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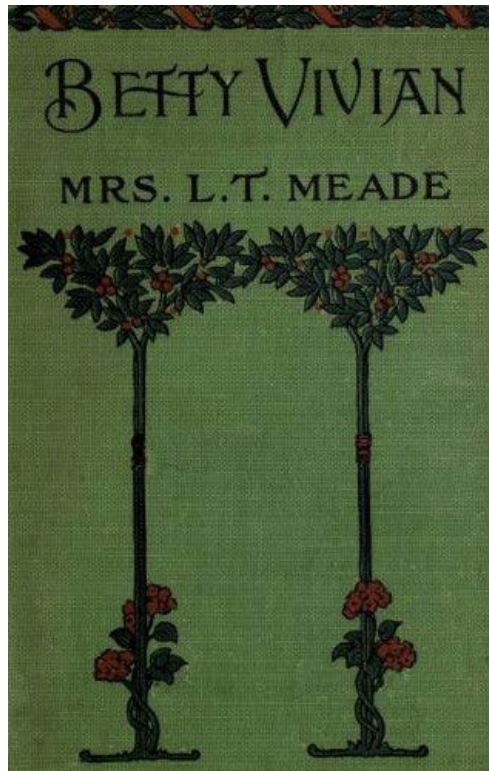
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BETTY VIVIAN: A STORY OF HADDO COURT SCHOOL ***



Betty Vivian ***A Story of Haddo Court School***

By MRS. L. T. MEADE

Author of

“The Harmon Girls,” “The Princess of the Revels,” “Aylwyn’s Friends,” “The School Queens,” “Seven Maids,” Etc.



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BETTY VIVIAN

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CHAPTER I

YES OR NO

Haddo Court had been a great school for girls for many generations. In fact, for considerably over a century the Court had descended from mother to daughter, who invariably, whatever her husband's name, took the name of Haddo when she became mistress of the school. The reigning mistress might sometimes be unmarried, sometimes the reverse; but she was always, in the true sense of the word, a noble, upright, generous sort of woman, and one slightly in advance of her generation. There had never been anything low or mean known about the various head mistresses of Haddo Court. The school had grown with the times. From being in the latter days of the eighteenth century a rambling, low old-fashioned house with mullioned windows and a castellated roof, it had gradually increased in size and magnificence; until now, when this story opens, it was one of the most imposing mansions in the county.

The locality in which Haddo Court was situated was not very far from London; but for various reasons its name will be withheld from the reader, although doubtless the intelligent girl who likes to peruse these pages will be easily able to discover its whereabouts. Haddo Court, although within a measurable distance of the great metropolis, had such large grounds, and such a considerable area of meadow and forest land surrounding it, that it truly seemed to the girls who lived there that they were in the heart of the country itself. This was indeed the case; for from the Court you could see no other house whatsoever, unless it were the picturesque abode of the head gardener or that of the lodge-keeper.

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The school belonged to no company; it was the sole and undivided possession of the head mistress. It combined the advantages of a first-class high school with the advantages that the best type of private school affords. Its rooms were lofty and abundantly supplied with bright sunshine and fresh air. So popular was the school, and such a tone of distinction did it confer upon the girls who were educated there, that, although Mrs. Haddo did not scruple to expect high fees from her pupils, it was as difficult to get into Haddo Court as it was for a boy to become an inmate of Winchester or Eton. The girl whose mother before her had been educated at the Court usually put down her little daughter's name for admission there shortly after the child's birth, and even then she was not always certain that the girl could be received; for Mrs. Haddo, having inherited, among other virtues from a long line of intelligent ancestors, great firmness of character, made rules which she would allow no exception to break.

The girls at Haddo Court might number one hundred and fifty; but nothing would induce her, on any terms whatsoever, to exceed that number. She had a staff of the most worthy governesses, many of whom had been educated at the Court itself; others who bore testimony to the lamented and much-loved memory of the late Miss Beale of Cheltenham; and others, again, who had taken honors of the highest degree at the two universities.

Mrs. Haddo never prided herself on any special gift; but she was well aware of the fact that she could read character with unerring instinct; consequently she never made a mistake in the choice of her teachers. The Court was now so large that each girl, if she chose, could have a small bedroom to herself, or two sisters might be accommodated with a larger room to share together. There was every possible comfort at the Court; at the same time there was an absence of all that was enervating. Comforts, Mrs. Haddo felt assured, were necessary to the proper growth and development of a young life; but she disliked luxuries for herself, and would not permit them for her pupils. The rooms were therefore handsomely, though somewhat barely, furnished. There were no superfluous draperies and few knick-knacks of any sort. There was, however, in each bedroom a little book shelf with about a dozen of the best and most suitable books—generally a copy of Ruskin's "Sesame and Lilies," of Carlyle's "Sartor Resartus," of Milton's "Paradise Lost"; also one or two books by the best writers of the present day. Works of E. V. Lucas were not forgotten in that collection, and Mrs. Ewing's "Jackanapes" was a universal favorite.

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The girls had one special library where classical works and books of reference were found in abundance; also standard novels, such as the best works of Thackeray and Dickens. In addition to this was a smaller library where the girls were allowed to have their own private possessions in the shape of books and drawings. This room was only used by the girls of the upper school, and was seldom interfered with either by the head mistress or the various teachers.

Out of one hundred and fifty girls it would be impossible to describe more than a few; but at the time when this story opens there was in the upper school a little band of devoted friends who adored each other, who had high aims and ambitions, who almost worshiped Mrs. Haddo, and, as far as possible, endeavored to profit by her excellent training. The names of the girls in question were Susie Rushworth, who was seventeen years of age, and would in a year's time be leaving the Court; Fanny Crawford, her cousin and special friend—Fanny and Susie were much of the same age, Fanny being a little the younger of the two—two sisters named Mary and Julia Bertram; Margaret Grant, who was tall, dark, and stately, and Olive Repton, everybody's favorite, a bright-eyed, bewitching little creature, with the merriest laugh, a gay manner, and with brilliant powers of repartee and a good-natured word for every one—she was, in short, the life of the upper school.

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None of these girls was under sixteen years of age; all were slightly above the average as regards ability, and decidedly above the average as regards a very high standard of morals. They had all been brought up with care. They knew nothing of the vanities of the world, and their great ambition in life was to walk worthily in the station in which they were born. They were all daughters of rich parents—that is, with the exception of Olive Repton, whose mother was a widow, and who, in consequence, could not give her quite so many advantages as her companions received. Olive never spoke on the subject, but she had wild,

impossible dreams of earning her own living by and by. She was not jealous nor envious of her richer schoolfellows. She was thoroughly happy, and enjoyed her life to the utmost.

Among the teachers in the school was a certain Miss Symes, an Englishwoman of very high attainments, with lofty ideas, and the greatest desire to do the utmost for her pupils. Miss Symes was not more than six-and-twenty. She was very handsome—indeed, almost beautiful—and she had such a passion for music and such a lovely voice that the girls liked to call her Saint Cecilia. Miss Arundel was another teacher in the school. She was much older than Miss Symes, but not so highly educated. She only occasionally came into the upper school—her work was more with the girls of the lower school—but she was kind and good-natured, and was universally popular because she could bear being laughed at, and even enjoyed a joke against herself. Such a woman would be sure to be a favorite with most girls, and Mary Arundel was as happy in her life at the Court as any of her pupils. There were also French and German governesses, and a lady to look after the wardrobes of the older girls, and attend to them in case of any trifling indisposition.

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Besides the resident teachers there was the chaplain and his wife. The chaplain had his own quarters in a distant wing of the school. His name was the Reverend Edmund Fairfax. He was an elderly man, with white hair, a benign expression of face, and gentle brown eyes. His wife was a somewhat fretful woman, who often wished that her husband would seek preferment and leave his present circumscribed sphere of action. But nothing would induce the Reverend Edmund Fairfax to leave Mrs. Haddo so long as she required him; and when he read prayers morning and evening in the beautiful old chapel, which had been built as far back as the beginning of the eighteenth century, the girls loved to listen to his words, and even at times shyly confided their little troubles to him.

Such was the state of things at Haddo Court when this story opens. Mrs. Haddo was a woman of about thirty-eight years of age. She was tall and handsome, of a somewhat commanding presence, with a face which was capable, in repose, of looking a little stern; but when that same face was lit up by a smile, the heart of every girl in the school went out to her, and they thought no one else like her.

