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A HARUM-SCARUM SCHOOLGIRL

"COULD YOU DO ME A KINDNESS, MISS?" SHE ASKED *Page 252*

A HARUM-SCARUM SCHOOLGIRL

BY

ANGELA BRAZIL

Illustrated by John Campbell

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CHAPTER I

A Pixie Girl

"If I'd known!" groaned Winifred Cranston, otherwise Wendy, with a note of utter tragedy in her usually cheerful voice. "If I'd only known! D'you think I'd have come trotting back here with my baggage? Not a bit of it! Nothing in this wide world should have dragged me. I'd have turned up my hair—yes, it's *quite* long enough to turn up, Jess Paget, so you needn't look at it so scornfully; it's as nice as yours, and nicer! Well, I tell you I'd have turned up my hair, and run away and joined the 'Waacs' or the 'Wrens', or have driven a motor wagon or conducted a tramcar, or scrubbed floors at a hospital, or done anything—*anything*, I say!—rather than stay at the Abbey without Mrs. Gifford."

"It's pretty stiff, certainly, for the Head to go whisking away like this," agreed Magsie Wingfield, sitting on the other shaft of the wheelbarrow. "And without any notice either! It leaves one gasping!"

"Stiff? It's the limit! Why didn't she give us decent warning, instead of springing it on to us in this sudden fashion? I feel weak!"

"There wasn't time," explained Sadie Sanderson, who, with Violet Gorton and Tattie Clegg, occupied, in a tight fit, the interior of the wheelbarrow. "It was all done at a day's notice. Geraldine's been telling me the whole history."

"Well?"

"Mr. Gifford got suddenly exempted, and was made Governor of some outlandish place with an unpronounceable name in Burma. He telegraphed to Mrs. Gifford to join him at Marseilles, and go out with him. So she went—that's the long and the short of it!"

"Went and left her school behind her," echoed Vi.

"I call it simply running away," commented Wendy. "Why couldn't she have stopped to arrange things—say till Christmas—and then followed him?"

"It's some tiresome red-tape business at the War Office. They'd give her a passport to travel out *with* him, but not to join him afterwards, so she thought she'd better take the opportunity and go out with him while she could. It must have been a terrific scramble for her to get off. I believe she [11] just bundled her things together and bolted, and left the school to Miss Todd."

"Will she ever come back?"

"I shouldn't think it's likely now."

"Then we're left for evermore to the tender mercies of Toddlekins?"

"That's just about the size of it. Toddlekins has taken the whole thing over."

"She's been longing and yearning to seize the reins and drive the coach ever since she came," commented Tattie.

"Well, she's got her chance now."

"And she'll use it, too! You bet there'll be changes!"

"Changes! There are changes already, although Mrs. Gifford can hardly have reached Marseilles yet."

"It's going to be a queer term," grunted Wendy.

The five girls were sitting in a retired corner of the garden at Pendlemere Abbey. On one side, above the tops of the rhododendron bushes, they could see the tall, twisted chimneys and flagged stone roof of the old house; on the other side, below the lawn and across the paddock, gleamed the silver waters of the lake, with its banks of rushes and alders, and beyond lay a range of grey hills that seemed to melt away into more distant peaks that merged into the mists on the horizon. It was a beautiful view, and on this hazy September afternoon, with the hidden sun sending long shafts of light from behind radiant masses of cloud, it formed a prospect that should have [12] afforded keen æsthetic satisfaction to anybody who cared to look at it. Usually the girls appreciated its changeful glories, but to-day—this first day of a new term—they were too much taken up with their own grievances to think about scenery. In fact, they sat huddled together in the wheelbarrow with their backs towards the view.

It had certainly been a considerable shock to the girls to find, on arriving after the holidays, that their popular Principal had deserted them in so sudden a fashion. It was not indeed the first surprise which she had given them. Two years before she had been Miss Housman, with a purely educational outlook in life, and a horizon bounded by her school; but Cupid, who plays strange pranks even with head mistresses, brought her fate along in the shape of a major from the temporary camp by the lake, and shot his arrows with such deadly aim that the whole romantic business—courtship, engagement, and war wedding—took place in the course of a few weeks, almost under the very noses of her interested pupils. They had gone home for their Easter holidays much thrilled about her engagement ring, and had returned to school to find her a war bride, with her husband already in the trenches. When the excitement of choosing her a wedding present was over, matters seemed to settle down pretty much as before. Except in an increased anxiety for news from the front, Mrs. Gifford had differed in no degree from Miss Housman. To [13] the school the Major was a mere abstraction; his leave had always occurred during the holidays, and up to this time his existence—apart from the element of romance with which it invested their head mistress—had not affected the atmosphere of Pendlemere in the least. It had occasionally occurred to some of the girls to question what would happen when the war was over, but they generally ended by deciding: "He'll have to come and live here, I suppose, and turn the junior room into a smoke-room". Some of the more imaginative had even ventured the suggestion that he might teach drilling and Latin. It never struck any of them that instead of settling down at the school he would want to whisk away his bride to the other side of the world. The unexpected had happened, however. Pretty Mrs. Gifford had decided that the claims of matrimony outweighed all consideration for her pupils, and had gone without even a good-bye, leaving Miss Todd to reign in her stead.

There was no doubt that Miss Todd was admirably fitted to fill the post. Possibly, unknown to the girls, she had been gravitating towards it ever since her principal's hasty war wedding. Certainly she was ready, with the utmost calm, to take over the school at the critical moment, and transfer the connection from Mrs. Gifford's name to her own. She was a woman of decided character, at her prime intellectually and physically, tremendously interested in reconstruction problems, and

longing to try some educational experiments. So far, her ambitious schemes had been much [14]
hampered by her Head. Mrs. Gifford, pleasant and popular both with girls and parents, had clung to old-fashioned methods, and had been very difficult to move in the matter of modern innovations. She had always put on the curb when the second mistress's fertile imagination had pranced away on Utopian lines. To an ardent spirit, steeped in new race-ideals, and longing for an opportunity of serving her generation, it was a proud moment when she suddenly found herself in a position to carry out her pet schemes unchecked. On this first day of the new term she moved round the school with the satisfaction of an admiral reviewing a battleship.

It was much to Miss Todd's credit that she was able to take her fresh duties quite calmly, and without any fuss or exhibition of nerves. She was not a nervy woman, to begin with, and she had made a great point of cultivating self-control. With her tall figure, clear grey eyes, bright complexion, and abundant chestnut hair, she made a very favourable impression upon those parents who had brought their daughters back to school in person. At the moment when Wendy, Sadie, Tattie, Magsie, and Vi were sitting grousing in the wheelbarrow, Miss Todd, in the drawing-room, was completing an arrangement which was largely to affect their future.

"It's very short notice, of course," she was saying. "But, as it happens, there's a vacant bed, and I [15]
can manage it perfectly well."

"That's just a real relief to me!" replied a pleasant American voice from the sofa. "We can't take Diana with us to Paris, and I don't want to burden my cousin with her, so I said to my husband: 'There's nothing for it but school, only it must be a good one'. Well, we motored along to the nearest clergyman, introduced ourselves, and asked him to recommend a real first-class, high-toned British school that would take in Diana, and he said: 'Why, there's one on the spot here—you needn't go any farther!' Time was getting short, so we brought her right along. I must say I'm satisfied with all I've seen, and the talk I've had with you, and I feel we're leaving her in good hands. My cousin, Mrs. Burritt, will send over the rest of her things from Petteridge, and if there's anything else she needs please get it for her. Well, Steve, if we've to catch that 4.30 train, we must be going."

The tall dark gentleman in the arm-chair consulted his watch and rose hastily.

"Just time if we put on some speed; but the roads are execrable," he vouchsafed.

The central figure around whom this conversation had revolved had been sitting in the window gazing at the view over the lake. She now turned her head sharply, with an inscrutable expression in her dark grey eyes, and, walking across to her father, linked her arm in his. He bent down and whispered a few rapid words into her ear. Her mother patted her on the shoulder [16]
reassuringly.

"You're going to have a good time, Diana. Why, I expect you won't be wanting us to come back, you'll be so happy here. Address your letters under cover of the American Embassy, Paris, till we send you the name of our hotel. Good-bye! Be a good child and a credit to us."

The leave-taking was perhaps purposely cut short. Mr. and Mrs. Hewlitt each bestowed a swift kiss upon their daughter, then made a hasty exit to their waiting car, and were whirled away in the direction of Glenbury Station and the 4.30 train, and their ultimate destination of Paris.

Ten minutes later Lennie Browne, one of the juniors, disturbed the quintette on the wheelbarrow with a message.

"Miss Todd's sent me to find you," she announced. "You've got to come and make friends with a new girl."

Sadie, Vi, and Tattie quitted their seats so suddenly that Magsie and Wendy, still resting on the handles, came croppers on to the grass. Wendy rolled over into a comfortable position, and did not trouble to rise.

"Bunkum!" she remarked incredulously. "Don't try to rag *me*, Lennie Browne, for it won't come off. As it happens, I asked Toddlekins half an hour ago, and she said there were *no* new girls. There!"

"Well, there's one now, at any rate."

Wendy looked at her pityingly, and shook her head. [17]

"Lennie, you're a decent kid, but you're not clever. If you'd really wanted to have us on successfully, why didn't you try something more out of the common? You've a great lack of imagination. Anybody—yes, *anybody*—could have thought of inventing a new girl!"

"But I *haven't* invented her—she's really here! She walked with me as far as the sundial, and I left her sitting on the seat while I went to look for you. I said I wouldn't be a minute. Why, there she is!—come to see what's become of me."

The quintette turned hastily, to find themselves confronted with an absolute endorsement of the truth of Lennie's statements. A stranger of about fourteen was walking towards them, or perhaps "shambling" would be a better description of her method of progress. She stooped badly, swung her arms in an awkward fashion, and shuffled her feet along the grass; her eyes were vacant, her chin was retreating, and her mouth was set in a foolish smile. For a full ghastly minute she stood and stared at the girls, and they, in utter and amazed consternation, could not think of a single

intelligent remark with which to break the silence. Magsie was the first to recover herself.

"You—you've only just come, I suppose?" she gasped, as politely as she could.

The stranger gave a sickly giggle.

"Are you my new schoolfellows?" she asked in a low creaking voice. "Miss Todd said you'd be [18]
pleased to see me, and I must make friends with you. I've been wanting a bosom friend, so I'll just pick one of you out. Let me see"—running her vacant eyes over the group and singling out Wendy —"I may as well choose you as anybody. Are you ready to be my chum?"

Wendy flushed scarlet, and, jumping up from the grass, brushed some dead leaves from her dress.

"It's too soon to think about chums yet," she returned. "You haven't even told us your name, and you don't know ours. Where do you come from?"

"That means, I suppose, that you don't want me for a friend!" rasped the creaking voice. "Don't you like the look of me? What's wrong with me now? Please tell me, for I'd really like to know. I'm just crazy to make friends."

In huge embarrassment Wendy and her companions stared at the extraordinary stranger. She bore their united gaze without flinching. She even turned round slowly, so that they might have an adequate view of her foolish profile, protruding lips, and retreating chin.

"Do tell me what's wrong with me?" she repeated.

No one volunteered a criticism, and for another whole minute there was dead silence. Then a brisk voice remarked:

"Would this style suit you better now, I wonder?"

The girls caught their breath in amazement. The stooping, slouching figure had suddenly [19]
straightened itself up, the protruding lips had set into a small, neat mouth, the receding chin had come forward, and the vacant eyes were twinkling with mirth. Instead of a half-idiotic, and wholly unattractive, specimen of girlhood, a very charming little personality stood before them. The transformation was so utter that at first the audience simply gaped, then with one accord they exploded into laughter and words.

"Oh, I say!"

"You fraud!"

"I really thought you were dotty!"

"How *did* you do it?"

"You looked too awful for words!"

"You haven't told us your name yet!"

"Can you do it again?"

The stranger curtsied, dropped her jaw, set her eyes in a glassy stare, and, resuming the creaking voice, bleated forth:

"Thank you! Thank you for welcoming me! I'm called Miranda Jane Judkins, and I come from Conic Section Farm, Squashville, Massachusetts. Which of you wants to chum with me? Don't all speak at once!"

"Oh, for goodness' sake drop that awful face! It absolutely gives me spasms!" hinnied Magsie. "It's the very image of a village idiot who used to terrify me when I was a kiddie. Don't look at me with those horrid eyes! I shall have a fit!"

"Look here, you mad thing!" said Vi. "Can't you tell us who you really are?" [20]

"Miss Judkins."

"No, no! Your real name! Stop ragging!"

Once more the half-witted, shambling figure gave place to a sparkling, self-possessed, laughing young witch of fourteen, who with another mock curtsy introduced herself.

"Diana Hewlitt—quick-change artiste. Entertainments arranged at any moment. Reserved seats, five shillings. Proceeds to the Red Cross Fund. Oh, I believe at first I really *did* take you in!"

"You did," admitted Wendy; "because, of course, we weren't expecting it. We shall know you better now, and be prepared. I say, you're rather a sport! Where have you turned up from? Miss Todd said only an hour ago there weren't any new girls."

"No doubt she told the truth. There weren't then! Why, an hour since we were just half-way between Glassenrigg and Scawdale, pelting along at about double the speed limit. Miss Todd didn't even know of my existence. I've been dropped upon her like a bolt from the blue. I must say I admired the calm way she fixed up to take me, all in ten minutes. Most Britishers wouldn't have fallen in so quickly with Dad's lightning methods, but she seemed to understand right

away."

"Are you American, then?"

"Rather! I was born under the Stars and Stripes. Never saw England till we crossed this summer. [21]
Dad's just been called over to Paris, and d'you know, they've let Mother go with him, but they wouldn't give *me* a passport. Wasn't it real mean of them? I do think the War Office is the limit! Well, of course, the question was: what could be done with me. I said: 'Leave me at Petteridge'. But Mother said: 'No; I'm not going to dump you on Cousin Coralie; she'd be down with nervous exhaustion at the end of a fortnight. School's the place for you, and we've got to rake round and find a school in double-quick time'. Dad nodded, and just rang up and ordered the car, and we started out with no more idea than the man in the moon where I was going to be landed. I'm glad fate tossed me here, though. It looks nice; kind of a real old-world flavour about the place, somehow. I'm crazy on old things—Scott's novels, you know, and castles, and all the rest of it. When I heard this was called Pendlemere Abbey, I said: 'That'll do! Take me there!' So here I am!"

"It takes one's breath away," commented Tattie. "I don't know that I'd like to be whisked off to school in such a precious hurry myself."

"It's rather as if the pixies had dropped you," laughed Vi.

"Right you are! I guess I'm a pixie sort of girl. Please don't expect 'prunes and prism' from me, for you won't get them!"

"I don't know that we want them," chuckled Wendy.

"That takes a weight off my mind, then," twinkled Diana. "I like mediæval abbeys and black [22]
beams and raftered roofs, and even ghosts; but I don't know that I exactly want mediæval schoolgirls."

"Don't alarm yourself," said Wendy, clapping her on the shoulder. "I assure you you'll find us all absolutely and entirely modern and up-to-date."

[23]

CHAPTER II

Stars and Stripes

If Diana was possessed with a passion for antiquities, she might certainly congratulate herself that a kindly fate had popped her into such an appropriate spot as Pendlemere Abbey. It offered every attraction to those in search of the romantic and picturesque. The Cistercian monks who had founded it in the thirteenth century had exhibited their proverbial good taste in the choice of a situation. It was built on rising ground above the lake, and commanded a glorious view across the fells. The garden, with its hill-side of rhododendrons, its clumps of sweet-smelling pines, and its borders of such hardy flowers as did not mind the nip of the northern air, ran steeply from a flat terrace towards the lake, where it ended in a landing-stage and a locked boat-house. Its orchard linked branches with the apple-trees of a neighbouring farm. The house itself, though preserving the name and the traditions of the Abbey, had been converted during Tudor times from religious to lay uses. Very little of the old monks' building remained intact, though evidences of it cropped up in unexpected quarters. There were the remains of a piscina in the pantry; a groined arch roofed the back kitchen; two carved stone pillars supported the fire-place [24]
in the dining-room; a Gothic doorway led into the courtyard, and the remnants of some ancient choir stalls were fitted as a window-seat on the stairs. The Tudor and Elizabethan periods had left more permanent traces, and, though later architects had played havoc with the simplicity of the style, they had not altogether destroyed its sixteenth-century appearance. The greater part was built of northern stone, with mullioned windows, twisted chimneys, peaked gables surmounted with stone balls, and a roof of flat slabs of the same yellow-brown stone that formed the walls. A section of black and white timbered Elizabethan work, a Queen Anne wing, and some early Victorian alterations made a strange conglomeration of styles of architecture; but the roses and ivy had climbed up and clothed ancient and modern alike, and Time had softened the jarring nineteenth-century additions, so that the whole now blended into a mellow, brownish mass, with large, bright windows enclosed in a frame of well-clipped greenery.

There was accommodation in the roomy old house for twenty boarders, and though no day pupils were supposed to be received a special exception had been made in the case of Meg and Elsie Fleming, the Vicar's daughters, who arrived every morning by nine o'clock, and Nell Gledhill, whose governess brought her each Friday afternoon for dancing-lessons. So far the school had [25]
jogged along very happily under Mrs. Gifford's mild regime. Fathers and mothers had sometimes shrugged their shoulders and hinted that her methods were old-fashioned, but they always added that the tone of the place was so excellent, and the health of the pupils so well looked after, that there was really no just cause for complaint. Miss Todd, sitting in her study, and writing twenty neat, well-thought-out letters to explain the sudden transfer of the school, assured parents that, while preserving all the traditions of her predecessor, she hoped to introduce a modern element of progress in keeping with the needs of the day. "I realize that we must march with the times," she wrote; and she meant it. She began her innovations on that very first day. Several

disconsolate seniors congregated on the upper landing viewed change number one with dismay.

"But Mrs. Gifford promised that Geraldine and Ida and I might have the East room," urged Nesta Erskine. "It was all arranged last term, and we clubbed together to buy a bookcase. What are we to do with it if we're separated? It belongs to us all three."

"I can't help it; those are Miss Todd's orders," answered Miss Beverley briskly. "Your names are on cards pinned on to the doors of your new rooms. Pass along at once, and find your quarters and begin to unpack. Don't stand here blocking up the passage! Yes, Betty? Miss Hampson wants to speak to me? Tell her I'm coming now."

As Miss Beverley bustled away the seniors moved slowly and forlornly along the landing in quest of billets. It reminded them of finding their places in an examination-room. Their names were unquestionably on the doors in black-and-white, but their distribution called forth a storm of indignant comment. [26]

"I'm actually put with Tattie Clegg and Jess Paget!"

"And I'm boxed up with Dorothy, and Nora Haddon, and Glynne Hamilton!"

"Why, we're all mixed up with the kids!"

"Look here, you know, we can't stand this kind of thing!"

"Somebody had better go to Miss Todd!"

"It's no use; I've just been," said Loveday Seton, joining the group of malcontents. "We had it all out in the study, and she listened quite kindly and politely, but she was firm as nails. She says it's an experiment for the sake of good tone, and she hopes it will work well. We seniors are sandwiched up with intermediates and juniors so that our influence may permeate through the school."

The five listeners groaned.

"Couldn't we permeate enough during the daytime?" sniffed Ida. "I don't see what influence I can have while I'm asleep. I call it a jolly nuisance to be saddled with three kids in one's room."

"Of course you have your curtains."

"What's the use of curtains? A cubicle's only semi-private after all. What it means is that we seniors are always on duty policing those juniors. What a life!" [27]

"Where are you put, Loveday?" asked Geraldine.

"In the little ivy room upstairs. There are two beds, and I'm to act mentor to this new American girl who's just arrived."

"Poor you! What's she like?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen her yet, but I wish she were at Jericho."

In a decidedly ruffled frame of mind, Loveday passed along the landing, and climbed the stairs that led to the ivy room. She found her room-mate already in possession, and with her belongings half-unpacked. Photos adorned her dressing-table, a large American flag draped the mirror, and her bed was spread with odds and ends. She smiled broadly as Loveday entered.

"So here you are!" she greeted her. "Goody! What a relief! I've been worrying about what you'd be like, and just praying you wouldn't have spectacles and talk with a lisp. Miss Todd gave me to understand you were a peach, and I might think myself in luck to room with you, but you never can trust head mistresses till you see for yourself. She's told me the truth, though, after all. Yes, I like you right straight away, and I always make up my mind about people, slap bang off at once."

Loveday stared in surprise at the impetuous little figure kneeling beside the big trunk. Diana's dark-grey eyes shone like stars, her oval face, if not exactly pretty, was piquant and interesting, her light-brown hair curled at the tips. It was, of course, an unheard-of liberty for a new girl, and an intermediate to boot, thus to address a senior, but the greeting was spontaneous and decidedly flattering. The grey eyes, in fact, expressed open admiration. On the whole, Loveday decided to waive ceremony and tradition for the nonce. [28]

"We've been put together for the term, so we must make the best of each other," she conceded, more graciously than she had intended to address the interloper. "I'm glad to see you've kept to your own side of the room, and haven't overflowed into mine."

"No fear!" chuckled Diana. "I've been at school before, and learnt not to spread myself out. We're on rather a short allowance of space, aren't we? Are these drawers all I've got? I shall have just to wedge my things in. There's my cabin trunk to come yet."

"You may have three pegs in the landing cupboard, and a locker in the cloak-room, but anything else will have to be stored in the box-room. I should think you had enough clothes there to last you a year, instead of wanting another trunk full."

Diana shook her head.

"They're all mixed up. We packed in half an hour. I just flung in the first things that came to [29]

hand. Cousin Cora promised to send on the rest of my luggage after me. If she doesn't, I'd best 'phone."

"You'd have a little difficulty to do that," said Loveday dryly.

"D'you mean to say there's no 'phone here, or"—looking round the room—"no electric light either?"

"Certainly not. We go to bed with candles."

"Well! I wanted mediæval ways, and it looks as if I was going to get them. It'll be rather a stunt to go to bed by candle-light. Are there any ghosts about this place? Or skeletons built into the wall? Or dungeons with rusting chains? Or mysterious footsteps? Oh! I thought there'd have been at least something spooky in a house that claims to be six hundred years old."

Diana's cabin trunk arrived in the course of a few days. She sorted out a selection of her numerous belongings, arranged them in her limited number of drawers, and consigned the surplus back to her boxes to be stored in the attic. This done, and a telegram received to announce the safe arrival of her father and mother in Paris, she seemed prepared to settle down. Her fellow intermediates, biased largely by her generosity in the matter of chocolates, gave her, on the whole, a favourable reception. Wendy even went further, and proffered friendship.

"You're just the jolly kind of girl I like," she explained. "I think we might have some topping times [30]
together, and wake up the school. Things are apt to get a little dull sometimes."

Diana nodded intelligently.

"I know. It was just the same at my last school. Everyone got into a sort of stick-in-the-mud mood, and one felt it was only *kind* to stir them up. I guess I did it!"

"I shouldn't wonder if you did," twinkled Wendy. "I vote we make an alliance, and, if one of us thinks of any rather ripping rag, she just tells the other, and we'll play it off together."

"Right you are! Let's shake on it!" agreed Diana, extending a small, slim hand, with a garnet birthstone-ring on the middle finger.

The little American did not fit into her niche at Pendlemere without encountering a certain amount of what her schoolmates considered necessary discipline for a novice. She had to go through an ordeal of chaff and banter. She was known by the sobriquet of "Stars and Stripes", or "The Yank", and good-natured fun was poked at her transatlantic accent. She took it good-temperedly, but with a readiness of repartee that laid the jokers flat.

"One can't get much change out of Diana," commented Magsie, after an unsuccessful onslaught of teasing.

"I think she's a scream," agreed Vi.

The baffling part of the new schoolmate was that her powers of acting were so highly developed
that it was impossible to tell whether she was serious or playing a part. She "took in" her teasers [31]
times out of number, and in fairness they deserved all they got. Towards the end of the first week she came into the intermediate room one morning fondling a letter.

"From Paris," she vouchsafed. "Dad and Mother have got anchored at last. The journey must have been a startler. Paris is so full of Americans, it's like a little New York."

"Why do you call it 'Parr-is'?" sniggered Sadie.

"It's more like the French than your way of saying it, at any rate," retorted Diana smartly. "This letter's been four days in coming through."

"You might give me the stamp."

"Certainly not. You don't deserve it. I wish I were in Paris, too. Yes, I shall call it 'Parr-is'. I'm beginning to want some of my own folks."

"I've never met any Americans, except you," volunteered Vi. "What are they like?"

"What do you imagine they're like?"

"Like the pictures of 'Uncle Sam', with a limp shirt front, and a big tie, and a goatee beard. I want to meet some real out-and-out Yankees."

"Won't your cousins from Petteridge ever come over to see you, Di?" asked Magsie.

"Perhaps they may, sometime," replied Diana thoughtfully. "I should say it's quite within the bounds of possibility, considering they only live ten miles away."

"Gee-whiz! I guess I'd just admire to make their acquaintance!" mocked Vi. "I reckon they'll be [32]
some folks!"

Diana's eyes were fixed upon her with an inscrutable look, but she answered quite calmly:

"I'll take care to introduce you if they come."

It was in the course of the next few days that a parcel for Diana arrived from Petteridge Court.

What it contained nobody saw except herself, for she did her unpacking in private. Judging from certain outbursts of chuckling, the exact cause of which she steadily refused to reveal, the advent of her package gave her profound satisfaction. The next Saturday afternoon was wet: one of those hopelessly wet days that are apt to happen in a land of lakes and hills. Banks of mist obscured the fells; the garden walks were turned to running rivers, the bushes dripped dismally, and cascades poured from the gutters. The school, which had been promised a country tramp, looked out of the windows with woeful disappointment. The seniors consoled themselves by holding a committee meeting, from which all but their elect selves were rigidly excluded. The juniors took possession of the play-room, and relieved their spirits by games which made the maximum of noise. Several of the intermediates peeped in, but, finding the place a mixture of a bear-garden and the Tower of Babel, they retired to the sanctuary of their own form-room, where they sat making half-hearted efforts to read or paint, and grousing at the weather.

"Is *every* Saturday going to be wet?" demanded Magsie in an injured voice. [33]

"Seems like it!" mourned Jess Paget. "Of course it can be beautifully fine on Friday, when we have to stop in and do dancing; and it just keeps all the rain for Saturday. I call it spiteful! I wish I knew what to do with myself. I'm moping."

"Get a book out of the library."

"I loathe reading."

"Do some painting."

"You know I can't paint."

"Go and romp with the juniors."

"I'd as soon spend an hour in a monkey-house."

"Then I can't do anything for you, I'm afraid. You'll just have to mope."

"Where's Sadie?" asked Peggy Collins. "She promised to give me back my crochet-needle, and I can't get on without it."

"She went off with Diana and Wendy half an hour ago. I saw them running upstairs together. Don't flatter yourself she'll remember about your crochet-needle."

"I know she won't—the slacker! I shall just have to go and rout her up, and make her find it. Oh, kafoozalum! It's a weary world!"

Peggy rose languidly, stretched her arms, and strolled in the direction of the door, which at that identical moment opened to admit the missing Sadie.

"Here, you old blighter, where's that crochet-needle?" demanded Peggy impolitely.

"Bother your crochet-needle! I've no time to go and hunt for it now. I say, girls!" continued Sadie excitedly; "anybody know what's become of Diana? She's wanted. Those American cousins of hers have turned up. I told them she was in here, and they're waiting outside the door. Oh!" [34]

Sadie's exclamation was caused by the door, which she had carefully closed suddenly opening, and nearly knocking her over. Apparently the visitors did not approve of being left to wait in the passage, and judged it expedient to make an entrance.

"Excuse me if we walk right in," said a nasal-toned voice; "but I was told we'd find Miss Diana Hewlitt in here."

The five girls, scattered about the room, stared for a second in blank amazement at the intruders. They were certainly unlike any other visitors who had ever come to Pendlemere. The speaker was a little, short, wiry man, in a slack-fitting, brown tweed suit, with a rather obtrusive striped tie. His raggy, grey beard straggled under his chin and up to his ears; his eyes twinkled through a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles; in defiance of European etiquette, he wore his hat over a crop of rough, grey hair. Clinging to his arm was a very stout lady in a green coat and a velvet turban adorned with feathers. She also was grey-haired, and her features were somewhat obscured by a thick, black veil. The most prominent thing about her was a large and obtruding tooth, which gave her somewhat the appearance of a good-natured walrus; she held a morocco-leather satchel [35] in her unoccupied hand, and wore a large feather-boa round her neck.

Magsie, to her eternal credit, was the first to remember her manners, and offer some sort of a greeting to the extraordinary strangers.

"Er—good afternoon!" she stammered. "I'm afraid Diana isn't here. Shall—shall I go and fetch her?"

"Well, now, I'd call that real elegant of you," returned the stout lady heartily. "We can't stay long, and we don't want to waste time."

"Cora, I guess we'd best introduce ourselves," observed the gentleman, gently disengaging her from his arm. "We're Mr. and Mrs. Elihu Burritt of Petteridge Court. I reckon you're Diana's schoolfellows? Pleased to meet you, I'm sure."

"Did you have a wet drive?" asked Jess Paget, making a desperate and most gallant attempt to

pump up some item of conversation.

The stout lady shook her head eloquently.

"I *do* say that in the matter of weather a British wet day just about takes the cake!" she replied.

Her voice was slightly tremulous and muffled; perhaps the weather agitated her. Moreover, her large tooth seemed to cause her some inconvenience—it wobbled visibly as she spoke.

"If Diana don't turn up, I guess we'll have to be getting on," ventured Mr. Elihu Burritt, pulling out a big watch and consulting it. "We've got to call at the drug store at Glenbury, and time presses." [36]

"Magsie's gone to fetch her. Peggy, you go too, and hurry her up. Won't you sit down while you're waiting?" asked Jess, pulling forward two chairs.

The visitors seated themselves, that is to say, they sank heavily down, and planted their hands on their knees. Their eyes took an interested review of the embarrassed faces of the girls, then they suddenly collapsed into gurgles of laughter. An instant wave of comprehension swept through the room.

"Diana and Wendy!" exclaimed a chorus of voices.

Mr. Elihu Burritt was guffawing to such an extent that his hat, and the venerable locks stitched inside it, tumbled to the ground, revealing a crop of brown hair. Mrs. Cora had lost her tooth altogether, and her turban was tilted to a most disreputable angle. She slapped her partner on the back, and commanded, between sobs of mirth:

"Elihu—stop laughing! I guess we'd best wangle ourselves off!"

But the girls had crowded round to examine the details of the costumes.

"They're topping!" they approved. "Absolutely A1! Can't think how you did it! Diana, where did you get those togs?"

"Sent to Petteridge for them," exulted Diana. "They came in that parcel. It's an old suit of Cousin Hugh's. I told Cousin Coralie I wanted it to dress up in. The beard's just made out of tow, and so's Wendy's hair. Flatter myself I came up to your expectations of a real backwoods Yank. I wonder if I'd take in Miss Todd. I'd give a hundred dollars to try. But it might be rather a risky experiment. Don't you think my old girl is a peach? I'm nuts on her!" [37]

"I simply shouldn't have known you, Wendy," said Jess. "How did you make yourself so fat?"

"I'm stuffed out with all sorts of things," laughed Wendy. "Vests, and nightdresses, and stockings, and anything we could lay our hands on. I'm specially padded over the shoulders. The toque is one of Diana's hats turned inside out with some feathers pinned on. The tooth? Why, that was a piece of india-rubber tucked inside my lip. It was fearfully difficult to make it stick, I can tell you. It kept jiggling about when I tried to talk. Elihu, old man, shall we dance a tickle-toe?"

"Stop, you mad creatures! If you make such a racket you'll be bringing Bunty down upon us," interposed Magsie, as the masquerading couple twirled each other round and round. "If you want to be ready in time for tea, you'd better go and get out of those weird garments."

"I'd like to go down to tea in them," declared Diana. "What a lovely sensation they'd make! Magsie, just peep out and see that the coast is clear before we make a dash for it along the passage. It might upset Bunty's nerves if she met us."

As it happened, during the very next week Diana received a visit from her cousins, Mr. and Mrs. Burritt of Petteridge Court. They arrived in their Daimler car, and lunched with the school. They were the very epitome of cultured and polished America, and the girls raved over them. After half an hour of their company, seven intermediates had determined to mould themselves absolutely on the lines of "Cousin Coralie", and to marry exact replicas of Mr. Burritt. It was felt that ambition could soar no higher. [38]

"I'm glad you like them," said Diana, as she stood on the steps with some of her friends watching the Daimler pass out through the gate. "I thought you would—when they really turned up. That was why I wanted you to see 'Cousin Elihu' and 'Cousin Cora' first. They were more your idea of typical Americans, weren't they? Ah!"—shaking her head commiseratingly—"that's because you benighted Britishers just don't know anything about the *real* America."

[39]

CHAPTER III

A Penniless Princess

Miss Todd, sitting at her desk in her study, with a row of the very latest publications on the most modern theories of education in a bookcase so near that she could stretch out her hand for any particular one she wanted, rapidly reviewed some of her new experiments. First and foremost came the plan of sandwiching seniors and juniors together in their bedrooms. She hoped the

influence of the elder girls would work like leaven in the school, and that putting them with younger ones would give them the chance of developing and exercising their motherly instincts. She tapped her book with her pencil as she mentally ran over the list of her seniors, and considered how—to the outside view of a head mistress—each seemed to be progressing.

"It's difficult to foster just the spirit one wants in them—it depends so largely on the girl," she decided.

And there she was right—the girl made all the difference. Hilary Chapman had listened to her remarks on "the mother instinct", and had walked straight into her dormitory, tow-rowed her young room-mates for their untidiness, snapped at their excuses, and sent them downstairs with [40] a snubbing, returning to the bosom of the seniors ruffled, but with a strong sense of having performed her obvious duty. Betty Blane, Erica Peters, and Peggy Collins, comparing injured notes, viewed the matter from a different angle.

"Calls herself a mother, does she? Jolly more like a step-mother, I should say," objected Erica.

"Pretty grizzly to be boxed up with Hilary for a whole term," lamented Betty.

"I'm *not going* to be 'mothered' by her," proclaimed Peggy with energy. "She's only two years older than I am, and yet from the airs she gives herself you'd think she was Methuselah."

"You don't *look* like her daughter," remarked Betty, who was literal-minded to a fault.

Peggy made an eloquent grimace.

"I'm an undutiful one, at any rate," she laughed. "I'm afraid Hilary will find me somewhat of a handful."

Up in the little ivy room, however, matters were going somewhat better. Diana and Loveday, after a few minor differences, dovetailed both their possessions and their dispositions so as to admit of the least possible friction. It was fortunate for Diana, for she had a side to her character that would have bristled into porcupine quills had she been placed with Hilary. Loveday's particular temperament soothed her down.

"I'm falling in love with her," she admitted to Wendy. "I was taken with her, of course, the [41] moment I saw her, but I believe now I'm going to have it badly. I think she's beautiful! If there were a Peach Competition, she'd win at a canter."

Such a pandering to the "pomps and vanities" as a Beauty Show was certainly not an item in the list of new experiments at Pendlemere, but there was a general consensus of opinion that Loveday held the palm in the matter of looks. She was a fair, slender girl, with delicate features, a clear complexion, and a quantity of long flaxen hair. She spoke prettily, but without affectation, and always gave an impression of great refinement. The wistful look that sometimes shaded her blue eyes was, on the whole, attractive.

"She's like a picture I once saw of Eve just turned out of Paradise," commented Diana, sitting with Wendy and Tattie in the window-seat on the stairs.

"Not half a bad shot," said Wendy. "In fact, it just about hits the mark. In a way, Loveday *is* turned out of Paradise. That's to say, I suppose, if her grandfather hadn't gambled, the Abbey would have belonged to her."

"What Abbey?"

"Why, this, of course, stupid!"

"Do you mean to say Loveday's folks used to *own* this place?"

"They did. Owned it for hundreds of years. They were an old Border family, and mixed up with the rebellion of 1745, and all sorts of interesting things. Loveday's grandfather was the regular [42] old-fashioned sporting kind of squire you read about in books. He gambled the whole property away. I suppose it used to be a fine place in his day. I've heard he kept eight hunters, and always had the house full of guests while his money lasted. Then there was a grand smash up, and everything had to be sold—house, horses, furniture, and all. He went abroad and died of a broken heart—never smiled again, and all that sort of thing, you know."

"How fearfully romantic!" gasped Diana. "Of course it was his own fault for gambling, but still one feels sorry for him. Did Loveday live here too when she was little?"

Wendy shook her head.

"I shouldn't think so. I believe it happened ever such a long time ago; before she was born, even."

"Couldn't her father get it back?"

"I suppose not. Besides, he's dead too. Loveday is an orphan. She's neither father nor mother."

"Where does she live, then, when she's at home?"

"With an uncle and aunt—her mother's relations. But she never talks very much about them, so we fancy they're not particularly nice to her. She has no brothers or sisters. I think she feels lonely, if you ask my opinion, but she's too proud to say so."

"And Pendlemere ought to be hers! How romantic!" repeated Diana. "I wanted to stay in a real old-fashioned mediæval British house, and here I'm plumped into a story as well. It's most exciting! What's going to happen next? Is Loveday going to get it back? Will she marry the man who owns it? Or will somebody leave her a fortune? Or will she find a lost will? How do stories generally end?" continued Diana, casting her mind over a range of light literature which she had skimmed and half forgotten. [43]

Wendy disposed of each of the suggestions in turn.

"There isn't anybody to leave her a fortune; and what's the good of finding a will when the place is sold? The present owner is a fat old fellow of fifty, with a wife already, and, even if *she* died, I shouldn't think Loveday would want to marry him. He has three daughters older than she is, and he's quite bald."

Diana looked baffled. Her romantic plan of restoring the fortunes of the Seton family through matrimony certainly did not seem hopeful.

"I'm fearfully sorry for Loveday," confided Tattie. "I know something about her, because some friends of ours live near her aunt. They say she gets very much snubbed; her cousins make her feel it's not her own home. She wants to go to college, but it's doubtful if she'll be able. Nesta Erskine says Loveday is just *counting* on a career. She wants to be independent of her aunt."

"It must be horrible to be snubbed," commented Diana thoughtfully.

She had admired Loveday before, but now she looked at her room-mate with new eyes. To Diana there was something fascinating about the idea of a "penniless princess". [44]

"Do your ancestors go right slap-bang back to the Conquest?" she asked interestedly, while she was undressing that evening.

"Well, not quite so far as that," smiled Loveday, diligently brushing a flaxen mane ripply with plaiting. "But I believe there were Setons in the fourteenth century, long before they had the Abbey from Edward the Sixth's commissioners. There are all sorts of stories and legends about them, of course."

