL CLUB



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For my clever, funny and kind-hearted brother and
football advisor, Dave Quinn. Sorry I tried to kill
you by feeding you crisps when you were a baby.

Winchester, July 1897

Adela held her breath as she gently scraped away at the paper, her face tight with concentration. If the razor blade went through it, the whole thing would be ruined. But in a few seconds, there it was: a blank space where Adela Monaghan used to be.

‘There,’ she said to her brother. ‘I told you it would work. Perhaps I should take up forgery for a living.’

‘Don’t joke, Adela.’ Charlie’s face was anxious. ‘This isn’t funny and I’m still not sure I should be helping you with it at all.’

‘But you’ll do the next part? You’ve a neater hand than me, and the last thing we need is an ink blot.’

Charlie sighed, but charged the quill and wiped it, then slowly, carefully, wrote the words that were going to change everything. He scattered the paper with fine sand, and neither of them spoke as they waited for the ink to dry.

Adela tipped the sand back into the pounce pot and looked at the words newly inscribed on the paper: Minerva Newton.

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The first name taken from the Roman goddess of knowledge and wisdom, the surname from a scientific genius.

‘I still think something more boring would have been better,’ said Charlie. ‘Jane Smith, or Mary Brown.’

‘I wanted a name that would make me feel strong. It’ll be my armour, this name. But I’ll go by Minnie. Minerva will be just for me.’

She looked at the paper again.

‘Minnie Newton sounds like a woman who stands on her own two feet and takes no nonsense. I like it.’

The cheery tone sounded false even to her, so of course Charlie saw through it.

‘Are you sure – really sure – you want to do this?’

‘I have to,’ she said.

Chapter 1

London, September 1897

Adela's day was not going well. Sultry late-afternoon sun slanting through the schoolroom's high windows picked out chalk dust motes in the air, and the unseasonal warmth was making the girls of the North London School for Young Ladies lackadaisical, bordering on dozy. In the hope of at least keeping them awake, Adela had set usual practice aside, stopped making them copy from the blackboard and invited questions instead. And then Rosalind Bentley put her hand up. If there was ever a pupil sent to try a schoolteacher's patience, it was Rosalind. All peaches and cream, but when she put her head on one side with that winsome smile, there was invariably trouble coming.

'Please, Miss Newton, what I'd like to ask is why do we need to learn about this?'

Not the kind of question Adela had meant, as Rosalind would perfectly well know. Nevertheless, she answered it.

'If you want to become a woman who has something

interesting to say for herself, Rosalind, every kind of knowledge is useful.'

Rosalind flicked back one of her flaxen plaits and glanced along the front row of desks at her little group of acolytes. 'My mama said to me only yesterday that gentlemen are put off by a woman who's too clever. She says a pretty face is worth more than any amount of schooling.'

And your mother is about as interesting as a wet Wednesday.

Of course, Adela didn't say the words. Rosalind's father was on the school board, and Adela had got this position by the skin of her teeth and a spot of forgery. If a complaint got her dismissed, the jig was up, the new life all over.

'Nevertheless,' she said, 'your father pays the school to teach you, so that's what I'm attempting to do.'

Rosalind pouted. 'I shan't need to know about this sort of thing to make a good marriage.'

'Perhaps not, but I have to teach it to you anyway. Now, let's get on—'

'Please, Miss Newton . . .'

Margaret Howley had her hand up. Adela's heart sank. Margaret was one of the cleverer girls, and during this first two weeks of term, she'd been showing herself to be a keen learner. Surely she wasn't going to join in with Rosalind's nonsense?

'Yes, Margaret?'

'Miss, do we have to get married? What if we want to do something else?'

Every head whipped round to look at her. 'Well,' said Adela carefully, 'what sort of thing do you mean?'

Blushing furiously, Margaret said, 'What if a girl wanted to be a doctor?'

A second's silence, and then the entire front row burst out laughing.

'Girls!' Adela rapped the eraser on the lectern in front of her. 'Be quiet, or there will be consequences.' It was the first time they'd heard her raise her voice and it surprised them enough to quell the laughter, though Rosalind the Untouchable allowed herself a final and very deliberate giggle after the others had stopped.