Mrs. Haddo was a widow, and had no children of her own. Her late husband had been a great friend of Mr. Fairfax. At his death she had, after careful reflection, decided to carry on the work which her mother had so successfully conducted before her. Everything was going well, and there was not a trace of care or anxiety on Mrs. Haddo's fine face.

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There came a day, however, when this state of things was doomed to be altered. There is no Paradise, no Garden of Eden, without its serpent, and so Janet Haddo was destined to experience. The disturbing element which came into the school was brought about in the most natural way. Sir John Crawford, the father of one of Mrs. Haddo's favorite pupils, called unexpectedly to see the good lady.

"I have just got the most exciting piece of news for you," he said.

"Indeed!" replied Mrs. Haddo.

She never allowed herself to be greatly disturbed, but her heart did beat a trifle faster when she saw how eager Sir John appeared.

"I have come here all the way from Yorkshire in order not to lose a moment," continued the good baronet. "I don't want to see Fanny at present. This has nothing whatever to do with Fanny. I have come to tell you that a wonderful piece of news has reached me."

"What can that be?" asked Mrs. Haddo. She spoke with that gracious calm which always seemed to pervade her presence and her words.

"Do relieve my mind at once!" said Sir John. "Is it possible that you—you, Mrs. Haddo, of Haddo Court—have at the present moment three vacancies in your school?"

Mrs. Haddo laughed. "Is that all?" she said. "But they can be filled up to-morrow ten times over, if necessary."

"But you *have* three vacancies—three vacancies in the upper school? It is true—I see it is true by your face. Please assure me on that point without delay!"

"It happens to be true," said Mrs. Haddo, "although I do not want the matter mentioned. My three dear young pupils, the Maitlands, have been unable to return to school owing to the fact that their father has been made Governor of one of the West India Islands. He has insisted on taking his family out with him; so I have lost dear Emily, Jane, and Agnes. I grieve very much at their absence. They all came to see me last week to say good-bye; and we had quite a trying time, the children are so affectionate. I should have greatly loved to keep them longer; but their father was determined to have them with him, so there was

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nothing to be done but submit.”

“Oh, Mrs. Haddo, what is one person’s loss is another person’s gain!”

“I don’t understand you, Sir John,” was the good lady’s reply.

“If you have three vacancies, you can take three more girls. You can take them into the school at once, can you not?”

“I can, certainly; but, as a matter of fact, I am in no hurry. I shall probably be obliged to fill up the vacancies next term from the list of girls already on my books. I shall, as my invariable custom is, promote some girls from the lower school to the upper, and take three new little girls into the lower school. But there is really no hurry.”

“Yes, but there is every hurry, my friend—every hurry! I want you to take three—three *orphan* girls—three girls who have neither father nor mother; I want you to take them at once into the upper school. They are not specially well off; but I am their guardian, and your terms shall be mine. I have just come from the death-bed of their aunt, one of my dearest friends; she was in despair about Betty and Sylvia and Hester Vivian. They are three sisters. They have been well educated; and, although I don’t know them personally, any girl brought up by Frances Vivian, my dear friend who has just passed away, could not but be in all respects a desirable inmate of any school. I am forced to go to India immediately, and must ask you to look after Fanny for me during the next vacation. Now, if you would only take the Vivians I should go away with a light heart. Do you say ‘Yes,’ my dear friend! Remember how many of my name have been educated at Haddo Court. You cannot refuse me. I am certain you will not.”

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“I never take girls here on the plea of friendship—even for one like yourself, Sir John. I must know much more about these children before I agree to admit them into my school.”

Sir John’s face became very red, and just for a minute he looked almost angry.

“Oh, Mrs. Haddo,” he said then, “do banish that alarmingly severe expression from your face and look kindly on my project! I can assure you that Frances Vivian, after whom my own Fanny has been called, had the finest character in the world. Ah, my dear friend, I have you now—her own sister was educated here. Now, isn’t that guarantee enough? Look back on the past, refer to the old school-books, and you will see the name of Beatrice Vivian in the roll-call.”

“What can you tell me about the girls themselves?” said Mrs. Haddo, who was evidently softened by this reference to the past. “I remember Beatrice Vivian,” she continued, before the baronet had time to speak. “She was a very charming girl, a little older than myself, and she was undoubtedly a power for good in the school.”

“Then, surely, that makes it quite all right?” said Sir John. “Mrs. Haddo, you must pity me. I have to place these girls somewhere in a week from now. I am responsible for them. They are homeless; they are young; they are good-looking.”

“Tell me something about their characters and dispositions,” said Mrs. Haddo.

“I can tell you nothing. I only saw Betty for two or three minutes; she was in a state of wild, tempestuous grief, poor child! I tried to comfort her, but she rushed away from me. Sylvia was nearly as bad; while as to poor Hetty, she was ill with sorrow.”

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“Well, I will think the matter over and let you know,” said Mrs. Haddo. “I never decide anything hastily, so I cannot say more at present.”

The baronet rose. “I had best have a peep at Fanny before I go,” he said. “I am only going as far as London to-night, so you can wire your decision—‘Yes’ or ‘No’—to the Ritz Hotel. Poor Fanny! she will be in trouble when she hears that I cannot receive her at Christmas; but I leave her in good hands here, and what can any one do more?”

“Please promise me one thing, Sir John,” said Mrs. Haddo. “Do not say anything to Fanny about the Vivians. Allow me to tell her when I have decided that they are to come to the school. If I decide against it, she need never know. Now, shall I ring and ask one of the servants to send her to you? Believe me, Sir John, I will do my very utmost to oblige you in this matter; but I must be guided by principle. You know what this school means to me. You know how earnestly I have at heart the welfare of all my children, as I call the girls who live at Haddo Court.”

“Yes, yes, I know; but I think, somehow, that you will agree to my request.”

“Send Miss Crawford here,” said Mrs. Haddo to a servant who appeared at that moment, and a minute later Fanny entered the room. She gave a cry of delight when she saw her

father, and Mrs. Haddo at once left them alone together.

The day was a half-holiday, and the head mistress was glad of the fact, for she wanted to have a little time to think over Sir John's request. Haddo Court had hitherto answered so admirably because no girl, even if her name had been on the books for years, was admitted to the school without the head mistress having a personal interview, first with her parents or guardians, and afterwards with the girl herself. Many an apparently charming girl was quietly but courteously informed that she was not eligible for the vacancy which was to be filled, and Mrs. Haddo was invariably right in her judgment. With her shrewd observation of character, she saw something lacking in that pretty, or careless, or even thoughtful, or sorrowful face—something which might *aspire*, but could never by any possibility *attain*, to what the head mistress desired to inculcate in the young lives around her—and now Mrs. Haddo was asked to receive three girls under peculiar circumstances. They were orphans and needed a home. Sir John Crawford was one of her oldest friends. The Crawfords had always been associated with Haddo Court, and beautiful Beatrice Vivian had received her education there. Surely there could not be anything wrong in admitting three young girls like the Vivians to the school? But yet there was her invariable rule. Could she possibly see them? One short interview would decide her. She looked round the beautiful home in which had grown up the fairest specimens of English girlhood, and wondered if, for once, she might break her rule.

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Sir John Crawford had gone to the Ritz Hotel. There he was to await Mrs. Haddo's telegram. But she would not telegraph; she would go to London herself. She took the first train from the nearest station, and arrived unexpectedly at the "Ritz" just as Sir John was sitting down to dinner.

"I see by your face, my dear, good friend, that you are bringing me the best of news!" said the eager man, flushing with pleasure as Mrs. Haddo took a seat by his side. "You will join me at dinner, of course?"

"No, thank you, Sir John. I shall have supper at the Court on my return. I will tell you at once what I have come about. I have, as you must know well, never admitted a girl into my school without first seeing her and judging for myself what her character was likely to be. I should greatly like to help you in the present case, which is, I will admit, a pressing one; and girls of the name of Vivian, and also related to you, have claims undoubtedly on Haddo Court. Nevertheless, I am loath to break my rule. Is it possible for me to see the girls?"

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"I fear it is not," said Sir John. "I did not tell you that poor Frances died in the north of Scotland, and I could not possibly get the girls up to London in time for you to interview them and then decide against them. It must be 'Yes' or 'No'—an immediate 'Yes' or 'No,' Mrs. Haddo; for if you say 'No' and I pray God you won't—I must see what is the next best thing I can do for them. Poor children! they are very lonely and unhappy; but, of course, there *are* other schools. Perhaps you could recommend one, if you are determined to refuse them without an interview?"