"What kind of stories? Do tell me! I'd just admire to hear. I'm crazy on Border ballads and legends. Tell me, while I fix my hair."

"Well, there was little Sir Rowland. When he was only six years old his father was killed in one of the battles of the Wars of the Roses. They were Lancastrians, and the Yorkists seized his estate, and Rowland was only saved from the fury of the conquering party by the devotion of his nurse. She managed to hide him in a secret place in the tower till there was an opportunity to escape, and then she got him away to her father's house in the midst of a wild tract of forest. He lived there, disguised as a forester, for years and years, and helped to cut wood and to hunt, and only two or three people knew the secret of his birth. He used to go errands sometimes to the great [45] Hall of the neighbourhood, and there he saw Lady Anne, the beautiful daughter of Lord Wharton, and fell desperately in love with her. One day when she was out riding he was able to save her from the attack of an infuriated stag, and I suppose she was very grateful, and perhaps showed her feelings too plainly, for her father shut her up in a turret-room, and ordered her to marry somebody whom she didn't like at all. I don't know what would have happened, but just then Henry VII came to the throne, and one of his first acts was to restore Sir Rowland Seton to his possessions and dignity. Lord Wharton must have thought him an eligible suitor then, for he was allowed to marry the Lady Anne, and take her away to his castle. Their tomb is in Dittington Church. He was killed at the Battle of Flodden, and one of his sons with him.

"There's a romantic story, too, about Sir Roderick Seton, who lived at the Abbey here in the days of Charles I. He had a stone seat made, and put just by the front door. The first person who sat on it was a lovely girl named Katherine, and he said to her: 'Katherine, you have sat on my seat, so you must give me three kisses as toll'. Not very long after he went away to London, leaving his brother William to look after the estate. Then civil war broke out, and he joined the Royalist forces, and followed the young King Charles into exile. After the Restoration he journeyed north, and came on foot to his old home. It was years and years since he had left there, and nobody had [46] had any tidings about him, or knew whether he was alive or dead. He found his brother William, who was now married to Katherine, sitting with her and their two children on the stone seat by the door. He asked them for a night's lodging, and, though they did not know who he was, they took him in and treated him kindly. Next morning he asked his hostess to accompany him to the door, and, pointing to the stone seat, said:

"'It is many years since I had three kisses from the dame who first sat on it.'

"She recognized him then, and ran joyously to call the rest of the household. His brother at once wished to hand over the keys to him, but he would not accept them. 'I am old and childless,' he said. 'All I ask here is bed and board till you carry me to the churchyard.' He lived with them for some years, and devoted himself to study. The people of the neighbourhood venerated him as a sage, and after his death he was supposed on very special occasions to appear and give the family warning of future trouble. They say he was seen before the Battle of Culloden, and several times during the Napoleonic wars; but of course I can't vouch for that—it's only legend."

Diana, sitting up in bed with the curtains of her cubicle drawn aside to listen, gave a long-drawn, breathless sigh.

"O-o-o-oh! How gorgeous to belong to a highfaluting family that's got legends and ghosts. I'm just crazy to hear more. What about the house? Aren't there any dungeons or built-up skeletons or secret hiding-places? There *ought* to be, in a real first-class mediæval place like this." [47]

Loveday was plaiting her flaxen hair into two long braids; she paused with the ribbon in her hand.

"I don't know—as you say, there ought to be. I've often wondered—especially since——" She hesitated.

"Since what?" urged Diana, scenting the beginning of a mystery.

"Since something that happened once."

"When? Oh, *do* tell me!"

"I've never told anybody."

Diana hopped out of bed, and flung two lace-frilled arms round her room-mate, clinging to her with the tenacity of a young octopus.

"Oh, Loveday! Ducky! Tell me! I shan't let you go till you promise. Please! please!" she entreated.

"If you strangle me I can't tell anything. Get back into bed, Diana! I don't know whether it was really important, but it may have been. It happened when I was quite a little girl. I had a slight attack of measles, and of course I was kept in bed. Mother was nursing me, and one afternoon she went out to do some shopping and left me to have a nap. I wasn't sleepy in the least, and it was horribly dull staying there all by myself. I remembered a book I wanted to read which was in [48] the dining-room bookcase, so I did a most dreadfully naughty thing: I jumped up, put on my dressing-gown and bedroom slippers, and ran downstairs to fetch *At the Back of the North Wind*. I opened the dining-room door and marched in, and then I got a surprise, for seated in a chair by the fire was a stranger. He looked as much surprised as I was.

"'Hallo!' he said. 'We go to bed early in this part of the world, don't we? Or are we only getting up?'

"I walked to the fire and warmed my hands, and looked at him calmly. I was a funny child in those days.

"'It's neither,' I answered. 'I've got measles.'

"'Then please don't give them to me,' he laughed. 'I assure you I don't want them. Look here! I called to see your father, or, failing your father, your mother. They're both out, and I've been waiting half an hour for either of them to come in. I can't stay any longer. Will you give them a message from me? Say I've been over at Pendlemere Abbey, and that I've made a most interesting discovery there. If they care to communicate with me, I'll tell them about it. Here's my card with my address. Now I must bolt to keep an appointment. You'll remember the message?'

"He flung his card on the table, went out of the room, and I heard the hall door bang after him. I stood for a moment thinking. If I gave this message, Mother would know that I had been out of [49] bed and downstairs, and I should be sure to get a tremendous scolding. I was a naughty little girl in those days; I took the card, flung it on the fire, seized *At the Back of the North Wind* from the bookcase, and tore upstairs again. Of course I caught cold, and had rather a serious relapse which puzzled everybody. No one except myself knew the reason, and I took good care not to tell. Only six months afterwards I lost both my father and mother, and went to live with my aunt at Liverpool. What became of the stranger I don't know. I didn't even remember his name."

"You weren't living at the Abbey then?"

"No, no! We never lived at the Abbey. It was sold before I was born. I believe at that time it was empty, and a caretaker used to allow tourists to look through it. I suppose that gentleman was a tourist."

"What had he found?"

"That's a question I've asked myself a hundred times. Was it a sliding panel or a secret door? Or was he simply some antiquarian crank who wanted to prove that the Abbey was of Norman origin, or built on a Roman foundation? How I wish I hadn't forgotten his name! When I heard that Pendlemere had been turned into a school I begged my aunt to send me here. For a long time she wouldn't, and I went to a day-school. Then two years ago she and uncle decided to send me to a boarding-school, so again I asked to come here, and after a great deal of urging they let [50] me. I hoped I might find out something. I'm always hunting about, but I've never yet made the 'interesting discovery'."

"Where have you looked?" asked Diana, immensely thrilled.

"Oh, everywhere! I've tapped panels, and pushed bits of carving to see if they'd move, but they're all absolutely firm and solid. I've had no luck."

"I'll go exploring on my own."

"Well, if you do, don't tell the other girls. I hate to pose as a sort of turned-out heiress, and have them pitying me. If they knew I was hunting for hiding-places, I believe some of them would rag me dreadfully. I should never hear the last of it. They'd always be pretending they'd found something, just to tease me."

"And yet you ought to have been the heiress," mused Diana.

"It's no use talking about being an heiress when the place was sold before I was born," returned Loveday rather bitterly. "I've told you this, but I trust you not to go blabbing it all over the school. If you're ready, I'll blow out the candle. Miss Hampson will be round in a minute."

[51]

CHAPTER IV

The Rush-bearing

Among Miss Todd's modern principles of education was the sensible theory that if you can once get a girl interested in a subject she will learn without any labour, and that self-acquired knowledge is far more readily retained than facts which are crammed down one's throat. More especially she applied this to history. Instead of making it a dry catalogue of dates of kings and battles, she tried to show the gradual evolution of the British nation from the barbarism of the Stone Age to present-day civilization. She dwelt much on folk-lore, ancient customs and traditions, and especially encouraged the study of all local legends and observances. In this she found an ally in the new vicar who had lately come to the church at Pendlemere, and whose daughters, Meg and Elsie, attended the school as day-girls. Mr. Fleming was an enthusiastic antiquarian, and revelled in the history of the neighbourhood. He went round his parish collecting information from the oldest inhabitants with regard to vanished and vanishing customs, and took notes for a book which he hoped to write upon the folk-lore of the northern [52] counties. In the heat of his ardour he suggested the revival of several quaint old festivals which had once held time-honoured places in the calendar of the year. First and foremost came the Rush-bearing. In ancient days it had been the custom of the parishioners to cut bundles of rushes, and, walking in procession to the church, to strew the floor thickly with them as a covering for the winter. They would be left till the spring, and cleared away in time for Easter. This old ceremony had long fallen into disuse, and was only remembered by village patriarchs as one of the yearly events of their far-away childhood.

Though it might not be desirable once more to strew the floor with rushes, Mr. Fleming suggested that it would be a pretty idea if the girls at Pendlemere School were to cut some bundles of them, tie them with ribbons, and carry them into the church on the date of the old festival, as a memorial of the past observance. Anything so interesting as going out to cut rushes appealed to the girls, and they readily adopted the suggestion. Miss Todd decided to turn the

afternoon into a kind of natural history and antiquarian excursion.

"The rushes by the lake are not very easy to get," she explained, "but there are beauties growing on Fox Fell. We'll have a ramble there on Saturday, take our lunch, and bring back our bundles. Then we can plait our ribbons at our leisure on Monday, in time for the festival on Tuesday. Who [53] wants to go? Anybody who likes may stay at home."

A rustle passed round the room, for nobody was anxious to be left out of the fun. Rambles were considered special treats at Pendlemere, and smiles decorated twenty faces at the prospect. At Geraldine's suggestion they did their Saturday prep. in Friday's recreation time.

"And get all your practising finished too," she urged. "If we can tell Miss Todd that our work's quite squared up, she'll let us stay out longer; but you know her. If there's a single girl who hasn't learnt her literature, or made up her music list, the whole crew of us will have to come trotting back. I'd be sorry for that girl!" Geraldine looked round the room grimly. "I should give her a very unpleasant time myself, and I expect the rest of you would, too. She'd richly deserve all she got."

Warned by the head girl's awful threat, tasks were completed in good time, and promptly by half-past ten the school, in a uniform of brown jerseys, brown tam-o'-shanters with orange tassels, strong boots, lunch-wallets slung over their shoulders, and sticks in their hands, were prepared, like a group of pilgrims, to make their start. Spot, the fox terrier, escorted them, barking his loudest. Meg and Elsie Fleming joined them in the village; so with Miss Todd and Miss Beverley they formed a party of twenty-four. They set their faces towards the fells, and stepped out briskly. They were not bound to walk in a crocodile, but, though some progressed in groups, most of the [54] girls gravitated into pairs. Diana and Wendy linked arms as naturally as two pieces of mercury merge together in a box. Their spirits, usually high, were to-day at bubbling-over point: they laughed at everything, whether it was a joke or not.

"It's my first real mountain walk in England," announced Diana.

"Oh! I'm glad you allow they *are* mountains," said Sadie, coming up from behind. "You've been bragging so hard about America, that I thought perhaps you'd consider them hillocks."

"They *are* hillocks compared with the Rockies," flashed Diana. "I'm not going to give way an inch about America, so there!"

"All right, Uncle Sam, brag away. Everything over there is ten times bigger and better than here—the apples are the size of pumpkins, and the brooks are so wide you can't see across them, and it takes you years to ride round a single farm! We know! You needn't tell us again."

"I wasn't going to!" retorted Diana. "What's the use, when you can make it all up for yourself?"

"Oh! my invention's nothing to yours. I expect you're telling Wendy some startlers. I'm going to walk with Vi, she's more interesting than you two."

"What's the matter with Sadie?" asked Diana, as their schoolmate ran on to catch up Violet.

"Jealous!" said Wendy, shaking her head sagely. "She has these attacks sometimes, and I know [55] the symptoms. She doesn't like to see you and me walking together. Last term she and I and Magsie and Tattie were in Dormitory 4. Magsie and Tattie did the 'twin cherries on one stalk' business all the time, so in self-defence Sadie and I had to chum, though we squabbled six times a day. I'm not going to be monopolized now, so she needn't think it. Let her chum with Vi if she likes, I'm sure I don't care. Hallo! Which stile do we go over here, I wonder?"

The two girls had lagged behind, so that the rest of the party, walking at the brisk pace set by Miss Todd, had passed on in front. Wendy mounted each stile in turn, and surveyed the prospect of fields and high hedges. There was not a solitary tam-o'-shanter to be seen from either of them. In much doubt she hesitated.

"It'll probably be to the left, because I know we have to go through that wood over there before we get out on to the fells," she conjectured.

"I can't help you," said Diana. "Is it any use tossing for it?"

They ventured to the left, and, after walking over three fields, found themselves in a narrow lane which terminated in a pond. It was such an evident cul-de-sac that there was nothing for it but to turn back. When they again reached the stiles they found Geraldine sitting upon the right-hand [56] one. Her expression was thundery, and her greeting the reverse of cordial.

"Where *have* you been, you two stupids? Why can't you keep up with the rest of us instead of side-tracking like this? Here you're keeping the whole party waiting, and I've had to turn back to hunt you up."

"Sorry to be on the earth!" apologized Wendy; "but we missed our way."

"Then it's your own fault, for we left the gipsy trail for you as plain as plain could be. Some people have no eyes!"

"What gipsy trail?"

Geraldine pointed laconically to the grass.

There, just by the right-hand stile, lay two crossed sticks. They were placed in a most obvious

position. It was a marvel how they had escaped notice.

"You may well stare!" commented Geraldine with sarcasm.

"I believe I did see them," said Diana, "but I didn't know what they meant."

"Didn't know! Why, Sadie told you! I sent her on purpose. Miss Todd said we were to leave the gipsy trail at every doubtful place."

"Sadie never told us. She never said a single word."

"You probably didn't listen. Well, I can't argue it out now, the others are waiting, and Miss Todd's furious. Come along as fast as you can."

Diana and Wendy considered that the summary scolding which they received from Miss Todd, [57]
who was in too big a hurry to listen to any excuses, was entirely Sadie's fault, and a point to be settled up with her later. At present she scuttled on ahead, conveniently out of their way.

"Just let her wait!" vowed Wendy darkly.

It was necessary to step along briskly if they meant to accomplish the walk which Miss Todd had in her mind's eye, and anybody who has ever acted leader to a party of twenty-four knows the difficulty of making everyone keep the pace.

"I believe Toddlekins would like to rope us all together as if we were Swiss mountaineers," giggled Magsie, "or a gang of prisoners clanking chains. It's rather weak if one can't even stop to pick a flower."

They had passed through the wood by now, and were on the open fells. The view was gorgeous. The October sun flooded the landscape and showed up the wealth of autumn colour: tree-crested crags, ravines with brawling brooks, stretches of heather-clad moor, banks of faded bracken, rugged rocks and stony hill-crests were spread on the one hand, while to the west lay a distant chain of lakes, embosomed in meadows green as emerald, and reflecting the pale autumn sky in their smooth expanse. At the top of the first fell, Miss Todd called a halt. They had reached number one of the objects she had set in the day's programme. It was a pre-historic cromlech— [58]
three gigantic stones reared in the form of a table by those old inhabitants of our island whose customs and modes of worship are lost in the mists of antiquity. The storms and snows of many thousand years sweeping round it had slightly displaced the cap stone, but it stood otherwise intact, a grey, hoary monument to the toil of the short, dark neolithic race who once hunted on these self-same fells. The girls crowded round the cromlech curiously. It was large enough for four of them to sit underneath, and several crammed in as an experiment.

"Was it an altar?" asked Stuart.

"The altar theory is exploded now," said Miss Todd. "It is generally recognized that they were burial-places of great chiefs. The body would be placed inside, with stone weapons and drinking-cups, and any other articles the man had loved when he was alive. Then a great heap of stones and earth would be piled over and round it, to keep out the wolves which were the terror of early man. The weather, and perhaps farmers, have taken away the mound, and laid bare the cromlech; but look! here is one that is almost in its natural position."

The girls turned, and saw close by a rocky mound that jutted from among the crags. In its side was a small opening, just large enough to squeeze through. Miss Todd had brought candle and matches, and personally conducted relays of girls into the chamber within. They went curiously or timorously as the case might be.

"Is there a skeleton inside? I don't know whether I *dare*," shivered Tattie. "It's like going into a [59]
grave, and I'm scared to death."

"Don't be silly!" said Geraldine, who, with Loveday and Hilary, was making her exit. "There's nothing inside it. It's only like a cave."

"You're sure bogeys won't catch my legs?"

"Stop outside, if you're afraid."

"It's like a fairy-tale, and going into the gnome's hill," fluttered Magsie.

Everybody was determined to have a peep, and even Tattie mustered up sufficient courage to screw through the narrow portal, though she squealed in the process, and clung tightly to Magsie's hand. Diana and Wendy were among the last to effect the investigation. By that time the piece of candle was guttering out, and Miss Todd, tired of acting show-woman, returned to the open air, and gave marching orders.

Diana and Wendy, rather fascinated with the "Goblin Hole", as they called it, lingered, poking their noses inside the entrance.

"I didn't go in," said a voice behind them. Turning, they saw Sadie's face, interested, and half-regretful.

"Then you've lost your luck," said Diana decisively. "If you go in and turn round three times inside, you can have a wish, and it's bound to come true. You'd better do it. You've just time."

"In the dark?" hesitated Sadie.

"Quick! Go on!" urged her companions, standing back to make way for her. "Here are the matches." [60]

Sadie struck a match, and cautiously ventured forward. The moment she was well inside Diana motioned to Wendy, and, catching up a piece of wood that lay on the ground, tilted it like a door across the entrance, and piled some stones against it. Then the pair fled. They heard an agonized shriek behind them, but they turned deaf ears to it.

They were half-way down the heathery hill-side when a very ruffled and indignant Sadie overtook them.

"Hallo! I thought you'd gone to live with the goblins," exclaimed Diana cheerfully.

"You're a pair of BEASTS!" exploded Sadie.

"Don't mench! What kind of beasts, please? Young gazelles or kittens?"

"Pigs would be more like it!" snapped Sadie. "To think of shutting me up alone in that bogey-hole! I might have lost my reason."

"Didn't fancy you'd go stark staring mad as fast as all that," chuckled Diana. "It didn't take you very long to push that door down."

"If we see any symptoms of insanity cropping out in you, we'll know the reason," added Wendy smartly.

"And you see it's been very good for you to know what it feels like to be left behind," rubbed in Diana. "You never told us about that gipsy trail dodge. Tit for tat's my motto."

"I think you're the two horridest girls in the school! I sha'n't speak to you again. You may consider yourselves funny, but no one else does," said Sadie witheringly, as she flounced away to hang on to Geraldine's arm, and pour her woes into the head girl's not too willing ear. [61]

It was a good hour's walk from the cromlechs to Birk Water, the lake where they intended to pick the rushes. The path was the merest track, and the tramp through the heather and over rough and rugged stones well justified the thick footgear upon which Miss Todd had insisted. Birk Water was a lovely little mountain tarn lying under the shadow of Fox Fell, a smooth, grassy eminence down which hurried a noisy stream. They found a sheltered place in the sunshine on the bank, and sat down to eat their lunch. Hard-boiled eggs and cheese sandwiches tasted delicious in the open air, and for a special treat there was an apple apiece. In normal times the supply of apples was liberal, but this year the crop had failed, and they were rare dainties.

"I sympathize with Eve," said Wendy, munching blissfully. "It must have been a very great temptation, especially with 'knowledge' thrown in. Just think of being able to eat an apple that would teach you all your dates and French verbs."

"There weren't any dates then, unless they counted the geological periods; and the Tower of Babel came later, so the French language wasn't invented," objected Tattie.

"Oh! don't be so literal-minded. I never meant that Eve sat at a desk and wrote exercises. I'm only telling you I like apples." [62]

"Well, so do I, and yours is a bigger one than mine."

"It won't be long, don't you worry yourself. It's getting 'small by degrees and beautifully less'."

The slopes of the hill were slightly marshy, and grew a crop of remarkably tall and fine rushes. They were much easier to gather than those on the borders of the lake. The girls had brought knives, and, when lunch had vanished to the last crumb, they dispersed up the hill-side to reap their rush harvest.

"If they're not all wanted for the church, I vote we ask Miss Todd to let us put some down on the schoolroom floor," said Diana, hacking away cheerfully. "I'd just admire to know what they feel like under one's feet. It would take one back about five centuries."

"Spiffing! We'll ask her! Get as many as you can carry, and tell the others. They'd be far more interesting than linoleum. Think of being able to swish one's toes about in them. I hope the church won't want too many."

"It oughtn't to claim more than its tithe. I suppose it's entitled to a tenth of every harvest, if we stick strictly to the old customs," smiled Loveday, whose arms were already filled with a sheaf of green and orange.

On the open side of the fell the wind blew strongly, and it was a struggle to toil upwards. The school tacked instead towards the sheltered bank of the stream, and with one accord broke into Scotch songs. Geraldine, in a full contralto, was singing "Green grow the rashes, O". Betty Blane's chirpy voice proclaimed "I'm ower young to marry yet",—a self-evident proposition, as she was only thirteen. Stuart and Loveday were crooning "Flowers of the Forest" as a kind of soprano dirge, which was drowned by a chorus of juniors roaring "Auld Lang Syne". [63]

"We twa hae paidled i' the burn

Frae mornin' sun till dine",

chanted Diana after them. "And that's just what I want to do. I've never had a chance yet to 'paidle' in a British burn."

"You won't to-day, then," said Geraldine, who chanced to overhear, and stopped her singing to interpolate a remark. "Shoes and stockings aren't allowed off, except in the summer term."

"Green grow the rashes, O!
Green grow the rashes, O!
The sweetest hours that e'er I spent
Were spent among the lassies, O!"

Diana stood frowning as Geraldine passed along, carolling at the pitch of her voice.

"What nonsense!" she growled. "Who made such a silly old rule? I'm not going to keep it."

"It's quite as warm to-day as it sometimes is in summer," agreed Wendy.

"I believe it's only 'swank' on Geraldine's part, because she's head prefect. I *shall* paddle! Just because she said I mustn't. Come on, Wendy! Let's scoot into this hollow and enjoy ourselves. Geraldine makes me feel real bad when she bosses. I want to go and break all the rules I can." [64]

[65]

CHAPTER V

Diana Dares

If Diana—a modern Eve—hankered after the apples of new experiences, Wendy succumbed to her persuasions as readily as Adam. The little purling brook was attractive, mistresses and prefects were safely out of sight, and schoolmates, if they chanced to appear on the scene, might be bribed not to blab. In a twinkling laces were unfastened, and two stout pairs of boots stowed away among the stones, each with its stocking tucked inside; while two pairs of bare feet went splashing joyously into the brook. It was fun paddling in the little pools and scrambling over the rocks, waving a foot occasionally into a foaming fall, and dancing out on to the grass when the water grew too cold to be endured any longer. They wandered for some distance up the hill-side, supremely happy, though taking care not to allow their exuberant spirits to overflow into song. So far not a soul seemed to have noticed them—they were enjoying the sweets of undiscovered crime. Suddenly through the clear autumnal air rang out the shrill, bubbling call of the regimental whistle with which Miss Todd was wont, on country walks, to collect her scattered flock. The two sinners jumped so uneasily that Wendy slipped from a stone and splashed into a pool, with rather disastrous consequences to her skirt. [66]

"We'd best go back and find our boots," she said, hurriedly wringing the water from the brown tweed.

They had not realized how far they had roamed up the stream, and the length of the way back surprised them. It is not an easy matter to hurry over slippery stones, though they made what speed they could, urged by another summons from the whistle.

"I think this was the place," declared Diana, at last arriving at landmarks that seemed familiar. "I left mine just over there."

Both girls sought their hiding-places, but, to their utter dismay, the boots were missing. They searched about here, there, and everywhere, but not so much as the tab of a lace could be found. Meanwhile the whistle sounded impatient blasts.

"What *are* we to do?" flustered Wendy. "Toddlekins will be furious if we don't go; and yet how *can* we go without our boots?"

"We must have mistaken the place," gasped Diana. "Perhaps it was farther down."

"No, no! I'm certain it was just here."

"Well, we're in a pretty fix, at any rate."

"T-r-r-r-r-ee-ee!" came again from the fell side. To disobey the summons deliberately was open mutiny. An agitated voice on the bank called to them. [67]

"Wendy and Diana, can't you hear the whistle? Come this instant!"

It was Stuart Hamilton, who stood beckoning violently.

"We've lost our boots," wailed Wendy.

"Then come without them. Miss Todd has sent me to find you. Hurry up!"

It was a scratchy and painful performance to hurry through heather and over sharp stones to the spot where the school was assembled. Miss Todd stood staring at them as they approached, with

her "report yourself in my study" expression. They felt their bare legs and feet most embarrassingly conspicuous, and wished that fickle fashion had clothed them in longer skirts.

"What is the meaning of this?" asked the Principal, eyeing their uncovered extremities severely.

"We've—we've—lost our boots," stammered Diana, speaking for both.

"And why were your boots taken off? You were aware of the rule, for I happen to know that you had just been reminded of it." (Here Wendy fixed a reproachful gaze on Geraldine, who coloured slightly.) "You've deliberately disobeyed orders, and you will be confined to 'bounds' for a fortnight. It's absolutely essential in our country rambles that discipline should be kept up, and any girl who breaks rules will stay at home next time. You deserve to walk back with bare feet, [68] but Miss Beverley will give you your boots. Put them on at once!"

It was horrible to have to sit down upon the heather and pull on stockings and boots under the critical supervision of twenty-two pairs of eyes. Diana's lace broke, and Wendy's fingers seemed all thumbs. Miss Todd superintended till the last knot had been awkwardly tied, then she gave the signal for marching. Considerably crestfallen, the delinquents dropped towards the rear.

"Did Geraldine sneak?" whispered Wendy to Violet.

"No, it wasn't exactly her fault—it was Spot really. He routed out the boots, and began barking and worrying them, and Miss Beverley rushed up to see what he'd got—she thought he'd caught an otter or a water-rat. When she saw it was boots—well——"

"She knew she'd caught us," finished Diana.

"She took the boots straight to Miss Todd, and Toddlekins blew her whistle and counted us over like sheep to find who was missing. Then she asked who'd seen you last, and if anyone had given you leave to wade. She dragged it all out of Geraldine. I don't think Gerry would have told on her own."

"Spot!" said Diana, turning reproachful eyes on that panting specimen of the canine race. "I used to think you a dinky little dog, but I'm out of friends with you now. It's a real mean trick you've [69] played us. Oh! you needn't come jumping up on me and licking my hand. What possessed you to unearth those boots? 'Bounds' for a whole fortnight! And I wanted to go to Glenbury on Wednesday. It's too disgusting for words! Vi, d'you think if I looked an absolute hallowed saint all Sunday, and Monday, and Tuesday, Miss Todd would let me go to Glenbury? My name's down for the exeat, you know."

Violet regarded Diana for a moment or two as if making mental calculations.

"You couldn't do it," she decided at last. "You couldn't look the least tiny, weeny atom like a saint if you tried till doomsday. Saints ought to be thin and wan, with straight noses and fair hair parted in the middle. You're rosy and substantial, and your nose isn't straight, and your hair's too brown, and as for your eyes—they've a wicked twinkle in them the whole time. No, my good girl, whatever else you may do, you won't succeed in looking saintly."

"Well, I guess I've got some bounce in me, certainly," agreed Diana. "But I thought perhaps if I went about on tiptoe and whispered, and"—hopefully—"I could keep my eyes half-shut, couldn't I?"

Violet shook her head decisively.

"That twinkle would ooze out of the smallest chink, and besides, even if you managed to look a saint, that wouldn't influence Toddlekins. You don't know her yet. Once she says a thing she [70] sticks to it like glue. *She* calls it necessary firmness in a mistress, and *we* call it a strain of obstinacy in her disposition. In the old days we could get round Mrs. Gifford, but now Toddlekins rules the show, you may as well make up your mind to things and have done with it. What she says is kismet."

"Why do you want to go to Glenbury?" asked Jess.

"Oh! just a reason of my own," evaded Diana.

"You'll very likely get an exeat the week after," consoled Violet.

"It would be no use to me then," said Diana dismally.

The procession of rush-bearers, each carrying a good-sized sheaf in her arms, wound down the hill-side to go back to Pendlemere by a different route. This was a wild track over the moors, past the old slate-quarry, where rusty bits of machinery and piles of broken slates were lying about, then over the ridge and down by Wethersted Tarn to the gorge where the river took its rise. Here a stream of considerable force thundered along between high walls of rock. It was a picturesque spot; rowan-trees hung from clefts in the crags, their bright berries rivalling the scarlet of the hips and haws; green fronds of fern bent at the water's edge, and brilliant carpets of moss clothed the boulders. At one point a great tree-trunk, a giant of the fells, rotten through many years of braving the strong west wind, had fallen and lay across the torrent. It stretched from [71] bank to bank like a rough kind of natural bridge, with the stream roaring and foaming only six feet below. The girls scrambled over its upturned roots, and stood looking at the straight trunk and withered branches that lay stretched before them.

"Shouldn't care to venture across there," said Loveday with a shiver.

"It looks particularly slippery and horrid," agreed Geraldine.

"The water must be so very deep down there," said Hilary.

"I don't believe there's one of us who'd go across for a five-pound-note," said Ida. "What offers? Don't all speak at once!"

The girls smiled, and were turning away to follow Miss Todd, when Geraldine stopped and held up a finger.

"What's that noise?" she asked.

"I don't hear anything but the stream," said Ida doubtfully.

"I do, though," said Diana, who with Wendy and Vi had joined the seniors. "It sounds like somebody whimpering."

"I'm going down the bank to see."

The others followed Geraldine, and swung themselves down to the water level. Sitting under the arch formed by the roots of the tree was a small boy of about seven, rubbing two swimming eyes with two grimy little fists and sobbing lustily.

"Hallo! What's the matter here?" said Geraldine briskly. "Where do you come from, and why don't you go home? Are you lost?" [72]

At the mention of "home" the little fellow's tears redoubled, and the whimper rose to a roar. Ida sat down on the rock beside him, and tried to comfort him. It was a difficult process to get any coherent or sensible replies to her questions, but after considerable coaxing, and a last piece of chocolate which Wendy fortunately fished from her pocket, she managed to wring from him that his name was Harry, that he lived at a farm on the other side of the torrent, that he had come down to the river with several other boys, and that they had dared him to cross by the fallen tree. Once over, he was too frightened to go back, and, after waiting and calling to him for some time, the other boys had run away. How was he going to get home?

The situation was difficult, for there was no bridge across the river for many miles. Unless the child could go back the way he had come, it was a problem what was to be done.

"You were a silly boy ever to try to cross," said Geraldine sententiously.

"They said I durstn't!" sobbed the small sinner.

"Oh, don't scold him!" pleaded Diana. "I do know so exactly how he felt. I've often been dared to do things myself, and done them, though I shivered."

"Well, you'd surely never do such a silly thing as cross that tree?"

"Wouldn't I? I believe I'm going to do it now." [73]

"Diana!"

"He's got to get home somehow. Look here, Harry!"—Diana knelt on the pebbles, and put her arm round the little blue-jerseyed figure—"suppose I were to go too, would you dare to cross again? We'd both crawl on our hands and knees."

The sobs stopped, while Harry took a swift survey of her face. Apparently he found it satisfactory.

"If you'll go first," he stammered.

"Then come along—we've no time to waste," said Diana, springing up and giving him her hand.

"Diana! You surely don't mean——" began Geraldine in eager remonstrance.

"Yes, I do!" interrupted Diana. "I've done worse things before, and I'm not scared. Come on, Harry! We'll have you home in forty cracks."

The girls did not attempt to interfere. They stood and watched while Diana hauled the little boy up the bank. Perhaps each secretly wished she were capable of such a piece of pluck. Though the tree was tall enough to span the stream, its bole seemed very narrow to form a bridge, and the rounded surface made it all the more slippery; the few branches here and there were of little help. Diana hoisted up her protégé, then going in front of him began to crawl across on her hands and knees, speaking to him all the time, so as to encourage him to follow her. Beneath them the [74] water foamed and roared over the rocks: to slip would mean to be whirled into the depths of a dark pool below. It was a slow progress, but inch by inch they crept along till the most dangerous part was passed, and they had reached comparative safety. The girls cheered when at last Diana scrambled to her feet and lifted Harry on to dry ground. A path led up the side of the gorge, and along this he set off at full speed for home. His preserver stood looking after him for a minute or two, and then she turned to re-cross her perilous bridge. Six hands were stretched out to help her as she completed the venturesome journey.

"You're a trump, Di!"

"*I* daren't have done it!"

"You've been a guardian angel to that child!"

"Was it *very* awful?"

"I can't think how you managed it!"

"I nearly screamed when you reached the middle!"

"It felt worse coming back than going," said Diana, brushing her skirt, which had suffered considerably. "Somehow I minded it more. Well, it's over now! We'd better be getting on, hadn't we?"

"Yes, indeed; the others will think we're lost," agreed Geraldine.

The t-r-r-ee-ee of the whistle was sounding from the far distance, so the girls made a spurt and hurried along to catch up the rest of the party. Geraldine, in virtue of her office as head prefect, [75] briefly explained to Miss Todd the cause of the delay.

"I shouldn't have let you do it, Diana, if I had been there," said the Principal. "But I've no doubt the little boy's mother is blessing you. We should have had to take him to Pendlemere with us, and have sent somebody from the village to take him home. There would have been no other way. Remember, though, that I'm responsible for you to your parents, and I really can't allow these harum-scarum tricks. Suppose there had been an accident!"

"Dad knows me, and he wouldn't have blamed you," said Diana cheerily. "He says I'm like a cat with nine lives, or a bad halfpenny that always turns up again. I've done worse things than this."

"Then you won't do them while you're at this school," returned Miss Todd firmly, motioning her to walk along in front with Geraldine.

On Monday afternoon, with the aid of some ribbons, the girls made their rushes into pretty little sheaves. They plaited bands for them, and twisted them securely. Miss Todd, much interested, superintended their operations.

"You may pick some flowers from the garden to-morrow, and put garlands round them," she suggested. "We're reviving a most ancient custom that dates back to the early days of Christianity in Britain. Pope Gregory IV recommended that on the anniversaries of the dedication of churches wrested from the Pagans, the converts should build themselves huts with the boughs [76] of trees round their churches, and celebrate the day with feasting. The rush-bearing is probably the last relic of that ancient ceremony. At one time there was always a village feast in connection with it, though it degenerated at last into a sort of rustic saturnalia, and had to be suppressed."

"Old customs are very interesting," said Diana, staring at the Principal with wide-open, steady

eyes.

"I'm glad you find them so."

"It's nice to see them *all* kept up. If we have the rush-bearing to-morrow, oughtn't we—just to revive an old ceremony—to have the feast as well?"

A rustle passed over the school at Diana's temerity. Miss Todd returned the steady gaze, then the corners of her mouth twitched.

"You've stated the case very accurately. As a matter of fact, I have ordered seed-cake and scones, and have invited the Vicarage people to tea."

[77]

CHAPTER VI

French Leave

The sheaves of rushes were duly carried into the church, and stacked artistically in the deep window-sills, where they gave somewhat the effect of a harvest festival. The girls were eager to lay bundles of them in the particular pews occupied by the school, but the verger, who looked askance at the whole business, and whose wife was hovering about with a broom to sweep up bits, vetoed the suggestion so emphatically that the Vicar, wavering with a strong balance towards ancient custom, hastily and regretfully decided in the negative. Neither would Miss Todd allow them to be strewn upon the schoolroom floor, although Diana ventured to suggest the advisability of practical study of mediæval methods.

"There are some things best left to imagination," replied the Principal dryly. "For instance, there would be no need to dispense with forks, and let you hold mutton bones with your fingers at dinner, in order to demonstrate fourteenth-century manners, nor to bleed you every time you had a toothache, to test ancient practices of medicine. If you're so very anxious to skip a few hundred [78] years, I have, in an old Herbal, a prescription to cure 'swimming in ye heade and such like phantasies'. It consists mainly of pounded snail-shells, mixed with boiled tansy and snippings from the hair of an unbaptized infant born between Easter and Michaelmas. Any one who wishes has my permission to try it."

"No, thank you!" said Diana, screwing up her mouth. "Unless," she added hopefully, "I might go out and gather the tansy. We saw some growing on the way to Fox Fell."

"There's a fine clump at the bottom of the garden, so you needn't go out of bounds to get it," replied Miss Todd, glancing at her pupil with eyes that clearly saw through all subterfuges.

The Principal was determined that Diana and Wendy, having deliberately broken a rule, should suffer the just consequences, and she did not intend to remit one jot or tittle of the punishment she had inflicted. "Bounds" at Pendlemere were sufficiently extensive to allow ample exercise, and any farther excursions must be deferred till the end of the appointed fortnight.

Diana, looking at the exeat list which hung in the hall, shook her head at sight of her own name scored through with a blue pencil.

"Just to think that removing my boots and stockings for ten short minutes should have cut me off from going to Glenbury," she philosophized. "I was only 'laving my feet', as the poets say. Nymphs always did it in classical times. Indeed, I don't suppose they ever had boots and [79] stockings to take off, so they could paddle as they pleased."

"They had a warmer climate in Greece," sniffed Wendy, who had a bad cold in her head as the result of her paddling; "and I suppose they were accustomed to it. If there is anything you want particularly in Glenbury, Magsie's going, and I expect she'd get it for you."

"I don't know whether she could."

"What is it you want?"

Diana hesitated, then whispered in Wendy's ear:

"Three packets of Turkish cigarettes."

"O-o-o-oh!"

Wendy's eyes were wide. Diana nodded determinedly.

"But what do you want them for?"

"That's my own business."

"You surely don't *smoke*!"—in a horrified voice.

"I don't want them for myself—I'll tell you that much."

"For whom are they, then?"

"I shan't tell you!"

"Magsie would never dare to bolt into a tobacconist's and buy cigarettes."

"I was afraid she wouldn't," said Diana sadly.

"And you'd better be careful yourself if you go to Glenbury next exeat day. Toddlekins would draw the line at cigarettes. You wouldn't like to get expelled?"

"I don't know that I'd very much care," sighed Diana. [80]

She revenged herself for her enforced seclusion by clumping noisily about the passages, till Miss Todd, hearing the racket, dropped a significant hint as to the necessity of compulsory felt slippers for girls who had not learnt to walk lightly. So, fearing that the Principal might really carry out this threat, Diana betook herself to the garden, and expended her superfluous energy on a fast and furious set of tennis. Having lost three balls, she left Vi and Peggy to look for them, and, still in a thoroughly bad temper, strolled round the corner of the house. On the front drive she saw a sight that set her running. Exactly opposite the door stood the car of her cousin, Mrs. Burritt. It was empty, but the chauffeur, at the top of the steps, was in the very act of handing two envelopes to the housemaid.