'Yes, Margaret. A girl could, in theory, be a doctor. Is that something you would like to do?'

Rosalind smirked. 'That's silly. Girls can't be doctors. Our brains are too small.'

Father on the school board or no, Adela couldn't let that go. 'Of course they're not. Women's brains are perfectly equal to men's. There's nothing a boy can learn that a girl can't.'

Henrietta Abbott, Rosalind's most devoted disciple, piped up, 'Why aren't there lady doctors then?'

Adela glanced at the door. Reverend Bagley, the local vicar and another member of the school board, occasionally popped into lessons unannounced and it hadn't passed her by that he was particularly keen on inspecting the older girls in this class. There'd be trouble if he happened to open the door on this conversation, but she couldn't let them all go on thinking their brains were inferior to men's, could she?

'There are women doctors. Not many, but that's because most universities won't allow women to study medicine, not because we're incapable of it. Woman can do most things, given the chance. We could be doctors, lawyers, engineers—'

'My father's an engineer,' said Henrietta. 'He has to wear overalls sometimes. How could a woman do that?'

‘Human ingenuity built the Crystal Palace and invented the steam engine, Henrietta. I don’t think creating overalls suitable for women is beyond it. The point is, there’s nothing about a woman’s brain that means she couldn’t design a bridge, for example. We are just as capable, intellectually, as men.’

Rosalind looked at her curiously.

‘You’re not one of those votes for women types, are you, Miss?’

Adela threw another glance at the door. ‘I do think women should have the vote, yes. And sit as MPs as well. We are half – more than half – of the country. We should have a say in how it’s run.’

Henrietta looked puzzled. ‘But why would we need to? Men look after all that for us.’

Give me strength.

Rosalind nodded. With the air of a messenger dispensing wisdom from Mount Olympus, she said, ‘My mama says it would be dangerous. Because women are too emotional to think clearly about things.’

‘What do the rest of you think?’ asked Adela. ‘Who would like to be able to elect their MP, when they’re old enough?’

A gratifying number looked interested, but before any hands went up, Rosalind turned round and, in the face of her disapproval, they shrank back into their shells like so many timid snails. Only Margaret and the girl beside her on the back row put their hands up.

‘That’s a pity,’ said Adela. ‘You’re all bright girls, I’d have hoped you’d want to have a say in how your country is governed.’

‘But Miss,’ said Henrietta, ‘what would happen if a woman wanted to vote differently from her husband?’

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‘That’s an interesting question,’ said Adela, with as much patience as she could muster. ‘Why do you think a woman shouldn’t have ideas of her own, just because she’s married?’

‘Shouldn’t think their husbands would like it much,’ said Rosalind. ‘If that kind of woman could even get herself one.’ She glanced over her shoulder at Margaret. ‘You’ll probably end up an old maid.’

‘Perhaps I don’t care,’ said Margaret. ‘Perhaps I don’t want a husband telling me what to do. You haven’t got one, have you, Miss Newton?’

Rosalind said, ‘She’s not allowed. Lady teachers have to leave if they get married, so they’ve got time to look after their husbands.’

‘Will you be leaving soon, Miss?’ asked another girl.

‘No, I won’t. And that’s enough chatter. Back to the lesson.’

As Adela turned to the blackboard, Rosalind mouthed to her neighbour, ‘Old maid.’

Oh, Rosalind. If only I was.

Usually Adela took the omnibus home, but the day was still warm and she’d no reason to hurry. The landlady at her boarding house, Mrs Burton, served a weekly menu that she apparently never troubled to vary, and Friday’s offering was watery cod in lumpy parsley sauce. Eating the stuff was bad enough, without having to suffer the smell of it cooking beforehand. A stop at the lending library on the way would delay getting back until just before it was dished up.

Browsing the ‘New titles’ section, she struck gold, spotting a familiar name. Lady Veronica Montague had been Adela’s favourite writer since she’d discovered, at seventeen, her novel

The Triumph of Euphemia. In it, the heroine pretended to be a man, got elected to Parliament and set about creating a society where women had an equal place with men. After reading it avidly, Adela had sought out the books Lady Veronica had written about her own life, exploring Africa and South America, and devoured them all. What luck to find her new one now! Everyone was talking about it: Lady Veronica had been the only woman on an expedition to the far reaches of Patagonia. It would chase away the melancholy of an evening alone in her room.