Mrs. Haddo could never tell afterwards why a sudden fit of weakness and compassion overcame her. Perhaps it was the thought of the other schools; for she was a difficult woman to please, and fastidious and perhaps even a little scornful with regard to some of the teaching of the present day. Perhaps it was the sight of Sir John's troubled face. Perhaps it was the fact that there never was a nicer girl in the school than Beatrice Vivian—Beatrice, who was long in her grave, but who had been loved by every one in the house; Beatrice, whom Mrs. Haddo herself remembered. It was the thought of Beatrice that finally decided the good lady.

"It *is* against my rule," she said, "and I hope I am not doing wrong. I will take the children; but I make one condition, Sir John, that if I find they do not fulfill the high expectations which are looked for in every girl who comes to Haddo Court, I do my best to place them elsewhere."

"You need not be afraid," said Sir John. His voice shook with delight and gratitude. "You will never regret this generous act; and, believe me, my dear friend, there is no rule, however firm, which is not sometimes better broken than kept."

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Alas, poor Sir John! he little knew what he was saying.

CHAPTER II

WAS FANNY ELATED?

Mrs. Haddo slept very little that night. Miss Symes, who adored the head mistress, could not help noticing that something was the matter with her; but she knew Mrs. Haddo's nature far too well to make any inquiries. The next day, however, Miss Symes was called into the head mistress's presence.

"I want to speak to you all alone," said Mrs. Haddo. "You realize, of course, Emma, how fully I trust you?"

"You have always done so, dear Mrs. Haddo," replied the young teacher, her beautiful face flushing with pleasure.

"Well, now, I am going to trust you more fully still. You noticed, or perhaps you did not, that Sir John Crawford, Fanny's father, called to see me yesterday?"

"Fanny herself told me," replied Miss Symes. "I found the poor, dear child in floods of tears. Sir John Crawford is going to India immediately, and Fanny says she is not likely to see him again for a year."

"We will cheer her up all we can," said Mrs. Haddo. "I have many schemes for next Christmas which will, I am sure, give pleasure to the girls who are obliged to stay here. But time enough for all that later on. You know, of course, Emma, that there are three vacancies in the upper school?"

"Caused by the absence of the dear young Maitlands," replied Miss Symes. "I cannot tell you how much we miss them." [Pg 15]

"We do miss them," said Mrs. Haddo, who paused and looked attentively at Miss Symes. "I don't suppose," she continued, "that there is any teacher in the school who knows so much about the characters of the girls as you do, my dear, good Emma."

"I think I know most of their characters," said Miss Symes; "characters in the forming, as one must assuredly say, but forming well, dear Mrs. Haddo. And who can wonder at that, under your influence?"

Mrs. Haddo's face expressed a passing anxiety.

"Is anything wrong?" said Miss Symes.

"Why do you ask me, Emma? Have you—noticed anything?"

"Yes, certainly. I have noticed that you are troubled, dear friend; and Mary Arundel has also observed the same."

"But the girls—the girls have said nothing about it?" inquired Mrs. Haddo.

"No; but young girls cannot see as far into character as older people can."

"Well, now," said Mrs. Haddo, "I will be frank with you. What I say to you, you can repeat to Mary Arundel. I feel proud to call you both my flag lieutenants, who always hold the banner of high principle and virtue aloft, and I feel certain you will do so to the end. Emma, Sir John Crawford came to see me yesterday on a very important matter; and, partly to oblige him, partly because of an old memory, partly also because it seemed to me that I must trust and hope for the best in certain emergencies, I have agreed to do what I never did before—namely, to take three girls into the school—yes, into the upper school, in place of the three Maitlands. These girls are called Betty, Sylvia, and Hester Vivian. They are the nieces of that dear woman, Beatrice Vivian, who was educated at this school years ago. I expect them to arrive here on Monday next. In the meantime you must prepare the other girls for their appearance on the scene. Do not blame me, Emma, nor look on me with reproachful eyes. I quite understand what you are thinking, that I have broken a rule which I have always declared I would never break—namely, I am taking these girls without having first interviewed them. Such is the case. Now, I want you, in particular, to tell Fanny Crawford that they are coming. Fanny is their cousin. Sir John is their guardian. Sir John knows nothing whatever about their disposition, but I gather from some conversation which I had with him last night that Fanny is acquainted with them. Observe, dear, how she takes the news of their coming. If dear Fanny looks quite happy about them, it will certainly be a rest to my mind."

"Oh, I will talk to her," said Miss Symes, rising. "And now, please, dear Mrs. Haddo, don't be unhappy. You have done, in my opinion, the only thing you could do; and girls with such high credentials must be all right."

"I hope they will prove to be all that is desirable," said Mrs. Haddo. "You had better have a talk with Miss Ludlow with regard to the rooms they are to occupy. Poor children! they are in great trouble, having already lost both their parents, and are now coming to me because

their aunt, Miss Vivian, has just died. It might comfort them to be in that large room which is near Fanny's. It will hold three little beds and the necessary furniture without any crowding."

"Yes, it would do splendidly," said Miss Symes. "I will speak to Miss Ludlow. I suppose, now, I ought to return to my school duties?"

Miss Symes was not at all uneasy at what Mrs. Haddo had told her. Hers was a gentle and triumphant sort of nature. She trusted most people. She had a sublime faith in the good, not the bad, of her fellow-creatures. Still, Mrs. Haddo had done a remarkable thing, and Miss Symes owned to herself that she was a little curious to see how Fanny Crawford would take the news of the unexpected advent of her relatives. [Pg 17]

It was arranged that the Vivians were to arrive at Haddo Court on the following Monday. To-day was Wednesday, and a half-holiday. Half-holidays were always prized at Haddo Court; and the girls were now in excellent spirits, full of all sorts of schemes and plans for the term which had little more than begun, and during which they hoped to achieve so much. Fanny Crawford, in particular, was in earnest conversation with Susie Rushworth. They were forming a special plan for strengthening what they called the bond of union in the upper school. Fresh girls were to be admitted, and all kinds of schemes were in progress. Susie had a wonderfully bright face, and her eager words fell on Miss Symes's ears as she approached the two girls.

"It's all very fine for you, Susie," Fanny was heard to say; "but this term seems to me quite intolerable. You will be going home for Christmas, but I shall have to stay at the school. Oh, of course, I love the school; but we are all proud of our holidays, and father had all but promised to take me to Switzerland in order to get some really good skating. Now everything is knocked on the head; but I suppose I must submit."

"I couldn't help overhearing you, Fanny," said Miss Symes, coming up to the girls at that moment; "but you must look on the bright side, my love, and reflect that a year won't be long in going by. I know, of course, to what you were alluding—your dear father's sudden departure for India."

"Yes, St. Cecilia," replied Fanny, looking up into Miss Symes's face; "and I am sure neither Susie nor I mind in the least your overhearing what we were talking about. Do we Susie?"

"No," replied Susie; "how could we? St. Cecilia, if you think you have been playing the spy, we will punish you by making you sing for us to-night." [Pg 18]

Here Susie linked her hand lovingly through Miss Symes's arm. Miss Symes bent and kissed the girl's eager face.

"I will sing for you with pleasure, dear, if I have a moment of time to spare. But now I have come to fetch Fanny. I want to have a little talk with her all by herself. Fan, will you come with me?"

Fanny Crawford raised her pretty, dark eyebrows in some surprise. What could this portend? There was a sort of code of honor at the school that the girls were never to be disturbed by the teachers during the half-holiday hours.

"Come, Fanny," said Miss Symes; and the two walked away in another direction for some little distance.

The day was a glorious one towards the end of September. Miss Symes chose an open bench in a part of the grounds where the forest land was more or less cleared away. She invited Fanny to seat herself, and took a place by her side.

"Now, my dear," she said, "I have a piece of news for you which will, I think, please you very much."

"Oh, what can please me when father is going?" said Fanny, her eyes filling with tears.

"Nevertheless, this may. You have, of course, heard of—indeed, I have been given to understand that you know—your cousins, the Vivians?"

Fanny's face flushed. It became a vivid crimson, then the color faded slowly from her cheeks; and she looked at Miss Symes, amazement in her glance. "My cousins—the Vivians!" she exclaimed. "Do you mean Betty—Betty and her sisters?"

"Yes, I think Betty is the name of one of the girls."

"There are three," said Fanny. "There's Betty, who is about my age; and then there are the twins, Sylvia and Hetty." [Pg 19]

"Then, of course, you *do* know them, dear?"