"Anything for me, Thompson?" cried Diana eagerly.

"Yes, miss. Letter for you, and one for Miss Todd," replied the man, touching his cap.

Diana seized hers from Edith, the maid, devoured its contents, and clapped her hands.

"I'll be ready in five minutes, Thompson!" she exclaimed, and fled indoors.

Half-way down the corridor she nearly ran into Miss Todd, emerging from her study with an open letter in her hand.

"Where are you going, Diana?"

"Cousin Cora's asked me for the night! She's sent the car for me. My cousin Lenox is there on leave!" panted Diana. [81]

"So I understand from Mrs. Burritt's letter, but I certainly cannot allow you to go."

"Not go?"

Diana's face was a study.

"I had no authority from your father and mother to allow you to accept invitations."

"But I *know* they'd let me! Oh, Miss Todd, I simply *must*!"

"That's for me to decide, Diana, not you, and I say 'no'."

Mistress and pupil looked at each other squarely. Miss Todd's mouth was set in a firm line. Evidently she considered that she was fighting a campaign against Diana, and she meant to carry this outpost. Diana had the sense to realize her defeat. She drooped her lashes over her eyes.

"May I send a note to Cousin Cora?" she asked in a strangled voice.

"You can if you wish, and I'll write to her myself, and explain that it is against our rules."

Murmuring something that sounded dangerously like "Strafe rules!" Diana darted upstairs for blotting-pad and fountain-pen. She frowned hard while she scribbled, thumped the envelope as she closed it, then ran down to give it into the personal charge of the chauffeur. She would have added some comments for his benefit, had Miss Hampson not been standing upon the doorstep.

"You're not coming, miss?" enquired Thompson civilly, but with evident astonishment. [82]

"*No!*" grunted Diana, turning indoors and clumping down the hall past Miss Todd's study with footsteps heavy enough to justify the demand for felt slippers.

She was too angry at the moment to mind what happened, and the Principal, who was wise in her generation, allowed her to stamp by unchallenged.

At tea-time, at preparation, at evening recreation, and at supper Diana sat with a thunder-cloud on her face. When she went to bed it burst. She squatted in a limp heap on the floor and raged at fate.

"I'm sorry, but you're really making a most fearful fuss!" said Loveday, whose sympathy and sense of fitness were playing see-saw. "It's one of the rules of the school that we don't go away for odd holidays. We may have Friday to Monday at half-term, but even Mrs. Gifford never let anyone off in the middle of the week to stay a night. You're only served the same as everybody else. Why can't you take it sporting?"

"You don't understand!" wailed Diana, mopping her moist cheeks.

"Do get up from the floor, at any rate. It looks so weak to be huddled up like a bundle of rags. You haven't brushed your hair yet. Don't be a slacker, Diana!"

Thus morally prodded, Diana rose dejectedly, put on her bedroom slippers, and took the hair-

brush which her room-mate handed. She did not like to be called a slacker, particularly by Loveday. The atmosphere was not altogether harmonious: she felt as if their thoughts were running round in circles, and had not yet met at a mutual angle of comprehension. [83]

"Loveday doesn't understand me—she thinks me a spoilt cry-baby!" she kept repeating to herself, and the mere fact of realizing that attitude in her companion prevented her from trying to explain the situation. Hair-brush drill proceeded in dead silence, only broken by an occasional gasping sigh from Diana, which echoed through the room about as cheerfully as a funeral dirge. Loveday stared at her once or twice as if about to make a remark, but changed her mind; she dawdled about the room, opening drawers and rearranging her possessions. When at last she was ready to put out the light she paused, and turned to the other cubicle. Diana lay quietly with her nose buried in the pillow. Loveday bent over her and dropped a butterfly kiss on the inch of cheek visible.

"Poor old sport! Was I rather a beast?" she said; then, hearing Miss Beverley's patrol step in the passage, she dabbed the extinguisher on the candle and hopped hastily into bed.

All night long Loveday had uneasy and troubled dreams about Diana. They met and parted, and quarrelled and made it up; they did ridiculous and impossible things, such as crawling through tubes or walking on roofs; they were pursued by bulls, or they floated on rivers; yet always they were together, and Loveday, with a feeling of compunction and no sense at all of the ridiculous, was trying with a sponge to mop up Diana's overflowing rivers of tears that were running down and making pools on a clean table-cloth. She awoke with a start, feeling almost as if the sheets were damp. Stealthy sounds came from the next cubicle, and the candle was lighted there. [84]

"What's the matter, Diana?"

"S-h-s-h!"

"Aren't you well?"

"Yes, I'm all right."

"What is it, then?"

As a grunt was the only answer, Loveday got up and drew aside the curtains. Her room-mate was ready dressed, and was in process of combing her light-brown locks and fixing in a slide.

"What the dickens are you up to, child?" ejaculated Loveday in amazement.

Diana turned quickly, pulled Loveday down on to the bed, flung an arm round her, and laid a fluffy head on her shoulder.

"Oh, *do* be a sport!" she implored.

"But what do you want to do?"

"Look here—it's like this! I'm such a duffer at explaining, or I'd have told you last night. My cousin, Lenox Clifford, has come over to England with the American contingent. He has just thirty-six hours' leave, and he rushed over to Petteridge to see the Burritts. Lenox and I were brought up together; I've stayed whole months with them when Uncle Carr had a ranch in New Mexico. It was Lenox who taught me to ride, and to fish, and to row, and to skate. There's no one in the world so clever as Lenox! It's his birthday to-day. It was for him I wanted to get those cigarettes—I thought he'd like them in camp. I couldn't think of anything else to send him that he could pack among his kit. Well, he's going off this week to the front, and, as likely as not, he'll be killed right away, and I'll never see him in this world again. It makes me crazy to think of it. He's only ten miles away, and I mayn't even say good-bye to him. Lenox, who's called me his 'little indispensable' ever since I was four! If he was killed, and I hadn't had one last word with him, I'd break my heart. Yes, I would! You English girls are so cold—you laugh at me because I feel red-hot about things." [85]

"We're not cold really. I didn't understand," said Loveday. "You never told me all this about your cousin. Does Miss Todd know he's just off for the front?"

"Cousin Coralie said so in her letter. That's what made me so furious. I wouldn't have asked to go to Petteridge just for the sake of a holiday; but when it's a case of seeing Lenox, perhaps for the last time, I'm desperate. Rules are cruel things!"

"I do think Miss Todd might have made a special exception," said Loveday, hugging the agitated little figure that clung to her. "I'm sure Mrs. Gifford would have let you go. It's because Miss Todd is new, and also because, when once she's said a thing, she sticks to it. You were kept to 'bounds'." [86]

"I know. But, Loveday, I'm going to break them this morning. I must say good-bye to Lenox whatever happens. I'm going to cycle over to Petteridge—now don't talk, for I've planned it all out. I can climb down the ivy, and I left Wendy's bicycle outside last night on purpose. I shall be back by half-past seven."

The audacity of the proposal nearly took Loveday's breath away.

"But—but——" she remonstrated.

"No buts," said Diana, getting up and putting on her tam-o'-shanter.

"But, you silly child, you'll never do it in the time, and they won't be up when you get to Petteridge."

"Won't they? I rather guess they will! I told Cousin Cora I was coming to breakfast at six o'clock, and they must send me back in the car, bicycle and all."

"Did you put that in the letter you sent by the chauffeur?"

"Yes. Miss Todd didn't ask to read it. I reckon they'll have a nice little meal waiting. If I can manage to slip in here before the gong sounds for prayers, nobody need know a word about it except you, Loveday, and I trust you not to tell."

"It's frightfully against my conscience," faltered Loveday doubtfully. [87]

"Oh! Suppose you had a brother or a cousin of your own who was going out to the front, wouldn't you want to say just one word of good-bye? Especially when you hadn't seen him for a year! It isn't as if I were doing anything that Father and Mother would be angry about. And Cousin Cora will send me back in the car."

"It really is red-tape of Miss Todd," murmured Loveday yieldingly.

"Then you'll promise? Oh, good! What a sport you are! Help me on with my coat. No, I don't need a scarf—it's quite warm. I must take my watch, though."

The girls drew aside the curtains and looked out of the window. It was only about half-past four; the stars were shining, and there was a thin, horned moon hanging in the east, its radiant rim turned towards the spot where the day would break. No hint of dawn was yet in the air, though curlews were calling from the meadows by the lake. Bushes and garden paths were plainly distinguished in the starlight.

"It'll be light soon," said Diana, "and, at any rate, I can see quite well enough to ride. I shall just enjoy spinning along."

"Be careful going down hills," urged Loveday. "By the by, you're on the early practising-list this morning—had you forgotten?"

"Oh, kafoozalum! So I am! Suppose Bunty comes to see why the piano's silent? Well, I can't help it! I'm going! Do the best you can for me, won't you?" [88]

The close ivy which grew up the side of the house had stems as thick as tent-posts. Diana let herself down over the sill, found a footing, and descended hand over hand with the agility of a middy. Wendy's bicycle was leaning against the wall at the bottom. She took it, and waved good-bye to Loveday, then walked along the side-path that led to the gate. A minute later she was free-wheeling down the hill that led through the village in the direction of Petteridge Court. Loveday, shaking her head, went back to bed.

"I'm thankful I'm not a prefect, or I should have felt bound to stop her," she reflected. "If I'd had a brother or a cousin whom I hadn't seen for a year, and who was just off to the front, I declare I'd have done it myself. I don't blame her! But there'll be a row if Bunty doesn't hear her scales going."

Exactly at a quarter to eight o'clock a Daimler car whisked through the village, and stopped by the gate of Pendlemere Abbey. A small figure hopped from it, and the chauffeur handed out a bicycle, then drove away at full speed. Girl and bicycle crept through the laurels to the side door, whence the former fled upstairs like a whirlwind. From the intermediates' room came the strains of the Beethoven sonata with which Loveday was at present wrestling. Diana, wrenching off coat and hat in her bedroom, paused to listen.

"Bless her!" she muttered. "She's actually gone and taken my place! What an absolute trump she is!" [89]

It was not until morning school was over that the confederates had the slightest chance to compare notes.

"Well, did you see him?" asked Loveday, when at last they met in their bedroom to brush their hair for dinner.

Diana's eyes filled with tears.

"Yes, and Cousin Cora said she was glad I came. She lost her own boy, you know—he went out with the American Red Cross, and was killed when a Zepp. bombed the hospital. That's two years ago now. I wouldn't have missed saying good-bye to Lenox for worlds. I'd quite a nice ride to Petteridge. It got light directly, and the hills looked beautiful in the dawn. Loveday, you did my practising for me!"

"Not exactly *for* you! I took your half-hour, and you must take mine instead, from half-past four till tea-time."

"Right-o! But did Bunty come in?"

"Yes; and I told her I wanted to go out with Nesta this afternoon. So I do."

"You don't think anybody suspects?"

"Not a soul!"

Diana came close, and laid a hand on her room-mate's arm.

"Loveday, I'll never forget what you've done for me to-day—*never*! If I ever get the chance to do [90]
anything for you in return, you bet I'll do it, no matter *what* it costs me! You've been a real mascot. There isn't a girl in the school who'd have played up better, certainly not among the seniors. I do think you're just ripping! Did Bunty look *very* surprised to see you at the piano?"

"She did, rather; but I asked her if Nesta and I might have an exeat this afternoon to go to the Vicarage. Mrs. Fleming gave us an open invitation, you know, to come and see her sketches."

"What a brain! You really are too lovely!" chuckled Diana.

[91]

CHAPTER VII

Land Girls

With the bond of such a secret between them, Diana and Loveday cemented a firm friendship. To be sure, Loveday's conscience, which was of a very exacting and inquisitorial description, sometimes gave her unpleasant twinges like a species of moral toothache; but then the other self which also talked inside her would plead that it was only sporting to screen a schoolfellow, and that no one but a sneak could have done otherwise. She sincerely hoped that Diana had escaped notice both going and returning, and that no busybody from the village would bring a report to Miss Todd. If the matter were to leak out, both girls would get into serious trouble—Diana for running away, and her room-mate for aiding and abetting her escapade. That she was really in some danger on her account gave Loveday an added interest in Diana. She began to be very fond of her. The little American had a most lovable side for certain people, on whom she bestowed the warmth of her affection, though she could be a pixie to those who did not happen to please her. [92]
With the seniors in general she was no favourite. She had more than one skirmish with the prefects, and was commonly regarded as a firebrand, ready at any moment to set alight the flame of insurrection among turbulent intermediates and juniors.

"Diana's at the bottom of any mischief that's going!" proclaimed Geraldine one day, after a battle royal over an absurd dispute about the tennis-court.

"And the worst of it is, she makes Wendy just as bad!" agreed Hilary warmly.

"Wendy wasn't exactly a saint before Diana came," put in Loveday.

"Oh, you always stand up for Diana! I can't think what you see in her—a cheeky little monkey, I call her!" Geraldine was still ruffled.

"She has her points, though."

"She'll get jolly well sat upon, if she doesn't take care," muttered Geraldine, who held exalted notions as to the dignity of prefects.

It was at the beginning of the second week in October that Miss Todd, in whose brain ambitious projects of education for the production of the "super-girl" had been fermenting, announced the first of her radical changes. She had not undertaken it without much consultation with parents, and many letters had passed backwards and forwards on the subject. Most, however, had agreed with her views, and it had been decided that at any rate the experiment was to be tried. Pendlemere, which so far had concentrated entirely on the Senior Oxford Curriculum and [93]
accomplishments, was to add an agricultural side to its course. There was to be a lady teacher, fresh from the Birchgate Horticultural College, who would start poultry-keeping and bee-keeping on the latest scientific principles, and would plant the garden with crops of vegetables. She could have a few land workers to assist her, and the girls, in relays, could study her methods. Miss Todd, who in choosing a career had hesitated between teaching and horticulture, snatched at the opportunity of combining the two. She was bubbling over with enthusiasm. In imagination she saw Pendlemere a flourishing Garden Colony, setting an educational example to the rest of the scholastic world. Her girls, trained in both the scientific and practical side of agriculture in addition to their ordinary curriculum, would be turned out equipped for all contingencies, either of emigration, or a better Britain. She considered their health would profit largely. She explained her views to them in detail, painting rose-coloured pictures of the delights in store for them in the spring and summer. The girls, very much thrilled at the prospect, dispersed to talk it over.

"Is Pendlemere to be a sort of farm, then?" asked Wendy.

"Looks like it, if we're to keep hens and bees, and grow all our own vegetables! Bags me help with the chickens. I love them when they're all yellow, like canaries. Toddlekins hinted something [94]
about launching out into a horse if things prospered."

"A horse! Goody, what fun!" exulted Diana. "I just *adore* horses! Bags me help with stable-work, then. I'd groom it instead of learning my geography or practising scales. I say, I call this a ripping

idea!"

"Don't congratulate yourself too soon," qualified Magsie. "You'll probably find the geography and the scales are tucked in somehow. All the same, I think it sounds rather sporty."

"It will be a change, at any rate, and we'll feel we're marching with the times."

"When does the 'back-to-the-land' teacher come?"

"On Friday, I believe."

Miss Chadwick, the graduate of Birchgate Horticultural College, who was to run the new experiment, arrived at the end of the week, and brought two students as her assistants. They were a fresh, jolly-looking trio, with faces rosy from open-air work, and serviceable hands which caused a considerable flutter among those of the school who went in for manicure. At tea-time they talked gaily of onion-beds, intensive culture, irrigation, proteids, white Wyandottes, trap-nests, insecticides, sugar-beets, and bacteria. Miss Todd, keenly interested, joined in the conversation with the zeal of a neophyte; Miss Beverley, the nature-study side of whose education had been neglected, and who scarcely knew a caterpillar from an earthworm, followed with the uneasy air of one who is out of her depth; the school, eating their bread-and-butter and [95] blackberry jam, sat and listened to the talk at the top end of the table.

"It sounds rather brainy," commented Diana in a whisper.

"Yes," replied Wendy, also in a subdued tone. "Poor old Bunty's floundering hopelessly. Did you hear her ask if they were going to cultivate cucumbers in the open? I nearly exploded! I believe she thinks pineapples grow on pine-trees. She's trying *so* hard to look as if she knows all about it. I'll be sorry for the infant cabbages if she has the care of them."

"It wouldn't be her job, surely."

"I'd agitate for a 'Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Vegetables' if it were. I believe I'm going to adore Miss Chadwick! She looks so sporty. She wrinkles up her nose when she laughs, just like a baby does."

"The little dark student with the freckles is my fancy."

"Oh! I like the other, with the bobbed hair."

Miss Chadwick, with her assistants Miss Carr and Miss Ormrod, brought a new and decidedly breezy element into the school. They spent Saturday in reviewing the premises, and on Monday they set to work. The girls, who as yet were only in the position of onlookers, watched the operations, much thrilled. All sorts of interesting things began to arrive: portable hen-houses packed in sections, chicken-coops, rolls of galvanized wire netting, iron stakes, the framework of [96] a greenhouse, and a whole cargo of tools. The three enterprising ladies seemed to have some knowledge of carpentry, and at once began to fit parts together and erect sheds. Their sensible land costumes excited admiration and envy.

"It's what I mean to do when I grow up," resolved Magsie. "Did you see the way Miss Carr ran up that ladder? And she's begun to thatch the roof so neatly. She does it far better than that old man from the village who potters about. I'm just yearning to try my hand at thatching. I wish Miss Carr would let me!"

While they were busy getting the place in order, Miss Chadwick and her assistants declined all offers of inexperienced help, assuring the girls that they would have their "jobs" given them later on, when there was time to teach them. This did not at all content the enthusiastic spirits who were burning to throw lessons to the winds and spend their days in mixing putty, lime-washing hen-houses, and fixing up wire netting. They hung about disconsolately, snatching at such opportunities of assistance as holding ladders or handing nails.

"You *might* let me tar the roof of the chicken-coop," begged Wendy. "I'd just love to let it all squelch on, and I adore the smell!"

But Miss Carr, who the day before had rashly allowed Diana the use of the lime-wash pail, was firm in her refusal.

"I haven't time to show you how, and I don't want things spoilt. Put down that tar-brush, Wendy! [97] If you get smears on your skirt, you'll never get them off again."

"I don't see where *we* come in!" groused Wendy. "I thought we were to learn agriculture."

"You won't learn it by dabbing tar on the end of your nose," laughed Miss Carr.

In the course of a few weeks, however, the preliminary stages were over. Some fowl-houses and runs were finished, and their feathered occupants arrived and took possession. A consignment of spades, rakes, and hoes was delivered by the carrier, and arranged by the students in the new tool-shed. Miss Carr announced herself ready to begin her course of instruction. To the girls the crowning-point of the preparations was the opening of several large boxes posted from a London shop. They contained twenty land costumes in assorted sizes. The excitement of trying them on was immense. Twenty little figures in smocks and gaiters went capering about the school, wild with the fun of the new experiment, and feeling themselves enthusiastic "daughters of the soil".

"It was A1 of Toddlekins to let us have a 'land uniform'."

"Couldn't do any decent work without, I should say."

"I believe Miss Carr insisted on it."

"Sensible woman!"

"It feels so delightfully business-like."

"Shall we win green armlets?"

"I'm just dying to start and dig!" [98]

"And I want to climb a tree!"

Miss Chadwick and her students set to work methodically. They gave classroom lectures on the principles of agriculture, and practical demonstrations in the garden. The girls learnt the constituents of soils, and also how to trench; the theory of scientific poultry-raising, and the actual mixing of the food. They prepared plots that would be sown in the spring, cleared and rolled paths, planted bulbs, and divided roots of perennials; they sawed wood, lifted rhubarb, and helped to prepare a mushroom bed. It was all new and exciting, and there was a spice of patriotism mixed up with it. They felt that they were training to be of some service to the community.

"It's fearfully weird," said Wendy, writing her essay on *Insect Pests*, "to have to find out whether your insect has a biting or a sucking mouth, so as to know whether you must spray the beastie direct, or apply poison to the plant. I'd feel rather like a dentist examining their jaws."

"I heard of an editor in America," laughed Magsie, "who got his 'answers to correspondents' mixed up, and in reply to 'how to kill a plague of crickets' put 'rub their gums gently with a thimble, and if feverish, administer Perry's Teething Powders'; while to 'Anxious Mother of Twins', he gave the advice: 'Burn tobacco on a hot shovel, and the little pests will hop about and die as dead as door-nails'."

"You always fix these yarns on America," pouted Diana. "It sounds a great deal more like one of your British editors." [99]

To some of the girls the greatest event of all was the arrival of the horse and trap which Miss Todd had decided to add to her establishment. Pendlemere was some distance from the station and from Glenbury, the nearest town, and she thought it would be a great convenience to be independent of carriers and able to fetch supplies for themselves. Diana, keenly interested, was allowed by Miss Ormrod to make the acquaintance of "Baron", the pretty chestnut cob, and even to help in his toilet. Diana loved horses, and used the curry-comb with enthusiasm, talking to Baron in what she called "horse language"—a string of endearing terms that on the whole he seemed to appreciate.

"I'd just adore to drive him!" she sometimes hinted; but Miss Ormrod always ignored the hint, and, instead of offering her the reins, never even invited her into the cart. Diana would stand watching wistfully when Baron was harnessed, and the governess car would start out on a pilgrimage to the town. She considered that a practical part of her education was being obviously neglected.

"If we could each keep a pony and go for rides on the hills, it would be ripping!" she sighed.

"Goody! What a circus we'd look!" said Vi, who did not take so kindly to horsemanship, and preferred a car.

Early in November, Miss Todd, having some urgent business to transact, went up to London for a few days, leaving Pendlemere in the hands of Miss Beverley. The school jogged along without any mishaps during her absence. She was expected home upon the Thursday. On Wednesday afternoon, which was a holiday, Miss Chadwick, Miss Carr, Miss Ormrod, and Miss Hampson mounted bicycles, and rode away with a party of seniors to Glenbury. The juniors, by special invitation from Mrs. Fleming, went to tea at the Vicarage. Two intermediates were in bed with a mild form of "flu", and the remainder amused themselves as they liked best. Peggy sat indoors, doing pen-painting; Vi brought stones for a rockery; Sadie and Magsie played a set of tennis on the cinder court; Diana and Wendy, who had asked to join the cycle party, and had in consequence received a severe snub from Geraldine, wandered about the garden like unquiet spirits. [100]

"It's the limit to be an intermediate!" groused Wendy gloomily. "Seniors and juniors get all the fun! Did you ever hear of *our* form being taken to do anything special while the others stopped at school? Of course you didn't, because we never are! The seniors get first innings, and we only have the crumbs that are left, and those juniors are treated like babies though they're nearly as tall as we are. I'm fed up with it!"

"We'd better have a demonstration—parade the corridor with a placard: 'Fair play for Intermediates! Equal treats for all!'" suggested Diana, who was always ready with ideas. [101]

"Much good it would do us! We should only get sat upon by everybody. Hullo! Here's Peggy wandering down. What's the matter with you, chucky? You look disturbed."

"I hate coming out in a wind," said Peggy, holding her hands over her rumpled hair. "I say, did you, or did you not see Miss Chadwick, Miss Ormrod, *and* Miss Carr bike off to Glenbury? Are they all three gone?"

"Of course they're gone!"

"You saw them with your own eyes?"

"Helped to blow up their tyres, which we thought was really saintly, when we weren't asked to go with them," said the still injured Wendy.

"Well, it's a pretty go they're all off! Bunty's just had a telegram from Toddlekins. She's coming back this afternoon, and wants the trap to meet the four-thirty train."

"She should! She's in a precious hurry to leave her beloved London. Whence this thusness?"

"I don't know. She's coming, at any rate," said Peggy, rather crossly. "Bunty sent me to find out if everybody had really gone. Toddlekins will have to get a taxi, that's all. Whew! I'm being blown to bits! I want to get back to my pen-painting. I'm making a birthday present for my cousin. Ta-ta!"

Diana stood watching Peggy's retreating figure as the latter raced up the garden and into the house.

"Toddlekins will be rather savage not to be met," she commented. [102]

"Yes; she's so keen on the trap, and the amount it saves in taxis and carriers."

"It does seem rough on her, especially when she's sent a telegram. Look here, old thing, let's take it to meet her ourselves!"

"What? You and me?"

"Why not? I can drive, and I know how to harness Baron. I have helped to put him in the trap heaps of times. Bunty? Best not tell her anything about it; she's always such a scared rabbit, and she'd only have fits!"

Wendy's eyes shone like stars.

"It *would* be a stunt! Fancy driving in state to the station and fetching Toddlekins! She'd be pleased to save a taxi."

"Bless her, she shall! We'll show her that her girls have some spirit and self-reliance at a crisis. It's only making a practical demonstration of our new agricultural course! What's the use of learning if you can't apply it at the right moment? Run and fetch our coats and hats and gloves, that's a cherub, while I go and tell Baron all about it."

Wendy, much thrilled, and fired with the excellence of Diana's notion, went indoors, and, taking elaborate precautions not to meet anybody, secured outdoor garments worthy of the occasion. She rolled them in a Union Jack for camouflage, and bore them off to the stable.

"I've brought 'bests'," she said. "Toddlekins wouldn't thank to be met by two Cinderellas!" [103]

Diana was standing with her arms thrown round Baron's neck, whispering sweet nothings into his twitching ear. If he did not understand the substance of her remarks, he realized the force of her affection, and kept rubbing his nose against her shoulder in a sort of caress, very gently catching her jersey with his lips and pulling it.

"I've told him, and he's delighted to go," declared Diana. "He's just pining for a run. It's so dull for him standing here with no one to talk to. It takes away his appetite. He'll enjoy his supper twice as much when he comes back. Won't you, dear old man?"

"We mustn't be all day about starting. If you've finished making love to him, let's get out the trap."

"Right you are!"

Diana was perfectly capable of accomplishing what she had undertaken. She took down the harness, led Baron out into the yard, and proceeded to put him into the shafts in quite a professional fashion. She looked over all the straps, fetched the whip, donned the garments which Wendy had brought, and proclaimed herself ready.

"We'll go out quietly by the back way," she chuckled. "Open the gate; that's a mascot!"

There was nobody to say them nay, so in a few minutes they were trotting briskly along the Glenbury Road. Diana was a capital little Jehu, and held the reins with a practised hand. Baron, [104] perfectly conscious of who was driving him, behaved admirably. The girls felt their spirits at high-water mark. They had certainly scored over the rest of the school, and secured a superior jaunt to anybody. Moreover, it was a pleasant afternoon to be out. The weather, which for some days had been damp, had changed to windy. Long, dappled mare's-tail clouds stretched across the pale November sky, and every now and then the sun shone out between them. The glory of the autumn tints had been blown away, but the infinitely intertwined, almost leafless boughs of the woodlands had a beauty apart from foliage. Bushes covered with crimson masses of hips or haws foretold a hard winter; birds twittered restlessly in the hedgerows; and the withered leaves came

whirling along the road with a scurrying, rustling sound as of the little footsteps of innumerable fairies. A seed-vessel of the sycamore, flying like a miniature aeroplane, struck Diana full in the face. She picked it up as it fell on her coat, and put it in her pocket.

"I shall keep it as my mascot," she said. "It was evidently meant for me, so it will bring me luck. Do you believe in luck?"

"Very much, sometimes, but I don't often have any."

"We've got it to-day, though. Baron's going splendidly. I think the wind excites him. You wouldn't believe he'd been out every day this week. He's as fresh as a daisy. What's the time? I can't get to my watch."

"Quarter past four." [105]

"Gee whiz! We must hurry ourselves. We've to be waiting at the station by half-past. Baron, can you put on a spurt?"

They were bowling along a good macadam road and down hill, so that Baron did not object to the extra strain put upon his legs. The spire of Glenbury Church loomed ahead; in a few more minutes they began to see the roofs of the houses. They crossed the bridge over the river, turned the corner by the King's Arms Inn, and were trotting at a good pace along Castle Street, when suddenly Wendy's side of the trap dipped down. There was a horrible jarring and grinding, and horse and governess car seemed to be trying to practise sliding. With great presence of mind, and also strength of arm, Diana pulled Baron up.

"We've lost our wheel!" she gasped.

A crowd immediately collected round the little carriage, which stood lop-sided in the gutter. One passer-by held the horse, another helped Diana and Wendy out; a boy came running up with the wheel that had danced across the street. People stood at shop doors and stared. Sympathetic voices asked if the girls were hurt. Several connoisseurs were feeling Baron's legs. In that most critical and agitating situation, who should be seen riding up from the town but a group of ten cyclists, led by Miss Chadwick, and displaying the familiar hatbands of Pendlemere School. Diana and Wendy turned the colour of boiled beetroot. The cyclists dismounted in a body, and Miss [106] Chadwick, staggered at the amazing spectacle of the wreck before her, took over instant possession. She tilted her bicycle against a lamp-post, sent a boy for a blacksmith, and began to unharness Baron. When he was clear of the shafts, and being led away by a friendly ostler, she demanded explanations. Diana supplied them briefly. Miss Chadwick looked at her keenly, but forbore to comment before the crowd.

"Miss Ormrod and I will stay in town and come back with Miss Todd," she said, with compressed lips. "You and Wendy can ride our bicycles. Miss Carr, will you please go as quickly as you can to the station and explain to Miss Todd what has happened. The train must be in by now. I think, Miss Hampson, you'd better take the girls on."

It was ignominious to be thus dismissed, and to be forced to mount machines and cycle back to school, instead of having the proud distinction of driving the head mistress. Diana and Wendy felt their feathers fall considerably, especially when they contemplated the fuller explanations which must inevitably follow.

It was quite dark before Miss Todd arrived in the mended cart. She and Miss Chadwick and Miss Ormrod had tea together in the drawing-room.

Later in the evening Diana and Wendy received orders to report themselves in the study. They [107] entered with sober faces. Outside, a band of thrilled intermediates, who had listened with bated breath to the account of the adventure, hung about and discussed possible punishments. Miss Todd was not a mistress to be trifled with, and the trap was her latest toy. It was nearly half an hour before the door opened, and two very subdued and crushed specimens of girlhood issued, mopping their eyes.

"She says Miss Chadwick knew the wheel wasn't safe, and had gone to get a fresh pin for it," volunteered Wendy with a gulp. "But how could *we* know that? She doesn't believe in practical demonstrations of our lessons, or in self-reliance; she says we've just to do what we are told. She got quite raggy when Diana mentioned it. We mayn't go near the stable for a week, and we've each to learn ten pages of poetry by heart."

"Ten pages! What an atrocious shame!" sympathized Vi. "It'll take all your recreation time this week."

"I know it will, and I wanted to do some sewing."

"She never said *what* poetry," put in Diana, her moist eyes suddenly twinkling. "I'll learn something out of the *Comic Reciter*—the very maddest and craziest one I can manage to find."

[108]

CHAPTER VIII

Diana had a fairly retentive memory, and learned poetry without much trouble. By far the hardest part of her punishment was to be forbidden to visit the stable for a week. She was sure Baron would miss her, and that, though he might receive other offerings of bread and carrots, he would be looking out and pricking his ears in vain for the friend with whom he had grown to be on such intimate terms.

Miss Chadwick, much annoyed at the accident to the cart, treated Diana distantly. Instead of smiling at her when she came into the room, she would look round her or over her head, and flash recognition to somebody else. It was humiliating to find herself out of favour, especially as it was noticed and commented on by her form-mates, all of whom were candidates for Miss Chadwick's friendship. Wendy, toiling away at her punishment task and grumbling at its difficulty, was not at all a cheerful companion. Moreover, it rained—rained for two days and nights without stopping; rained as it only can rain in a northern and mountainous district in the month of November. The fells were covered with mist, rivers ran down the garden paths, and [109] from the eaves came a continual and monotonous drip-drip-drip. Diana, whose letters from Paris had been delayed, and who was home-sick in consequence, vibrated between a fit of the blues and a wild outbreak of spirits. She had reached the stage when she must either laugh or cry. She wandered restlessly round the schoolroom on Saturday afternoon, while the others were amusing themselves with reading, painting, or sewing.

"What a quiet set you are!" she raged. "Anyone would take you for 'Miss Pinkerton's Academy for Young Ladies'! Why can't you wake up? This is the dullest hole I've ever been in in my life. Magsie, stop that eternal sewing, and be sporty! You look like a model for 'gentle maidenhood'. I want to stick a pin into you, to see what would happen."

"Draw it mild, Stars and Stripes," answered Magsie, biting off the end of her cotton. "And be careful about experiments with pins, or something more may happen than you quite bargain for."

"I don't care! Anything for an excitement! I want some fun, and there'll be a shindy if I don't get it. Wendy! Vi! Sadie! Do brace up and be sports! Let's go on the upper landing and let off steam. It's better than moping here."

Diana, by sheer force of will, carried the day, detached her friends from their several occupations, and bore them, three steps at a time, up the stairs to the top story. The upper [110] landing was long, and had a polished oak floor; it looked gloomy on this wet afternoon, and the rain made a continual patter on the roof. In Diana's eyes, however, it afforded a field for enterprise.

"I've a gorgeous idea!" she purred. "We'll pretend the floor's a skating-rink. I've borrowed Loveday's roller skates, and we'll take it in turns."

That roller skates were hardly meant for indoor amusement did not occur to the girls. They agreed with enthusiasm. In order to share the pleasure Vi and Sadie each buckled one on, and began a series of glides, punctuated by pushes from the other foot. Wendy and Magsie, not to be outdone, began to slide down the polished floor, and Tattie, who had powers of invention, fetched a cake of soap and a sponge, and perfected their activities by making a slippery course along the boards.

"It's like Alpine sports," exulted Wendy, taking a turn with one of the skates, and skimming at top speed. "Can't you just imagine you're in Switzerland? I want to make snowballs. Oh! why can't we do some toboganning? I'd like to go tearing down a hill on a bob-sleigh. It would be priceless."

"You shall do next best to it, my child," said Diana cheerily. "Trust your granny to find the way for you. I've coasted indoors before now. Wait a second, and you'll see!"

She disappeared, and in a short time returned with her drawing-board.

"You just squat on this," she explained, "and you go skimming down the stairs like a water-chute. [111] It'll be prime!"

"O-o-o-oh!"

"You *are* priceless!"

"Great is Diana of the Americans!"

The improvised bob-sleigh worked admirably, and if it happened to catch, there was always the banister to clutch at. Its popularity eclipsed even that of the soap-slide and the roller skates. The fun waxed fast and furious, not to say noisy. Bumpings and bursts of laughter began to echo downstairs on to the lower stories. Miss Hampson, coming to unlock the jam-cupboard in preparation for tea, stood for a moment in the corridor, listening like a pointer. Then she thrust the key into her pocket and dashed to the upper regions, just in time to behold Wendy, with scarlet cheeks and flying hair, coasting down the stairs on a drawing-board. For a moment Miss Hampson was without words. She stared, gasping, at Wendy, who hurriedly picked up both herself and the drawing-board, and stood at attention. The sporting party on the upper landing would gladly have melted away had there been any possible cover, but there was not. Vi and Sadie had not even time to kick off their roller skates. Miss Hampson's keen eyes took in every detail of the trails on the polished oak floor, and the soap-slide. Then they focused on Diana.

"I can imagine who's been the instigator of all this!" she said sharply. "We've never been [112]
accustomed to such doings at Pendlemere before. Miss Todd will be appalled at the damage you've done to the floor. Go downstairs to the schoolroom at once, and remember that this landing is prohibited in future. I'm astonished that all of you don't know better!"

It was on the following Monday that tidings of the armistice were proclaimed. The girls heard the church bells ringing when they were in the middle of morning lessons, and unanimously "downed books and pencils" and trooped to the front door, where Miss Todd was verifying the good news from the butcher boy. For five minutes the school went wild; everybody joined hands and danced in a circle on the drive, shouting "Hurrah!" After all the long suspense and anxiety the relief was stupendous. There was hardly a girl who had not some relation at the front over whose safety she might now rejoice. That the shadow of more than four years had at length been removed, seemed almost too good to be true. Miss Todd and Miss Beverley had gone indoors to find all the available stock of bunting; Miss Chadwick was already climbing on a ladder up the porch to hang the Union Jack over the threshold.

"We ought each to have a flag of our own," said Geraldine, who was intensely patriotic. "I'm going to ask Miss Todd if we may go and buy some."

Wild schemes for celebrating the day floated in the air, varying from a picnic to a bonfire. [113]

"The ground is too wet yet for either," decreed Geraldine. "How could we tramp over the fells when everything's a quagmire? And if you think you can light a bonfire with damp wood, you're jolly well mistaken. We'll collect sticks, and have one when they're dry. I plump for a flag-hunt. There must be some in the shops."

Geraldine's suggestions were generally received with favour at head-quarters. Miss Todd felt that the school was fizzing over, and must find some outlet for its excitement. An expedition to Glenbury to buy flags seemed feasible. They could have an early lunch, and start immediately afterwards. Those who possessed bicycles could ride, and the rest could walk a mile to Athelton village and catch the motor-omnibus which passed there. Everybody was satisfied with the arrangement, and the cyclists dispersed to oil their machines and pump tyres. Miss Todd and Miss Chadwick were going in the trap; even Spot, with a bow of red, white, and blue ribbon tied to his collar, was to accompany the party.

Diana did not possess a bicycle, so Wendy, out of sheer good-fellowship, decided to lend hers to Sadie and to take the omnibus, so that she herself might go in company with her chum. Nine girls and a mistress started off in good time for Athelton, slightly in advance of the cyclists, who expected to meet them in Glenbury. Even in the village of Pendlemere and the little hamlet of [114]
Athelton people were making peace rejoicings: flags hung from windows, and children ran about blowing tin trumpets, whistles, and mouth-organs. A string of small urchins had improvised a band, and paraded proudly along, banging on tin trays and old kettles, and yelling the National Anthem. Men talked eagerly together outside the post office; women stood at their doors and watched, some radiant and excited, and some quieter, with a heartache behind the smile, as they thought of those lads who would not come marching home with the others.

The wild weather of the last few days seemed to have rolled away with the war clouds. The sky was flecked with blue, and the trees by the roadside were hung all over with drops that sparkled in the sun like jewels. The brook that ran down from the fells was tumbling along in a great brown stream, thundering under the bridge; robins, hopping in the wet hedgerows, twittered their plaintive little autumn song. A woman picked a marigold from her battered, rain-sodden garden, and handed it over the wall to Wendy. Everybody seemed to want to speak, even to strangers, and to tell how many of their relations had served in the war.