The book tucked under her arm, Adela headed for home, resisting the temptation to read as she walked along. She'd dreamed about being an explorer herself, once, and made lists of the places she wanted to see: India, Japan, the Galapagos where Darwin had made his discoveries. But as Mother had pointed out tartly, Lady Veronica had independent means and a family tree as long as your arm, and they'd attracted a husband who indulged her passion for travel. Adela didn't. Her only travels had landed her here, in a dull part of north London, with carriages clip-clopping by as though they had nowhere particularly important to go and shops selling nothing more exotic than pork cutlets and tins of treacle. But at least this evening she'd see Patagonia, even if only through the pages of Lady Veronica's book.

Nearly home, she passed the recreation ground, where there was a football practice going on. She stopped to watch. One player was making mincemeat of the fellow marking him, heeling the ball backwards and forwards, grinning. He put Adela in mind of her brother; no one could touch Charlie once he had the ball. Fast like Charlie too: suddenly he took

off down the pitch, and the ball was between the posts before any of the other players had even caught up with him. Poor goalkeeper hadn't a hope.

I used to run like that once.

When the family assembled at their grandparents' house in the country, the garden was big enough for four-a-side. The boy cousins didn't want a girl joining in, but Charlie wouldn't play unless they let Adela play too. She could still see cousin Henry's shocked face the first time she'd scored a goal past him.

She'd been in shorter skirts and pantalettes then, of course, and it had felt like flying, tearing up and down the garden, chasing the ball. The same feeling she could see in the players' faces now, as the other side pulled themselves together and got some speed up. So free they looked, haring around in their baggy breeches, sliding in to seize the ball, jumping to head it. Just watching made Adela's corset pinch and her skirts cling heavy round her legs. Was it any wonder men ruled the world when women were too trussed up even to run?

That thought brought back the conversation in the classroom that afternoon. They were intelligent, those girls. Even Rosalind had a decent brain, for all that her dim-witted mother had convinced her never to use it. But their minds were already as trussed up as their bodies were destined to be. Placidly accepting that their only goal in life should be to find a husband and be a good little wife to him. That they had nothing else to offer the world.

Our brains are too small.

We're too emotional.

Men take care of it for us.

It wasn't as though she'd never heard those words before. Far from it. But there was something unbearable about hearing them from your own sex – seeing those young girls, full of promise, swallowing the lie that they weren't clever or capable. Willingly squashing themselves down and confining themselves to the gaps men allowed them. And their mothers encouraging it.

Oh, to show them that they could be as good as any boy! That women could do all the things men said they couldn't. Or shouldn't. But it'd only be raising false hopes, because they'd never be allowed to do those things anyway. You could teach them till you were blue in the face, but what was the point? The headmistress, Miss Cranmer-Gordon, had summed it up for Adela when she'd offered her the position. 'You know I believe we should give girls as good an education as any boy. That's what makes this school different from most – as you've said, it's why you wanted to teach here. But we must always remember that the parents who pay our fees want their daughters well educated for no other reason than that it will make them good wives and mothers. And whatever you and I might hope, that is what most of them will be.'

The best a girl with a good brain could realistically hope for was what Adela had: a position as a teacher, filling her pupils' heads with knowledge they could never use. And even that only on loan till they married. She'd been wrong even to dangle the hope of something else in front of Margaret, when the odds were against her even getting the chance to try.

As she turned to go, the goalkeeper kicked the ball down the field, but it missed his waiting teammate and flew past

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her face. The player nearest her shouted, 'Throw it back, would you, miss?'

Adela could do better than that. She fetched the ball, lifted her skirts a little and kicked. Into that kick went all her anger about the girls, and a lot of other things besides – and it soared past him.

A cheer went up, and one of the players said, 'She's got a better left foot than you, Mick! You can't even beat a woman!'

Another one shouted, 'You ought to set up a ladies' team, miss – you can have Mick for a start!'

And that, you see, was how it all started.