"Yes, I know them. I went to stay with them in Scotland for a week during last holidays. My cousin—their aunt, Miss Vivian—was very ill, however, and we had to keep things rather quiet. They lived at a place called Craigie Muir—quite beautiful, you know, but very, very wild."

"That doesn't matter, dear."

"Well, why are you speaking to me about them? They are my cousins, and I spent a week with them not very long ago."

"You observed how ill Miss Vivian was?"

"I used to hear that she was ill; Sylvia used to tell me. Betty couldn't stand anything sad or depressing, so I never spoke to her on the subject."

"And you—you liked your cousins? You appreciated them, did you not, Fanny?"

"I didn't know them very well," said Fanny in a slightly evasive voice.

Miss Symes felt her heart sink within her. She knew Fanny Crawford well. She was the last girl to say a word against another; at the same time she was exceedingly truthful.

"Well, dear," said Miss Symes, "your father came here yesterday in order to——"

"To see me, of course," interrupted Fanny; "to tell me that he was going to India. Poor darling dad! It was a terrible blow!"

"Sir John came here on other business also, Fanny. He wanted to see Mrs. Haddo. You know that poor Miss Vivian is dead?"

"Oh, yes," said Fanny. Then she added impulsively, "Betty will be in a terrible state!"

"It may be in your power to comfort her, dear."

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"To comfort Betty Vivian! What do you mean?"

"It has just been arranged between Mrs. Haddo and your father, who is now the guardian of the girls, that they are all three to come here as pupils in the school. They will arrive here on Monday. You are glad, are you not, Fan?"

Fanny started to her feet. She stood very still, staring straight before her.

"You are glad—of course, Fanny?"

Fanny then turned and faced her governess. "Do you want the truth, or—or—a lie?"

"Fanny, my dear, how can you speak to me in that tone? Of course I want the truth."

"Then I am not glad."

"But, my dear, consider. Those poor girls—they are orphans almost in a double sense. They are practically alone in the world. They are your cousins. You must have a very strong reason for saying what you have said—that you are not glad."

"I am not glad," repeated Fanny.

Miss Symes was silent. She felt greatly disturbed. After a minute she said, "Fanny, is there anything in connection with the Vivians which, in your opinion, Mrs. Haddo ought to know?"

"I won't tell," said Fanny; and now her voice was full of agitation. She turned away and suddenly burst out crying.

"My dear child! my dear child! you are upset by the thought of your father's absence. Compose yourself, my love. Don't give way, Fanny, dear. Try to have that courage that we all strive to attain at Haddo Court."

Fanny hastily dashed away her tears. Then she said, after a pause, "Is it fixed that they are to come?"

"Yes, it is quite fixed."

"Miss Symes, you took me at first by surprise, but when the Vivians arrive you will see that I shall treat them with the affection due to cousins of my own; also, that I will do my utmost to make them happy."

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"I am sure of it, my love. You are a very plucky girl!"

"And you won't tell Mrs. Haddo that I seemed distressed at the thought of their coming?"

"Do you really wish me not to tell her?"

"I do, most earnestly."

"Now, Fanny, I am going to trust you. Mrs. Haddo has been more or less driven into a corner over this matter. Your dear, kind father has been suddenly left in sole charge of those three young girls. He could not take them to India with him, and he had no home to offer them in this country. Mrs. Haddo, therefore, contrary to her wont, has agreed to receive them without the personal interview which she has hitherto thought essential."

Fanny smiled. "Oh, can I ever forget that interview when my turn came to receive it? I was at once more frightened and more elated than I believed it possible for any girl to be. I loved Mrs. Haddo on the spot, and yet I shook before her."

"But you don't fear her now, dear?"

"I should fear her most frightfully if I did anything wrong."

"Fanny, look down deep into your heart, and tell me if, in keeping something to yourself which you evidently know concerning your cousins, you are doing right or wrong."

"I will answer your question to-morrow," replied Fanny. "Now, may I go back to the others; they are waiting for me?"

"Yes, you may go, dear."

"The Vivians come here on Monday?" said Fanny as she rose.

"Yes, dear, on Monday. By the way, Miss Ludlow is arranging to give them the blue room, next to yours. You don't object, do you?"

"No," said Fanny. The next minute the girl was out of sight.

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Miss Symes sat very still. What was the matter? What was Fanny Crawford trying to conceal?

That evening Mrs. Haddo said to Miss Symes, "You have told Fanny that her cousins are coming?"

"Yes."

"And how did she take it?"

"Fanny is very much upset about her father's absence," was Miss Symes's unexpected answer.

Mrs. Haddo looked attentively at the English teacher. Their eyes met, but neither uttered a single word.

The next day, after school, Fanny went up to Miss Symes. "I have been thinking over everything," she said, "and my conscience is not going to trouble me; for I know, or believe I know, a way by which I may help them all."

"It is a grand thing to help those who are in sorrow, Fanny."

"I will do my best," said the girl.

That evening, to Miss Symes's great relief, she heard Fanny's merry laugh in the school. The girls who formed the Specialities, as they were called, had met for a cheerful conference. Mary and Julia Bertram were in the highest spirits; and Margaret Grant, with her beautiful complexion and stately ways, had never been more agreeable. Olive Repton, the pet and darling of nearly the whole of the upper school, was making the others scream with laughter.

"There can be nothing very bad," thought Miss Symes to herself. "My dear friend will soon see that the charitable feeling which prompted her to receive those girls into the house was really but another sign of her true nobility of character."

Meanwhile Fanny, who was told not to keep the coming of the Vivians in any way a secret, was being eagerly questioned with regard to them.

"So you really saw them at their funny home, Craigie Muir?" exclaimed Olive.

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"Yes; I spent a week there," said Fanny.

"And had a jolly good time, I guess?" cried Julia Bertram.

"Not such a very good time," answered Fanny, "for Miss Vivian was ill, and we had to be very quiet."

"Oh! don't let's bother about the time Fanny spent in that remote part of Scotland," said Olive. "Do tell us about the girls themselves, Fan. It's so unusual for any girls to come straight into the upper school, and also to put in an appearance in the middle of term. Are they very Scotch, to begin with?"

"No, hardly at all," replied Fanny. "Miss Vivian only took the pretty little cottage in which they live a year ago."

"I am glad they are not too Scotch," remarked Susie; "they will get into our ways all the sooner if they are thoroughly English."

"I don't see that for a single moment," remarked Olive. "For my part, I love Scotch lassies; and as to Irish colleens, they're simply adorable."

"Well, well, go on with your description, Fan," exclaimed Julia.

"I can tell you they are quite remarkable-looking," replied Fanny. "Betty is the eldest. She is a regular true sort of Betty, up to no end of larks and fun; but sometimes she gets very depressed. I think she is rather dark, but I am not quite sure; she is also somewhat tall; and, oh, she is wonderfully pretty! She can whistle the note of every bird that ever sang, and is devoted to wild creatures—the moor ponies and great Scotch collies and sheep-dogs. You'll be sure to like Betty Vivian."

"Your description does sound promising," remarked Susie; "but she will certainly have to give up her wild ways at Haddo Court."

"What about the others?" asked Olive.

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"Sylvia and Hetty? I think they are two years younger than Betty. They are not a bit like her. They are rather heavy-looking girls, but still you would call them handsome. They are twins, and wonderfully like each other. Sylvia is very tender-hearted; but Hetty—I think Hetty has the most force of character. Now, really," continued Fanny, rising from her low chair, where her chosen friends were surrounding her, "I can say nothing more about them until they come. You can't expect me, any of you, to overpraise my own relations, and, naturally, I shouldn't abuse them."

"Why, of course not, you dear old Fan!" exclaimed Olive.

"I must go and write a letter to father," said Fanny; and she went across the room to where her own little desk stood in a distant corner.

After she had left them, Olive bent forward, looked with her merry, twinkling eyes full into Susie Rushworth's face, and said, "Is the dear Fan *altogether* elated at the thought of her cousins' arrival? I put it to you, Susie, as the most observant of us all. Answer me truthfully, or for ever hold your peace."

"Then I will hold my peace," replied Susie, "for I cannot possibly say whether Fan is elated or not."

"Now, don't get notions in your head, Olive," said Mary Bertram. "That is one of your faults, you know. I expect those girls will be downright jolly; and, of course, being Fan's relations, they will become members of the Specialities. That goes without saying."

"It doesn't go without saying at all," remarked Olive. "The Specialities, as you know quite well, girls, have to stand certain tests."