At last the omnibus, ten minutes late, came rumbling along, and stopped to pick up passengers. The school scrambled in, and with difficulty found places. It was a jolting journey, much crammed up among country people with baskets, but it was fun, even though the rattling almost shook them off their seats, for all the passengers seemed so good-tempered and jolly. On their arrival at [115]
Glenbury they found the town *en fête*, with bunting hanging across the streets, and large banners decorating the public buildings. The pavements were so full that the crowd overflowed into the road. The cyclist members of the Pendlemere party had arrived first, and had already bought flags, which they pinned in their hats. The motor-omnibus contingent rushed off immediately to secure any that were left, and to try to get some sweets. Miss Todd, who had put up the cart at the Queen's Hotel, met them as they were emerging from the confectioner's, sucking pear-drops and toffee.

"You're lucky, for sweets are scarce," she commented. "Thanks very much—I won't have one just now. Where are the others? Can you find them? I'm going to take you all up the church tower to get a bird's-eye view of the town. It will look nice to-day, with the flags out, and we ought to be able to see for miles round."

Glenbury Church was almost as large as a cathedral, and possessed a steeple which was a landmark for the neighbourhood. It was possible to ascend as far as the flying buttresses, and to walk round a stone causeway that encircled the tower just where the spire tapered up. The entrance was in the nave, through a small oak door studded with nails. The verger, aged, wheezy, and inclined to conversation, admitted them.

"You'll get a fine view," he said huskily; "you ought to be able to see the prison and the cemetery, [116]
and, with luck, the lunatic asylum as well. It's over amongst the trees to the east of Chatford. You

can't miss it if the sun's shining on the roof. There's been a-many folks up to-day."

The narrow corkscrew staircase was old and worn, and seemed to twist round and round in an absolutely endless ascent as the girls toiled up its hundred-and-eighty-six steps. To add to their difficulties, parties of people kept coming down, and the problem of passing was difficult; it could only be accomplished by the school flattening itself against the walls while the descending sightseers gingerly made their way round the narrow centre of the staircase. Tiny lancet windows here and there let in streams of sunshine, but most of the pilgrimage was made in a decidedly "dim religious light". Everyone's knees were aching when at last they emerged through a small door on to the causeway. They were standing on a flat terrace edged by a stone parapet just tall enough to allow them to lean their arms on it and look over. Above them rose the spire, tapering thinner and thinner till its slender point ended in a weather-cock. Below, the town lay spread out like an architect's design. They could see the roofs of all the buildings, and the streets, and the lawns, and the pond in the park; all seemed viewed at an unusual angle, for they were gazing down on the tops of things. Round the town stretched miles of misty woods and fields, melting [117] into the grey haze of the fells. The objects of attraction mentioned by the verger—the jail, cemetery, and lunatic asylum—were not particularly conspicuous, and nobody was very anxious to localize them. The girls walked all round the causeway, so as to get the view at every point.

"I suppose Pendlemere's over there?" said Diana, pointing a brown-gloved finger in the direction of the fells.

"Yes; you can see the road we came by in the 'bus," explained Stuart. "It winds round by Athelton. There's a much shorter way back, though, if we were walking. Do you see that white farm-house on the hill above the park? Well, you go through the fold-yard, across a field, and down a lane, then there's a straight path over the moor, right to Pendlemere. It saves two miles at least. Hilary and Nesta and I walked it once with Miss Todd."

"Dinky, I should guess."

"Nice in summer, but it might be pretty wet now."

Most of the girls agreed that coming down steps was rather worse than going up. Their ankles ached when they reached the bottom. The old verger was taking the sixpences of another party of tourists, and telling them, in his wheezy voice, to look out for the cemetery, the jail, and the lunatic asylum—to him evidently the three prime points of interest in the landscape. Spot, who had been fastened by his leash to the railings outside, greeted the girls with noisy enthusiasm. [118] Diana untied him, and gave him a pear-drop.

"Bless him! He wants a bit of candy as well as the rest of us. He's a 'booful' dog with his patriotic ribbon on his collar. Stop barking, that's a cherub boy, or you'll drive your Auntie Diana crazy!"

There was a short interval of shopping after the excursion up the tower, and then Miss Todd pulled out her watch, compared it with the church clock, and declared it was time to be returning. The motor-omnibus, which started from Shipham, five miles away, was due in Glenbury at a quarter to four. Miss Hampson marched her contingent to the market-place, where it always stopped to pick up its passengers. Already quite a crowd was waiting for it—people who had come in from the neighbouring villages to see the peace rejoicings. There was no policeman to insist on an orderly queue, so when the great scarlet vehicle lumbered up, a wild scramble ensued. Some of the Pendlemere girls were pushed in amongst the jostling throng, and some were elbowed out. Wendy, Diana, and Miss Hampson, at the tail-end of the crush, tried to scramble on to the step. The conductress, a brawny woman in uniform, stopped them.

"Only room for one more," she shouted; "and I can't take that dog!"

"But we'd stand!" entreated Miss Hampson piteously.

"They're standing as it is! Can't take more than the 'bus is registered for, or we'd break down at [119] the hills. Room for one! Which of you's coming? Be quick! I can't wait all day!"

It was a matter that had to be decided in a moment. Miss Hampson, knowing that seven of her girls were already packed in the omnibus, felt that she must go and escort them. She turned desperately to Wendy and Diana, and panted:

"Miss Todd won't have started yet. Run to the 'Queen's'. She'll take you back in the trap."

Then she allowed herself to be hustled inside by the impatient conductress.

The two girls left behind stood staring for a minute after the retreating omnibus. Spot, straining at his leash, barked his loudest.

"Well, I don't envy them their drive. They're packed like sardines," commented Wendy.

"I guess we've got the best of it," agreed Diana.

Evidently the next thing to be done was to walk to the Queen's Hotel and report themselves, to Miss Todd. Diana was even beginning to speculate whether she could advance any possible argument, such as a desire to save strain on her mistress's arm, whereby she might induce the Principal to allow her to take the reins and drive Baron home. They went along Westgate, and turned the corner of Hart Street; in another two minutes they would have been in Castle Street. Then fate interfered. From a narrow alley on the right came sounds resembling explosives, and

three small boys, yelling gleefully, shot out into the road. Wendy, pausing to ascertain the cause of the excitement, ejaculated the one word, "Squibs!" [120]

"Gee whiz! You don't mean to say they've got fireworks!" exclaimed Diana. "Then I'm not going back till I've bought some. Here, sonny!"—catching a bare-headed urchin by the shoulder—"tell me where you got those squibs, and I'll give you my last bit of candy. Mrs. Cobbes's in Beck Street? Where's Beck Street? Is it far? You ought to come and show us for that big bit of candy."

"Can't! Got to go 'ome to my tea," returned the youth, whose small teeth were already in the toffee. "Cobbes's is down there!" pointing an arm like a sign-post in the direction of a by-street.

Diana and Wendy did not even wait to discuss the expediency of thus side-tracking. The magic lure of fireworks drew them on, and with one accord they trotted off to seek Mrs. Cobbes's shop. It took a little hunting about and asking to find it; and then Mrs. Cobbes was stout and slow, and seemed to need an eternity of time to wrap up their purchases in an old piece of newspaper.

"We shall have to hurry!" said Diana, emerging at last, hugging her parcel, and dragging Spot away from the pursuit of an impudent and provocative tabby cat, with a torn ear, that was spitting at him from the railings.

They did hurry. They nearly ran up Jessamine Street and Vine Street, and clattered up the steps behind the post office into Castle Street, and tacked through the crowd into the yard of the Queen's Hotel. A whole row of conveyances was standing with shafts down, but the familiar governess car was not among them. Perhaps it had been put inside the coach-house. [121]

"Miss Todd's trap, did you say?" replied the ostler, removing the fag-end of a cigarette from his lips. "Why, she's gone! I harnessed her only five minutes ago!"

Here was a blow indeed! They had never expected Miss Todd to drive away without them, though, considering that she did not know they had been left behind by the omnibus, she was scarcely to be blamed for doing so. The two girls looked serious as they walked into the street again. Somehow they felt aggrieved.

"If the rest haven't started, Magsie and Vi might take us behind them on their bicycles," suggested Wendy dubiously. "Hodson's would know if they've gone. They were to call for some parcels there."

It proved a forlorn hope. The girl behind the counter assured them that a party on bicycles, wearing brown tam-o'-shanters, had come and claimed their purchases, and ridden off up the street ringing their bells. The next motor-omnibus would come through at seven. It was always crowded, and no doubt would be particularly full to-night.

"There's nothing else for it, Di—we shall have to walk," said Wendy blankly. [122]

"Whew! It's a pretty good step."

"Six miles."

"Je-hoshaphat!"

"Well, it's no use waiting for the 'bus. We should never get places."

"Let's take that short cut that Stuart was talking about. She said it saves two miles."

"What a brain wave! It's only a quarter past four. We'd be home long before dark. You can walk four miles an hour, can't you?"

"Ra-ther!"

So they turned across the park, and up the hill to the white farm, and through the fold-yard, and over the field, and along the lane on to the open moor. They felt decidedly pleased with themselves, for it was far nicer here than plodding along the high road. The ground was not so wet as Stuart had prognosticated; indeed the path was quite firm and well trodden, and in parts was even paved with stones. Spot, released from his leash, careered about like a mad creature. Diana could not help dancing a few steps, and Wendy, though she was growing hungry, stopped grousing to admire the view. The sun, a red ball among grey masses of mist, was sinking behind the fells, and a golden glow tipped the brown, withered heather. The whole atmosphere seemed to reflect peace. Overhead, little radiant clouds stretched themselves into the semblance of angels' wings moving lightly across the evening sky. To watch them was like gazing at the portals of a heavenly world. [123]

The girls walked along as briskly as they could, but on the rough moorland path it was impossible to keep the pace at four miles an hour. They were going uphill, and, unless they went in single file, one of them, owing to the narrowness of the track, was obliged to keep stepping into the heather. At the top of the crest they dipped down again into a high, narrow valley between two fells. It was swampy here, and in places there were quite wide pieces of water to jump across. The path, which had been growing worse and worse, finally separated into a fork. The girls came to a halt, and stood looking first at one track, then at the other. They were in doubt which to choose, for each looked equally bad. They had turned so often that they had rather lost their sense of locality.

"I should think Pendlemere must be over there," said Wendy, pointing to the right, but looking

frankly puzzled.

"Well, you know the place better than I do," answered Diana, following her lead.

So they went to the right, through a small thicket of hazel-bushes, over some rocks, and on up the bleak fell-side. The sun had disappeared, and the little golden angels' wings had given place to sombre, grey clouds. It was growing distressingly dark. A spot or two of rain began to fall. The path, degenerated into a mere sheep track, was increasingly difficult to trace. Though neither [124] would admit it, both the girls felt uneasy. They could not recognize any familiar landmarks to show them their whereabouts. Suppose darkness came on, and found them still wandering about on the moor?

"Do you think we've come the right way?" asked Diana at last.

Wendy looked round in the fading light, hoping against hope to see the corner of Pendlemere gleaming below her in the valley. By now it certainly ought to be visible. Nothing in the shape of a lake, however, appeared in the landscape; only an interminable waste of brown heather under threatening rain-clouds.

"No." said Wendy, with a shake in her voice. "As a matter of fact, I believe we're lost."

Diana was plucky as a rule, but she was very tired now, and hungry as well. Two somethings that may have been rain-drops splashed down her cheeks; she turned her face away from Wendy as she wiped them off.

"What's to be done?" she asked huskily.

"Go back, I suppose. Goodness knows where this will lead to!"

"We ought to have taken that other turning."

"It's too dark to go that way now. We'd better get back to Glenbury, and try for the 'bus."

Very soon the girls realized that it was getting too dark even to distinguish the path at all. They stumbled blindly on through the heather, conscious only that they were going downhill, but whether they were really retracing their steps or not, it was impossible to tell. Spot, whose spirits [125] had failed him, followed at their heels. Faster and faster fell the darkness; the girls linked arms to avoid getting separated. They were both thoroughly frightened. Would they be obliged to spend the night upon the moor? If there were only some means of finding the way back to Glenbury!

Suddenly, a long distance in front of them, a light flashed out, as though a candle had been placed in a cottage window. Hope revived. If only they could reach some human habitation, they could ask to be directed. They dragged their tired feet along, splashing in the dark through puddles, sinking in soft ground, or stumbling over stones. It seemed an interminable tramp before at last they struck the end of a wall, and, feeling their way with their hands, groped along till they reached a gate. The next moment they were rapping with their knuckles on a door.

It was opened by a thin, middle-aged woman, who stared at them in suspicious amazement as they asked to be directed to Glenbury; then, seeing that they were only girls with their hair down their backs, she cautiously invited them to come in. They accepted thankfully. After the dark and the damp outside, the farm-kitchen seemed a haven of refuge.

A little boy, who had been sitting by the fireside, sprang up at their entrance, and faced them with wondering eyes. Something in the small figure seemed familiar. Diana's mind galloped rapidly back to a day in late September when she had crawled along a tree-trunk across a racing [126] torrent, with a frightened, blue-jerseyed atom of humanity creeping behind her.

"Gee-whiz! I guess you're Harry!" she exclaimed heartily.

The mental thermometer of the kitchen, which had stood at about freezing-point, suddenly thawed into spring. Harry, recognizing his former friend in need, hastily explained to his mother, who turned to the girls with a light in her face.

"I've always wanted to thank you," she said to Diana; "but I never knew who it was who'd helped Harry home that day. Sit you down, both of you, by the fire. You'll let me make you a cup of tea?"

Rest, warmth, and tea were what the tired girls craved. They sat on the settle, with a little round table in front of them, and ate the scones and blackberry jam that with true northern hospitality were piled on their plates. Harry's father came in presently, and, after a whispered conversation with his wife in the back-kitchen, offered to take a lantern and escort the girls back to Pendlemere.

"It's a goodish step, but you're rested now, maybe, and it's no use risking missing the 'bus at Glenbury, and having to walk it after all."

A very tired Diana, and an equally weary Wendy arrived at the school just when Miss Todd was getting absolutely desperate about their absence. She had sent Miss Chadwick to Athelton to meet the seven o'clock omnibus, and the teacher had returned to report that they had not come [127] on it. Miss Todd forbore to scold two such limp wrecks, and sent them straight upstairs, with orders for hot baths, bed, and basins of bread-and-milk. Explanations were reserved for next day, and they did not get off scot free by any means. Miss Todd had an aggravatingly mathematical

mind. She calculated the time the omnibus left the market-place, the exact moment when she herself started in the trap from the Queen's Hotel, the distance between these two given points, and in how many minutes at the rate of not less than three miles an hour two ordinary walkers should accomplish it. The answer left ten whole minutes to spare, and of that ten minutes of the afternoon she demanded a strict account from Diana and Wendy.

The sinners, whose bones still ached after their adventure, appeared in such crushed spirits that they did not receive the entire scolding their head mistress had intended, and were for once dismissed with a caution.

"She didn't say we mightn't go to the bonfire," sneezed Wendy, on their way down the passage. Wendy as usual had taken a cold in her head.

"I kept the squibs dry, thank goodness!" sighed Diana. "Nobody knows about them yet, so we'll let them off as a surprise. Won't they all just jump when they hear them? I'm looking forward to that bonfire as the event of my life!"

[128]

CHAPTER IX

Diana's English Christmas

Diana had fondly hoped that the armistice meant an immediate declaration of peace, that her father and mother would return post-haste from France, take her away from Pendlemere, and cross at once to America, so that they might spend Christmas in their own home. To her immense disappointment, nothing so nice happened. The peace conferences were lengthy. Mr. and Mrs. Hewlitt remained in Paris, and did not even speak of booking passages to New York. They wrote instead to make arrangements for Diana's holidays in England. It was at first decided that she should spend the time with her cousins, the Burritts, but influenza broke out so badly at Petteridge Court that all in a hurry the plans had to be changed. It ended in Diana passing Christmas with the Flemings at Pendlemere Vicarage. So far she had scarcely realized Meg and Elsie Fleming. They came to school daily, and she had seen them among the juniors, and remarked that they were "sweet kids". She was now to meet them at nearer acquaintance, and not only Meg and Elsie, but Monty, Neale, and Roger as well.

[129]

They were an interesting and lively family, and after a preliminary half-hour of painful politeness, they thawed over schoolroom tea, and adopted her into their midst. Monty, the eldest, was an eccentric, clever lad in spectacles, fond of making scientific and chemical experiments, which generally ended in odours that caused the others to hold their noses and open the schoolroom windows, top and bottom. He had a philosophical mind and a love of argument, and would thrash out questions for the sheer fun of debate in a growling sort of tone that was not really bad-tempered, only put on.

Neale, six months older than Diana, was a bright, jolly-looking boy, with a freckled nose and chestnut hair that rather stood on end. As regards book-learning, the less said about his attainments the better, and he had an unpleasant half-hour in his father's study, explaining details of his school report; but in all practical matters he was ahead of Monty. He was a thorough young pickle, up to endless pranks, and determined not to let time hang heavy on his hands during the holidays.

Roger, the youngest, a smart little chap of nine, followed in the wake of his brothers, poking interfering fingers into Monty's chemical messes, or acting scout for Neale's escapades. At the end of twelve hours Diana felt that she knew them perfectly, and had shaken down into a place of her own amongst them.

[130]

Six young people home for the holidays are apt to turn a house upside down, and it was fortunate for Mrs. Fleming that she had an easy-going and happy-go-lucky disposition, and could view with comparative equanimity the chaos that reigned in the schoolroom. To Diana it was delightful; she preferred a floor littered with shavings, a table spread with paints, plasticine modelling-clay, and other descriptions of mess, and chairs encumbered with books and papers, to the neatest, tidiest room where everything you want is put away out of reach in cupboards.

"When I heard I was coming to the Vicarage, I thought: 'My, I guess I won't have to bounce there!' But you're a real set of sports," she assured her new friends.

"Well, I don't think we're exactly what you'd call prim and proper," chuckled Meg.

There were still a few days before Christmas, and the energies of the whole family were focused on decorations. There were not many people in the village with leisure to help, so most of the work fell upon the Flemings. They tramped down to the church, bearing great armfuls of evergreens, strings of holly-berries, and texts cut out in paper letters. The girls sat in a pew and twisted garlands of yew and laurel, which the boys, with the aid of a short ladder, fastened round the pillars. Mrs. Fleming was fitting panels of cotton wool on to the pulpit, and sprinkling them with artificial frost.

[131]

"We ought to have lots of flags about the place this Christmas," said Monty, "to make it a sort of

victory celebration as well. I'll put two or three over the organ, and stick some round the monuments. What I'd like would be to see our huge Union Jack hanging down over that blank wall there."

"Well, why don't you put it?" enquired Diana, looking up from her wreath-twisting.

"All very well, madam, but how am I going to get it there? That's a little detail which escapes your feminine observation. Please to note the height of our ladder and the height of that wall, and compare the difference."

"I'd get up on to that passage and fix it," nodding to the triforium.

"Would you, indeed, Miss America? I rather think I see you toddling along there, with a drop of thirty feet below you."

"Do you dare me to?"

"You're brave enough down here in a pew, but I don't believe any girl would have the head for that. Women aren't steeple-jacks!"

"You needn't speak so scornfully. There may be a few steeple-jennies among them!"

"No fear," laughed Monty, turning away.

Diana said nothing more, but as she went on with her wreath her thoughts were as busy as her fingers. She was more silent than usual at lunch, and slipped away quickly afterwards, leaving the family talking round the fire. First, she ran upstairs to the corner of the upper landing, where she knew the big Union Jack was kept. She rolled it into a tight bundle, tucked it under her arm, [132] then tore off to the church. She found herself alone there, for none of the other decorators had returned. It was exactly the opportunity she wanted. The bunch of keys was hanging in the big door. She pulled them out, and carried them to the tiny door by the chancel steps. This she unlocked and flung open, disclosing a steep, winding stair. Almost on her hands and knees Diana scrambled up, and up, and up till she reached the triforium, the narrow stone gallery that ran round the church under the clerestory windows. The first few yards were safely protected with arches, pillars, and a balustrade, but after that came a stretch of about twenty feet with no parapet at all. The gallery was only twenty-four inches wide; on the one side was the wall, on the other a sheer drop of about thirty feet. Diana paused, and set her teeth. She did not dare to walk it, but she knelt down and crawled along till she reached the next piece of balustrade. Then she unrolled her Union Jack, and, tying it by its cords to the pillars, arranged it so that it hung down into the church and covered the exact spot of blank wall that Monty had indicated. She had just finished when she heard footsteps in the porch. Not wanting to be caught by the Vicar, she began to crawl back in the same way as she had come. Perhaps the sense that someone might be watching her from below unnerved her, for the return journey seemed far worse than the outward one had done. She did not venture to look down, but kept her eyes on the wall. Half-way [133] she was suddenly seized with a horrible paroxysm of dizziness. For a moment or two she lay flat, too frightened to move, while her giddy head seemed to be spinning round. With a supreme effort she mastered the sensation, and crawled on, inch by inch, till she once again reached safety. With rather tottering knees she came down the winding staircase, and through the small door to the chancel steps. Mrs. Fleming, Meg, Monty, and Neale were standing by the lectern when she appeared. Mrs. Fleming was white as chalk; the others were staring open-mouthed, with a queer strained look in their eyes.

"Well, I've done it, you see!" said Diana jauntily.

The Flemings gazed at her without speaking. Monty went and locked the door of the staircase and put the keys in his pocket. The silence was embarrassing.

"I think it looks very nice hanging there," declared Diana, nodding at her Union Jack.

"My dear," said Mrs. Fleming in a shaky voice, "if you knew what I suffered when I saw you creeping along the triforium you couldn't speak so lightly. It isn't right to risk your life in this fashion."

Diana tried to carry the matter off airily, but the boys were grumpy and would not speak. Meg kept looking at her with a peculiar expression, as if she were recovering from a shock. Altogether, Diana felt that her deed of daring had fallen very flat. She was annoyed that no one [134] congratulated her upon it. She considered that for a girl of fourteen it was rather a record. Monty would not be able to sneer at "Miss America" again. She strolled in a casual way past the font which he was decorating, and made a final effort to wring from him the appreciation she craved.

"There *are* some steeple-jennies in the world!" she remarked, staring upwards at the clerestory.

Monty picked up another piece of holly, placed it deliberately in position, and then turned his spectacles on Diana.

"And there are more jenny-asses in it too than I should have expected!" he answered pointedly.

When Diana had undressed that evening Mrs. Fleming came into her room to say good-night, and sat down for a minute on the edge of her bed.

"Have you thought, dear," she said, "what it would have meant to Mr. Fleming and me to have been obliged to write to your father and mother and tell them you were lying dead, or, worse still,

a cripple with a broken spine; and what your father's and mother's feelings would have been at the news?"

Diana turned her face away.

"Thoughtlessness can sometimes amount to heartlessness in its lack of consideration for others."

"Monty dared me to do it."

"He never dreamed you actually would. Besides, are you going to do every idiotic, silly thing that every foolish person says you dare not? I thought you were more sensible, Diana! Remember, we [135] are responsible for you during the holidays, and I wish to return you whole to your parents. We use every reasonable precaution to take care of you, but I can't calculate on safeguarding you as if you were a baby of three."

Diana drummed her fingers on the pillow. Mrs. Fleming waited a moment, then tried a different tack.

"I'm not very strong, Diana. My heart is weak, and I'm afraid for some days I shall feel the effect of the shock you gave me this afternoon. I don't believe you're the kind of girl who'd deliberately want to make me ill."

Diana wriggled round, but her head was bent down.

"Remember that we care about you, dear. It would grieve us very much if the slightest little accident were to happen to you. We want you to have jolly holidays here, and to go back to school safe and well, with, I hope, a happy remembrance of the Vicarage."

Two soft arms were thrown round Mrs. Fleming's neck.

"I'd do anything for *you*, though I hate to be a molly-coddle!" whispered Diana. "I'm most fearfully sorry if I've really made you feel ill!"

The decoration of the church was only one of the incidents of Christmas; there were other things to be done before the festival arrived. The Flemings liked to preserve old traditions, and finding [136] that their little American guest was very keen on all the details of a genuine British Yule-tide, they did their best to satisfy her. Mrs. Fleming used the cherished half-pound of currants—which in the war-time shortage of dried fruits was all the grocer could send her—to make the frumenty and spiced cakes that from time immemorial had been eaten in that northern district to celebrate the feast of the Nativity. A Yule-log was sawn and placed upon the dining-room fire, and a huge bough of mistletoe hung up in the hall.

"We ought to have the Waits to make it just perfect!" said Diana.

"I believe some of the choir used to go round carol singing once," said Meg, "but it's been given up. The mothers said the girls caught cold, and they stayed out too late, so it was put a stop to. It's a pity in a way. Mrs. James was saying only the other day that she quite missed them, and so did Mrs. Holmes. They both said Christmas wasn't what it used to be."

The pupils of Diana's eyes were growing large and round and shining, as they always did when her fertile mind was evolving new ideas. She seized Meg's arm.

"Oh, I've got such a brain-wave!" she confided. "Look here! Why shouldn't we be Waits? We've learnt all those Christmas carols at school. Let's go round and sing them. It would be ripping fun!"

The idea appealed to Meg and Elsie, and, rather to the astonishment of the girls, the boys also [137] took it up with enthusiasm, and volunteered their assistance. They enlisted the help of the village schoolmistress, and some of the most tuneful among her pupils, and all on the spur of the moment made up their company.

"What always spoils carol singing," said Monty sententiously, "is that everybody's generally so beastly out of tune. They don't seem able to keep the pitch without a harmonium."

"Pity we can't carry a harmonium with us!"

"Why shouldn't we?" suggested Neale. "I don't mean I'm going to haul the thing on my back, so you needn't grin. I've a better notion than that. We'll see if the Blackwoods will lend us a cart. Put the harmonium inside, hang up a lantern to see by, and there you are, with a movable concert platform ready to take round where we like."

The others looked at Neale with admiration. It was such a very brainy idea, they wondered they had never thought of it for themselves. Time was short, as the performance was to be that evening, so they dispersed to make their arrangements. Ted Blackwood, a member of the church choir, agreed to bring his father's cart.

"I'll take t'owd mare," he grinned. "Shoo's steady, and won't bolt when th' harmonium starts. Aye, I've a big stable lantern as 'ull do too."

Here indeed was an excitement for a young American visitor. Diana could hardly wait till tea was [138]

over and darkness fell. Fortunately it was a fine evening, with a hint of frost in the air, so the expedition would not be damped by rain. Mrs. Fleming insisted upon all the party being very warmly clad, and brought out an old picture of "The Waits" to demonstrate that the use of mufflers was an integral part of the ceremony. Diana, to her delight, was lent a Red Ridinghood cloak of Meg's, clad in which she felt that she had stepped back at least three centuries, and was walking in the days of the Stuarts.

"I might be one of the pilgrims in the *Mayflower*!" she exclaimed. "What would Dad give to see me? I wish you were coming too," she added to Mrs. Fleming.

"I'm too busy, child, to-night," said Mrs. Fleming, kissing the roguish little face framed in the red hood. "Enjoy yourselves, chicks! And, Diana,"—with a warning finger held up—"*don't*, please, do anything desperately amazing!"

"I'll be an absolute model of mild mediæval maidenhood," promised that damsel, with twinkling eyes.

They went first to the Blackwoods' farm, then, when Ted had harnessed "t'owd mare", they proceeded with the cart to the schoolhouse, and, after a good deal of heaving and hauling, lifted in the harmonium and a stool for Miss Simpson, the schoolmistress, to sit upon while she played. The rest of the party having joined them, they jogged along to the first house on their list, that of Mrs. Holmes at the Old Grange Farm. They drew up the cart outside the door, placed lanterns on [139]
the harmonium, and saw Miss Simpson settled at the instrument—a matter of some difficulty, as the cart sloped, and the stool was inclined to slide away. Ted held the old mare by the bridle, in case the music might revive her youthful spirits and cause her to bolt. The others grouped themselves round the cart. Miss Simpson struck up, and through the keen night air rang out the cheerful strains of "Christians, awake!" The Holmes family opened the door in quite a state of excitement, and listened with much appreciation while "Good King Wenceslas", "The First Nowell", and other old carols were sung. They insisted on bringing the party indoors for slices of Yule cake, and would have given them hot coffee as well, but Monty, who wished to visit other houses, declared they had not time to wait while it was made. So they tramped on to the James's farm, where they had an equally hearty reception, and were regaled with cocoa, currant bread, and cheese.

It was a unique experience, trudging along country lanes with a cart and lanterns, with hoar-frost under foot, and a few stars winking in a misty sky, then standing in the cold night air to sing their carols. Diana felt that she could never forget it, and that the shrill voice of little Jack Greenhalgh warbling

> "Nowell! Nowell! Nowell! Nowell!
> Born is the King of Israel!"

would always be associated with her idea of Christmas. [140]

She had her fill of old-world customs, for she was allowed, by special favour, to go into the belfry and help for one brief minute to pull a bell. And after service on Christmas morning she stood in the church porch and watched the distribution of the "roth shillings", which, in accordance with the terms of an old charity, were handed over to "twelve worthy widows resident within the bounds of the parish". She helped in the afternoon at the schools, where a big tea-party and Christmas-tree were given to the children of the village, and joined nobly in the games that were played afterwards, tearing round at "Drop the Handkerchief", or pulling at "Oranges and Lemons", with unflagging energy.

"Have you had a nice Christmas Day, childie, away from all your own people?" asked Mrs. Fleming, holding Diana's face between her hands as she said good-night, and looking at her critically for signs of home-sickness.

But Diana's eyes were without a suspicion of moisture, and her voice was absolutely cheerful as she answered:

"Yes, thanks; just topping!"

[141]

CHAPTER X

A Fit of the Blues

The interest of experiencing a real old-fashioned English Christmas had kept Diana's spirits up at fizzling-over point, but directly the festival was over, her mental barometer came down with a run, and landed her in a bad fit of the blues. There were several reasons for this unfortunate plunge into an indigo atmosphere. First, the inevitable reaction after the over-excitement of breaking up, sending off presents and cards, and duly celebrating the Yule-tide feast. Diana was a highly-strung little person, whose nerves were apt to get on edge, and who made the common mistake of trying to live too fast. Her father's "lightning methods", which she much admired and imitated, were decidedly wearing to her vitality, and left her sometimes like a squeezed orange or an india-rubber ball that has lost its bounce. Then secondly, the French mails had been delayed,

and, since the holidays began, Diana had not received a single parcel, letter, or even solitary picture post card from her parents in Paris. The blank was great, and though the Flemings assured her that foreign posts were irregular, and that the whole of her correspondence would [142] probably arrive together in one big cargo, she nevertheless could not rid herself of the uneasy impression that illness or accident to father or mother might be the cause of the delay. Reason three, a hackneyed but very present trouble was the weather. The English climate had behaved itself during the first days of the holidays, and had shown Diana quite a story-book aspect of Christmas, with a light fall of snow on the fells, hoar-frost on all the plants and ferns in the garden, and the sun a red ball seen through a rime-tipped tracery of trees. After that, however, it revenged itself in rain, steady rain that came down from a hopelessly grey sky without the least glint of sunlight in it. It was very mild too; the air had a heavy languor that made everybody feel tired and disinclined for any exertion. Mrs. Fleming spread the table with sewing, and sighed at the largeness of the task which faced her. The Vicar shut himself in his study, and pinned a notice on the door stating that nobody must disturb him. Monty retired to develop photos; Neale, clad in a mackintosh, went out into the wet; Meg and Elsie buried themselves in books.

Diana, feeling that life was utterly drab, wandered from room to room doing nothing. She could not settle to sew, read, paint, write letters, or any normal employment, and had not even the patience to try to put together a jig-saw puzzle. She missed Wendy and her other chums amongst the intermediates, and was almost tempted to wish herself back at school. Her piquant little face [143] with this new *triste* aspect was a sorry spectacle, and Mrs. Fleming watched her uneasily.

"I hope the child isn't going to be home-sick," she said to herself. "I shall be sorry we took her in if we can't make her happy."

It was evident that something must be done, and something beyond the ordinary resources of books and dissected puzzles. Mrs. Fleming cudgelled her brains. Her few days' acquaintance with her young visitor had taught her that Diana needed judicious handling. It was no use making palpable efforts to interest her. In her pixie moods she seemed almost to resent it.

"I believe the secret of Diana is to switch her thoughts off herself on to other people," ruminated Mrs. Fleming. "Instead of trying so hard to amuse her, I shall ask *her* to amuse *us*."

She waited till her guest, who had taken an aimless prowl round the house, returned once more like a wandering will-o'-the-wisp to the dining-room, then she tackled her.

"Diana, I want you to do something very kind. I'm in low spirits to-day, and feeling as stupid as an owl. I believe we all are—Meg and Elsie, and the boys, and even the Vicar! I'd give anything for something to buoy me up and to look forward to. Suppose, after tea, we were to make a circle round the fire and tell stories—really jolly stories that we'd prepared beforehand. We'd each take the rest of the day to think them out. If possible, they must be personal experiences; things that [144] have actually happened to ourselves. You must have had adventures in America, I'm sure, that would interest us immensely. I'm just longing to hear about your life out there. Can't you write down a few notes, and give us a really good yarn? You've no idea how much I'd enjoy it."

Diana stopped whistling, and stood with her mouth screwed into a button. Her grey eyes were fixed on Mrs. Fleming speculatively.

"I didn't know grown-up ladies ever got bored stiff!" she remarked at last.

"They do horribly sometimes; indeed the more middle-aged they are the more they need cheering up, I think. They don't like 'getting on in years'."

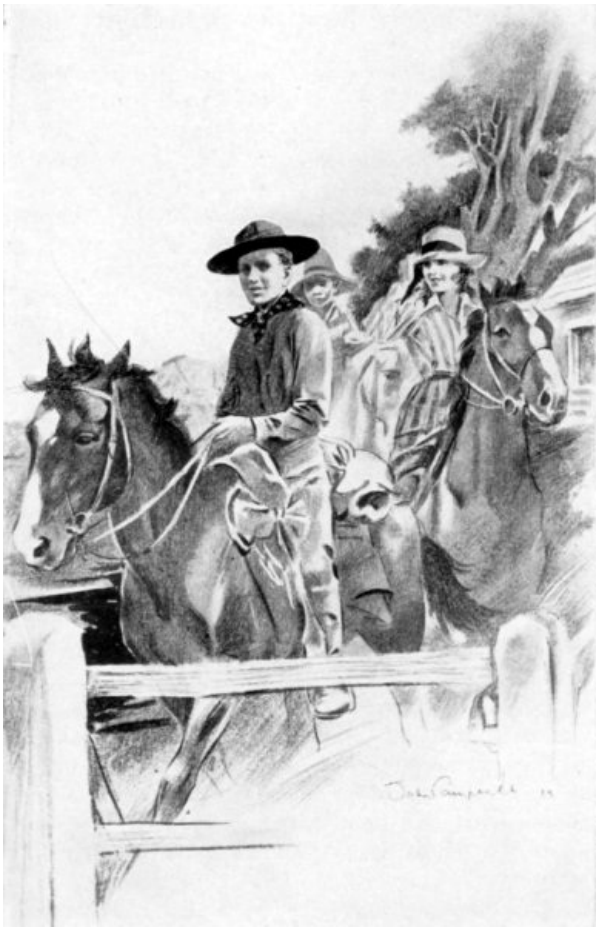
"I guess you want me to act jester."

"That's exactly the role I'd like to assign to you."

The twinkle was slowly coming back to Diana's eyes, and the dimples to the corners of her mouth. The effect was like sunshine bursting through a rain-cloud.

"I guess I'll try if I can remember anything to startle you, if you're out for sensations. It's a kind of literary society, isn't it? Can you lend me a pencil, please, and some waste paper? I don't know what I've done with my blotter. Thanks! Now I'm going right up to my bedroom to sort of ruminate."

Mrs. Fleming's prescription for low spirits acted like a charm. Diana spent most of the rest of theday scribbling. She came down to tea looking quite elated. The others tried to question her, [145] but she refused to be drawn. "Wait and see!" was all she would vouchsafe.



WE SET OFF AND RODE ALL THE MORNING

It was cosy in the drawing-room when the family collected and made a circle round the log-fire. By unanimous vote Diana's story was given first innings, and, seated in a basket-chair near the lamp, she opened her manuscript.

"I thought I'd rather read it than tell it, if you don't mind," she said. "I'm a duffer sometimes at telling things. Before I start off, though, I'd best explain who folks are, or you won't understand. Uncle Carr Clifford had a ranch in New Mexico, and I used to go and stay there months. They always kept a special pony for me to ride. Her name was Darkie, and she was just a peach. I used nearly to live on her back. Lenox, my cousin, would take me all round the ranch. I'd great times. Well, it was when I was staying at Buller's Creek (that was Uncle Carr's ranch) that this happened. Have I made it clear?"

"Crystal! Bowl ahead!"

So Diana began:

"THE LOST PONY

"I had been staying some weeks at Buller's Creek, and one morning, when I came down to breakfast, Lenox ran into the veranda. He looked fearfully excited.

"'Do you know,' he cried, 'that Darkie's missing from the stable?' [146]

"We all sprang up at the bad news, and Uncle Carr whistled. Darkie was my special pet, and, apart from that, she was the best pony on the ranch. How had she got out of the stable? Lenox had tied her up himself the night before. Either some malicious person must have let her loose or, worse still, some one must have stolen her.

"'I believe it's Lu Hudson!' declared Lenox and Uncle Carr nodded.

"Lu Hudson, whom most people called 'Spanish Lu', was the owner of the next ranch, and a very disagreeable neighbour. He was a big, rough, dark, hot-tempered fellow, with a bad reputation for picking quarrels and using his revolver. He and Uncle Carr were continually having lawsuits about the boundary of their ranches, and his sheep were constantly trespassing on the Buller's Creek ranges. He had the greatest admiration for Darkie, and several times had asked to buy her, but Uncle Carr had always curtly refused to part with her. The last time there had been trouble about the boundary, Spanish Lu had sworn that he would pay Uncle Carr out, and he was just the sort of desperate fellow to keep his word. Of course the first thing to be done was to ride round the ranch and see whether Darkie could be found anywhere.

"'I'm sorry I can't look after the matter myself to-day,' said Uncle Carr; 'but Jake and I have to get off to the mart at Louisville. She may have strayed, but it's not likely. I don't [147] believe you'll find her.'

"As soon as Uncle and Jake, the herdsman, had started off in the buggy, Lenox saddled Whitefoot, his own pony, to go in search of Darkie. I begged and prayed and implored to go too, so finally they let me have my way, and saddled Jap for me, a brown pony, quiet and steady, though not so clever as Darkie. Coonie, a little half-caste boy, went with us.

"'The air feels heavy this morning,' said Aunt Frances, as we were starting. 'If a storm comes on, make for cover. Don't try to get home across the prairie till it's over.'