"It is my opinion," said Susie, "that we are all getting too high and mighty for anything. Perhaps the Vivians will teach us to know our own places."

CHAPTER III

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GOING SOUTH

It was a rough stone house, quite bare, only one story high, and without a tree growing anywhere near it. It stood on the edge of a vast Scotch moor, and looked over acres and acres of purple heather—acres so extensive that the whole country seemed at that time of year to be covered with a sort of mantle of pinky, pearly gold, something between the violet

and the saffron tones of a summer sunset.

Three girls were seated on a little stone bench outside the lonely, neglected-looking house. They were roughly and plainly dressed. They wore frocks of the coarsest Scotch tweed; and Scotch tweed, when it is black, can look very coarse, indeed. They clung close together—a desolate-looking group—Betty, the eldest, in the middle; Sylvia pressing up to her at one side; Hetty, with her small, cold hand locked in her sister's, on the other.

"I wonder when Uncle John will come," was Hetty's remark after a pause. "Jean says we are on no account to travel alone; so, if he doesn't come to-night, we mayn't ever reach that fine school after all."

"I am not going to tell him about the packet. I have quite made up my mind on that point," said Betty, dropping her voice.

"Oh, Bet!" The other two looked up at their elder sister.

She turned and fixed her dark-gray eyes first on one face, then on the other. "Yes," she said, nodding emphatically; "the packet is sure to hold money, and it will be a safe-guard. If we find the school intolerable we'll have the wherewithal to run away."

"I've read in books that school life is very jolly sometimes," remarked Sylvia.

"Not *that* school," was Betty's rejoinder.

"But why not that school, Betty?"

Betty shrugged her shoulders. "Haven't you heard that miserable creature, Fanny Crawford, talk of it? I shouldn't greatly mind going anywhere else, for if there's a human being whom I cordially detest, it is my cousin, Fanny Crawford."

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"I hear the sound of wheels!" cried Sylvia, springing to her feet.

"Ah, and there's Donald coming back," said Betty; "and there is Uncle John! No chance of escape, girls! We have got to go through it. Poor old David!"—here she alluded to the horse who was tugging a roughly made dogcart up the very steep hill—"he'll miss us, perhaps; and so will Fritz and Andrew, the sheep-dogs. Heigh-ho! there's no good being too sorrowful. That money is a rare comfort!"

By this time the old white horse, and Donald, who was driving, and the gentleman who sat at the opposite side of the dogcart, drew up at the top of the great plateau. The gentleman alighted and walked swiftly towards the three girls. They rose simultaneously to meet him.

In London, and in any other part of the south of England, the weather was warm at this time of the year; but up on Craigie Muir it was cold, and the children looked desolate as they turned in their coarse clothes to meet their guardian.

Sir John came up to them with a smile. "Now, my dears, here I am—Betty, how do you do? Kiss your uncle, child."

Betty raised her pretty lips and gave the weather-beaten cheek of Sir John Crawford an unwilling kiss. Sylvia and Hetty clasped each other's hands, clung a little more closely together, and remained mute.

"Come, come," said Sir John; "we mustn't be miserable, you know! I hope that good Jean has got you something for supper, for the air up here would make any one hungry. Shall we go into the house? We all have to start at cockcrow in the morning. Donald knows, and has arranged, he tells me, for a cart to hold your luggage. Let's come in, children. I really should be glad to get out of this bitter blast."

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"It is just lovely!" said Betty. "I am drinking it in all I can, for I sha'n't have any more for many a long day."

Sir John, who had the kindest face in the world, accompanied by the kindest heart, looked anxiously at the handsome girl. Then he thought what a splendid chance he was giving his young cousins; for, although he allowed them to call him uncle, the relationship between them was not quite so close.

They all entered the sparsely furnished and bare-looking house. Six deal boxes, firmly corded with great strands of rope, were piled one on top of the other in the narrow hall.

"Here's our luggage," said Betty.

"My dear children—those deal boxes! What possessed you to put your things into trunks of that sort?"

"They are the only trunks we have," replied Betty. "And I think supper is ready," she continued; "I smell the grouse. I told Jean to have plenty ready for supper."

"Good girl, good girl!" said Sir John. "Now I will go upstairs and wash my hands; and I presume you will do the same, little women. Then we'll all enjoy a good meal."

A few minutes later Sir John Crawford and the three Misses Vivian were seated round a rough table, on which was spread a very snowy but coarse cloth. The grouse were done to a turn. There was excellent coffee, the best scones in the world, and piles of fresh butter. In addition, there was a small bottle of very choice Scotch whiskey placed on the sideboard, with lemons and other preparations for a comforting drink by and by for Sir John.

The girls were somewhat silent during the meal. Even Betty, who could be a chatterbox when she pleased, vouchsafed but few remarks.

But when the supper-things had been cleared away Sir John said emphatically, turning to the three girls, "You got my telegram, with its splendid news?" [Pg 28]

"We got your telegram, Uncle John," said Hetty.

"With its splendid news?" repeated Sir John.

Hetty pursed up her firm lips; Sylvia looked at him and smiled; Betty crossed the room and put a little black kettle on the peat fire to boil.

"You would like some whisky-punch?" Betty said. "I know how to make it."

"Thank you, my dear; I should very much. And do you three lassies object to a pipe?"

"Object!" said Betty. "No; Donald smokes every night; and since—since—" Her voice faltered; her face grew pale. After a minute's silence she said in an abrupt tone, "We go into the kitchen most nights to talk to Donald while he smokes."

"Then to-night you must talk to me. I can tell you, my dears, you are the luckiest young girls in the whole of Great Britain to have got admitted to Haddo Court; and my child Fan will look after you. You understand, dears, that everything you want you apply to me for. I am your guardian, appointed to that position by your dear aunt. You can write to me yourselves, or ask Fan to do so. By the way, I have been looking through some papers in a desk which belonged to your dear aunt, and cannot find a little sealed packet which she left there. Do you know anything about it, any of you?"

"No, uncle, nothing," said Betty, raising her dark-gray eyes and fixing them full on his face.

"Well, I suppose it doesn't matter," said Sir John; "but in a special letter to me she mentioned the packet. I suppose, however, it will turn up. Now, my dears, you are in luck. When you get over your very natural grief—"

"Oh, don't!" said Betty. "Get over it? We'll never get over it!"

"My dear, dear child, time softens all troubles. If it did not we couldn't live. I admire you, Betty, for showing love for one so worthy—" [Pg 29]

"If you don't look out, Uncle John," suddenly exclaimed Hetty, "you'll have Betty howling; and when she begins that sort of thing we can't stop her for hours."

Sir John raised his brows and looked in a puzzled way from one girl to the other. "You will be very happy at Haddo Court," he said; "and you are in luck to get there. Now, off to bed, all three of you, for we have to make an early start in the morning." Sir John held out his hand as he spoke. "Kiss me, Betty," he said to the eldest girl.

"Are you my uncle?" she inquired.

"No; your father and I were first cousins. But, my poor child, I stand in the place of father and guardian to you now."

"I'd rather not kiss you, if you don't mind," said Betty.

"You must please yourself. Now go to bed, all of you."

The girls left the little sitting-room. It was their fashion to hold each other's hands, and in a chain of three they now entered the kitchen.

"Jean," said Betty, "*he* says we are to go to bed. I want to ask you and Donald a question, and I want to ask it quickly."

"And what is the question, my puir bit lassie?" asked Jean Macfarlane.

"It is this," said Betty—"you and Donald can answer it quickly—if we want to come back here you will take us in, won't you?"

"Take you in, my bonny dears! Need you ask? There's a shelter always for the bit lassies under this roof," said Donald Macfarlane.

"Thanks, Donald," said Betty. "And thank you, Jean," she added. "Come, girls, let's go to bed."

The girls went up to the small room in the roof which they occupied. They slept in three tiny beds side by side. The beds were under the sloping roof, and the air of the room was cold. But Betty, Sylvia, and Hetty were accustomed to cold, and did not mind it. The three little beds touched each other, and the three girls quickly undressed and got between the coarse sheets. Betty, as the privileged one, was in the middle. And now a cold little hand was stretched out from the left bed towards her, and a cold little hand from the right bed did ditto.

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"Betty," said Sylvia in a choking voice, "you will keep us up? You are the brave one."

"Except when I cry," said Betty.

"Oh, but, Betty," said Hetty, "you will promise not to! It's awful when you do! You will promise, won't you?"

"I will try my best," said Betty.

"How long do you think, Betty, that you and Hetty and I will be able to endure that awful school?" said Sylvia.

"It all depends," said Betty. "But we've got the money to get away with when we like. It was left for our use. Now, look, here, girls. I am going to tell you a tremendous secret."

"Oh, yes! oh, yes!" exclaimed the other two. "Betty, you're a perfect darling; you are the most heroic creature in the world!"

"Listen; and don't talk, girls. I told a lie to-night about that packet; but no one else will know about it. There was one day—now don't interrupt me, either of you, or I'll begin howling, and then I can't stop—there was one day when Auntie Frances was very ill. She sent for me, and I went to her; and she said, 'I am able to leave you so very little, my children; but there is a nest-egg in a little packet in the right-hand drawer of my bureau. You must always keep it—always until you really want it.' I felt so bursting all round my heart, and so choky in my throat, that I thought I'd scream there and then; but I kept all my feelings in, and went away, and pretended to dearest auntie that I didn't feel it a bit. Then, you know, she, she—died."

"She was very cold," said Sylvia. "I saw her—I seem to see her still. Her face made me shiver."

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"Don't!" said Betty in a fierce voice. "Do you want me to howl all night long?"

"I won't! I won't!" said Sylvia. "Go on, Betty darling—heroine that you are!"

"Well, I went to her bureau straight away, and I took the packet. As a matter of fact, I already knew quite well that it was there; for I had often opened auntie's bureau and looked at her treasures, so I could lay my hands on it at once. I never mean to part with the packet. It's heavy, so it's sure to be full of gold—plenty of gold for us to live on if we don't like that beastly school. When Sir John—or Uncle John, as he wants us to call him——"

"He's no uncle of mine," said Hetty.

"I like him, for my part," said Sylvia.

"Don't interrupt me," said Betty. "When Uncle John asked me about the packet I said 'No,' of course; and I mean to say 'No' again, and again, and again, and again, if ever I'm questioned about it. For didn't auntie say it was for us? And what right has he to interfere?"

"It does sound awfully interesting!" exclaimed Sylvia. "I do hope you've put it in a very, very safe place, Betty?"

Betty laughed softly. "Do you remember the little, old-fashioned pockets auntie always wore inside her dress—little, flat pockets made of very strong calico? Well, it's in one of those; and I mean to secure a safer hiding-place for it when I get to that abominable Court. Now perhaps we'd better go to sleep."

"Yes; I am dead-sleepy," responded Sylvia.

By and by her gentle breathing showed that she was in the land of slumber. Hetty quickly followed her twin-sister's example. But Betty lay wide awake. She was lying flat on her back, and looking out into the sort of twilight which still seemed to pervade the great moors. Her eyes were wide open, and wore a startled, fixed expression, like the eyes of a girl who was seeing far beyond what she appeared to be looking at.

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"Yes, I have done right," she said to herself. "There must always be an open door, and this is my open door; and I hope God, and auntie up in heaven, will forgive me for having told that lie. And I hope God, and auntie up in heaven, will forgive me if I tell it again; for I mean to go on telling it, and telling it, and telling it, until I have spent all that money."

While Betty lay thinking her wild thoughts, Sir John Crawford, downstairs, made a shrewd and careful examination of the different articles of furniture which had been left in the little stone house by his old friend, Miss Frances Vivian. Everything was in perfect order. She was a lady who abhorred disorder, who could not endure it for a single moment. All her letters and her neatly receipted bills were tied up with blue silk, and laid, according to date, one on top of the other. Her several little trinkets, which eventually would belong to the girls, were in their places. Her last will and testament was also in the drawer where she had told Sir John he would find it. Everything was in order—everything, exactly as the poor lady had left it, with the exception of the little sealed packet. Where was it? Sir John felt puzzled and distressed. He had not an idea what it contained; for Miss Vivian, in her letter to him, had simply asked him to take care of it for her nieces, and had not made any comment with regard to its contents. Sir John certainly could not accuse the girls of purloining it. After some pain and deliberate thought, he decided to go out and speak to the old servants, who were still up, in the kitchen. They received him respectfully, and yet with a sort of sour expression which was natural to their homely Scotch faces.

Donald rose silently, and asked the gentleman if he would seat himself.

"No, Donald," replied Sir John in his hearty, pleasant voice; "I cannot stay. I am going to bed, being somewhat tired."

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"The bit chamber is no' too comfortable for your lordship," said Jean, dropping a profound curtsy.

"The chamber will do all right. I have slept in it before," said Sir John.

"Eh, dear, now," said Jean, "and you be easy to please."

"I want you, Jean Macfarlane, to call the young ladies and myself not later than five o'clock to-morrow morning, and to have breakfast ready at half-past five; and, Donald, we shall require the dogcart to drive to the station at six o'clock. Have you given orders about the young ladies' luggage? It ought to start not later than four to-morrow morning to be in time to catch the train."

"Eh, to be sure," said Donald. "It's myself has seen to all that. Don't you fash yourself, laird. Things'll be in time. All me and my wife wants is that the bit lassies should have every comfort."

"I will see to that," said Sir John.

"We'll miss them, puir wee things!" exclaimed Jean; and there came a glint of something like tears into her hard and yet bright blue eyes.

"I am sure you will. You have, both of you, been valued servants both to my cousin and her nieces. I wish to make you a little present each." Here Sir John fumbled in his pocket, and took out a couple of sovereigns.

But the old pair drew back in some indignation. "Na, na!" they exclaimed; "it isn't our love for them or for her as can be purchased for gowd."

"Well, as you please, my good people. I respect you all the more for refusing. But now, may I ask you a question?"

"And whatever may that be?" exclaimed Jean.

"I have looked through your late mistress's effects——"

"And whatever may 'effects' be?" inquired Donald.

"What she has left behind her."

"Ay, the laird uses grand words," remarked Donald, turning to his wife.

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"Maybe," said Jean; "but its the flavor of the Scotch in the speech that softens my heart the

most."

"Well," said Sir John quickly, "there's one little packet I cannot find. Miss Vivian wrote to me about it in a letter which I received after her death. I haven't an idea what it contained; but she seemed to set some store by it, and it was eventually to be the property of the young ladies."

"Puir lambs! Puir lambs!" said Jean.

"I have questioned them about it, but they know nothing."

"And how should they, babes as they be?" said Jean.

"You'll not be offended, Jean Macfarlane and Donald Macfarlane, if I ask you the same question?"

Jean flushed an angry red for a moment; but Donald's shrewd face puckered up in a smile.

"You may ask, and hearty welcome," he said; "but I know no more about the bit packet than the lassies do, and that's naucht at all."

"Nor me no more than he," echoed Jean.

"Do you think, by any possibility, any one from outside got into the house and stole the little packet?"

"Do I think!" exclaimed Jean. "Let me tell you, laird, that a man or woman as got in here unbeknownst to Donald and me would go out again pretty quick with a flea in the ear."

Sir John smiled. "I believe you," he said. He went upstairs, feeling puzzled. But when he laid his head on his pillow he was so tired that he fell sound asleep. The sleep seemed to last but for a minute or two when Jean's harsh voice was heard telling him to rise, for it was five o'clock in the morning. Then there came a time of bustle and confusion. The girls, with their faces white as sheets, came down to breakfast in their usual fashion—hand linked within hand. Sir John thought, as he glanced at them, that he had never seen a more desolate-looking little trio. They hardly ate any of the excellent food which Jean had provided. The good baronet guessed that their hearts were full, and did not worry them with questions.

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The pile of deal boxes had disappeared from the narrow hall and was already on its way to Dunstan Station, where they were to meet a local train which would presently enable them to join the express for London. There was a bewildered moment of great anguish when Jean caught the lassies to her breast, when the dogs clustered round to be embraced and hugged and patted. Then Donald, leading the horse (for there was no room for him to ride in the crowded dogcart), started briskly on the road to Dunstan, and Craigie Muir was left far behind.

By and by they all reached the railway station. The luggage was piled up on the platform. Sir John took first-class tickets to London, and the curious deal boxes found their place in the luggage van. Donald's grizzly head and rugged face were seen for one minute as the train steamed out of the station. Betty clutched at the side of her dress where Aunt Frances' old flat pocket which contained the packet was secured. The other two girls looked at her with a curious mingling of awe and admiration, and then they were off.