"The sun was shining, and we did not think the weather looked at all like a storm. I rather laughed at Auntie as she fastened a wrap on to my saddle, with instructions to wear it if I felt cold. Lenox had the lunch-basket, and also a small axe, which he always took with him when going round the ranch.

"We set off and rode all the morning, but never a trace of Darkie was to be found. We ate our lunch in a stony little glen, where a stream flowed down from the ridge above. I was very keen on getting wild flowers, and while our ponies rested, I wandered up the bank of the stream, gathering myself a posy. I went on and on, much farther than I intended. At the very head of the glen was a natural barrier of rock, with a few steep steps leading on to a kind of plateau at the top. This spot, I knew, marked the boundary [148] between my uncle's ranch and that of Spanish Lu. The glen was the property of Buller's Creek; the farther side of the ridge belonged to the Hudson range, and the plateau was neutral ground.

"Something, I don't know what, impelled me, as I stood there, to give the long-drawn, peculiar whistle with which we always called Darkie. To my astonishment, a whinny came from the plateau above. In another moment I was scrambling up the rock steps. There, tied to a cedar-stump, was Darkie. She recognized me at once, and whinnied again. There was nobody in sight. I did not even stop to think of Lu Hudson. I just ran to Darkie and untied her, and took her by the bridle. It was a fearful business to lead her down the rock steps, but she was as surefooted as a mule, and together we managed it somehow. The boys nearly had a fit when I made my appearance with the missing pony. It was pretty plain, so they said, that Spanish Lu must have stolen her and taken her there for safety, intending to come back and fetch her. Where was he now? The answer came unexpectedly.

"'What's that smoke there?' asked Coonie.

"Lenox and I turned to look in the direction in which he pointed. A grey haze was mounting from the horizon.

"'It's more like dust than smoke,' said Lenox. 'I wouldn't mind betting it's sheep.'

"Who could have the impudence to be driving sheep on to the Buller's Creek range? It [149] seemed more than probable that Lu Hudson had broken his pledge, and was again trespassing on his neighbour's property. Lenox and I looked at each other. If Spanish Lu were within short distance of us, the sooner we got Darkie safely home, the better.

"'I'll ride her, and you lead Jap,' I decided.

"We started off at once. As we got out of the glen and on to the prairie we could see in the distance an immense flock of sheep, herded by two men on horseback. We were too far from them to recognize faces, but the general appearance of one of them suggested Spanish Lu.

"'They're grazing east of the ridge, in spite of what the judge settled!' exclaimed Lenox angrily. 'If I hadn't to take care of you and Darkie, I'd go and tell them what I think of them.'

"It seemed no use running our heads into danger, and perhaps having Darkie wrenched from us, so we made off east towards home. We had only gone about a mile when suddenly the sky to the west behind us turned black. In a few minutes we were in the thick of a terrific blizzard. My first instinct was to give Darkie her head and fly for the ranch, but Lenox caught at my bridle.

"'Ride back to the glen!' he shouted.

"Lenox knew enough about prairie blizzards to prevent him from trying to find our way home through this one. On the open plains, where the wind has full sweep, a blizzard is a thing to be dreaded. Though we had to face the storm to ride back to the glen, it was [150] the safest thing to do, for we were not far away, and we should find shelter there. With our heads down, and sharp scraps of ice beating on our saddles, we urged our ponies along. Suddenly we caught sight of a great moving mass coming on with the storm. It was the immense flock of sheep, that had stampeded before the blizzard, and were drifting along across the prairie. Lenox stood up in his stirrups, and shouted to Coonie:

"'Ride over there, and we'll turn them into the glen!'

"Coonie understood in a second, and so did I. Unless we could drive the sheep into shelter, undoubtedly the whole number would perish in the storm. Lenox thrust Jap's

bridle into my hand, and dashed ahead. In a few minutes he and Coonie had succeeded in turning the leaders towards the entrance of the creek, and after them swept the rest of the flock. We followed into the sheltered glen, and, dismounting from our ponies, found a nook under a projecting piece of rock. There were some tree-stumps about, and Lenox set to work to chop them with his axe, and soon made a roaring fire. How glad I was that Aunt Frances had made me bring the wrap! I should have been frozen without it. Even by the fireside the air was bitter. What must it be like out in the open prairie, we wondered? We had not sat long in our sheltered nook before we heard voices, and two figures, covered with ice and snow, made their appearance leading horses. They staggered to our camp-fire, half exhausted by the violence of the storm. Though his hair and his beard were white with snow, we had no difficulty in recognizing Spanish Lu. He thawed for a little, and then spoke to his herdsman. [151]

"'The sheep!' he gasped.

"'They're all here,' answered Lenox in triumph. 'We saw them, and turned them into the creek.'

"Spanish Lu stared at us as if he could hardly believe his eyes.

"'You kids! You turned the whole herd?'

"I expect he felt pretty grateful, for, if it hadn't been for Lenox and Coonie, several thousand of his sheep would certainly have been lost, and, as it was, they were safely grazing in shelter. When the storm was sufficiently over for us to venture home, he led out Darkie himself and helped me to mount. Neither he nor we said a word about her loss, though we were perfectly certain he must have taken her from the stable.

"After that day he kept his sheep to his own side of the ridge, and, though he was never a pleasant neighbour, Uncle Carr wasn't obliged to go to law with him again about the boundary of the two ranches. So we felt that Darkie had patched up peace, particularly as we didn't accuse Lu Hudson of taking her. Horse-stealing is a very serious crime in the West, so I expect he thought he had got off uncommonly well."

"And what became of Darkie?" asked Meg, as Diana's manuscript came to a rather abrupt end.

"Uncle Carr gave up the ranch when he went into Congress, and Darkie and all the other ponies were left at Buller's Creek. She wouldn't have been happy off the prairie, or I'd have begged to have her. Lenox? Why, he's still in France; but I suppose he'll be demobilized soon, and going back to Harvard. He wants to be a professor, not a ranchman. He's a fearfully clever boy. Now, I've read my story, and I'm waiting for yours. Who's going to come next?" [152]

"After such excitements as horse-stealing and a blizzard, our poor little adventures would seem very tame," said Mrs. Fleming, voicing the general feeling of the family, each member of which was showing a plain desire to shirk. "Suppose we keep our stories for another evening, and play games now? Meg, get pencils and paper, and we'll have a round of 'telegrams'."

[153]

CHAPTER XI

Diana to the Rescue

Next morning the postman arrived quite laden with parcels and letters addressed to "Miss Diana Hewlitt". As Mrs. Fleming had prophesied, everything came at once, and her young guest spent a busy and ecstatic half-hour opening her various packages. Scent, French chocolates, Parisian embroideries, gloves, ribbons, and other dainty vanities such as girls love were raved over and spread forth on the table, while Diana devoured the contents of her letters. From one large envelope she drew forth a photograph of a lovely lady in evening-dress.

"It's Mother! Oh, how perfectly sweet! And the very image of her, too!" she cried, handing the photo to Meg for admiration.

Her fit of the blues had utterly vanished, and she was in a rose-coloured mood to-day. Meg, leaning over the table, deeply interested in the parcels, looked critically at the picture of the bright-eyed lady with the soft coils of fair hair.

"She's not like you, Diana."

"No. A thousand times better looking than I am!"

"I suppose you're like your father?" [154]

"Yes, so people say, though I can't see it myself."

"How pretty she is—and how young! She might almost be your sister. And yet I suppose she must be middle-aged."

"What do you mean by 'middle-aged'?" demanded Diana sharply.

"Why, anything over thirty! I call *my* mother middle-aged."

"Do you?"

"Of course!" (Meg was still examining the photo.) "What a perfectly glorious dress to be taken in! And I adore her necklace. She's like the pictures one sees in *The Queen*. It must be lovely to have a pretty mother."

Diana was looking at Meg with an unfathomable expression in her grey eyes.

"Don't you call your mother pretty, then?" she asked.

"Oh, yes! she's a darling; but she's had her day. She's not a society beauty, is she?"

"N-n-n-o, I suppose not," said Diana thoughtfully.

The boys came into the room just then; the conversation was interrupted, and Meg probably forgot all about it. Diana, however, did not. At lunch-time she critically studied her hostess's features, and mentally compared them with those of the photo which had arrived that morning from Paris.

"I don't believe Mrs. Fleming is really any older than Mother," she decided. "She's been very [155] pretty some time, but she's let herself go. It's a pity. All the same, I could shake Meg!"

An impression that had been gathering in Diana's mind ever since she arrived at the Vicarage now shaped itself into definite form. She did not like the attitude of her friends towards their mother. They were devoted to her, but their love lacked all element of admiration. Mrs. Fleming had made the common mistake of effacing herself utterly for the sake of her children. She had dropped her former accomplishments, even the music in which she had once excelled, and made herself an absolute slave to her household. So long as Meg and Elsie wore pretty frocks she cared nothing for her own dress; she never bought a new book or took a holiday; her interests were centred in the young people's achievements, and she had become merely the theatre of their actions. Going away seldom, and reading little, had narrowed her horizon. She often felt her ideas were out of date, and that she was not keeping up with the modern notions her children were imbibing at school. They always spoke with more respect of their teachers' opinions than of hers, and would allude to subjects they were learning as if they did not expect her to understand them. Sometimes they assumed little airs of patronage towards her. Among themselves they occasionally referred to her as "Only Mother!"

Diana, thinking it all carefully over, raged mentally. "I guess I've got to make those Flemings [156] admire their mother!" she said to herself. "Just how to do it beats me at present, but I don't give up. I'd like to fix her hair for her if I dared. She strains it back till she looks like a skinned rabbit, and her dresses were made in the year one, I should say. She's a dear, all the same, though. If she could only be cured of feeling on the shelf, she'd grow ten years younger."

Having set herself the surprising undertaking of rejuvenating Mrs. Fleming, Diana went warily to work. It would certainly not do to reproach Meg, Elsie, and the boys for lack of appreciation of their mother; they would simply have stared in utter amazement. Somehow, by hook or by crook, she must be made to shine, so as to command their honest admiration. Diana catalogued her personal attractions:

1. A really quite classical nose.
2. A nice, neat mouth.
3. Good teeth.
4. A pretty colour when she gets hot or excited.
5. Quite fascinating brown eyes.
6. Hair that would be lovely if it were only decently done, instead of scooped away and screwed into a tight knob at the back.

Anybody with these points might make so much of them, if they only knew how to use them properly. Diana wondered if it would be possible to buy a book on the secrets of fascination. It [157] was just the element that was lacking. Putting personality aside, she began probing into the extent of her friend's mental equipment. She induced her to bring out the water-colour sketches of former years, and even wrung from her a half promise that some day—when the weather was nice, and if she had time—she would paint a picture of the church.

"The boys would each like a sketch of their mother's to take to school with them," decreed Diana. "Monty would have his framed and hang it in his study, and show it to all his friends as *your* work."

"Why, so he might," said Mrs. Fleming, looking much surprised. The idea had evidently never occurred to her before.

From painting, Diana passed to other accomplishments. Mrs. Fleming rendered the accompaniments to Elsie's violin pieces and Meg's songs with a delicacy of touch that revealed the true musician.

"I wish you'd play something to me," begged Diana one day when the girls' practising was over and their mother was rising from the piano.

"*I*, my dear child! I never play now."

"Why not?"

"I gave up my music long ago, when I got married."

"You haven't forgotten it, though."

"Well, not altogether, of course. I'm a good reader still."

"Please!" urged Diana. [158]

And, to content her impetuous visitor, Mrs. Fleming gave in. She pulled a volume of Chopin from the stand, and began the twelfth nocturne. It was years since she had played it, but as she touched the keys the old spirit crept back into her fingers, and the notes came rippling out delicately and easily. Diana, sunk back in the recesses of the long basket-chair, listened fascinated. She loved music when it was of a superior quality, and she did not often get the chance of hearing playing such as this.

"More! More!" she begged, when the nocturne came to an end.

The ice once broken, Mrs. Fleming, as much to her own astonishment as to that of the family, actually revived her interest in the piano. She hunted out her old pieces and began to practise them. She said it was to amuse Diana, but it was evident that enjoyment was mixed with her philanthropy. As a girl she had studied under a good master, and she had much natural talent. She would improvise sometimes, and even compose little things of her own.

"Why, my dear," said her husband, peeping into the drawing-room one evening just at the conclusion of the "Moonlight Sonata", "this takes me back to the time when we were engaged! I've been sitting listening in my study."

Diana, squatting on one foot in the corner of the sofa, clapped her hands softly. She liked the Vicar, but she thought his antiquarian researches monopolized the conversation at meal-times. It [159] was quite nice to hear him express appreciation for some other line than his own. Diana had a scheme in her mind, and, when she judged the time was ripe, she proposed it suddenly and boldly in the face of the whole united family of Flemings. It was nothing more or less than that Mrs. Fleming should play a solo at the concert which was to be held at the schools on the 10th of January. In vulgar parlance, she "shot her bird sitting", plumped the idea upon her, and dragged forth an acceptance before—as the poor lady afterwards protested—she had time to realize what she was undertaking.

"Certainly. Why not?" confirmed her husband. "We badly want some more items on the programme. I shall put you down for two solos."

"But what *can* I play?" remonstrated Mrs. Fleming.

"Oh, Mother, you know heaps of things! Don't be absurd!" reproved Meg.

"I guess we'll have a rehearsal to-night, and choose your star pieces," said Diana, with shining eyes.

So far, so good. Her plot had answered admirably. The family took it almost as a matter of course that "Mother" was to perform at the concert, though it had never occurred to any of them to ask her to do so.

"She's a very good pianist," said Meg airily to Diana.

"Glad you think so!" rapped out Diana, with an emphasis that made Meg stare and whisper [160] afterwards to Elsie that she couldn't quite somehow get at the back of "Stars and Stripes".

It was a mighty matter to select the two solos. Mrs. Fleming, flustered and bewildered at this unexpected dive into publicity, hesitated among many pieces. As she could not make up her own mind, Diana made it up for her.

"We want the 'Moonlight Sonata' for one, and Chopin's 'Ballade in A flat' for the other," she decided. "They're classical, but they're so exquisite that I guess even the old women will enjoy them. Then for the encores you could play——"

"Encores!" gasped Mrs. Fleming feebly.

"Why, of course there'll be encores! Schubert's 'Hedge Roses' for one, and that nocturne of your own for the other. It'll just about take the house!"

So Mrs. Fleming, with an extraordinary feeling that she had somehow been whisked back to her school-days, sat practising in the drawing-room, with Diana, curled up in the corner of the sofa for audience. It was a dream-world for them both. Diana had been reading *Stories of the Great Composers*, and now she knew the hearts of the musicians she could enter more fully into the meaning of their music. She had fallen, utterly and entirely, under the magic spell of Chopin; the lovely, liquid melodies thrilled her like the echo of something beyond her earthly experience, and seemed to go soaring away into regions she had not yet explored, regions of breathless beauty, [161] though only entered by the gates of sorrow. She would read Alfred Noyes's poem on Chopin as she sat listening to the haunting, bewitching rhythm of the "Ballade in A", and the ring of the poetry merged itself into the glamour of the music, so that ever afterwards she connected the two.

"'Do roses in the moonlight glow
Like this and this?' I could not see
His eyes, and yet—they were quite wet,
Blinded, I think! What should I be
If in that hour I did not know
My own diviner debt?"

or

"Wrapped in incense gloom,
In drifting clouds and golden light;
Once I was shod with fire, and trod
Beethoven's path through storm and night:
It is too late now to resume
My monologue with God."

"I don't wonder Chopin had his piano carried out into the fields!" she commented. "I don't believe he could have composed in the house. You hear the wind blowing through his pieces, and see the tassels of the laburnum-tree he was sitting under swaying about in it."

The concert was an annual gaiety which most of the people in the neighbourhood attended, and was generally much above the average of village performances. North-country folk are musical, and this district of the Pennines had produced many voices that passed on to cathedral choirs. Instrumental music, also, was appreciated and understood, and before the war there had been [162] quite a good little orchestra in the parish. When Mr. Fleming drew up his programme, he knew the audience for whom he was catering, and did not fill it entirely with coon songs and ragtimes. Diana, to whom the affair loomed as the main event of the holidays, discussed at the Vicarage the eternally feminine question of dress.

"No one ever comes very smart," Mrs. Fleming assured her.

"But one likes to see the performers in something pretty," pleaded Diana. "It makes it so much more festive, doesn't it?"

"Mother, you intend to go in evening-dress, don't you?" said Meg.

Mrs. Fleming had intended nothing of the sort, but urged on by the girls, she took a review of her wardrobe. She shook her head over the result.

"I haven't anything at all except that grey silk, and it's as old as the hills. Why, I got it for my sister's wedding, when Roger was a baby!"

"But fashions come round again," said Diana, who, with Meg and Elsie, had been allowed to watch what came out of the big ottoman in the spare bedroom. "Why, this dress is the very image of the picture of one in that magazine Mother sent me from Paris! It only wants the sleeves shortened and some lace put in, and the neck turned down to make it lower, and then a fichu put [163] round. Here's the very thing! I'd fix it for you if you'd let me. I'd adore to do it."

No one knew exactly how Diana managed to work matters, but for this occasion she took over Mrs. Fleming's toilet, and that astonished lady resigned herself into her hands. She was a natty little person, with exquisite taste, and by the aid of some really good lace, which the ottoman yielded, she managed to transform the grey silk dress into a very creditable imitation of the Parisian fashion-plate. She even dared to venture a step further without offending.

"I often help Mother fix her hair when she's going out, and she calls me her little *coiffeuse*. I'm crazy to try yours, if I may."

"'In for a penny, in for a pound,' I suppose, you young witch!" acquiesced Mrs. Fleming, letting her enthusiastic guest have her way.

So on the evening of the concert Diana shut herself up in her hostess's bedroom with a pair of crimping-irons and some curling-tongs. She covered up the result with a light gauze veil.

"Don't let them see you till you get to the concert," she implored, helping her friend to put on her cloak. "I want them to get a real surprise. I guess it will make them sit up!"

The parish hall was quite full that evening, and the platform was prettily and appropriately decorated with flags and plants in pots. There was a sprinkling of local gentry on the front benches, and Miss Todd, who had returned after the holidays, and was entertaining some visitors [164] at the Abbey, brought her whole house-party. The villagers had turned up in full force, thoroughly prepared to enjoy themselves. The Fleming family sat at the end of the second row, and watched as the audience filed in.

"Where's Mother?" asked Elsie.

"She's in the performers' room, talking to Miss Watson," vouchsafed Diana, chuckling softly to herself.

Then the concert began. There was a madrigal by the choir, and a glee for four male voices, and a duet for soprano and mezzo, and then came the item for which Diana was waiting:

The curtain at the back of the platform was drawn aside, and a lady entered—a lady who was palpably nervous, but oh, so pretty! Her brown eyes shone like two stars, and her cheeks were the colour of the knot of carnation ribbon that fastened the lace fichu of her dress. Her lovely bronze hair was parted on one side, and rippled lightly over her forehead; it looked the very perfection of glossy fluffiness. She wore a moonstone pendant set in dull silver that matched the shimmering grey of her dress. The piano had been drawn to the front of the platform, and she took her place. Then the magic music began. Diana knew her friend could play well, but she had never heard her reach this pitch before. The audience listened as if spell-bound, and, when the [165] last note died away, broke into a storm of applause. There was no question about their enthusiasm, and an encore was inevitable. They stamped heartily, indeed, for a second encore, but Mrs. Fleming refused to return to the platform, and sent on the next performer instead. The "Ballade in A flat", in the second part of the programme, was an almost greater success, and produced shouts of "Brava!" from the back of the hall. Pendlemere people could appreciate good music, and showed their approval with north-country heartiness.

The Fleming family sat during the performance gazing as if they could scarcely believe the evidence of their own eyes and ears. Diana had calculated upon giving them a surprise, and she had certainly done so. Apparently it was a very pleasant one, to judge from the expression on their faces.

As the crowd filed out from the benches at the close of the concert, Diana found herself walking behind Meg, who was speaking to a friend.

"That 'Moonlight Sonata' was beautiful!" Ada Davis was saying. "And Mrs. Fleming looked so charming to-night! How nice to have such a pretty, clever mother!"

"I'm *awfully* proud of her!" agreed Meg, with unction.

"Humph! High time you were!" sniffed Diana behind.

At the door the Vicar was helping his wife into her cloak. He put it round her with quite a gallant [166] little air, and offered her his arm as they stepped out into the starlight together.

"I hardly know you to-night, Sylvia. You excelled yourself!" he remarked.

"'Sylvia'!" Diana triumphed inwardly. "That's the first time I've ever heard him call her anything except 'Mother'. If *I* get married, I'll want my husband to call me 'Diana', even if I've a dozen children to be 'Mother' to! I guess Mrs. Fleming has hopped off the shelf to-day, and I just hope to goodness she'll never go back."

[167]

CHAPTER XII

Diana Breaks Out

Diana went back to school in the wildest and most rampageous of spirits. She felt that she just had to let off steam somehow. She seized Wendy's hand, tore with her to the very top of the house and down again, then careered along the corridor in such a mad, not to say noisy stampede, that Miss Todd issued from her study like a lion from its lair, and fixed the culprits with the full concentrated power of what the girls called her "scholastic eye".

"Winifred and Diana," she remarked in calm, measured tones, "if I have to remind you again about walking quietly in the passages, it will mean forty lines for you both, and I should be sorry to have to give punishments on the first day of term."

The tempestuous pair, very much sobered down, tip-toed away, and went to unpack their possessions in their separate dormitories. Diana found Loveday in the ivy room, and burst in upon her with as much of the bubbling-over spirits as she dared to exhibit, hugging her till she nearly choked her.

"I've missed you loads, Loviekins!" she assured her. "It felt queer to be in bed, and not have you [168] on the other side of a curtain. I used to wake up in the night and begin to speak to you out of sheer force of habit. I wanted my 'little elder sissie' awful bad sometimes! Did you miss me the least tiny atom? Do you care that much for your 'pixie girl'?"

"Of course I missed you, darling! I'm just delighted to see you again! It's nice to be back. I haven't enjoyed the holidays *very* much. I never do——"

"I know," said Diana sympathetically, as Loveday hesitated. "I could read that between the lines, in your letters. You wrote me absolutely ripping letters! I loved them! You were a dear to write so often. It must have taken heaps of time."

"I'd nothing very much else to do," sighed Loveday, disengaging herself gently from Diana's arms. "Let me go, child! I haven't half finished my unpacking, and you haven't even begun yours

yet."

"*Bust* the unpacking!" said Diana naughtily. "I don't feel inclined to be tidy; I shall just shovel armfuls of things out, and pitch them anyhow into the drawers. Yes, Loveday Seton, I feel like that! I'm 'fey' to-day, as the Scotch say, and must 'dree my weird'. Don't quite know exactly what that means; but I guess I've got a little pixie imp dancing around inside me, and he's going to make me do something crazy. There's no help for it! It's kismet!" [169]

"And Miss Hampson is also kismet!" said Loveday, leaving her own box and coming to the rescue of Diana's garments, which were being literally pitched into the drawers with no regard at all for their condition. "Look how you're crushing your blouses! Go and sit on the bed, and let me do it. There! What a baby thing you are! You're more like four than fourteen!"

"It pays," said Diana serenely, squatting cross-legged on her bed, while Loveday's neat hands arranged her possessions. "If I were a sedate, goody-goody, 'old-beyond-her-years', staid sort of a person, you'd never spoil me as you do. I'll try to practise it if you like, though. Anything to please you! How would this do?"

Diana's mobile face suddenly underwent a quick change. The corners of her mouth were drawn down, her eyelids drooped, while her eyes were cast upward in a sort of sanctimonious squint.

"Don't!" implored Loveday, almost hysterically. "Oh, suppose your face were to stick like that! You'd look the most abominable little Pharisee. I'd hate you!"

"You like your pixie-girl best? Then, that settles it! Now, if you ever scold me again about anything, I'll put on the Pharisee face; so I warn you. You've got to choose between them. Yes, I know I'm a handful—I always have been—but, perhaps, it's good for you, Loveday mine: develops [170] your character, and makes you more patient and persevering, and—and——"

"You're the cheekiest little imp on the face of the earth!" interrupted Loveday. "Get up, this minute, and come and finish your own work. I've something else to do besides unpack for you. If Miss Hampson comes and finds my box still half full——"

"She'll say how slow you've been, and what a nice, tidy child Diana is! Don't try to look 'proper', Loveday! It doesn't suit your style of beauty. Yes, put my collars away, too, or I shall only crush them. There! Very well done! First prize for order! I think you're absolutely topping, if you ask me!"

All that evening, and all the next morning, Diana's spirits continued to fizz. She might possibly have worked them off out-of-doors, but the British climate was against her; once more the fells were swathed in their familiar garments of mist, and the rain came pitter-pattering down on the roof of Pendlemere Abbey, and falling from the eaves in a monotonous drip, drip, drip. It was drawing afternoon, and promptly at half-past two intermediates and juniors would be due in the studio to go on with the various copies and models on which they were engaged. It was now shortly after two o'clock, and the school was amusing itself for the half-hour between meal-time and lessons. During that brief interval Diana, so to speak, "popped her cork".

"Hallo, America! You're looking rather weedy, standing on one leg like a marabou stork!" quizzed [171] Sadie. "What's the matter with you?"

"Your beastly, abominable British climate!" retorted Diana. "It goes on rain, rain, raining till I'm fed up. I want to get away somewhere, and see something different from just school. I wasn't born for a convent!"

"I should think not!" chuckled Vi.

"But I'm in one, and I'm tired of it! I'm tired of you all! Yes, I mean what I say!"

"Draw it mild, Stars and Stripes!" warned Sadie.

"I don't care! School's dull, and I'm bored stiff. I'll wake things up somehow; see if I don't!"

"What'll you do, old sport?"

"Ah! *Just wait and see!*" nodded Diana, putting down the foot that had been twisted round her leg, and stamping to get rid of the pins and needles that followed her cramped position. "It's just possible I may turn philanthropist, and give you all a dinky little surprise," she added casually, as she strolled towards the door.

The studio was a large room on the upper story, with the orthodox north windows and top-light, in the shape of a skylight. It was fitted with desks and easels, and round its walls was a row of casts on pedestals. The girls liked drawing afternoon well enough, but they were not in any particular hurry to go upstairs and take out boards and pencils. It was not until twenty-five minutes past two that Wendy, Vi, Sadie, and Peggy came leisurely along the top landing. They [172] opened the door of the studio in quite an every-day manner, and walked in. Then they all four stared and ejaculated:

"O-o-o-oh!"

"Jehosh-a-phat!"

"I say!"

"Good night!"

They might well exclaim, for a very startling and unanticipated spectacle greeted them. The classic heads of the casts had lost their dignity. Apollo wore a tam-o'-shanter cocked rakishly over his left ear; Clytie had on a motor veil; Juno and Ceres were fashionably arrayed in straw hats; a wreath of twisted paper encircled the intellectual brow of Minerva; Psyche peered through spectacles; Perseus was decked with a turban; and, worst of all, the beautiful upper lip of Venus sported a moustache. Armed with a pointer stood Diana, ready, like Mrs. Jarley of the famous waxworks, to act show-woman.

"Walk up! Walk up, ladies and gentlemen!" she began glibly. "This isn't funny at all, it's calm and classical. Greek art up-to-date is what I call it. If Apollo had lived in this British climate I guess he'd have needed a tammy to keep his hair in curl; and Psyche must have been short-sighted when she blundered about hunting for Cupid; she'd have found him in a decent pair of spectacles, poor girl! Clytie suffered from earache, and couldn't motor without a veil; as for Venus, it's giving [173] her the vote that's forced a moustache; she's sent for a safety-razor, but it hasn't arrived yet."

More girls had come in during Diana's explanation, and they wandered round the room in explosions of laughter.

"Why has Perseus got a turban on?" demanded Tattie.

"Because his hair grew thin on the top, and even Tatcho didn't fetch up another crop of curls, and Andromeda so objected to seeing him bald that there was nothing for it but to turn Moslem and wear a turban. He did it in self-defence, because she threatened to buy him a dark wig, and he said it would make him look like a Jew."

"That's *my* hat!" objected Vi, pointing to the straw that decorated Juno.

"Excuse me—hers! The lady's gone on the land, working like a nigger digging the ground for the potato crop. You see, Jupiter hasn't got demobilized yet, and——"

The flower of Diana's eloquence suddenly withered and dried up as if electrocuted. In the doorway, above the heads of the giggling girls, appeared a vision in pince-nez—an avenging vision that passed rapidly through the several stages of amazement, consternation, and wrath.

"Di-ana *Hew*litt!" snapped Miss Hampson. "Go down and report yourself *instantly* to Miss Todd. This is simply disgraceful! Girls, take your seats! Tattie and Vi, help to remove those—those——" [174] The irate mistress paused for a word, but, failing to find one adequate to the occasion, began instead, her fingers trembling with indignation, to strip the turban from the classic head of Perseus.

Dead, awful silence reigned in the room. Not a girl dared to giggle; a few began nervously to sharpen pencils, but most sat and stared while the casts were denuded of their trappings. Miss Hampson removed the moustache from Venus as if she were apologizing to that deity for sacrilege, and, with her own handkerchief, wiped away from the lovely lip the seccotine which had attached the masculine appendage to the Queen of Beauty. She rolled up the hats in the towel which had served as turban, set her pupils to work at their copies, then marched sternly downstairs to lay the full enormity of the case before the justly-shocked ears of Miss Todd. Nobody ever heard exactly what happened in the interview; no coaxing or persuasion would induce Diana to disclose details even to Wendy or Loveday, but it was generally understood in the school that Miss Todd had "spoken her mind". One result loomed large, and that was the punishment. It was absolutely unique. Perhaps the Principal was tired of giving poetry to learn or lines to write, and considered that confinement to bounds was not very good for a girl's health, so she devised something else to act as a discipline. For a week Diana was condemned not to wear evening-dress. It was a far greater trial than it sounds. Each night before supper the school [175] changed into pretty frocks, and, when the meal was over, spent a pleasant hour together at recreation. With everybody else in festive attire, it was terrible for Diana to be obliged to come downstairs in her serge skirt and jersey, the one Cinderella of the party. Most especially trying was it on Saturday, when chairs and tables were pushed back in the dining-room, and dancing was the order of the evening. Poor Diana, in her thick morning-shoes, stood forlornly in a corner, refusing all offers of partners, but watching wistfully as the others whirled by. Miss Hampson, whose wrath was of the short, explosive kind that quickly turns to softness of heart, was understood to murmur something to Miss Todd about the impossibility of waltzing in anything but dancing-slippers; but the Principal's mouth was set firm, and she would not remit the least atom of the sentence till it was paid to the uttermost farthing.

If Diana looked wistful, she nevertheless bore her punishment with dignity. She was a girl of spirit, and she did not mean to betray, even by the blink of an eyelid, how much she cared. Geraldine, Hilary, and Ida had rubbed in her ostracism, and certain impudent juniors had enjoyed themselves with witticisms at her expense. To these she must preserve an attitude of sang-froid. But up in the ivy room, when she went to bed, the mask fell off. The Diana that cuddled in Loveday's arms was a very different Diana from the don't-care young person of downstairs. [176] Loveday—who understood her now—consoled and kissed where a term ago she would have scolded. There are some dispositions that can only be managed by kisses.

"It wasn't as if I'd taken a hammer and smashed the wretched old casts!" sobbed Diana. "I really didn't do them any damage; even the seccotine was easily sponged off Venus. But Miss Todd talked and talked as if I'd done something irreligious in church. I'd never do that, you know!

Would I, now? She said I had 'an irreverent mind'. I don't believe she'll ever *quite* forgive me. And oh, Hilary has been so nasty! Thank goodness, dancing evening's done with! I've only Monday and Tuesday nights to go through now, then the whole wretched week will be over. I suppose I'm to be allowed to wear my Sunday clothes to-morrow? If I mayn't, I'll sham ill and stop in bed. I won't go to church in my brown coat and tammy, and have Mr. Fleming and everybody staring at me. I just *couldn't*! I'd die!"

"It's all right about that—don't you worry! I asked Miss Hampson, and she said: 'Certainly, Sunday clothes'. I'll speak to Hilary, and try to get her to leave you alone. As for those kids, just leave them to me; I'll tackle them, and tell them what I think of the way they behaved to-night—the young wretches! I fancy I'll make them squirm!"

"You mascot! Miss Todd says I've been utterly and entirely spoilt. Do *you* think I have?"

Loveday took the piquant little face between her two hands and looked a moment into the upturned grey eyes. [177]

"Yes," she decided. "You're undoubtedly a spoilt darling—but you're a darling all the same," she added softly under her breath.

[178]

CHAPTER XIII

Crusoe Island

When the days grew a little finer, and it was possible to venture out of doors without being almost drowned, Miss Chadwick began to put the "Principles of Agriculture" into practical application. All through the winter she and her assistants—Miss Carr and Miss Ormrod—had worked in all weathers looking after the poultry, the pony, and the new greenhouse, but it was only at rare intervals that it had been possible for the school to turn out and do digging in the garden. The "Land Classes" had, however, been studying the scientific side of the matter. They had analysed soils, estimated the rainfall, and examined the germination of seeds; they understood such mysterious terms as bacteria, protozoa, cotyledons, trenching and ridging, cross-fertilization and spermatozoids, and had some elementary acquaintance with the theory of the rotation of crops. They felt like full-fledged farmers when Miss Chadwick wrote on the black-board such questions as:—

"How far apart should different kinds of orchard trees be planted to ensure enough sunlight?"

"Explain a method of testing seeds." [179]

"What effect has transplanting on a seedling?"

"Describe the difference in structure between a corn-stem and a rose-stem. Make a cross-section drawing of each."

They tried experiments, such as planting in a box six beans with the scarred ends down, and six with the scarred ends up, and noted the results from day to day; they placed blotting-paper between two panes of glass, with seeds next to the glass, put the apparatus in water, and demonstrated the growth of roots; they started one plant in the dark, and another in a light place, grew identical peas in moist cotton or saw-dust, broke the seed leaves from specimen beans to observe what happened, and compared the results of distilled water and tap water as nourishment.

Everybody agreed, however, that it was much more interesting to put on their land costumes and work out-of-doors. Miss Chadwick, whose methods were on the newest lines, taught rhythmic digging, which is far less fatiguing than anyhow exertions, and was very particular about the position of the body and the action of the spade. Miss Todd, looking on with huge satisfaction, felt that she was cultivating girls as well as vegetables, and that her educational experiment promised elements of success. Certain special pupils were allowed to help to attend to the poultry—a coveted honour as soon as the fluffy chickens and ducklings began to be hatched; [180] others were being trained to understand bee-keeping; it was rumoured in the school that Miss Todd's ambition even soared so high as buying a cow.

"Where would she keep it, though?" asked Tattie, who was practical.

"I don't know, unless on the lawn," ventured Jess.

"Whew! It would spoil the tennis-courts."

"Well, I suppose she could hire a field. It would be ripping fun to learn to milk."

"Don't flatter yourself you'd have the chance. The seniors get all that kind of fun, and we poor intermediates only get the spade work. I've never been allowed to feed the chickens once, no—not *once*—and I think it's jolly hard luck!"

"Well, after the way you stuck your fingers into the bee-hive, I should think Miss Ormrod would hardly trust you to feed a sparrow!"

"What nonsense! I was only investigating!"

"Oh, I dare say! It sounds very grand when you put it that way. Miss Ormrod called you 'Meddlesome Matty', and said you deserved to be stung!"

One great advantage of the farming operations, in the eyes of the younger girls, was that so many materials were left lying about, and it was quite possible to obtain a considerable amount of enjoyment from them. A plank placed over a tree-trunk made quite a good see-saw; the new back gate was a delightful one to swing upon; and, when Miss Ormrod's back was turned, it was a [181] favourite amusement to place a ladder against the potting-shed wall, climb to the ridge of the roof, and then slide down and give a flying jump to the ground. There was an old bucket inside the potting-shed upon which Diana had her eye; she had schemes that centred round that bucket. It had holes drilled in its sides, and had been used during building operations to light a fire in. She was determined it should be used for that purpose again.

Down by the brink of the lake was a boat-house that belonged to the school. It was kept carefully locked, and Miss Todd had the key. Since she had taken over the school she had allowed no one to use the boat—a grievance at which the girls sometimes grumbled. There was a small landing-stage at the edge of the water, and only six feet away from this was a sort of island formed of some willow-stumps and a little soil. It was a tiny place, hardly worthy to be called an island, and yet for Diana it held an immense attraction. She wanted to get on to it. She went down one day with Wendy, Peggy, and Vi, and they took the plank which had been used for a see-saw, fixed it as a bridge from the landing-stage to a willow-stump, and then walked across and took possession. Their new property was only about as large as a good-sized dining-table, but they were immensely pleased with it.

"We'll bring down the Stars and Stripes and hang them up!" exulted Diana.

"The Union Jack, you mean!" corrected Wendy. "Can't run up even an Allied flag on British soil [182] without first claiming it for the King! I'd like to have a picnic here!"

"That's exactly what's in my mind," agreed Diana, waiving the question of the colours. "And I've got a brain-wave. We'll carry the bucket over, light a fire, and cook something. Wouldn't it be rather ripping?"

"A1!" beamed Peggy and Vi.

"Crusoe Island", as the girls named their willow-clump, might certainly claim the doubtful distinction of being the smallest British possession in the world, but it was an important one in the eyes of its owners. They duly brought down the Union Jack and the American flag, and—as a concession to Diana—planted them side by side on its scanty soil. They decided not to tell seniors or juniors anything at all about it. Of course, in a vague way, the whole school knew of its existence, but nobody had troubled before to land on its few yards of surface. It was well hidden by the boat-house, so that any operations there were not visible from the garden or orchard. The rest of the intermediates, admitted with many cautions of silence into the secret, approved whole-heartedly; the form squatted in a circle on their territory, linked little fingers, and pledged themselves into a sort of Crusoe Society. Everybody felt that the first thing to be done was to hold an inauguration feast. They borrowed the bucket, filled it with coal and coke from the [183] greenhouse, and carried it successfully over the plank to the island.

"So far so good!" purred Diana. "We've got our fire!"

"But not our feast!" qualified Wendy.

"We shall have to be jolly careful to dodge those juniors," advised Jess. "If they see us carrying out cups they'll be on the scent directly."

"We mustn't risk it. Besides, Barker would be sure to catch us in the pantry, and make a clamour if we took cups; we must manage without things from the house."

"There's a large biscuit-tin lid in the hen-yard," suggested Sadie. "If we washed it very well, it would do as a frying pan."

"Good biz!"

"What could we fry?"

The commissariat question was indeed the problem of problems. The village was unfortunately out of bounds, so that, except on stated occasions, when they were escorted by a mistress, the girls were unable to do shopping "on their own". There are ways, however, of crawling through even the most barbed-wire fence of rules.

"Toddlekins never told us we weren't to ask anybody else to do shopping for us," said Wendy demurely. "When you've not been told not to do anything, you're not disobedient if you don't do it —oh! I'm getting rather in a muddle, but you know what I mean."

They did, and they grinned approval.

"There's a little boy working on the next farm," continued Wendy. "I've smiled and waved to him [184] over the hedge sometimes. I believe he'd do *anything* for me. If you can stump up some cash, I'll get him to run an errand for us. He's picking stones out of the field at this present moment—at least, to be absolutely truthful, he was, ten minutes ago, and I don't suppose he's stopped. If I go

to the orchard fence I can call to him."

The circle looked at Wendy with admiration. They had not before realized the riches of her resourcefulness. Each promised to contribute sixpence, and told her where to find their purses, so that they need not arouse suspicion by visiting their dormitories in a body.

"We'll be lighting the fire while you get the prog," they assured her.

So Wendy departed on her foraging expedition, collected the necessary funds after much hunting in various drawers and coat pockets, hurried to the orchard, and climbed the fence. Freddie Entwistle was still steadily engaged in the rural occupation of ridding his father's field of superfluous stones, but he kept an eye on the horizon, and at the sight of Wendy's beckoning finger he flung duty to the winds.

"D'you want me?" he grinned, as he came panting across the newly ploughed earth.

"Yes," said his siren sweetly. "I want you badly. Will you go to the village and buy something for me?"

"I don't mind. What shall I get?" [185]

"Half a pound of biscuits and something to fry."

"Bacon?" suggested her swain laconically.

"N-n-no. We had bacon for breakfast."

"Kippers or ham?"

"I don't think kippers; but really it must be anything you can get. Here's the money. If there's any change, take it out in sweets."

"Right you are! I'll be as sharp as I can."

"It's something to have a knight-errant who's prepared to relieve a maiden in distress," reflected Wendy, seating herself on the fence to await the return of her chivalrous squire.

He came back in course of time with his pockets bulging with parcels, evidently very proud of himself for having executed his lady's commands. Her thanks and a commission of sweets left him radiant. He returned to his stone-picking, living in a dream.

The party on the island received Wendy with enthusiasm. The fire was burning beautifully in the bucket, the tin had been scoured with sand and well washed, large ivy leaves had been picked to serve as plates, and the company had their penknives ready.

"It's sausages!" exclaimed Wendy, opening one of the parcels; "and he's actually bought some lard to fry them in. What a brain—and only twelve! That boy'll be a general some day, if he doesn't die of over-cleverness. Biscuits to eat with them, my children, and some chocs. for [186] dessert. I beg to propose that we accord a hearty vote of thanks to Freddie Entwistle."

"For he's a jolly good fellow!
For he's a jolly good fellow!"

began Jess; but Diana promptly squashed her.

"Stop that noise! D'you want to give the whole show away, and have Lennie, and Nora, and Betty, and all the rest of the kids swarming down upon us? Anybody who can't keep quiet will be made to walk the plank. Yes, and splash into the river at the other end of it! We wouldn't pick you out either; we'd let you drown!"

"Then I'd sing 'For he's a jolly good fellow' as my 'dying swan song'," protested Jess. "The kids are far enough away. No one can hear us."

She took the hint, all the same, and did not allow her enjoyment to bubble over into music. Instead, she helped Wendy to prick the sausages with a penknife and place them on the temporary frying-pan. The biscuit-tin lid just fitted nicely over the bucket. In a few minutes there was a grand sound of fizzling, and a most delicious scent began to waft itself over the waters of the lake. The best of a bucket-fire is that everybody can sit round it in a circle and superintend the cooking operations. Eight penknives prodded the sausages so often that it was a wonder they were not all chopped to pieces before they were done. At last the connoisseurs declared they were brown enough, and they were carefully and mathematically halved and served on biscuits. [187]

"Delicious!" decreed Tattie, critically.

"Couldn't have been better if Toddlekins had reared the piglets on our own farm," chimed in Peggy.

"Diana, you haven't taken a bite yet," commented Wendy.

"I'm not sure that I want any. I think I'll only have a biscuit, after all."

"Not want any? Not want the lovely sausages that I risked so much to get? Diana Hewlitt, what's the matter with you?"

"Oh, nothing—only——"

"Only nothing, I should say! Eat up that piece of sausage double quick, if you value my friendship."

"Suppose you eat it for me? That would be sentiment."

"No, it wouldn't; you must eat it yourself. There'll be a shindy if you don't. Our first feast! It's a sort of ceremonial!"

"Not 'the cup of brotherhood' but 'the sausage of sisterhood'!" hinnied Jess.

Diana looked doubtfully at the two inches of brown, porky substance on her ivy-leaf plate, and sighed.

"I feel like the elephant at the Zoo when they offered him his hundredth bun: It may kill me, but it's a beautiful death," she demurred. "Well, if you're all nuts on my having some, I guess there's [188] nothing else for it. Here goes! What a life!"

"The Sisterhood of the Sausage," murmured Jess fatuously.

"Don't make such a fuss; you know you're enjoying it, old sport," said Wendy. "It isn't every day in your life you can come and have a blow-out on Crusoe Island."

On Thursday morning Diana, who had been restless and fidgety in the night, awoke with a rash all over her face and chest. Loveday, much alarmed, would not allow her to get up till the authorities had seen her, and fetched Miss Todd. The Principal, dismayed at the prospect of infection in the school, mentally ran over the gamut of possible diseases from scarlatina to chicken-pox, ordered Diana to stop in bed, and sent at once to Glenbury for the doctor.

Now it happened that Dr. Hunter was himself in bed, suffering from a severe attack of influenza, and, as it was extremely difficult for him, at a few hours' notice, to secure the services of a really competent medical man as locum tenens, he had been obliged to put up with a Hindoo doctor who was sent by the London agent in answer to his urgent telegram. It was a case of "any port in a storm", and though Dr. Jinaradasa's qualifications might be such as only just to satisfy the board of the Royal College of Surgeons, it was better to send him to look after the patients than [189] to leave them utterly unattended. Therefore, when the neat little two-seater car drew up at Pendlemere Abbey it was not the bluff, rosy-cheeked Dr. Hunter who stepped out of it, but a foreign-looking gentleman with a very dark complexion. He explained his presence to Miss Todd, who gasped for a second, but recovered herself, received him gratefully, and conducted him upstairs to view his patient. Diana, I regret to say, behaved like the spoilt child she really was. She buried her head under the bedclothes, and at first utterly refused to submit to any examination. Miss Todd coaxed, wheedled, stormed, and finally pulled the clothes away by force and displayed the rash to the dark, lustreless eyes of Dr. Jinaradasa. He asked a few questions—which Diana answered sulkily—took her temperature, felt her pulse, and retired downstairs to talk over the case with Miss Todd, leaving a very cross and indignant patient behind him. Ten minutes afterwards the door of the ivy room swung gently open, and Wendy's interested and sympathetic face made its appearance.

"Di!" she whispered impressively; "I'm coming to see you, even if it's smallpox you've got. I'm supposed to be practising, but I just did a bolt. Well, old sport, you do look an object, I must say!"

Diana hitched herself higher in bed.

"You needn't be afraid. I'm not infectious," she remarked.

"They say you've got measles," ventured Wendy.

"Measles!" snorted Diana scornfully. "That's all they know about it. I've told them till I'm tired [190] that it's nettle-rash. I've had it before. I always *do* get the wretched thing when I eat sausages. They sort of poison me. It'll go away all right if they only let me alone. What did Miss Todd want bringing that black doctor up to see me? I had nearly forty fits when he came marching into my room."

"Well, he says you've got measles at any rate, and Toddlekins is in no end of a state. Thinks it's going to spread all through the school. D'you know she's making arrangements to send you to the Fever Hospital? They're to come and fetch you away in the ambulance."

"*What!* The idiots! I tell you I *haven't* got measles. I won't go! Do you think I'm going to let myself be bundled off to the Fever Hospital just because an ignoramus of a Hindoo doctor doesn't know his business sufficiently to tell nettle-rash when he sees it? Rather not! I'd show fight first!"

"They'll roll you in blankets and carry you downstairs!" thrilled Wendy.

"They'll do nothing of the sort—I'll take good care of that. I wouldn't be easy to carry if I kicked, even inside blankets. I never heard of such an outrageous thing in all my life. I've some bounce left in me yet, and I'll use it—see if I don't! Measles, indeed! I wonder he didn't say it was hydrophobia."

"Well, whatever it is, you're to be taken to the Fever Hospital; they've ordered the ambulance. I'm awfully sorry, old sport! It's hard luck on you. I must scoot now, and go back to my practising, or I shall have Bunty on my track. Bye-bye!" [191]

Wendy vanished, leaving Diana alone and most upset. She considered that she was being treated abominably. She longed to telegraph to her parents, but she knew that was impossible.

"Whatever happens, I'm not going to that wretched Fever Hospital," she said to herself. "I'm sure Cousin Cora wouldn't like me to be taken there. Why shouldn't I go to Petteridge? They're all well again from the 'flu'. What a brain-wave! I declare I will, and tell Cousin Cora all about it!"

Diana was nothing if not impetuous. She jumped up immediately, and began a hasty toilet. She was just three-quarters through with it when she heard footsteps on the stairs. She immediately whisked her nightdress on over her clothes, and popped into bed just three seconds before Miss Todd entered the room. The excitement of such a rush made her face more flushed than ever. Miss Todd came and looked at her critically.

"Yes, the rash is coming out very nicely," she observed.

"It's nettle-rash, not measles!" affirmed Diana defiantly.

"That's for the doctor to decide, not you. I'm afraid you must have caught it the day you went in the omnibus to Glenbury. It takes nearly a fortnight to incubate." [192]

Diana shivered with anxiety lest Miss Todd should wish to inspect the progress of the rash on her chest as well as on her face, and thus discover that she was half clothed beneath her nightdress, but fortunately the head mistress did not descend so far in her investigations. Instead, she turned to Diana's drawers, and began filling a hand-bag with various necessaries. She did not mention the Fever Hospital, probably judging it better not to prepare the patient beforehand, but to wait until the ambulance arrived. Diana, of course, knew why she was collecting the garments, but feigned to ignore the matter, and made no comment. She wished Miss Todd would be quick and go. She was so terribly afraid that the ambulance might drive up before she had the chance to make her escape. Flight seemed certainly preferable to a struggle.

The mistress at last found a sufficiency of nightdresses and other garments, and, telling Diana to keep herself covered up and warm, took her departure.

The moment she was safely out of the way the invalid sprang up and resumed her interrupted toilet. Diana had suffered from nettle-rash several times before, and the treatment had not included stopping in bed or even staying indoors. Her complaint was really more in the nature of dyspepsia. She felt as if fresh air would do her good. She did not dare to walk downstairs in case [193] she might meet anybody, so she decided to adopt the method she had found effective last autumn, and climb out through the window and down the ivy. Lessons were in progress, so nobody would be in the garden to watch her, except Miss Carr and Miss Ormrod, who would probably be engaged with the horse or the hens. She swung herself out, therefore, and let herself down by the thick stems. Then she dodged round the house to the bicycle-shed. She did not yet possess a machine of her own, but Wendy's stood handy, and she knew her chum well enough to borrow it. She wheeled it through the back gate, fortunately without meeting Miss Carr, and then set off at top-speed for Petteridge Court.

Mrs. Burritt was naturally much surprised to see her young cousin turn up in so unexpected a fashion, and with a rash on her face, but she did the most sensible thing in the circumstances: she put Diana to bed, and sent to Dunswick for a doctor. He arrived during the course of the afternoon, and, after a careful examination of his patient, pronounced her complaint to be nettle-rash.

"There's not a doubt about it!" he declared. "You need not be in the least afraid that it's measles."

Armed with a medical certificate to that effect, Mrs. Burritt motored over to Pendlemere Abbey to patch up peace with Miss Todd. Partly for reasons of health, and partly to let the storm blow over, she kept Diana at Petteridge until the rash had entirely disappeared and the girl seemed in [194] her absolutely normal condition. Mrs. Burritt took her back on the understanding that bygones should be bygones, and a fresh start should be made without any reference to former delinquencies.

Miss Todd received Diana quite amiably, but insisted upon her having a carbolic bath, and herself washed her hair with strong disinfectant soap. The clothes she had worn disappeared mysteriously for some days, and were then returned from the stoving department of the Glenbury Sanitation Office. Diana made no comments at head-quarters, but laughed to herself.

"I'm sure Toddlekins believes I've had measles," she confided to Wendy.

"Of course she does. She said she hadn't the least doubt about it, and that you hadn't eaten anything which could have caused you to have nettle-rash."

"What would she say if she knew about the sausages?" queried Diana.

[195]

CHAPTER XIV

Spooks

March had come, and even in the northern mountainous region of the Pennines, where snow lingers long after it has melted in more favoured districts, winter had begun to make way for spring. The snowdrops—January flowers in Wales or Cornwall, fair maids of February in most counties—were late bloomers at Pendlemere, and were never in their prime till St. Patrick's Day. They made up for their tardy arrival by their luxuriance. They grew almost wild in the orchard, and spread like a white carpet over the grass, tossing fairy bells in the wind. Diana, promoted to help Miss Carr in the spraying of apple-trees, paused in her work to look round and revel in nature's re-awakening. She was a sun lover, and the long months of perpetual mist and rain had tried her very much. She had, to be sure, kept up her spirits in spite of weather; still, the sight of fleecy, white clouds scudding across a blue sky, and the sound of the missel-thrush tuning up on the bare branch of the plum-tree were particularly cheering. Hedge-sparrows twittered among the shrubs, and rooks were busy flying with large twigs in their bills to repair their nests in the [196] elms near the church. In the March sunshine the lake glittered like gold.

"I wonder if it looked just like this when the old monks lived here," said Diana. "Did they see exactly what we do now?"

"Pretty much the same, I expect," answered Miss Carr rather abstractedly. "The lake and the fells would be there, and probably most of the farms, though the buildings would be different in those days. The lay brethren would attend to the land just as we do. I dare say they dug in this very orchard, and grew herbs in the same place where we're going to plant our potatoes."

"It's a pity we can't call up a vision of them!"

"No, thank you!" said Miss Carr, who was a practical person, and not given to romance. "I've not the slightest desire to see spooks. I'm quite content with modern life, and don't want fourteenth-century ghosts gliding about the place. Get on with your work, Diana! I'm more concerned with apple-trees than with the old monks."

When Diana got an idea into her head, however, it was apt to stick. She had a lively imagination, and she liked to picture what the Abbey had once been. She read the account of it in the local guidebook and in Chadwick's *Northern Antiquities*, which she borrowed from the library, and she further devoured Scott's *The Monastery*. Steeped in this mediæval atmosphere, she began to tell the girls such vivid stories of the doings of the brethren that they almost believed her. She [197] invented several fictitious characters: Brother Amos, Brother Lawrence, Brother John, and Prior Andrew, and gave a most circumstantial account of their adventures.

"How do you know what they used to do?" asked Jess, much impressed.

"I guess I sort of feel it," said Diana. "It's almost like remembering."

"Some people think we come back to earth and live again. Were you one of the old monks, Di?"

"She must have been an unholy one, if she was!" interrupted Sadie. "Anybody less like a monk than 'Stars and Stripes' I couldn't think of!"

"There were all sorts, of course. I've told you Brother Lawrence was up to tricks sometimes, and got the discipline. The Prior used to be down on him, just as Toddlekins is down on us. He was more sinner than saint. That's why he can't rest quietly."

"Doesn't he rest?" Jess's voice held a note of uneasiness.

"No, I don't think he does. I've a kind of feeling that he haunts the place, coming back to find out what it's like now."

"An earth-bound spirit!" gasped Jess.

"Yes, he's got some sins to expiate, you see."

The conversation was growing creepy. Sadie, Tattie, Jess, and Peggy, who with Diana were squatting near the schoolroom fire in the gloaming, moved a little nearer together. There is comfort in physical contact. The fact that Brother Lawrence was entirely an invention of Diana's [198] did not relieve the tenseness of the situation; she had talked about him so often that she seemed to have conjured him up. They could almost see his white habit gliding along the corridor, and his unsaintly eyes gleaming from under his cowl. They began to wish he had behaved better during his lifetime, or at any rate that he had not chosen to revisit the scenes of his old sins.

"If I were really to see him I'd have forty fits!" shivered Peggy, who was a superstitious little soul who threw spilt salt over her left shoulder, and curtsied religiously to the new moon.

"It isn't everybody can see ghosts," declared Diana. "You've got to have the psychic faculty. Some people can feel they're there, even when they can't see them."

"Oh, that would be *far* worse! It would be awful to know something was in the room, and not be able to see it!" exploded Jess. "Tattie, may I come and sleep in your bed to-night?"

"There's not much room, but you can if you like," conceded Tattie; "so long as Geraldine doesn't

find out."

"I'll creep in when she's asleep."

It was all very well for Diana to people the corridor with imaginary monks; she knew they were images of her own creation; the more weak-minded of her form mates, however, were frankly frightened. Nothing spreads more readily than a ghost scare. Sadie, Jess, and Peggie were bolting squealing along the passage one evening, when they almost collided with Geraldine. She [199] seized Jess by the arm, and pulled her into the radius of the lamplight, nodding to the other two to follow.

"I want a word with you," she said. "It's high time you stopped this ridiculous nonsense. I don't know who started it, but it's getting the limit. Oh, yes! I know you go creeping into Tattie's bed when you think I'm asleep, and you daren't walk upstairs alone. I'm not as blind or deaf as you seem to suppose. You're putting silly ideas into juniors' heads. Whoever heard of the Abbey being haunted? Such stuff! You'll be afraid of your own shadows next. Do try to be more strong-minded! I really shouldn't have expected——"

Geraldine stopped, because something like a whirlwind suddenly descended the stairs and stampeded towards them. It resolved itself into Diana—Diana with scarlet cheeks, shining eyes, and face simply bubbling over with excitement.

"Hallo! I say!" she jodelled, "What *do* you think?" Then she saw Geraldine, and halted dead.

"Come here!" commanded the head girl. "I want to talk to you too about this absurd spook scare. It's mostly among you intermediates, and the sooner you get it out of your silly heads the better. Pity you can't find something more sensible to talk about. Why don't you read, and fill up your empty brains? There are heaps of good books in the library, if you'd only get them out. You spend all your spare time gossiping."

"We *do* read!" retorted Diana, taking up the cudgels for the maligned intermediates. "I've just [200] read *The Monastery*, and that's all about a ghost called 'The White Lady of Avenel'. It's *grand* where she rides the sacristan's mule down the river and sings:

> 'Merrily swim we; the moon shines bright.
> Good luck to your fishing! Whom watch ye to-night?'

There are heaps and loads of ghost tales in the guide book and in Chadwick's *Northern Antiquities*, and those are all books Miss Todd *told* me I might read. She said they were 'educational'."

"She didn't mean you to take the ghosts seriously, though, any more than you'd believe in the gods of Greece because you were learning classical literature. Why, you'll tell me next that you expect to see the fairies."

"I'm not sure that I don't!"

"Then you're a bigger goose than I thought you. Really, at fourteen! I'm astonished at all of you. You don't see *me* running squealing away from supposed ghosts. Don't let me catch you being such little idiots again."

Having finished her harangue, and having, as she thought, thoroughly squashed the folly of the intermediates, Geraldine proceeded on her way, happily oblivious of the faces they were pulling behind her back.

"I'd like to see *her* squeal and run," grunted Jess.

ITS COWL FELL BACK, AND DISCLOSED A WELL-KNOWN AND DECIDEDLY MIRTHFUL COUNTENANCE

"So should I," agreed Sadie. "She's always *very* superior. By the by, Stars and Stripes, what were you just going to tell us?" [201]

"Nothing particular."

Diana was looking preoccupied, as if her thoughts were far away.

"I'm sure it was," urged Sadie. "Don't be mean! Go on!"

"I've changed my mind. No, I'm *not* going to tell you. It's no use bothering me, for I just shan't."

"I think everybody's horrid to-night," said Sadie, turning away much offended.

It was on the very next evening that Ida Beckford, going to her bedroom in the gloaming, caught a glimpse of a white-robed figure with a cowl over its head gliding along the passage and up the stairs. Ida was not so strong-minded as Geraldine. She turned the colour of pale putty, and went straight downstairs again to relate her psychic experience to her fellow seniors. She did not meet with the sympathy she expected.

"Some silly trick of those intermediates," sniffed Hilary.

"I'll be down on them if they go shamming spooks," threatened Geraldine.

"If it happens again we'll set a watch and catch it," declared Stuart loftily.

Ida cheered up at this mundane view of the matter, and recovered her colour; but she abandoned the blotter she was going to fetch, and stayed in her form-room instead of walking upstairs again. [202] The news began to creep about the school, however, that the Abbey was being haunted by a spiritual visitor. Many of the girls saw it glide along the landing in the dusk, and disappear up a certain narrow flight of stairs. Now herein lay the mystery. The stairs went up ten steps in full view of the passage, then they turned a sharp corner, rounded a yard of landing, and with four more steps ended in a locked attic door. Several of the most venturesome members of the school had tried to follow the figure, but when they came round the corner, to their immense surprise it had utterly disappeared. And there was absolutely no place in which it could possibly have concealed itself.

"Has it crept through the keyhole?" quavered Peggy.

"Or just vanished into thin air?" speculated Magsie.

"The door's really locked!" declared Vi, rattling the handle again to make sure.

"We certainly *saw* it go up, but it's not here now!"

"Flesh and blood can't disappear in a second!"

"It's most uncanny!"

"The old Cistercians wore white habits."

"I say, I don't like this!"

Brother Lawrence, as the girls began to call the apparition, showed himself frequently, but always with the same elusiveness. The phenomenon was invariably as before: his white monastic robes would glimmer through the darkness, glide up the stairway, and then seemingly melt into [203] nothing. Geraldine herself pursuing hotly on the scent, found that she was utterly baffled.

A head girl, especially a prefect with a scorn for superstition, does not like to admit herself baffled. Geraldine thought the matter over, took Loveday into her confidence, and went to Miss Todd. As the result of her interview she resolved to set what she called "a very neat little spook-trap". She and Loveday said nothing about it to the rest of the school. They merely bided their time.

Brother Lawrence did not always show up when anybody was on the watch for him; he seemed to prefer displaying his supernatural powers to the unwary. For two whole days he did not put in an appearance; whether he was haunting elsewhere or expiating his sins in purgatory was a point for discussion. On the third evening, however, Tattie, Jess, and Magsie had screwed their courage to sticking-point, and strolled upstairs in the twilight, half hoping and half fearing to catch a glimpse of the now almost familiar apparition. They kept in the shadow of the big cupboard, and held each others' hands without speaking. A full moon was shining through the landing window, and lit up the narrow staircase with a silvery, ghostly gleam. Suddenly from the darkness of a doorway emerged the white robes, and passed rapidly upwards in the moonlight. Still clutching hands for moral support, the three girls tore after it. Surely this time they could manage to [204] overtake it? But no; it had turned the corner before they reached the lowest stair, and by the time they had dashed up the ten steps it had made its usual disappearance. They halted on the yard of landing, breathing hard; then their hearts seemed to turn somersaults, for the attic door suddenly opened. It was no ghost who peered forth at them, but Geraldine and Loveday. The former had a candle in her hand; she struck a match and lighted it calmly.

"You needn't look so scared!" she said to the panting trio. "I'm just going to show you your precious spook. Stand back a little, will you? I assure you it won't bite you!"

She descended to the landing, turned round towards the four steps that led to the attic door, then, to the immense amazement of the girls, raised up the steps like the lid of a chest. There was a good-sized cavity below, and in this place of concealment crouched a white-clad figure. Geraldine took it by the arm and hauled it unceremoniously forth. It issued chuckling, and, as its cowl fell back, disclosed a well-known and decidedly mirthful countenance.

"Stars and Stripes!" ejaculated Jess.

"The game's up!" proclaimed Diana coolly. "You two"—nodding at the seniors—"have been too many for me."

"I always thought you were at the bottom of all this, Diana Hewlitt!" said Geraldine. "I was quite [205] determined I'd catch you. Take those things off at once. What are they? Sheets? Fold them up properly; don't trail them on the floor. Do you know that if anybody in the school had had a weak heart you might have killed her by playing such a trick?"

"I knew you were all too strong-minded," twinkled Diana. "Of course, nobody believed in Brother Lawrence, any more than they believed in the fairies or the gods of Greece. I guess it's rather nice sometimes to make a sort of practical demonstration of one's reading. It shows one appreciates the books and takes an intelligent interest. There are heaps of good books in the library. I'm going to borrow *Customs and Superstitions of the Celts*."

"You may borrow what you like," said Geraldine grimly; "but if we've any more of this business Miss Todd will settle it herself; so I tell you."

"People who provide entertainment are rarely thanked," sighed Diana, as she folded the sheets. "I ought to receive a stipend for keeping the school amused."

"You'll receive something you don't bargain for, if you don't take care," warned Geraldine. "Go downstairs, all of you!"

That Brother Lawrence was identical with Diana did not very much surprise the school, but everybody went crazy over the discovery of the secret hiding-place under the stairs. Even Miss Todd had not known of its existence. Diana confessed that she had found it out quite by accident, had rushed downstairs to communicate the thrilling news, but had changed her mind as its [206] obvious advantages flashed across her. She had not been able to resist making use of it to play a ghost trick. The little chamber which she had so unexpectedly brought to light was only just big enough to crouch in, and had probably been made in the troublous times of the Stuarts as a place of temporary concealment when the Abbey was searched by soldiers. Unfortunately it was quite empty.

"When I first opened it I expected to find a hoard of spade-guineas or silver punch-bowls," said Diana ruefully to Loveday—the two girls were discussing the great discovery as they went to bed. "I nearly howled when I found nothing but dust."

"I wonder," answered Loveday, "if this is what that gentleman found—the one, I mean, who came to see Father when I had measles. You know I've always been hunting about for hiding-places."

"Yes, I know."

"I thought somehow it would be rather better than this, though. It hardly seemed worth while his troubling to come and call; though, of course, it's interesting. Mr. Fleming will be very thrilled."

"I'd have been a great deal more thrilled if there'd been anything worth having inside. As I told you before, I expected spade-guineas. It's one of the disappointments of my life!" declared Diana, getting into bed.

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CHAPTER XV

Joy-riding

The post at Pendlemere Abbey was distributed after breakfast, and the girls devoured their correspondence in the short interval before lessons began. One morning in April the usual weekly letter with the Paris postmark arrived addressed to "Miss Hewlitt", and, five minutes after receiving it, Diana came tearing down the corridor in search of Loveday. She looked the very incarnation of joy—her face was aglow, and her eyes shining.

"Such news!" she gasped. "What d'you think? I'll give you three guesses. Father and Mother are coming over to England for Easter. I haven't seen them since last September, and I'm simply off my head. Isn't it ripping? And that's not all, by any means. Come up to the ivy room, Loveday mine. I want to tell you all about it without those kids hanging about listening to every word one says. Come now!"

Linking her arm in Loveday's, Diana dragged her friend upstairs, away from the eyes and ears of inquisitive juniors, who were veritable little pitchers where their elders' affairs were concerned. It was only when they were in the safety of their own sanctum that she fully unbosomed herself. [208]

"Somebody else is coming to England. It's my brother Giles. He's been made London correspondent of the *Louisville Herald*. He wanted most frightfully to join the army, but they wouldn't accept him because of his eyes. He'll be just standing on his head with joy at getting to Europe after all. Did I tell you he was in a newspaper office? He's crossing next week, and he's to go and see Father and Mother in Paris first, then come back with them to England, and have a holiday before he begins his new work. Dad's going to hire a car and take us a joy-ride, and Lenox is to get leave and join us. You know Lenox isn't demobilized yet. He's in a camp in Wales. But he expects they'll give him about five days. Think of seeing Britain in a car, with Father and Mother and Giles and Lenox! I want to shout!"

"You little lucker!" sympathized Loveday.

"But that isn't all yet. I haven't finished telling you," triumphed Diana, laying a fluffy head on her room-mate's shoulder, and poking a caressing finger into Loveday's dimples. "Mother said in her letter that she guessed I'd enjoy the tour so much more if I had a girl companion with me, and would I like to ask one of my school friends? You bet I would! Ra—ther! Do you know whom I'm going to ask?"

"Wendy?"

"Wendy! No! I'm very fond of her, but she's not *the* one for a tour like this. Besides, I know she's [209]
going to the seaside with her own home folks. There's only one person from Pendlemere I want, and that's Loveday. Will you come? I'd just adore to have you!"

"O-o-o-oh! If your mother really asks me."

"Of course she does! She says she's writing about it to Miss Todd."

Such a dazzling prospect as a joy-ride through England was hardly to be refused. In due course Loveday's aunt gave her permission, and the invitation was accepted. It was arranged for the motor tour to begin on Easter Tuesday, so as to allow Diana and her family to have a few quiet days together first. They were to spend them at Windermere, then call with the car at Liverpool for Loveday, and also to pick up Lenox, who would join them there from the American camp in Wales.

Loveday went about the school feeling as if her reason were rocking. She had never imagined that anything so nice could happen to her. Since the loss of her parents life had not been too bright. Sometimes she almost dreaded the holidays at her aunt's. She was shy and sensitive, and the impression that she was not altogether welcome there was a bitter one. It is very hard for a girl when she has no home of her own, and no one whose special prerogative it is to love and encourage her. Though her uncle and aunt saw that she had everything needful in the way of education and clothing, they never petted her, and she had grown up with the starved feeling of [210]
the child who lacks kisses. She had too much self-respect to parade her woes at school, and perhaps her fellow seniors mistook her shyness for pride; they were nice to her, but she had not a

real confidante among any of them. It was Diana—Diana whom she had at first resented as an intruder in the ivy room—who had broken down the wall of her reserve and found the road to her heart.

The remainder of the term passed quickly; the spring days were so full with lessons and land-work that time at the Abbey literally raced along. Nevertheless, with characteristic impatience, Diana crossed off the calendar each evening, and counted the lessening dates in huge satisfaction. Then came the joyful afternoon when trunks were brought down from the box-room, and the school began its congenial task of packing. The accustomed term-end routine was gone through, and next morning three tired mistresses saw twenty excited pupils safely into their respective railway carriages.

"Only a week and we meet again," said Loveday to Diana, whose train started first.

"Just seven days," returned that damsel, leaning dangerously out of the compartment window. "Guess I'm about living for that tour. If we don't have the time of our lives, I'm much mistaken. Ta-ta till next Tuesday."

Diana enjoyed the quiet week at Windermere with father, mother, and brother, and though the little circle was not quite complete—for there was a brother of seventeen at school in America—it [211] was delightful to be among her own family again. Mr. Hewlitt was very tired after his long spell of arduous work in Paris, and was glad to rest his brains, so they spent most of the time boating on the lake, or strolling in the woods, getting new-made-over in the fresh, bracing country air. The car they had hired was to meet them at Lancaster. They went thus far south by train, then motored to Liverpool. Loveday, ready with suit-case packed, was eagerly expecting them. From the window of her aunt's drawing-room she watched the big six-seater car arrive at the door. Giles—a masculine edition of Diana, in spectacles—was driving. Lenox—a beaming khaki-clad figure with twinkle-some brown eyes—sat by his side. Mr. and Mrs. Hewlitt and Diana were in the rear seat. A goodly pile of boxes and baskets was strapped on to the luggage-carrier behind. A change of places was effected, resulting in the two girls sitting with Giles in the front. Loveday's suit-case was stowed away, her aunt waved good-bye, the electric-starter was applied, and the car moved off on its eventful journey south.

It was a delightful way of travelling, to whiz along by road instead of by rail. The country was just in the blush of spring, the woods were bursting into tender leaf, plum blossom made fairy lace-work in wayside orchards, and wallflowers and cowslips bloomed in cottage gardens. Giles, who drove the car, had planned out their tour carefully. He was determined to see rural England to [212] best advantage, and, instead of keeping always to the main roads, he intended to take by-ways, so as to pass through typical country villages. Once free from the suburbs of Liverpool, they avoided large towns as far as possible, as they made their way through Cheshire to the Midlands. Their first object was that Mecca of all American pilgrims—the Shakespeare country.

"In five days we haven't time to look at everything as we go along, so I guess we'd better just sprint till we get to Kenilworth, and start our sight-seeing there," decreed Giles.

He made an excellent chauffeur, and fortunately encountered no police traps, though he certainly exceeded the speed limit when he saw a clear road ahead. A lunch-basket with thermos flasks was packed in the car, and the party picnicked for their mid-day meal in a wood where primroses were opening their little pale-yellow flowers, and king-cups blazed in a marshy ditch. The air was fresh with spring, and cuckoos were calling from the fields by a river.

"When I was a small girl," said Loveday, "I thought there was only one cuckoo in the world. People used to say: 'Oh, have you heard the cuckoo yet?' so, of course, I thought there was only one. Nobody said: 'Have you seen the swallow yet?' when swallows returned. I was fearfully puzzled one day when I heard *two* cuckoos both cuckooing at once."

They reached Kenilworth just at sunset, when a crimson sky was flaming behind the old castle, [213] and glowing on the windows of the picturesque cottages that faced the ancient ruin from the other side of the village green. Its grey walls, magnificent even in their decay, seemed teeming with historic memories, and, in the glamour of the sunset, they could almost, in imagination, restore the half-legendary splendour of its later days, and picture Queen Elizabeth arriving there on her famous visit to the Earl of Leicester. It was too late to do any exploring that evening, so, after a halt to admire the beauty of the scene, they went on to their hotel, promising themselves to make it the first object of their sight-seeing to-morrow.

"It seems so extraordinary," said Mr. Hewlitt at dinner, "that every little bit of ground we're passing over now has a history that dates right back to the Middle Ages. It's a wonderful corner of England, and so unspoilt. Half of the houses look as if they'd stepped straight out of an artist's canvas."

For the next few days the party lived with guidebooks in their hands. They thoroughly explored Kenilworth Castle, tried to call up a vision of the pageant that was presented before Queen Elizabeth there, and deplored the tragic fate of poor Amy Robsart. Then the car splashed through the ford at the foot of the wood, and carried them along the Warwick Road, past Blacklow Hill, where Piers Gaveston was executed, and where, it is said, his restless spirit still rides at drear midnight, to Guy's Cliff, with its old Saxon mill and romantic view of the Avon. Then on to [214] Warwick, to look at the treasures of a castle fortunately untouched by the ravages of war, and the beautiful Beauchamp Chapel, with its tomb of the "King Maker". They could have stayed a long time in ancient, picturesque Warwick, admiring the quaint, old houses and the smooth stretches

of the river, but the attractions of Stratford lay only eight miles away, and they had booked their rooms in advance at the hotel there. None of them ever forgot their first entry into Shakespeare's town. It was the season of his anniversary, and in his honour flags decorated the black-and-white houses, and dainty little maidens, with May garlands of flowers, came tripping down the sixteenth-century streets. Our pilgrims did their devoirs in orthodox fashion, beginning with Shakespeare's birthplace and its museum of relics, going on to the Grammar School where he learned his "little Latin and less Greek", to the remains of his house "New Place", and his tomb and monument in the glorious old church. They could hardly tear themselves away from Anne Hathaway's thatched, half-timber cottage at Shottery, with its carved, four-post Elizabethan bedstead, its garden full of rustic flowers, and its ingle-nook where perhaps Shakespeare sat to woo.

"If we could only take it just as it is, and carry it out to America," sighed Diana.

"But it would be nothing without its surroundings," said Loveday. "It's because Shakespeare [215] seems associated with every corner of Stratford that the whole place is so fascinating. Wherever you go you feel as if you were following him round. I'd like to spend a month here, and do each separate spot leisurely and quietly."

If the whole of the projected tour was to be carried out, and the Shakespeare villages inspected, not to speak of Edgehill, Evesham, Broadway, and Gloucester, which they had also set their hearts on seeing, it was impossible to do more than rush through the various sights, so their boxes were once more strapped on to the luggage-carrier, and the car set off on its further travels.

They did not escape the usual accidents that delay motorists: a tyre exploded one afternoon with a terrific bang, and the ladies of the party had to sit for an hour by the roadside, while the men-folk fixed on the Stepney wheel. Giles's love for by-roads landed him sometimes in difficulties. He whisked them once down a charming primrose-starred lane, only to find that it ended in a ford. As you cannot run a car through even the shallowest river without stopping the engine, it was evidently a case of "thus far and no farther", and there was nothing for it but a return to the highway. There was no room to turn in the narrow lane, so the car had to back the whole distance to the road—a most difficult performance between high banks and round sharp corners, and one which required all Giles's skill as a chauffeur. Another time, trying a short cut across [216] some fields, the car ran into soft earth and refused to stir. Her occupants got down and tried with their united efforts to push her out of her "slough of despond", but with no effect. Giles kept starting the engine, but the wheels, instead of gripping, simply turned round and round, and sank deeper into the soil. They were obliged to go to a farm for help, and have planks fixed under the wheels before the heavy car could move on to terra firma and proceed with its journey. These little accidents, however, all added a spice of adventure and fun to the tour; the young folks, at any rate, did not wish everything to be too plain sailing; they thoroughly enjoyed the romantic side of the trip, and liked to get off the beaten track into the wilds of the country. They had brought all sorts of wonderful contrivances for cooking the mid-day lunch, which they always ate out-of-doors. There was an apparatus with a spirit-lamp for making coffee, which whistled like a canary when the beverage was brewed; there was a marvellous double frying-pan, heated merely by strips of newspaper being lighted underneath it, which cooked eggs and sausages with surprising speed; and there was a neat canteen-basket with cups, plates, spoons, forks, and knives all ready to hand. In their enthusiasm the boys would have liked to sleep in the car had that been possible, and Lenox often regretted wistfully that they had not brought tents with them to pitch for the night.

"No, thanks," said Mr. Hewlitt. "You youngsters may enjoy that sort of thing; but I consider this [217] British climate is too damp for camping out, and I much prefer a comfortable bed at a decent hotel."

"Besides which, the hotels are so delightfully old-world and quaint, I shouldn't like to miss them," added Mrs. Hewlitt.

"Rather *too* old-world sometimes," shivered her daughter.

Diana had had an unpleasant experience the night before. Generally she and Loveday slept together, but on this occasion they had been given separate rooms. Diana, who had a tiresome trick of waking, furiously hungry, in the small hours of the morning, put a couple of biscuits under her pillow before she got into bed, so as to be prepared for any emergencies of appetite. She woke suddenly in the night, with the horrible sensation that a hand was groping under her pillow. She switched on the electric light by her bedside, but nothing was to be seen. Thinking she must have been dreaming, she switched off the light and lay down again. Hardly was she settled, and sinking off to sleep, when once more came a most unmistakable movement under her pillow. Thoroughly scared, she switched on the light, only to find nothing. When this happened a third time she no longer dared remain in the dark, so lighted a candle which fortunately stood on the mantelpiece, and placed it on a table not far from her bed. She could not see everything in [218] the room, and lay watching with wide-open eyes. For a few minutes all was absolutely still; then came a slight noise, and along the rail at the foot of the bed ran something with whiskers, either a young rat or the very biggest mouse she had ever seen.