Sir John guessed at the young people's feelings, and did not trouble them with conversation. By and by they left the small train and got into a compartment reserved for them in the London express. Sir John did everything he could to enliven the journey for his young cousins. But they were taciturn and irresponsible. Betty's wonderful gray eyes looked out of the window at the passing landscape, which Sir John was quite sure she did not see; Sylvia and Hester were absorbed in watching their sister. Sir John had a queer kind of feeling that there was something wrong with the girls' dress; that very coarse black serge, made with no attempt at style; the coarse, home-made stockings; the rough, hobnailed boots; the small tam-o'-shanter caps, pushed far back from the little faces; the uncouth worsted gloves; and then the deal boxes! He had a kind of notion that things were very wrong, and that the girls did not look a bit as his own darling Fanny looked, nor in the least like the other girls he had seen at Haddo Court. But Sir John Crawford had been a widower for years, and during that time had seen little of women. He had not the least idea how to remedy what looked a little out of place even at Craigie Muir, but now that they were flying south looked much worse. Could he possibly spare the time to spend a day in a London hotel, and buy the girls proper toilets, and have their clothes put into regulation trunks? But no, in the first place, he had not the time; in the second, he would not have the slightest idea what to order.

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They all arrived in London late in the evening. Sylvia and Hetty had been asleep during the latter part of the journey, but Betty still sat bolt upright and wide awake. It was dusk now, and the lamp in the carriage was lit. It seemed to throw a shadow on the girl's miserable face. She was very young—only the same age as Sir John's dear Fanny; and yet how different, how pale, how full of inexpressible sadness was that little face! Those gray eyes of hers seemed to haunt him! He was the kindest man on earth, and would have given worlds to comfort her; but he did not know what to do.

CHAPTER IV

RECEPTION AT HADDO COURT

Having made up her mind to receive the Vivian girls, Mrs. Haddo arranged matters quite calmly and to her entire satisfaction. There was no fuss or commotion of any kind; and when Sir John appeared on the following morning, with the six deal boxes and the three girls dressed in their coarse Highland garments, they were all received immediately in Mrs. Haddo's private sitting-room.

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"I have brought the girls, Mrs. Haddo," said Sir John. "This is Betty. Come forward, my dear, and shake hands with your new mistress."

"How old are you?" asked Mrs. Haddo.

"I was sixteen my last birthday, and that was six months ago, and one fortnight and three days," replied Betty in a very distinct voice, holding herself bolt upright, and looking with those strange eyes full into Mrs. Haddo's face. She spoke with extreme defiance. But she suddenly met a rebuff—a kind of rebuff that she did not expect; for Mrs. Haddo's eyes looked back at her with such a world of love, sympathy, and understanding that the girl felt that choking in her throat and that bursting sensation in her heart which she dreaded more than anything else. She instantly lowered her brilliant eyes and stood back, waiting for her sisters to speak.

Sylvia came up a little pertly. "Hetty and I are twins," she said, "and we'll be fifteen our next birthday; but that's not for a long time yet."

"Well, my dears, I am glad to welcome you all three, and I hope you will have a happy time in my school. I will not trouble you with rules or anything irksome of that sort to-day. You will like to see your cousin, Fanny Crawford. She is busy at lessons now; so I would first of all suggest that you go to your room, and change your dress, and get tidy after your journey. You have come here nice and early; and in honor of your arrival I will give, what is my invariable custom, a half-holiday to the upper school, so that you may get to know your companions."

"Ask Miss Symes to be good enough to come here," said Betty, but Betty would not raise her eyes. She was standing very still, her hands locked tightly together. Mrs. Haddo walked to the bell and rang it. A servant appeared.

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"Ask Miss Symes to be good enough to come here," said Mrs. Haddo.

The English governess with the charming, noble face presently appeared.

"Miss Symes," said Mrs. Haddo, "may I introduce you to Sir John Crawford?"

Sir John bowed, and the governess bent her head gracefully.

"And these are your new pupils, the Vivians. This is Betty, and this little girl is Sylvia. Am I not right, dear?"

"No; I am Hester," said the girl addressed as Sylvia.

"This is Hetty, then; and this is Sylvia. Will you take them to their room and do what you can for their comfort? If they like to stay there for a little they can do so. I will speak to you presently, if you will come to me here."

The girls and Miss Symes left the presence of the head mistress. The moment they had done so Mrs. Haddo gave a quick sigh. "My dear Sir John," she said, "what remarkable, and interesting, and difficult, and almost impossible girls you have intrusted to my care!"

"I own they are not like others," said Sir John; "but you have admitted they are interesting."

"Yes," said Mrs. Haddo, speaking slowly. "I shall manage them yet. The eldest girl, Betty, is wonderful. What a heart! what a soul! but, oh, very hard to get at!"

"I thought, perhaps," said Sir John, fidgeting slightly, "that you would object to the rough way they are clothed. I really don't like it myself; at least, I don't think it's quite the fashion."

"Their clothes do not matter at all, Sir John."

"But the less remarkable they look the better they will get on in the school," persisted Sir John; "so, of course, you will get what is necessary."

"Naturally, Miss Symes and I will see to that."

"They led a very rough life in the country," continued Sir John, "and yet it was a pure and healthy life—out all day long on those great moors, and with no one to keep them company except a faithful old servant of Miss Vivian's and his wife. They made pets of dogs and horses, and were happy after their fashion. You will do what you can for them, will you not, Mrs. Haddo?"

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"Having accepted them into my school, I will do my utmost. I do not mind simple manners, for the noblest natures are to be found among such people; nor do I mind rough, ungainly clothing, for that, indeed, only belongs to the outward girl and can quickly be remedied. I will keep these girls, and do all that woman can for them, provided I see no deceit in any of them; but that, you will clearly understand, Sir John, is in my opinion an unpardonable sin."

"Do they look like girls who would deceive any one?" was Sir John's rejoinder.

"I grant you they do not. Now, you must be very busy, so you must cast the girls from your mind. You would like to see Fanny. I know she is dying to have a talk with you."

Meanwhile Miss Symes had conducted the girls upstairs. The room they entered was much grander than any room they had ever seen before. It was large—one of the largest bedrooms in the great house. It had three noble windows which reached from floor to ceiling, and were of French style, so that they could be opened wide in summer weather to admit the soft, warm air. There was a great balcony outside the windows, where the girls could sit when they chose. The room itself was called the blue room; the reason of this was that the color on the walls was pale blue, whereas the paint was white. The three little beds stood in a row, side by side. There was a very large wardrobe exactly facing the beds, also a chest of large drawers for each girl, while the carpet was blue to match the walls. A bright fire was burning in the cheerful, new-fashioned grate. Altogether, it would have been difficult to find a more charming apartment than the blue room at Haddo Court.

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"Are we to sleep here?" asked Betty.

"Yes, my dear child. These are your little beds; and Anderson, the schoolroom maid, will unpack your trunks presently. I see they have been brought up."

Miss Symes slightly started, for the six wooden trunks, fastened by their coarse ropes, were standing side by side in another part of the room.

"Why do you look at our trunks like that?" asked Sylvia, who was not specially shy, and was quick to express her feelings.

But Betty came to the rescue. "Never mind how she looks," remarked Betty; "she can look as she likes. What does it matter to us?"

This speech was so very different from the ordinary speech of the ordinary girl who came to Haddo Court that Miss Symes was nonplussed for a moment. She quickly, however, recovered her equanimity.

"Now, my dears, you must make yourselves quite at home. You must not be shy, or lonely, or unhappy. You must enter—which I hope you will do very quick—into the life of this most delightful house. We are all willing and anxious to make you happy. As to your trunks, they will be unpacked and put away in one of the attics."

"I wish we could sleep in an attic," said Betty then in a fierce voice. "I hate company-rooms."

"There is no attic available, my dear; and this, you must admit, is a nice room."

"I admit nothing," said Betty.

"I think it's a nice room," said Hester; "only, of course, we are not accustomed to it, and that great fire is so chokingly hot. May we open all the windows?"

"Certainly, dears, provided you don't catch cold."

"Catch cold!" said Sylvia in a voice of scorn. "If you had ever lived on a Scotch moor you wouldn't talk of catching cold in a stuffy little hole of a place like this." [Pg 41]

Miss Symes had an excellent temper, but she found it a trifle difficult to keep it under control at that moment. "I must ask you for the keys of your trunks," she said; "for while we are at dinner, which will be in about an hour's time, Anderson will unpack them."

"Thanks," said Betty, "but we'd much rather unpack our own trunks."

Miss Symes was silent for a minute. "In this house, dear, it is not the custom," she said then. She spoke very gently. She was puzzled at the general appearance, speech, and get-up of the new girls.