"Sh-sh-sh-oo-oo!" cried Diana, sitting erect in bed with round frightened eyes. The intruder, equally terrified, took the hint to quit, and scuttled noisily away. The idea that it might return to seek her biscuits was too much for Diana.

"Even if I eat them it'll come back to see if they're there," she thought. "I'd have a fit if I felt it under my pillow again. I can't sleep another wink in here, that's certain. I'd as soon have spooks as rats or mice. I'm going to Loveday."

So, though the time was about 1 a.m., she jumped up, seized the candle, and managed to find her way along the passage to her friend's room. Loveday, much astonished to be thus awakened, took her into her bed, and they laughed over the little adventure.

"Oh, yes, it's all very fine to laugh," said Diana. "But if *you* were all alone you wouldn't like it yourself. Nothing will induce me to sleep by myself again in a strange hotel; so I warn you. You'll be saddled with your pixie girl for the rest of the tour. She's a scared baby at nights, and she doesn't mind confessing it. Rats—ugh! The very name of them makes me creep."

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CHAPTER XVI

A Family Crest

After the joys of Stratford-on-Avon came the delights of the rest of the fascinating Shakespeare villages. "Piping Pebworth", "Dancing Marston", "Drunken Bidford", "Haunted Hillborough", "Hungry Grafton", "Papist Wixford", and "Beggarly Broom" were visited and rejoiced over in turn; then the car wended its way from Warwickshire to sample the glories of Gloucestershire. Here, too, our pilgrims found plenty to arouse their enthusiasm: the richness of the landscape, with orchards just breaking into bloom; the slow winding rivers, with their willowy, reedy banks; the beautiful half-timbered manors and farms and the thatched cottages set in a tangle of greenery, made an ideal picture of English country life. They saw it at the cream of the year, in all the glory of spring tints and blossoms, and even if showers came on they put up the hood of the car and whisked along wet roads, admiring the freshness of the rain-washed leaves and the effects of gathering storm-clouds over distant hills. They were a full day's journey beyond Stratford when [220] suddenly there happened that most common misfortune to motorists, "something wrong with the car". Giles just managed to run her into the nearest village, then, stopping at the inn, he sent for the services of the blacksmith, who was somewhat of a mechanic, and with his aid set to work on repairs. Leaving Giles, with his coat off and his sleeves rolled up, crawling under the car and getting exceedingly oily and dusty in the process, the rest of the party set off to explore the neighbourhood on foot. The village was so charming that they could really hardly grumble at being held up there. Each cottage seemed a picture, with its thatched or red-tiled roof, black-and-white walls, creeper-covered porch, and gay little garden. So luxuriant were the flowers that they even strayed through the railings and made bright borders among the grass at the edge of the road; forget-me-nots were mixed up with dandelions, and wallflowers bloomed side by side with dead-nettles.

At the end of the village, on a rise overlooking the river, stood the parish church, a grey, old Early-English building whose priceless architecture had mercifully not been tampered with by the ruthless hand of the so-called restorer. With a little difficulty Lenox found the cottage of the caretaker, whose wife presently came up clanking the big keys and unlocked the west door for them. The interior was most beautiful: the graceful sandstone pillars, the interlacing arches, the delicate tracery of the windows with their old stained glass, the black oak roof, the carved choir [221] stalls, the ancient rood-screen, the blazoned shields and faded banners, the Lancastrian tombs and the Elizabethan brasses, all combined to give that atmosphere which Milton expressed in his *Il Penseroso*; and as the afternoon sunlight flooded through the old stained glass, and cast blue and crimson gleams on the tiled floor of the chancel, the glorious building seemed like the prayers of many generations crystallized into stone.

Their guide, a young woman in a sun-bonnet, took them round to show them the various points of interest. It was when they had duly examined the banners and the Norman font, the carving on the miserere seats and the motto on the base of the lectern, and had listened rather wearily to the sing-song description of them poured out, like a lesson learned by rote, from the lips of their conductress, that in the side chapel they came face to face with an ancient tomb. It was an unusually beautiful one, carved in marble, probably by some Italian master-craftsman of the late fifteenth century. A knight clad in full armour lay stretched out in his last sleep; his clasped hands rested over the good sword whose handle formed a cross upon his breast; the attitude of the inclined head and the sculpture of the strong, lined, noble face in its utter repose were magnificent, and recalled the marvellous art that created the busts of the emperors in the days of Rome's zenith. Round the base of the tomb were small figures in the costume of the period, [222] somewhat defaced and worn, with finely-carved pilasters between the panels. At the end was a coat of arms.

Lenox walked round with the others, admiring the beauty of the sculpture, though rather bored by the eloquence of their guide. At sight of the coat of arms, however, he stopped and whistled.

"By all that's wonderful, that's our family crest!" he exclaimed.

Here was an excitement! At once the whole party began to examine the ancient, worn escutcheon, on which was depicted a chained eagle with a crown on its head, three arrows, and the motto *Manu et corde* (with hand and heart).

"It's *exactly* the same!" declared Lenox. "Dad has a copy of the crest in an old book that his grandfather brought out from England more than a hundred years ago."

"It's the arms of the de Cliffords," said their guide, shaken out of her sing-song recitation into first-hand information. "You'll find the same crest on those monuments over there in the nave."

"Dad always said we were descended from an old family," rejoined Lenox, immensely thrilled.

That their young cousin should have discovered the tombs of his ancestors in the village church was certainly a matter of great interest to the Hewlitts. They besieged their guide with questions. She could not really tell them very much, except that from mediæval times the Cliffords had owned the soil, and that the Manor House was now in the possession of Mrs. Elliot, a daughter of [223] old Squire Clifford who had died many years ago.

"It was before I was born, but I've heard my father speak of him," she added.

"Where is the Manor House?" asked Lenox eagerly.

"Two miles beyond the village. It's a beautiful old place too, with a moat round it, and big stone gates."

"Is it possible to look over it?"

The guide shook her head emphatically.

"No, Mrs. Elliot won't have anyone coming. She's an old lady and very infirm, and she can't bear to see strangers about the place. At one time she'd let people look round with a guide, but she found them so bothersome she stopped it. One day some Americans came and peeped through the windows when she was having her lunch, and wouldn't go away."

"I'm sorry they were Americans," put in Mrs. Hewlitt. "My countrymen don't often so forget their manners, I'm glad to say."

"Well, at any rate," smiled the guide, "both English and Americans made themselves nuisances, and she wouldn't let any more tourists come near. She has the great gates locked, and whoever wants to go in, no matter on what errand, must ring the lodge-keeper's bell, and it's only her own visitors, or the tradespeople with meat and groceries and such like as are admitted. They say she's gone almost queer in her head about it."

"What a pity!" sighed Diana. [224]

"Still, you can hardly blame her," added Mrs. Hewlitt. "It must be very trying to live in a show place. I'm afraid, Lenox, you'll have to give up the idea of going over it. Is anything to be seen from the road?"

"Nothing of the house; it's all hidden by the trees. You can only see the great gates."

"It would hardly be worth a four-mile walk, just for the gates," decided Mrs. Hewlitt. "If the car's not ready yet we'll just take a conveyance and drive to Ratcliffe this afternoon."

The car repair proved a tougher job than either Giles or the blacksmith had anticipated, and, as it apparently could not be finished for many hours, the Hewlitts arranged to make an excursion in a wagonette, and, as the inn seemed comfortable, to return to the village, spend the night there, and proceed on their way the next morning. Though her mother had dismissed all question of visiting the old Manor House, Diana still harped on the subject. She and Lenox talked it over in private after dinner. They were sitting in the porch of the hotel, watching the lights begin to gleam in the windows down the village street. Mr. and Mrs. Hewlitt were writing letters; Giles and Loveday had disappeared into the garden to try to hear a nightingale reputed to sing there.

"Len," said Diana, "you oughtn't to leave this place without seeing your ancestral home. Think of having an ancient ancestral family home! It's an immense idea! Aren't you just crazy to go and [225] look at it?"

Lenox rolled his cigarette carefully, and lighted it before replying.

"So crazy that I mean to go," he admitted at last. "Don't say anything about it to the others, but I'm planning to get up early, climb over the Manor House wall, and take a peep at the outside of the old place at any rate before anybody's about. That much won't do the old lady's nerves any harm. Besides, who's to find out?"

"What a ripping notion!" Diana drew her breath admiringly. "Oh, Len, I *must* go too! I simply *must*! I'd give everything in the world to see your family manor. That woman said it has a moat. I've never seen a real moated British manor."

"If you could be up by five?" suggested Lenox.

"Couldn't I? Just you wait and see! I'll be all dressed and ready and standing in the hall by five o'clock. Oh, what *topping* fun! Don't let us tell a soul about it. We'll just keep it to ourselves."

"*Ra*—ther! I'm not going prating about my plans, I can tell you."

Diana was almost sorry that her mouse scare had made her decide to sleep with Loveday. She did not want to be questioned beforehand about her expedition. Fortunately her room-mate was very

sleepy next morning, and slumbered tranquilly on while the stealthy process of early dressing went forward. She did not lift an eyelid when Diana opened the door and crept downstairs. The [226] big clock on the landing had not yet struck five, but Lenox was already waiting in the hall. He grinned as Diana joined him.

"You *are* a sport!" he whispered.

They let themselves out softly, and in another minute were walking down the village street. The clocks were at "summer time", an hour forward, so it was really only four o'clock. The sun had not risen yet, though it was quite light already. The air felt deliciously fresh, birds were singing, and cattle lowing. Here and there a cottage door opened, and a labourer came out, who looked at them with speculative curiosity as they passed by. They were soon through the village and along the road that led in the direction of the Manor. On either side lay pastures with clumps of yellow cowslips, the faint fragrance of which was wafted on the pleasant air. Diana could not resist scaling a fence and going to gather some, though she got her shoes soaked with the morning dew. Down a hill, along the river side, and up through a long avenue of elms ran the road, till at last a high oak fence took the place of the hedge; this in its turn gave way to a wall, and presently to the left loomed a pair of great ornamental iron gates, with a lodge at the side.

An archway across, surmounted by a stone escutcheon, bore the Clifford crest, so there was no doubt that they had reached their destination. The gates were padlocked together, and the blinds [227] were drawn in the lodge; evidently the keeper was not an early bird.

"How are we going to get in?" asked Diana.

"Not here, certainly. We'll go back to that oak paling, and climb over. Don't you feel as if we were poachers?"

"Yes, or burglars! I guess we've got to burgle quietly. Hope the old lady hasn't set man-traps in her park."

"Or doesn't leave savage bloodhounds to roam at large and guard the premises. Well, we shall have to take our chance. It's rather like storming a fortress—isn't it?"

"I call it precious!" chuckled Diana.

The fence did not look too easy to scale. It was of solid oak pales set upright, and was about six feet in height. Its straight surface did not offer any foothold. For some distance they wandered along, rather discouraged, but at last an overhanging tree seemed to promise hope. Lenox lifted up Diana till she could catch hold of a branch, then, with considerable boosting and scrambling, she swung herself over. Lenox dropped after her directly, and the adventurous pair stood within the park.

So far, so good. They were certainly trespassing, but they considered that their errand justified the deed. Lenox had brought his hand camera, and hoped to get a snap-shot of the old place to take back to America to show his father. He had ascertained that no picture post cards of it were [228] obtainable in the village. They could see the twisted chimneys rising over the top of a thick grove of trees and shrubs, so they turned their steps in that direction. Over some grassy park-like land they tramped, where rabbits were still scuttling about, and a few tame deer were grazing; then through a thicket of trees and under a belt of ornamental shrubs. All at once, as they scrambled from the shade of some rhododendrons, they caught their first view of the Manor. It was a glorious old mansion, built partly in half-timber and partly in grey stone, with an embattled tower for entrance, and a stone bridge crossing the moat that encircled the walls. The morning sun shone direct on its mullioned, diamond-paned windows, its twisted chimney stalks, ivy-clad walls, and smooth, green stretch of water. Nothing could have been more charming for a photograph, and, to make the picture absolutely perfect, a pair of stately swans came sailing along the moat. Lenox pulled his camera from its case, ventured forth from the cover of the bushes, and began to focus. Diana followed closely at his elbow. They were brimful of excitement. Here they were actually facing the "ancestral home" of the Clifford family.

"Don't you wish you lived here?" sighed Diana.

"Rather! But no such luck!"

"If the old lady has no children perhaps you'll turn out to be the heir," said Diana wistfully.

"She has nephews," said Lenox, dashing her hopes. "Besides, we must be a very far-off branch of [229] the family tree. It's a hundred years since we settled in America. Now don't nudge me. I've just got the thing focused—swans and all."

Lenox pressed the button, and turned the film on to No. 2, then looked about him.

"I'm going to take the whole half-dozen," he announced. "Let's move on and get a different view."

There was not a soul to be seen. With the exception of the swans, the inhabitants of the Manor did not seem to be early risers. Lenox and Diana grew bolder, and ventured nearer. By degrees they got right to the edge of the moat. The view here was beautiful, for it took in the bridge and the embattled tower, with the coat of arms over the doorway. It was exactly what they wanted to carry home to America. Lenox snapped it with huge satisfaction, including the swans, which luckily swam into the scene at the psychological moment.

"I'd give worlds to be able to go inside and explore," said Diana. "I wish I could make myself invisible. D'you think we dare just toddle across the bridge, and perhaps peep in through a window? There's nobody watching. O-o-o-oh!"

She might well exclaim, for, in direct contradiction to her words, the door at that moment opened, and an elderly lady made her appearance. She walked slowly with the aid of a cane, but it was evident that she had seen the intruders on her property, and was coming to tackle them. [230] Swift and hasty flight seemed the only way out of the difficulty.

"Quick, Lenox! Run!" gasped Diana.

She turned, as she spoke, to make a dash for the cover of the shrubs, but in her hurry and agitation she tripped on her dangling shoe lace, missed her footing, slipped, tumbled down the bank, and fell backwards with a splash into the moat.

It was not very deep, and Lenox hauled her out in a minute. There she stood upon the bank a dripping object, her nice dress all coated with duckweed and green slime. Her hat was floating away in the direction of the swans. The lady had crossed the bridge, and with the help of her cane walked painfully down the bank. Lenox and Diana felt like a pair of naughty school children caught stealing apples. The situation was most ignominious. Their faces would have made a study for a comic artist, especially Diana's, with smears of duckweed on her cheeks, and her moist hair hanging over her shoulders. They wondered what Mrs. Elliot was going to say to them.

She came slowly up, blinking her eyes rather nervously, looked Diana over from dripping head to muddy shoes, then made the obvious comment:

"You're very wet!"

"Ye-e-es!" shivered Diana, with chattering teeth.

"You'd better come indoors and have your clothes dried."

The relief of receiving such a charitable reception, instead of the stern rebuke they felt they [231] deserved, was intense. Lenox suddenly burst into a flood of gentlemanly apologies. He explained rapidly that his name was Clifford, that he had seen his father's coat of arms in the church, and had been tempted to trespass in order to secure some photographs of the house that was probably the old home of their family. Mrs. Elliot listened till he had finished.

"I'd have given you permission if you had asked," she replied calmly. "Now it's time that your sister—cousin, is she?—took off those wet clothes, or she'll catch cold."

Diana marvelled at Mrs. Elliot's goodness. She was taken indoors, and lent some garments while her own were dried. The household was an earlier one than they had supposed, and in answer to the mistress's bell came servants who were too well trained to express surprise in their faces at the sight of a dripping visitor. An elderly maid showed Diana to a bedroom, rubbed her hair for her with a towel, helped her into a pink silk kimono dressing-gown, and brought her a cup of hot tea. These precautions against cold having been taken, Mrs. Elliot most kindly volunteered to show the young people over the house. It was a funny little procession: the elderly lady with her cane; Lenox, in his khaki, still blurting out apologies; and Diana trailing the pink kimono, which was much too long, and shuffling in bronze-beaded shoes that were two sizes too large. The glories of the old Manor left them gasping: the big banqueting hall with its armour and [232] tapestries, the panelled oak boudoir, the library with its family portraits, the wide staircase, the drawing-room with its cabinets and priceless china, the state bedroom with the carved four-post bed where Queen Anne had slept, the courtyard and dove-cote where pigeons were strutting and preening their feathers, and the little chapel with its coats of arms in the stained glass, and chained Bible. Through a window they could see the garden, with clipped yew hedges and smooth lawn, and a peacock spreading its gorgeous tail to the morning sun.

"If your great-grandfather went to America a hundred years ago you are probably descended from either Guy, Charles, or Humphrey Clifford," said Mrs. Elliot, showing Lenox a family genealogical tree that hung in the hall.

"I know my great-grandfather's name was Humphrey," answered Lenox, "and the dates would seem to correspond."

Diana's clothes were dried at last, and brushed. Even her hat, by the aid of a fishing-rod, had been recovered from the moat. Though rather crushed and spoilt they were quite wearable. She felt herself again when she had put them on. Mrs. Elliot sent a servant to conduct the young people to the lodge, and order the gate to be unlocked for their exit. She received their renewed apologies and thanks in the same calm manner in which she had greeted them.

"I hope the photos will come out well," were her last words, as she stood at the door watching [233] them walk across the bridge.

When Lenox and Diana returned to the inn, and burst upon the rest of the party, who were having breakfast, their extraordinary story was at first scarcely believed.

"Bunkum, my boy!" said Giles, shaking his head.

But the two witnesses gave such a circumstantial account of their adventure that incredulity turned to amazement, and then amusement.

"You cheeky young cubs!" declared Mr. Hewlitt. "I think Mrs. Elliot was far too good to you."

"You got more than you deserved; but I'm grateful to her for drying you, Diana," commented Mrs. Hewlitt.

"I wish we'd been with you," said Giles. "You've had all the luck."

As the car was now repaired, the party once more packed up their baggage, and set forth for the short remainder of their tour. Lenox's leave was nearly over; Giles would be due in London next week; and Mr. Hewlitt's business in Paris was not yet concluded. After another day's enjoyment they parted at Cheltenham, and sent the girls back to school by train.

"We shan't forget you, dear," said Mrs. Hewlitt to Loveday, as she saw them off. "You must come and see us again some time—perhaps in America. Take care of my little Diana for me—won't you?" [234]

"I will—I will, indeed! Oh, I don't know how to thank you! It's been just the absolute time of my life!" said Loveday, leaning out of the carriage window as she waved good-bye.

[235]

CHAPTER XVII

The Green-eyed Monster

With the summer term came a period of great outdoor activity at Pendlemere. Miss Chadwick, Miss Carr, and Miss Ormrod were tremendously busy on the land, and gave the school a thorough initiation into the principles of gardening. The girls studied birds, noted what insects they ate, and how useful they were in a garden; they learned the life-histories of certain insects, and the causes of some plant diseases; they organized an amateur weather bureau, and kept charts of the progress of their crops. Everybody agreed that the new regime was much more interesting than that of the old days when the gardening had all been done for them, and they had only lounged about the lawn and played tennis. Each flower seemed twice as beautiful when they had helped to grow it, and the vegetables of their own cultivation were voted prize-winners.

Diana, in consideration of her great love for horses, was allowed to give some assistance in Baron's toilet, and even sometimes to drive him, a privilege (dependent on good behaviour) which made her supremely happy.

On the whole, though Miss Todd was undoubtedly rather strict, the girls decided that the school [236] was jollier than in Mrs. Gifford's days. They did not forget their former Principal, who wrote to them sometimes from her new home and told them about her life in Burma, but they had accepted the changed conditions, and had grown to like them. The outdoor department seemed to bring a much wider current of life into Pendlemere. Miss Chadwick and her two assistants were thoroughly modern, and would discuss all sorts of up-to-date problems, so that the school kept in touch with the outside world instead of living in the narrow rut of its own little round of lessons and amusements. This term four elder students had come, principally to study gardening under Miss Chadwick. They were girls of eighteen and nineteen, who, instead of being placed among the school, took somewhat the position of the old-fashioned "parlour boarder" of sixty years ago, and were on terms of intimacy with the mistresses. Naturally they were the envy and admiration of those less fortunate beings who were still only ordinary pupils. They were good-natured to the schoolgirls, but held themselves a little aloof. Sometimes, in a rather superior manner, they would condescend to be friendly. Each had her own train of worshippers. The prettiest and most attractive of the four was Adeline Hoyle, a tall, fine-looking girl with dark eyes, a very fair skin, and thick coils of brown hair twisted into a classic knot. There was a calm dignity [237] about her and a charm of manner that was exceedingly taking. It bowled over Diana's heart entirely. She took a sudden and most violent affection for Adeline. She would hang about to try to get a word with her, flush crimson at the slightest notice from her idol, and was ready to perform anything in the way of odd jobs. She even took up sewing—a much neglected part of her education—in order to embroider a handkerchief-case as a birthday offering. It is an exhilarating, but rather wearing process to be violently in love, especially when you are decidedly doubtful as to whether the loved object in the least appreciates your attentions. Adeline would accept Diana's sweets or flowers with a kind "Thank you", and then pat her on the shoulder and tell her to run away. She would sometimes allow her to link arms in the garden, but it was suffered with an air of amused tolerance. It was obvious that she very much preferred the society of Hilary, who was nearer her own age, and that she regarded intermediates as mere children. Diana, who was eccentric in her likes and dislikes, but very keen when she took a fancy to anybody, went through all the stages of longing, hope, elation, despair, and jealousy. When she saw Hilary received into supreme favour, the green-eyed monster swooped down and took possession of her. Loveday, who had watched the progress of the affair with some distress, offered what consolation she could in the sanctuary of the ivy room.

"Adeline's really very good to you," she comforted. [238]

"Yes, but she doesn't care twopence," raged Diana. "I know she's nice and kind and all that, but she loves me with the love she'd give to a distressed negro or a starved cat. I want her to *want* me—and she doesn't one little bit! She just tolerates me sometimes, and that's all. What she can

see in Hilary I can't imagine. I think Hilary's the most detestable girl in the school. I always have disliked her. I *hate* her now!"

"Some people say that hating anybody sends out 'thought-forms' like hideous daggers into the invisible world, and they do dreadful harm, and in the end they come back to their owners like curses. Can't you manage to send out some prettier thoughts?"

"No, Loveday Seton; I can't, and won't, and shan't!" said Diana emphatically, screwing up mouth and eyes into one of her ugliest faces. "I'm not going to pretend I like Hilary when I don't—that would be a fiblet and worse than red daggers. Yes, you can call me naughty if you like. I've got to the stage when I don't care."

Knowing by experience that Diana generally received suggestions in this way, but sometimes ruminated over her remarks afterwards, Loveday shelved the question of thought-forms and their possible ill effects, and petted her spoilt room-mate instead till she cajoled her into a better temper. The green-eyed monster still reigned, however, and Diana sat at tea-time flashing, if not [239]
red daggers, very obvious untoward glances, as she caught a smile of comprehension pass between Adeline and Hilary. Nobody had time to take much notice of her heroics.

Everyone was too busy discussing school affairs. The very latest news was that the boat-house was at last to be unlocked, the boat thoroughly overhauled and painted, and that mistresses and students would go rowing on the lake. A rumour even began to circulate that certain favoured members of the school might be taken as passengers.

"We used when Mrs. Gifford was here," said Wendy. "She often got Mr. Thwaites from the village to come and row us. It was top-hole. And once he let Tattie and me try to row, but I 'caught a crab' and dropped the oar. I'd soon learn though, if I'd another chance."

"We ought to have two or three boats," decided Sadie.

"One for each form," amended Vi.

"You bet it's only seniors who'll have any luck," groused Diana, who was still in the depths of despondency.

"There's no knowing," said Jess hopefully.

Though they might not be certain of sharing in the pleasure of navigating the lake, there was at least an element of anticipation in the matter. It was just possible that some fine day Miss Todd might say to one of them: "Put on your jersey and you may go for a row". They felt it was one of [240]
those sporting chances that sometimes turn up in a life. They hung about the boat-house wistfully when Mr. Appleton from Glenbury did his task of overhauling, and if he went away for a few minutes they took advantage of his absence to scramble in and sit inside the boat and imagine how delightful it would feel to be really on the water. They began to practise boat-songs, just to be ready for any emergency, and would sit on the landing-place singing "Row, brothers, row!" or "My barque is on the shore".

It was very exciting when repairs got to the painting stage, especially when Diana did not notice, and took a leap inside, with equal disaster to Mr. Appleton's nice coat of paint and her own serge skirt. Great was the day when the *Peveril* at last was dry, and Mr. Appleton launched her himself on the lake, and took Miss Todd, Miss Beverley, and Miss Chadwick for a trial trip. The school, watching enviously from the bank, decided that nothing but a steamer, or a small fleet of rowboats could satisfy its demands. They considered rowing ought to be a part of every girl's education.

As Diana had prophesied, the intermediates came in for no luck. Miss Chadwick and her assistants, with the four gardening students, monopolized the *Peveril*. They took Miss Todd, Miss Beverley, and Miss Hampson out for airings on the lake; occasionally a senior was invited, and once the four youngest girls in the school were given a brief treat. All the rest had just to look on [241]
and long. Diana, indeed, extorted a sort of half promise from Adeline that some time, when it was convenient, and if she was not too busy, and if nobody else wanted the boat, she would let her realize her ambition, but so far this promise had remained an empty one, a vague invitation that meant nothing. Diana, catching Adeline in the garden one afternoon, made a desperate effort to obtain its fulfilment.

DIANA CALLED AND SHOUTED TO THEM. THEY TOOK NO NOTICE.

"Just for ten minutes," she pleaded.

"I'm so busy," evaded Adeline. "I've got seedlings to plant out, and really haven't time to take people on the lake. What a bother you are, Diana!"

"You said you would some time."

"Well, so I will; but the time isn't to-day. I've other things to do."

"May I help you to plant the seedlings?"

"No indeed! They need very delicate handling, and I'm responsible to Miss Chadwick for them. Why don't you go and help Miss Carr?"

With a decidedly snubbed feeling Diana strolled away, not to help Miss Carr, for it was recreation hour, and she felt at liberty to employ her leisure as she liked, but to find Wendy or some other congenial spirit. Wendy, Sadie, and Vi, however, had gone to the village with Miss Ormrod, and Tattie, Jess, Magsie, and Peggy occupied the tennis-court. Diana was the only one of the intermediates left out. She felt exceedingly aggrieved. She stood for a while watching the set; but looking on at tennis is never very amusing, so she wended her solitary way into the house to fetch [242] a book. Down the corridor bustled Miss Hampson in a hurry.

"Diana! I was just wanting somebody, and you'll do. Will you go and tell Adeline that Miss Todd wishes to speak to her as soon as she's finished in the greenhouse?"

Miss Hampson, with her arms full of exercise books to correct, disappeared into the senior room, and Diana departed on her errand. Adeline was not in the greenhouse. She had not even begun to transplant the seedlings, though the pots and the soil were ready. Diana waited a few minutes to see if she would come, then went in quest of her. Bobbing briskly down the shrubbery path were two heads, a dark one with hair in a classic knot, and a fair one with a pig-tail. They could just be distinguished above the line of the laurels. Diana put her hands to her mouth and called:

"Ad—el—ine!"

The heads turned for a moment to look, then scuttled on with the utmost rapidity. Diana, following, caught a glimpse of two figures whisking past the boat-house to the landing-place. She stopped dead.

"So it's Hilary Adeline's taking with her. And they're going in the boat. Well, of all mean things this is the limit! Adeline hadn't time to take people on the lake, and wanted to plant seedlings. That's why she was so anxious to send me off to help Miss Carr. If she won't listen when I call to [243] her *I*'m not going to bother to give her Miss Hampson's message. I don't suppose Miss Todd wants her about anything important. I'm fed up!"

A very disconsolate and indignant Diana once more walked up the garden; the green-eyed monster was sitting on her back and digging in his disagreeable talons pretty deeply; he was

anything but a bright companion. She wandered aimlessly round the orchard, and finally came across Miss Carr and Loveday carrying out food to the chickens. They were chatting as she met them, and the words drifted to her between the apple-trees.

"So Mr. Appleton said it really wasn't safe at all, and Miss Todd had better let nobody take her out till he could come up. He'd try to come this evening, but he wasn't sure if he'd manage it because—why, Diana, what's the matter?"

"Is it the boat you're talking about?" demanded a breathless, excited little figure.

"Yes—but why? Diana! What is it? Di—an—a!"

Loveday spoke to the winds, for already her room-mate was half-way down the orchard. Diana's feet were trying to keep pace with her whirling brain. The boat was unsafe! That, no doubt, was the message that Miss Todd had intended for Adeline. If she had not already started it might be possible to stop her, or at any rate to call her back. She raced along the shrubbery and down the bank to the landing-place. But Adeline and Hilary had wasted no time, and were already quite a [244] considerable way out on the lake. Diana called and shouted to them. They turned their heads to look, evidently laughed, and took no notice. It was plain that they thought Diana wished them to return and take her for a row, and that they had no intention of any such philanthropic course of action. On the landing-place Diana raged. If the *Peveril* were really unsafe every stroke of the oar was taking Adeline and Hilary into greater danger. How could she possibly make them understand? The more she called, the more they would row away.

Then a very desperate idea occurred to her, so desperate that only a harum-scarum like Diana would have thought of it. She would swim out towards them, and when they saw her in the water they would probably turn and come back. She pulled off her skirt and her shoes. Now Diana was not a very expert swimmer; it was indeed two years since she had had any practice, and that had been in the sea, which is easier than fresh water. She never thought of these particulars, however, but, putting her hands together, dived off the landing-place just as Loveday turned the corner of the boat-house. It was very cold, indeed, in the water, far colder than she had expected; it made her gasp for breath, and sent a numbness into her limbs. She struggled on, however, with brave strokes.

"Di—ana!" screamed Loveday's agitated voice behind her.

The girls in the boat were not even looking. How fearfully cold it was! It was difficult to hold up [245] her head properly and see where she was going. She had thought swimming was so easy. A few more strokes and something seemed to be twining round her. She had dashed into some waterweeds, and their clammy stems clutched her like dead fingers. She made a desperate effort to free herself; down went her head, and next moment she was gulping, struggling, and shrieking for help. There was a splash behind from the landing-place as Loveday plunged to the rescue; the occupants of the boat also, at last looking and realizing the seriousness of the situation, began to row in her direction as fast as they could pull. They were some distance off, however, and Loveday won the race. She caught Diana just as she was sinking, and held her up until the boat arrived.

A very draggled, agitated pair of girls made their way up the shrubbery walk to the house, leaving a wet trail to mark their path. Adeline tied up the *Peveril* before she followed them.

"I'm sure nobody can blame *us*," she remarked to Hilary.

Loveday and Diana, warmed, dried, and clad in fresh garments, scolded by Miss Todd, and cosseted by Miss Carr, the heroines of a real adventure, and for the moment the centre of interest in the school, discussed the event in private.

"I've explained, but Adeline doesn't see it," said Diana. "She says the boat wasn't as bad as all [246] that, and they were in no real danger, and that I did a very silly, idiotic, foolhardy thing. She doesn't understand I was trying to save her life. But I *was*!"

"I know," nodded Loveday. "I don't think somehow, though, that Adeline's the kind of girl whom you could ever make understand. Why do you lavish all this love on her, Di? She's not worth it."

Diana was plaiting her skirt into little gathers. She looked at her fingers and not at Loveday.

"I *did* like her so! But it's all ended now—drowned in the water, I think. She doesn't care twopence about me. Well! If *she* doesn't, no more do *I*! She may go to Hong-Kong as far as I'm concerned."

Loveday glanced anxiously at her friend. There was a suspicious tremble in the usually cheerful voice. Were those drops shining on the long eyelashes?

"It takes a good deal of riddling before we sort out the wheat and the chaff in our friendships," ventured Loveday.

"*You're* 'honest grain', at any rate!" said Diana, winking rapidly, as she rose and ended the conversation.

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CHAPTER XVIII

Diana's Foundling

There was very little doubt in the minds of Miss Todd and of other mistresses at Pendlemere Abbey that Diana was a spoilt child. Her parents, far away in Paris, made up for their enforced absence by sending her a larger assortment of presents than usually falls to the lot of a schoolgirl. She had practically everything that she could want, and a great many things beside. There was one subject, however, upon which she had coaxed her father for a long time. In every letter she had written lately she had assured him that life was not liveable in the summer term without a pony. Diana had a passion for horses. She had ridden much in America, and her ideal of happiness was to be on ponyback. She was occasionally allowed to mount Baron, but, as Miss Todd would not permit her to take him into the lanes alone, she had to confine her gallops to the paddock, which she considered very poor sport. She thought the matter over till she evolved an idea; then she confided it to Miss Carr. Miss Carr was also an enthusiast about horses, and was secretly longing to ride Baron. Diana's scheme was that she should ask her father to allow her to [248] hire a pony for the rest of the term, have it stabled at the farm near, and go with Miss Carr for rides. When she made up her mind to a thing she was apt to press the subject hotly. A series of such very urgent letters went to Paris that Mr. Hewlitt yielded, and wrote to Miss Todd asking her to be so kind as to arrange the matter. Very fortunately for Diana the idea appealed to Miss Todd; she wished to encourage riding amongst her girls, and was quite willing to allow the experiment to be tried. She commissioned Mr. Greenhalgh, a neighbouring farmer, to procure a suitable mount for a young lady of fourteen, and to take charge of it in his stable. Diana had to wait a week, in great impatience, while he made enquiries and interviewed horse-dealers; then one red-letter afternoon she was taken by Miss Todd to the farm, and introduced to the prettiest possible little white pony. "Lady" was getting on in years, but still had some spirit left in her, and she was accustomed to the saddle. Her owner, considering that she needed a rest, was glad to hire her out for such light work. Diana flung her arms round the pony's neck, and at once began the process of making love to her, cementing the new friendship with several lumps of sugar which she had brought in her pocket.

Then began a series of perfectly delightful rides. Miss Carr and Diana would start out after tea, and explore all the bridle-roads in the neighbourhood. Sometimes they would go up on the moors, [249] and enjoy a canter over the soft grass, or ride alongside the beautiful little lakes that lay like gems among the hills. Diana did not much mind where they went, so long as she could be upon Lady's back. Her new possession naturally aroused wild longing in the breasts of a considerable number of her schoolfellows. If it had been possible Miss Todd would have arranged for a riding-master to bring horses to Pendlemere and give lessons to some of the girls, but matters had not yet adjusted themselves sufficiently after the war for such an ambitious scheme as that, so she did the next best thing, hired a second pony, and sent certain girls, whose parents wished them to learn riding, out in relays. These elect few were regarded as favourites of fortune, but they were obliged to take their luck in turns. They could only have one ride a week each, and that was not nearly enough to content them. They wanted at least two.

"If Miss Todd could hire another pony," sighed Wendy, "that would mean we each got in a second lesson a week."

"Mr. Greenhalgh has tried, and says he can't hear of one anywhere," lamented Tattie. "Horses are scarce since the war, and ponies seem particularly wanted in the summer. It's very difficult to get riding-ponies."

"Glad I secured Lady," chuckled Diana.

"I think it's very mean of you to keep Lady all to yourself," retorted Sadie, airing a grievance. [250] "Why can't you let her be the second school pony, and take your turn with the rest of us? It would be far fairer."

"Give up Lady? Well, I like that! Coolest idea I've ever heard! Why, I thought of the whole thing, and wrote to Dad, and she was hired specially for me. *Your* riding lessons were only a copy of my idea. Get a third pony if you can, but I guess I'm not going to give up Lady to anybody. Why should I? Dad said she was to be mine."

"It's not sporty of you, though," grumbled Sadie. "You know perfectly well we *can't* get a third pony, and everybody in the school is saying how hard it is for you to monopolize one entirely to yourself. There are six other girls who'd be glad to learn riding if they could get a mount."

"Then let them write home to their fathers to send them ponies."

"As if they could! But their fathers would let them take lessons if there were a school pony for them. I know that for a fact."

"Well, they shan't have mine, at any rate," rapped out Diana defiantly. "You just needn't think it, so there!"

One afternoon it was Wendy's turn for the school pony. She and Diana and Miss Carr rode away together down the road to Chapelrigg. It was a gloriously fine day. Wild roses starred the hedgerows, and the beautiful blue speedwell bordered the lanes. Larks were singing, and, though [251] the cuckoo had changed his tune, blackbirds still fluted in the coppices.

They had come out on an errand—not a particularly romantic one, as it happened, only to pay a bill for Miss Todd at a farm-house a few miles away. If the errand was prosaic the farm and its surroundings looked attractive; it stood on a hill with a beautiful group of birch-trees behind it, and a small stream came rippling down at the bottom of the garden. The path from the high road was blocked by a cart left standing with a load of straw, so it would be impossible to ride the horses up to the door. The three riders dismounted, and Miss Carr, tying Baron to the fence, said she would walk up the lane and pay the bill while the girls waited for her in the road. Allowing Lady and Topsy to crop the grass in the hedge bottom, Diana and Wendy sat on the bank lazily enjoying themselves. It was very pleasant that afternoon to be alive. In that northern district although summer came late she made up for it by the extreme beauty with which she clothed the landscape; the view from the hill-side was like one of Turner's pictures.

As the girls sat chatting, watching the ponies, and idly plucking flowers, they heard footsteps coming along the road, and presently a woman carrying a baby appeared round the corner. She was young and dark and gipsy-looking, and wore large ear-rings and a red cotton handkerchief [252] knotted loosely round her brown throat. She stopped at the sight of Diana and Wendy and the ponies, and seemed to consider a moment. Then she walked boldly up to them, looked keenly in their faces, and evidently chose Diana.

"Could you do me a kindness, miss?" she asked. "I've to go up to the farm for a basket. I don't want to carry the baby with me; she's so heavy. If I leave her here on the grass would you keep an eye on her till I come back? I shan't be gone five minutes."

Now Diana was fond of babies, and the little dark-eyed specimen, wrapped up in the plaid shawl, was pretty and attractive and fairly clean. For answer she held out her arms, received baby, shawl, and feeding-bottle on to her knee, and constituted herself temporary nurse.

"She'll be good till I come back," said the woman, turning up the lane that led to the farm.

The small person with the brown eyes was probably accustomed to be handed about. She did not jib at strangers, as might have been expected, but accepted the situation quite amiably. She gurgled in response to Diana's advances, and allowed herself to be amused. Perhaps the vicinity of horses was familiar to her, and she felt at home. Diana, hugging her on her knee, freed her from the folds of the shawl and allowed her to kick happily. She was certainly a fascinating little mortal.

In the course of about ten minutes Miss Carr, who had been having a chat at the farm about [253] gardening prospects, returned leisurely down the lane, and was electrified to find Diana sitting by the roadside nursing a baby.

"I didn't see any gipsy woman come up to the farm," she said, in answer to the girls' explanations. "You'd better go, Wendy, and see if you can find her, and tell her to come at once and fetch her baby."

So Wendy went up the lane to the farm, and asked at the front door and the back door, and looked round the stack-yard and the buildings, but there was never a trace of the gipsy girl. A little boy playing by the pond, however, declared that he had seen a woman crossing the field and climbing over the fence on to the road. Wendy returned with this report. Miss Carr looked annoyed.

"We must go along the road, then, and follow her. We can't wait here till she chooses to come back."

So Diana carried the baby, and Wendy led Lady and Topsy, and Miss Carr, with an anxious wrinkle between her eyebrows, followed with Baron in the direction that the small boy had pointed out. They walked a mile, and enquired at cottages and from passers-by, and from men working in the fields, but nobody had seen the gipsy woman. Then they went back to the trysting-place to see if she had returned, but she was not there. They asked again at the farm, and went back to the cottages, and Miss Carr begged to leave the baby there, because its mother would be [254] sure to enquire for it and find it. The occupants of the cottages, however, shook their heads, and were not at all prepared to accept the responsibility. Neither were the people at the farm. They utterly refused to take it in. Then Diana realized that it is one thing to offer to nurse a baby, and quite another to get rid of it again. What were they to do?

"We can't dump the poor mite down by the roadside and leave it," said Miss Carr distractedly. "Whatever *can* have become of its mother?"

No answer was forthcoming to her question, and matters were urgent. She decided that the only thing to be done was to take the baby with them to Pendlemere, leaving messages at the farm and the cottages for the mother to follow on and claim it. Naturally it made a great sensation in the school when Diana arrived holding her foundling in her arms. Miss Carr explained at full length to Miss Todd, who was utterly aghast, but consented to take in the small stranger till it was claimed. Miss Chadwick, who had studied hygiene at the Agricultural College, and had once assisted at a crèche, constituted herself head nurse, mixed a bottle, and left Miss Ormrod to feed the fowls while she sat in a rocking-chair and soothed the foundling to sleep.

"Surely the mother'll turn up before dark," she said.

But nobody turned up, and Miss Chadwick, who had had to guess at the baby's age and requirements, and had mixed too strong a bottle, spent a wakeful night patting her small guest [255]

on the back and endeavouring to still her wails. Next morning Miss Todd reported the matter at the police station, enquiries were made, and it was ascertained that a girl answering to the description given had been in the company of a band of hawkers, but had disappeared and left no trace of her whereabouts. The baby was not hers, but belonged to a woman who had just been arrested on a serious charge and taken to Glenbury jail; the hawkers with whom she had associated disclaimed all responsibility for the child.

"The only thing to be done is to send it to the Union," said the police sergeant.

But by that time the school in general, and Diana in particular, had fallen in love with the poor little baby. They raged at the idea of sending it to the workhouse. They had borrowed clothes for it; and, nicely bathed and dressed and recovered from its fit of indigestion, it looked a sweet thing, and was ready to make friends with anybody and everybody.

"Bless her, she *shan't* go the workhouse!" declared Diana, kissing the small fist that clung round her finger.

There was a wild idea among the girls that the foundling might be kept as a "school baby".

"We're taught gardening, and poultry-keeping, and bee-keeping," said Wendy quite seriously, "so why not the care of children? We could learn to bathe her, and mix her bottle, and do heaps of things for her." [256]

Miss Todd, however, thought otherwise. Theoretical hygiene of infants was all very well as part of the curriculum, but the practical side of it was disturbing to the school. Miss Chadwick had other duties besides that of nursing a baby. Rows of plants needed attention, and young chickens claimed her care.

"If the mother gets a heavy sentence," said Miss Todd, "I think the child would be received into a 'Home for Destitute Children'. In the meantime——"

"*Not* the workhouse!" pleaded Diana. "Isn't there anybody in the village who'd take her in?"

"Mrs. Jones would have her, but she would charge twelve and sixpence a week; nobody will take in a baby for less now."

"What's that in dollars? About three, isn't it? Dad will fix that up easily. I'll write to him to-night. It's as good as settled."

"Diana," said Miss Todd emphatically, "I shall *not* allow you to write to your father and ask him for anything more. If you care to give up your pocket-money for the baby's sake that's another matter; but you're getting into a bad habit of expecting your father to pay for every whim that comes into your head. It's cheap charity to suggest something that's to cost *you* nothing. You want to have all the credit of the generosity at your father's expense."

Diana flushed up to her hair, and down over her neck. [257]

"Do you think me a slacker?" she asked.

"Yes; in this respect I certainly do. If you were prepared to deny yourself anything it would be different, but you're not. You like to call the child *your* foundling, but personally you've done nothing for her. It's Miss Chadwick who's had the wakeful nights."

Diana did not urge in self-defence that she would willingly have taken the baby to bed with her if she had been allowed; she knew it was useless to offer arguments or excuses. She was busy thinking. Miss Todd's reproaches stung her like a whip. She would let the school see that she was not the pampered, spoilt darling that they imagined. On that score she was determined. Sacrifices! She was quite prepared to make sacrifices if they were necessary. Nobody should again have the chance of telling her that she did her generosity at other people's expense. An idea swept through her mind, and she set her teeth.

"Does it cost more than twelve and six a week to keep Lady?" she asked.

"Considerably more; though I don't suppose you've ever concerned yourself about the cost," returned Miss Todd sarcastically.

"Might I hand Lady over to the school for the rest of the term, then, and pay for the baby instead? I'd square it up with Father. He wouldn't mind about the riding when I explained."

Miss Todd looked Diana squarely in the face. Pupil and mistress met each other's eyes. The Principal's voice softened when she spoke. [258]

"Yes; if you like to do this, Diana, I could arrange it. We want another school pony. You could take your turn with Lady once a week, the same as the other girls. By the end of the term we should know whether the 'Home' would receive the baby. Meantime, Mrs. Jones would take good care of her."

"Then I guess it's fixed," said Diana rather hoarsely.

[259]

CHAPTER XIX

Ambitions

The poor little foundling, pending her mother's trial at the Assizes, was boarded out in the village with Mrs. Jones, and Diana had permission to see her twice a week. Miss Todd communicated with the "Home for Destitute Children", and received the reply that, should the mother be convicted, as seemed only too probable, they would be ready to receive the baby, and would apply to the judge for an order for entire charge, so that it should not be claimed and taken away to a possibly criminal life when the mother's term of penal servitude was over.

For the present, therefore, there was nothing more to be done except take an interest in their protégée. Diana set to work to make her a dress—a really heroic effort, for she hated sewing—and sat stitching at it on those afternoons when the other girls were riding Lady. It was typical of Diana that she would not discuss her arrangement about the pony with anybody, not even Wendy.

"I've done it for reasons of my own, and that's enough!" she said rather crossly. "You've no need [260]
to thank me—it wasn't particularly to please *you*! I suppose I can do as I like!"

"Of course you *can*, but you needn't flare up so!" retorted Sadie. "*Most* people would *expect* to be thanked. What a queer girl you are, Diana!"

At which remark Diana grunted and turned away.

It is a funny thing that a burst of self-sacrifice often leaves us in a bad temper. Diana was no model heroine, only a very ordinary and rather spoilt girl. The reaction after giving up her pony had sent her spirits down to zero, and if all her doings are to be faithfully chronicled, it must be confessed that for a day or two she did not display herself at her best. She was snappy even with Loveday, and matters came to an open quarrel with Hilary, who, as prefect, was inclined to be dictatorial. A war of words followed; Hilary threatened to appeal to Miss Todd, and Diana, defeated but unrepentant, retired vowing vengeance.

"I'll pay you out some day; see if I don't!" she declared hotly.

"You're not worth noticing!" retorted Hilary, shrugging her shoulders.

Diana retired to the ivy room, had a thoroughly good cry, and came down with red eyes, but feeling better. She did not speak to Hilary again, however, for days.

Meantime, examinations were drawing near. Although Miss Todd conducted her school on [261]
absolutely modern lines, she still clung to examinations as being some test of a girl's attainments. The seniors in especial were anxious to distinguish themselves. It was their last chance before they left, and all, with the exception of Stuart and Ida, who were to remain as gardening students, were leaving at the end of the term. The breaking up of her school-days meant an anxious time for Loveday. When they were alone in the ivy room she sometimes confided her troubles to Diana.

"I don't know what I'm to do next. Uncle Fred has told me plainly that the little sum of money my father left has been nearly all spent on my education, and that he himself can't do anything for me. I'd like to go and take a proper training for something—kindergarten, or horticulture, or domestic economy. But how can I when there's nothing to do it on? I suppose it'll end in my going out as a nursery governess."

"Oh, Loveday!"

"Well, what else can I do? I daresay I'd love the children, and be quite happy in a way, but the worst of it is, it's such a blind alley, and leads to nothing. It's all very well to be a nursery governess when you're eighteen, but I'd like to be something better at thirty-six. If you want to get anything decent in the way of a post you have to train."

Diana, to whom all these ideas were fresh and bewildering, was trying to adjust her brains to the new problems. She wrenched her mind from the near present, and took a mental review of [262]
Loveday's far future.

"But aren't you going to get married?" was the result of her cogitations.

Loveday, busy plying her hair-brush, shook her long flaxen mane dolefully.

"I don't say I wouldn't *like* to. But I don't think it's at all likely. I'm not an attractive kind of girl; I know that well enough. I'm so shy. I never know what to say to people when they begin to talk to me. They must think me a silly goose. You should see my cousin Dorothy; she's always the very life and soul of a party. If I were like *that* now! I don't suppose anybody'll ever trouble to look at me twice. I'm sure Auntie thinks so. No; I expect I've just got to make up my mind to be a nursery governess for the rest of my days."

Diana, still in a state of mental bewilderment, looked at pretty Loveday sitting on the bed brushing out her silky fair hair, and her memory switched itself back suddenly to the last evening of their motor trip. She had been sitting in the lounge of the hotel, and through the open door could see Giles standing in the hall. Loveday had come running downstairs. Diana would never forget the look that for an instant flashed across Giles's face. It contained something that she had

not yet altogether grasped or realized.

"I wouldn't make up my mind too soon if I were you," she said slowly. "You might change it some day."

Whatever the future might hold in store, the present was the most immediate concern. Loveday [263] wished to take back a good report to her uncle and aunt, and studied hard so as to obtain a fair place in the examination lists. She had just a faint hope that if they thought she showed any intellectual promise they might consider it worth while to have her trained. They had never made much of her attainments, but if she could come out third or fourth in the school she felt they would be pleased. It would be impossible to overstep Geraldine or Hilary, but her work was tolerably on a level with Ida's and Stuart's, and certainly above Nesta's.

It was just at this crisis that Miss Todd offered a prize for the best essay on "The Reconstruction of England after the Great War, and its Special Application to Women's Labour and Social Problems".

It was rather an ambitious topic for girls to tackle, but the seniors attacked it with the crude courage of seventeen. It is often easier at that age to state our opinions than later, when our minds wobble with first-hand experience of the world. At any rate, it gives a force and style to an essay to be absolutely sure that what you write in it is the final thing to be said on the subject. The girls scribbled away, tore up many sheets, showed bits to admiring friends, and felt themselves budding authoresses. Public opinion, surging round the school, had already fixed the laurel wreath on the head of Hilary. Hilary exhibited decided literary ability; she had quite a [264] clever knack of writing, and had composed several short stories. When she read these aloud—in bed—her thrilled listeners decided that they were worthy of appearing in print.

"Why don't you send them to a magazine?" urged Peggy, who slept in Dormitory 4.

"Perhaps I may some day—but please don't tell anybody a word about it," said Hilary, putting the cherished stories away again inside her dispatch-case.

In the ivy room Loveday also wrote and burnt, and wrote and tore up, and wrote again. Composition was her strong point, and though she knew she could never rival Hilary in mathematics or languages, she might possibly match her in the matter of an essay. In imagination Loveday took home the prize and showed it to her uncle and aunt, who were so overcome with amazement that they at once decided to send her to college on the strength of it.

On Wednesday afternoon the school had planned a mountain walk; but the weather, with its usual northern perversity, turned on the water-tap, and sent down deluges of rain. July can be quite as wet as February, and through the steaming window-panes the disappointed girls watched little rivers racing down the walks, and black clouds driving over the fells. The pent-up energy that wanted to spend itself in walking must find some other vent. The seniors, with one accord, retired to their form-room to copy out their essays. Miss Chadwick charitably conducted [265] the juniors, clad in mackintoshes and goloshes down to the stable, and let them climb the ladder on to the hay in the loft, where she sat and told them stories. She did not invite the intermediates, so they were left to their own devices.

Diana, suffering from a cold, annoyed with the weather, and cross that she was not allowed to go out into the rain, raged up and down the room, and finally, for lack of any other form of physical exercise, organized a jumping competition.

The girls scrambled over the desks and took leaps on to the floor. They squealed as they did so, and every now and then broke into hallos or bursts of song. It was certainly not a quiet occupation. In the midst of the riot the door opened, and Hilary, in a towering temper, made her appearance.

"I never heard such a disgraceful noise in my life!" she stormed. "It sounds like a menagerie or an infants' tea-party. Great girls of your age to be jumping about like babies. You ought to be ashamed of yourselves! Here are we all trying to copy our essays; and how d'you think we're going to write with that racket going on over our heads? If you don't stop I shall fetch Miss Todd. She'll hear it for herself very soon, if you don't take care, and then there'll be squalls. She's working in her study."

There was truth in Hilary's remarks. Though they would not acknowledge there was anything [266] derogatory to the dignity of intermediates in indulging in the pastime of jumping, they knew full well that should the noise penetrate to the precincts of the study Miss Todd would issue forth like a dragon. But Diana was cross, and not disposed to take reproof lightly. She pulled one of her most impossible faces, and stormed back at Hilary.

"You seniors want to have the school all to yourselves! It's a holiday afternoon; and why shouldn't we do as we like? We've just as good a right to amuse ourselves in our own way as you have. I don't see why you should tyrannize over us. You're always interfering! What business is it of yours what we do?"

"Very much my business, Diana Hewlitt, considering I'm prefect," said Hilary grimly. "If I've any more cheek from you you'll march down and report yourself in the study. This noise must stop. I give you warning that if it begins again I shall go straight to Miss Todd."

"You'll be a sneak then," retorted Diana. "I've a great many scores to settle with *you*, Hilary.

You'll have a very unpleasant surprise before long, so look out!"

Hilary did not deign to answer, but stalked away in majestic silence, leaving gloom behind her. The girls knew perfectly well that even for a holiday afternoon they had exceeded the noise limit. Visions of a surprise visit from Miss Todd kept them silent. Tattie brought out her sewing, and Peggy her painting. Sadie went down to the library for a book. Wendy and Jess began a game of [267] halma. Even Diana, after staring disconsolately out of the window, settled to read *Ivanhoe*. Downstairs the seniors, in peace and quiet, finished copying out their essays.

"They look so neat now they're done," rejoiced Geraldine. "Shall you keep your old copy?"

"What's the use?" said Hilary. "Mine's all alterations and corrections. I shall just tear it up."

"Well, so shall I."

Most of the others followed suit, and made a bonfire in the empty grate with the originals of their essays. The fair copies they placed inside their desks. Hilary put hers away with the short stories she had written, and, happening to be in a rather communicative mood, she confided the secret of these literary efforts to Stuart. Stuart was much impressed.

"Why don't you try to publish them?" she asked.

"Well, I would if I could," admitted Hilary.

"I saw a little bit in the end of the *Blue Magazine* saying that the editor would be glad to consider contributions."

"Oh, did you? Where is it?"

"I'll find it for you."

Stuart hunted up the magazine, found the paragraph in question, and tendered good advice.

"I'd certainly send them if I were you. Why shouldn't you try as well as anybody else? They might be accepted. Just think of having a story in a magazine! I'd die of swelled head if it were mine." [268]

"I suppose there's no harm in trying," fluttered Hilary. "It would be a joke to see one's own story in print."

"Send some of them off to-day."

"Shall I?"

"Why not?"

"I don't know which to choose."

"Oh, any of them!"

Thus urged, Hilary drew three of her manuscripts at a venture, put them inside a long envelope, wrote a short note offering them to the editor, enclosed it, fastened, addressed, and stamped her letter, and placed it in the post-box in the hall.

"What fun if you have some luck!" said Stuart.

"I drew a tiny little swastika inside the envelope, and I made three crosses over it with my right forefinger," confessed Hilary, "but I don't suppose it's any use; they'll probably come packing back."

"Well, if they do you must send them to some other magazine," said Stuart hopefully.

Diana felt a little cheered up after reading three chapters of *Ivanhoe*, but she was still angry with Hilary. She felt that she would like to play a trick upon her. It would really serve her right for being so generally disagreeable. There was no need at all for prefects to take advantage of their office and ride roughshod over the intermediates. How could she possibly pay her out and settle the score between them? She pondered for a while, then had a sudden brain-wave and chuckled. [269] First, she ascertained that the senior room was empty, then she paid a surreptitious visit to the pantry and purloined a pepper-pot. Hiding this for safety in her pocket she went back to the senior room, opened Hilary's desk, and put a plentiful sprinkling of pepper inside.

"It'll make Hilary just sneeze her head off to-morrow!" triumphed Diana. "She'll think she's got a touch of 'flu', and she'll be in *such* a scare! I'd give worlds to see the fun. Only, of course, I daren't show myself, or she'll find out. No, that would never do."

Putting the pepper-pot back in her pocket, she was in the act of leaving the room, when in the dusk she collided with Geraldine. The astonishment was mutual.

"What are you doing here, Diana?" asked the head prefect sharply.

"Oh, nothing in particular. I was just taking a roam round the school, that's all."

"You've no business to roam into the senior room. Keep to your own quarters. We can't have juniors coming in here!"

"I'm not a junior!"

"Well, intermediates are quite as bad, if not worse!"

Diana beat a retreat, for the supper-bell was ringing. She marched into the dining-room with a defiant twinkle in her eyes, and meeting Wendy, could not refrain from whispering:

"Done 'em brown for once! Hilary'll get the surprise of her life to-morrow." [270]

"Sh! Sh!" warned Wendy too late.

Geraldine, who was exactly behind, and who had evidently overheard, glared at the couple, but forbore to speak. Indeed there was not time for her to do so, for the girls were taking their seats, and Miss Todd was waiting to say grace. It is undignified for a head prefect to take too much notice of the chance remarks of intermediates, so Geraldine let the matter pass, and, whatever her private thoughts might be, did not revive the subject after supper.

[271]

CHAPTER XX

A Tangled Plot

Loveday and Diana went to bed that evening just as usual. They performed their customary hair-brush drill, twisted Diana's light-brown locks in curl-rags, and plaited Loveday's flaxen mane in two long braids, folded their clothes neatly, read their Bible portions, said their prayers, and blew out the candle. Then they lay chatting quietly till Miss Beverley came on her nightly round of dormitory inspection.

"Only a few weeks more and we shall be saying good-bye to the ivy room," said Loveday. "I shall be back in Liverpool; and where will you be, Diana?"

"Crossing the Atlantic, I hope. Dad's had our names down for passages for ever so long, and they told him our turn might come early in August. We're crazy to get home again."

"I don't wonder! But *how* I'll miss you! I shall want heaps of letters."

"Rather! And so shall I. I'll want to know what you're doing."

"Answering advertisements about posts as nursery governess," said Loveday bitterly. "No luck ever comes to me. I had a sort of wild idea that if I won the prize for that essay Uncle Fred might think it worth while sending me somewhere to train; but I *know* I shan't get it now. Hilary read us bits out of hers, and it's just splendid—far better than mine. I'm not in the innings." [272]

"Oh, Loveday, what a shame! The prize means so much more to you than to Hilary."

"I know it does. She'll win the maths prize too, and the Latin one."

"It doesn't seem fair she should get everything. I wonder if she'd hold back her essay so as to give you a chance?"

"Not she!"

"But if——"

At that identical moment Miss Beverley opened the door, and, candle in hand, looked round the room to see that all was left tidy. Her inspection was swift; she said "Good night, girls!" shut the door, and went downstairs to drink cocoa in Miss Todd's study. After her evening round the silence rule was a point of honour in the dormitories. Loveday and Diana turned over and went to sleep.

Some time in the middle of the night Diana woke with a start, just in time to see Loveday in a blue dressing-gown, with their bedroom candle in her hand, disappearing through the door. Where could Loveday be going? Had she heard burglars? Was she ill? Why had she not roused her room-mate? Could she by any chance be walking in her sleep?

All these questions raced through Diana's brain, and, as the quickest way to solve them, she jumped up, fumbled in the dark for her bedroom slippers and dressing-gown, and hurried after Loveday. She could see by the glimmer of light that the candle was going downstairs. She followed, flopping along in her woollen slippers, for she had not had time to draw them on properly. She nearly lost one on the landing, and had to stop. When she reached the hall the light had gone into the seniors' room. Diana walked softly, and peeped cautiously in. She had rather an idea of saying "Boo!" suddenly, and giving Loveday a scare, but she wanted to reconnoitre first. Her friend's back was turned towards her; she was bending over a desk, not her own desk, but Hilary's. She quickly drew out a roll of manuscript, tore it across and across, carried it to the fire-place, put it inside the grate, and applied the candle. Diana, standing in the dark outside the doorway, watched her in utter amazement. So many questions began to rush into her mind that the hall did not seem the best place to answer them. She fled upstairs again, jumped into bed, and lay thinking. In a minute or two Loveday came quietly back, blew out the candle at the door, and, treading softly, also went to bed. Diana did not speak, or betray by any movement that she was awake. It was an hour, however, before sleep came to her. She was on the early practising list, so she went downstairs next morning before her room-mate was stirring. [273]

Breakfast passed over as usual; the post-bag came in; Miss Todd sorted and distributed the contents, and the girls retired to read their letters. At ten minutes to nine something happened. Hilary, with wide open eyes and flushed cheeks, came running along the hall. [274]

"Somebody's gone and taken my essay out of my desk!" she declared excitedly.

Her fellow-seniors wrenched their thoughts from home news.

"Impossible!" said Geraldine.

"You've misplaced it!" said Stuart.

"No, I haven't! I know just where I put it yesterday."

"Go and look again!"

"I've turned the whole desk out, I tell you, and it simply isn't there!"

"Where is it, then?"

"That's what I want to know!"

"Has anyone taken it for a joke?"

"I expect so, but I'll reckon with whoever has!"

"It's probably one of those intermediates," suggested Stuart.

"Anybody who's got it must just turn it up at once!" said Geraldine grimly. "We can't allow this sort of thing to happen. I'll ask who's taken it."

The head prefect made an instant tour of the school, proclaiming the loss, and demanding instant restoration. The school, as one girl, utterly denied the accusation.

"But look here!" persisted Geraldine. "*Somebody* must have taken it. It couldn't walk out of Hilary's desk by itself! She *knows* she left it there yesterday. If anybody's hiding it for a joke, please give it back at once. If it's not brought back by nine o'clock I shall tell Miss Todd. Yes, I'm in earnest! Dead earnest!" [275]

Seniors, intermediates, and juniors, very much astonished, retired to their form rooms and talked the matter over; but nobody produced the missing manuscript. During the course of the morning Miss Todd entered the intermediate room.

"A disagreeable thing has happened, girls," she said. "Somebody has taken Hilary's essay from her desk. If it was done as a joke, I consider it a very sorry joke! Does anyone in this room know anything about the matter? If so, she must speak out at once and tell me."

Miss Todd looked searchingly at the faces before her, and waited for an answer; but nobody spoke. There was a flush of annoyance on her cheeks, and that firm set about the mouth which generally indicated a danger signal.

"I intend to get to the bottom of it. It can't possibly be overlooked," she remarked, as she left the room to go and catechize the juniors.

For the rest of the morning lessons went on as usual. Immediately after dinner, however, Diana received a message to report herself in the study. She went slowly. She was still thinking; she had been doing nothing else but think since that midnight excursion down the stairs. It was rather a white-faced, anxious-eyed little Diana who entered the study. Miss Todd was sitting at her desk, and Hilary and Geraldine stood near her. They looked half resentful and half nervous. [276]

"Diana," began Miss Todd, "I've sent for you because I believe you're the only girl who can throw any light on this most distressing business. I'm going to ask you a straight question. Have you taken Hilary's manuscript? I expect a straight answer."

"No," breathed Diana, looking down on the floor.

"Look me in the face, Diana. Do you know where it is? Or anything at all about it?"

Diana's eyes raised themselves to the level of the Principal's knee, and then fell to the floor. She did not answer.

"Geraldine tells me that she saw you at Hilary's desk yesterday evening."

No answer.

"You are known to have threatened to play a trick on Hilary!"

Still no answer.

"Very well, Diana. Until you condescend to explain, I can't allow you to mix with the rest of the school. We have rules here, and I intend they shall be obeyed. I make no exception for any pupil. You're inclined to think you have licence to do as you like, and play any pranks you choose here. I'm going to teach you a lesson for once. You'll stay in the attic until you choose to answer my question. I've dealt with obstinate girls before. Come along with me!" [277]

Miss Todd rose, and, taking a key from her desk, led the way to the attic at the top of the little

narrow staircase. The room was very simply furnished, and was always kept in readiness as a hospital in case any girl should be suddenly taken ill. It was not a particularly cheerful apartment; it had a skylight window, there were no pictures on the walls, and the floor was of scrubbed boards. It looked, as it was intended to be, arranged with the main object of being easily disinfected if necessary. Miss Todd ushered in Diana, and pointed to a chair.

"You may sit there and think it over," she remarked. Then she shut the door, and locked it on the outside.

Left alone, Diana took a seat on one of the small iron bedsteads. Her face was a mixture of bewilderment and consternation.

"Diana Hewlitt, it seems to me you've got yourself into *some* fix," she said to herself. "What's puzzling me is that I can't believe the evidence of my own eyes. Did I *dream* I saw Loveday go downstairs and take a roll of papers out of Hilary's desk? Goodness, I was only too horribly awake! The queerness of the thing bothers me. It doesn't fit in, somehow. Loveday! Loveday's the last person in the world, as I should have thought, to do a trick like that. I can't understand it. It's the sort of stupid thing that girls do in books. I never believed they did it in real life. Well, one [278] thing's certain. I'm not going to tell about her—not if Miss Todd keeps me shut up here till I'm a hundred. Loveday shielded me when I ran away to say good-bye to Lenox, and I vowed I'd do the same for her if ever I got the chance. Well, I've got it now, and no mistake. Only—Loveday! Loveday! I don't understand! You've toppled down somehow off a pedestal. I feel as if something I liked had got broken."

It was anything but a cheerful afternoon for Diana. The only literature in the room was a catalogue of the Stores and some reports of charitable institutions. She read the cost of tins of sardines, pots of jam, table linen, household china and hardware, and tried to take some faint interest in the annual statements of the "District Nursing Association" and "The Society for Providing Surgical Appliances for the Sick Poor". To amuse herself she was reduced to choosing a word at random and seeing how many other words she could make out of it, but as she had no pencil in her pocket to write them down, it was rather difficult to keep count, and the occupation soon palled. Shortly after four o'clock she heard a scrimmage on the little landing outside the door. A deep-toned voice, that sounded like Miss Beverley's, said, "Come away this minute!" and a high-pitched, excited voice—undoubtedly Loveday's—protested, "If you'd *only* let me speak to her, I'm certain——"

Then a sound followed like somebody sliding down three steps at once, and Loveday's voice, with [279] words indistinguishable, but tone still highly indignant, grew fainter and farther away till it ceased altogether. Diana smiled rather bitterly.

"It's not much use her coming and talking to me," she thought. "If she wants to tell anybody, she can tell Miss Todd. She needn't think I'll give her away. Don't suppose she knows, though, what I saw last night. It's a queer world! I'll be glad when I'm back in America. If Dad gets those passages he'll come and cart me off, Miss Todd or no Miss Todd. I'd like to see his face if he found me locked up in an attic."

Diana's tea was brought to her at five o'clock, and an hour later she was visited by the Principal, who again urged confession.

"What's the use of keeping this up?" asked the mistress impatiently. "You'll have to make a clean breast of it some time, so you may just as well do it at once. It's perfectly evident that you know where the essay is. You don't even deny that. What have you done with it?"

And again Diana stood with the same unyielding look on her face, and stared at the floor, and did not answer a word.

There is nothing so irritating as a person who utterly refuses to speak. Miss Todd glared at her, then turned towards the door.

"Very well; you may spend the night here. I'm not going to waste any more time on you now. [280] Perhaps by to-morrow morning you'll be in a different frame of mind. I intend to know the truth of this; so it's merely a matter of waiting. You can leave here the moment you decide to confess; so you're punishing yourself by staying."

Once more the key turned in the lock, and Diana was a prisoner. At eight o'clock Miss Beverley, in strict silence, brought in a tray with supper, placed it on the table, departed, and secured the defences. After that nobody else even came up the stairs.

"They might some of them have managed to push a note under the door," sighed Diana. "I guess I'd have got a message in somehow if it had been Wendy shut up here. What a set of thick-heads they are! There isn't one of them ever has a decent brain-wave. Wonder how long I'll have to stick in this attic? I've not lost my bounce yet. But I guess, all the same, I'll go to bed now."

Miss Beverley, with the supper tray, had also brought Diana's night-gear in a small bundle. As there was no candle in the attic, it seemed wise to disrobe while there was still light enough to see by. The little bed was rather hard, the pillow was a lumpy one, and the spring mattress squeaked when she moved. Diana watched the room grow gradually darker and darker till stars appeared through the skylight. It was a very long time before she slept. The early sunshine, however, woke her in the small hours of the morning. There was no blind to the window, and the room faced east. Diana sat up in bed. Her eyes fell on the pictureless walls. Perhaps the very fact [281]

of their bareness made her look at them more particularly. She did not admire the pattern of the paper. In places it had been badly fitted together, especially in that corner. Why, the magenta roses actually overlapped! They did it in a sort of curve, almost as if they were outlining the top of a door. *Was* it by any chance a door?

At this stage of her inspection she sprang out of bed, went over to the corner, and ran her hand along the portion in question. It certainly felt as if the edge of a door were beneath. She rapped, and there was a hollow sound, very different from that given forth from the wall when she tried it a few yards farther on.

"I'm going to solve the problem for myself," she decided.

There was a knife left on the supper-tray. She thrust it through the paper, and began to cut round the seeming door. And most undoubtedly it was a door, though only a small one, with a curved top that came to the height of her shoulder.

"It must lead somewhere!" she thought excitedly. "Suppose I could get out on to the leads, climb down the ivy, and go off to Petteridge. Cousin Coralie wouldn't let me be brought back here to be shut up in an attic, I know!"

She worked away laboriously, tearing at the paper to free the door. It flashed across her mind that Miss Todd might have something to say about the disfigurement of the wall, but as she had [282] gone so far, that did not deter her.

"Might as well finish it now," she smiled.

More hacking and tearing, then a gigantic shove, and the door suddenly opened inwards. She was looking into another attic, a larger and much darker room, lighted only by a tiny little skylight in the corner. It seemed full of furniture—chairs and tables piled together, and something that looked like a small grand piano. They were so thickly coated with dust that it was difficult in the dim light to distinguish more than upturned legs and general outlines. There did not appear to be the least possibility of escape in this direction. The skylight was more inaccessible than the one in her own attic. She sighed, went back, washed her dusty hands, and got into bed again.

"I guess there'll be a fine old shindy when Miss Todd sees what I've done," she soliloquized.

Miss Todd, who was thoroughly out of patience with Diana, did not hurry to send her breakfast up early that morning. She decided that the prisoner might very well wait until the school had finished its meal. She even distributed the post first, and began to read her own letters. She intended to carry the tray upstairs herself, and have another talk with Diana. It was an unpleasant duty, and could be deferred for a few minutes. Meantime the school also read its letters. There were two for Hilary. One in the well-known home writing, and the other a long envelope addressed in a strange hand. She opened this first. It contained three manuscripts, and [283] a printed notice to the effect that the editor of the *Blue Magazine* much regretted his inability, owing to lack of space, to make use of the enclosed, for the kind offer of which he was much obliged.

"My stories packed back by return of post. How disgusting!" groused Hilary. "He might have taken one of them. Are they all here, by the by? Yes; 'The Flower of the Forest', 'The Airman's Vengeance', and—Good Heavens! What's this? Why—why, it's actually my essay on 'Reconstruction'!"

Hilary was so utterly dismayed that at first she could only stare aghast at her recovered manuscript; then she tore straight off to Miss Todd.

"I must have put it in in mistake for my other story," she explained. "I can't imagine how I could; but evidently I *did*! I'm too sorry for words. *Poor* Diana!"

Everybody said "Poor Diana!" when the news—as news will—spread like wildfire over the school. Miss Todd ordered some fresh tea to be made, and an egg boiled for the breakfast-tray. She was a just woman, and ready to make damages good. She even asked Miss Hampson to get out the last jar of blackberry jelly; there was still one left in the store-room. Diana, in the attic, having dressed hours ago, sat hungrily by the table, listening for footsteps, and wondering if starvation were to be part of her punishment. She glanced guiltily at the torn wall-paper as the key turned [284] in the lock. Miss Todd, however, was so full of the good news that she hardly looked at the attic wall.

"Why did you say, Diana, that you knew something about the essay?" she asked.

"I never said anything at all," replied Diana, which, of course, was literally true.

It was nice to eat a dainty breakfast at leisure and not hurry down to lessons. She felt herself the heroine of the school that morning as she strolled into the French class just when the disagreeable grammar part of the lesson was over. Later on in the day there were confidences in the ivy room.

"I knew you hadn't done it, darling!" declared Loveday. "It wasn't like you one little bit. I had a regular squabble with Miss Beverley. I tried to come and talk to you through the door, and she came and dragged me away. Why didn't you tell Miss Todd you'd never even seen the wretched essay?"

"Sissie," whispered Diana, "will *you* tell *me* what you were doing at Hilary's desk in the middle of the night?"

"Why—why, surely you never thought——"

"Yes, I did; and that's why I held my tongue," said Diana, burying her hot face on Loveday's shoulder. "Forgive me, please, for having thought it."

"It never struck me that anybody should think that," said Loveday, still amazed at the idea. "And how did you know about it? Did you follow me? Well, I'll tell you what I was doing. We seniors have a secret—not a very desperate one; it's only a little literary society. We make up stories for it, and fasten them together into a sort of magazine. Geraldine is president, and Hilary is the secretary. It was the night for giving in the stories, and I put mine with the others inside Hilary's desk. Geraldine and I haven't been quite hitting it lately; so I'd made a girl in my story exactly like her, only nastier, and written a lot of very sarcastic things. I thought they were awfully clever. Then when I got into bed I was sorry. It seemed a mean sort of thing to do. I made up my mind I'd go down first thing in the morning and tear up the story. But I'm such a sleepy-head in the mornings, and you know how early Geraldine generally gets up. I was afraid she'd come down first, and probably rummage the stories out of Hilary's desk and read mine. The more I thought about it the more ashamed I was of what I'd written. I couldn't go to sleep. I felt I shouldn't be easy till it was burnt; so at last I got up, and lighted the candle, and went downstairs and did the deed. That's how you saw me at Hilary's desk. By the by, Geraldine said she caught *you* there before supper. What were *you* doing?" [285]

"Putting pepper among her books to pay her out and make her sneeze," confessed Diana.

"Why, she did say her desk smelled somehow of pepper!" exclaimed Loveday. "We were all so excited, though, about the essay being missing that we didn't take much notice of it. The whole affair's been a sort of 'Comedy of Errors'." [286]

One substantial result remained from Diana's confinement to the attic, and that was the discovery of the door into the room beyond. Miss Todd explored, and carried some of the dusty chairs out into the light of day. She was enough of a connoisseur to see at a glance that they were Chippendale, and extremely valuable. She had the rest of the furniture moved out and cleaned, then sent for a dealer in antiques to ask his opinion about it. He said it made his mouth water.

"A set of ten Chippendale singles with two armchairs will fetch almost anything you like nowadays," he added.

"The question is, to whom do they legally belong?" said Miss Todd. "I'm only the tenant here. I must tell my landlord."

The owner of the Abbey, who had bought the property many years before from Mr. Seton, was a man with a fine sense of honour. Though, legally, the furniture in the forgotten attic might have been transferred to him with the house, he did not consider himself morally entitled to it.

"It certainly belongs to the heirs-at-law of the late Mr. Seton," he declared.

There was only one heir, or rather heiress-at-law, and that was Loveday. It was decided, therefore, to sell the furniture for her benefit. The collection included objects of great rarity, among them a genuine spinet and a beautifully inlaid bureau. At the present boom for antiques they would realize a very substantial sum, quite a windfall, indeed, for Loveday. [287]

"Will it be enough to send me to a horticultural college?" she asked Miss Todd.

"Ample, my dear. It ought to bring you sufficient for a thoroughly good training in any career you want to take up."

This was news indeed—so splendid that it seemed almost too good to be true. Hilary's essay, which, as everybody expected, easily won the prize, had indirectly made Loveday's fortune after all.

"I bless the day when I was a prisoner in the attic," rejoiced Diana. "If I hadn't knocked that door in, the furniture might still have been lying there in the dust."

"I wonder if *this* was the discovery that gentleman wanted to tell Father about," surmised Loveday.

Surprise came on surprise, for the very morning after this happy solution of Loveday's future, Diana received a telegram from Paris. Mr. Hewlitt had succeeded in getting three passages (thrown up at the last by a family who were taken ill with "flu" and unable to travel); he and Mrs. Hewlitt were crossing the channel post-haste, and Diana must start from school and meet them in Liverpool. Loveday helped her to pack her boxes. It was an excited, fluttered, tearful little Diana who clung to her at the last.

"Sissie! I can't say 'Good-bye!' It's not 'good-bye' to *you*—only 'au revoir'." [288]

"We'll meet again some day, darling!"

"We'll just jolly well have to, or I'll know the reason why! If you don't come out to see us in America I shall come over here and fetch you. Write very often, and let me know how the baby goes on, and if it has been taken into the Home. I haven't quite finished its frock. Will you do it?

Oh, thanks! I'm leaving the Abbey in as big a hurry as I came here. Dad always uses his 'lightning methods'. But I shan't forget any of you, ever—not you, Wendy, or Jess, or Vi. Write to me, won't you? As for you, Loveday mine, I haven't words left. Let me give you one more good hug! Yes, Miss Todd, I'm really coming. No, I don't want to miss my train. Good-bye, everybody and everything! Good-bye! Good-bye!"

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