"And we can, of course, keep our own keys," continued Betty, speaking rapidly, her very pale face glowing with a faint tinge of color; "because Mrs.—What is the name of the mistress?"

"Mrs. Haddo," said Miss Symes in a tone of great respect.

"Well, whatever her name is, she said we were to be restricted by no rules to-day. She said so, didn't she, Sylvia? Didn't she, Hetty?"

"She certainly did," replied the twins.

"Then, if it's a rule for the trunks to be unpacked by some one else, it doesn't apply to us to-day," said Betty. "If you will be so very kind, Miss——"

"Symes is my name."

"So very kind, Miss Symes, as to go away and leave us, we'll begin to unpack our own trunks and put everything away by dinner-time."

"Very well," said Miss Symes quite meekly. "Is there anything else I can do for your comfort?"

"Yes," remarked Sylvia in a pert tone; "you can go away."

Miss Symes left the room. When she did so the two younger girls looked at their elder sister. Betty's face was very white, and her chest was working ominously. [Pg 42]

Sylvia went up to her and gave her a sudden, violent slap between the shoulders. "Now, don't begin!" she said. "If you do, they'll all come round us. It isn't as if we could rush away to the middle of the moors, and you could go on with it as long as you liked. Here, if you howl, you'll catch it; for they'll stand over you, and perhaps fling water on your head."

"Leave me alone, then, for a minute," said Betty. She flung herself flat on the ground, face downwards, her hair falling about her shoulders. She lay as still as though she were carved in stone. The twin girls watched her for a minute. Then very softly and carefully Sylvia approached the prone figure, pushed her hand into Betty's pocket (a very coarse, ordinary pocket it was, put in at the side of her dress by Jean's own fingers), and took out a bunch of keys.

Sylvia held up the keys with a glad smile. "Now let's begin," she said. "It's an odious, grandified room, and Betty'll go mad here; but we can't help it—at least, for a bit. And there's always the packet."

At these words, to the great relief of her younger sisters, Betty stood upright. "There's always the packet," she said. "Now let's begin to unpack."

Notwithstanding the fact that there were six deal trunks—six trunks of the plainest make, corded with the coarsest rope—there was very little inside them, at least as far as an ordinary girl's wardrobe is concerned; for Miss Frances Vivian had been very poor, and during the last year of her life had lived at Craigie Muir in the strictest economy. She was, moreover, too ill to be greatly troubled about the girls' clothing; and by and by, as her illness progressed, she left the matter altogether to Jean. Jean was to supply what garments the young ladies required, and Jean set about the work with a right good will. So the coarsest petticoats, the most clumsy stockings, the ugliest jackets and blouses and skirts imaginable, presently appeared out of the little wooden trunks. [Pg 43]

The girls sorted them eagerly, putting them pell-mell into the drawers without the slightest attempt at any sort of order. But if there were very few clothes in the trunks, there were all sorts of other things. There were boxes full of caterpillars in different stages of chrysalis form. There was also a glass box which contained an enormous spider. This was Sylvia's

special property. She called the spider Dickie, and adored it. She would not give it flies, which she considered cruel, but used to keep it alive on morsels of raw meat. Every day, for a quarter of an hour, Dickie was allowed to take exercise on a flat stone on the edge of the moor. It was quite against even Jean Macfarlane's advice that Dickie was brought to the neighborhood of London. But he was here. He had borne his journey apparently well, and Sylvia looked at him now with worshiping eyes.

In addition to the live stock, which was extensive and varied, there were also all kinds of strange fossils, and long, trailing pieces of heather—mementos of the life which the girls lived on the moor, and which they had left with such pain and sorrow. They were all busy worshiping Dickie, and envying Sylvia's bravery in bringing the huge spider to Haddo Court, when there came a gentle tap at the door.

Betty said crossly, "Who's there?"

A very refined voice answered, "It's I;" and the next minute Fanny Crawford entered the room. "How are you all?" she said. Her eyes were red, for she had just said good-bye to her father, and she thoroughly hated the idea of the girls coming to the school.

"How are you, Fan?" replied Betty, speaking in a careless tone, just nodding her head, and looking again into the glass box. "He is very hungry," she continued. "By the way, Fan, will you run down to the kitchen and get a little bit of raw meat?"

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"Will I do what?" asked Fanny.

"Well, I suppose there is a kitchen in the house, and you can get a bit of raw meat. It's for Dickie."

"Oh," said Fanny, coming forward on tiptoe and peeping into the box, "you can't keep that terror here—you simply won't be allowed to have it! Have you *no* idea what school-life is like?"

"No," said Betty; "and what is more, I don't want you to tell me. Dickie darling, I'd let you pinch my finger if it would do you any good. Sylvia, what use are you if you can't feed your own spider? If Fan won't oblige her cousins when she knows the ways of the house, I presume you have a pair of legs and can use them? Go to the kitchen at once and get a piece of raw meat."

"I don't know where it is," said Sylvia, looking slightly frightened.

"Well, you can ask. Go on; ask until you find. Now, be off with you!"

"You had better not," said Fanny. "Why, you will meet all the girls coming out of the different classrooms!"

"What do girls matter," said Betty in a withering voice, "when Dickie is hungry?"

Sylvia gathered up her courage and departed. Betty laid the glass box which contained the spider on the dressing-table.

If Fanny had not been slightly afraid of these bold northern cousins of hers, she would have dashed the box out on the balcony and released poor Dickie, giving him back to his natural mode of life. "What queer dresses you are wearing!" she said. "Do, please, change them before lunch. You were not dressed like this when I saw you last. You were never fashionable, but this stuff—"

"You'd best not begin, Fan, or I'll howl," said Betty.

"Hush! do hush, Fanny!" exclaimed Hester. "Don't forget that we are in mourning for darling auntie."

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"But have you really no other dresses?"

"There's nothing wrong with these," said Hester; "they're quite comfortable."

Just at that moment there came peals of laughter proceeding from several girls' throats. The room-door was burst open, and Sylvia entered first, her face very red, her eyes bright and defiant, and a tiny piece of raw meat on a plate in her hand. The girls who followed her did not belong to the Specialities, but they were all girls of the upper school. Fanny thanked her stars that they were not particular friends of hers. They were choking with laughter, and evidently thought they had never seen so good a sight in their lives.

"Oh, this is too delicious!" said Sibyl Ray, a girl who had just been admitted into the upper school. "We met this—this young lady, and she said she wanted to go to the kitchen to get some raw meat; and when I told her I didn't know the way she just took my hand and drew

me along with her, and said, 'If you possessed a Dickie, and he was dying of hunger, you wouldn't hesitate to find the kitchen.'

"Well, I'm not going to interfere," said Fanny; "but I think you know the rules of the house, Sibyl, and that no girl is allowed in the kitchen."

"I didn't go in," said Sibyl; "catch me! But I went to the beginning of the corridor which leads to the kitchen. *She* went in, though, boldly enough, and she got it. Now, we do want to see who Dickie is. Is he a dog, or a monkey, or what?"

"He's a spider—*goose!*" said Sylvia. "And now, please, get out of the way. He won't eat if you watch him. I've got a good bit of meat, Betty," she continued. "It'll keep Dickie going for several days, and he likes it all the better when it begins to turn. Don't you Dickie?"

"If you don't all leave the room, girls," said Fanny, "I shall have to report to Miss Symes."

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The girls who had entered were rather afraid of Fanny Crawford, and thought it best to obey her instructions. But the news with regard to the newcomers spread wildly all over the house; so much so that when, in course of time, neat-looking Fanny came down to dinner accompanied by her three cousins, the whole school remained breathless, watching the Vivians as they entered. But what magical force is there about certain girls which raises them above the mere accessories of dress? Could there be anything uglier than the attire of these so-called Scotch lassies? And was there ever a prouder carriage than that of Betty Vivian, or a more scornful expression in the eye, or a firmer set of the little lips?

Mrs. Haddo, who always presided at this meal, called the strangers to come and sit near her; and though the school had great difficulty in not bursting into a giggle, there was not a sound of any sort whatever as the three obeyed. Fanny sat down near her friend, Susie Rushworth. Her eyes spoke volumes. But Susie was gazing at Betty's face.

At dinner, the girls were expected to talk French on certain days of the week, and German on others. This was French day, and Susie murmured something to Fanny in that tongue with regard to Betty's remarkable little face. But Fanny was in no mood to be courteous or kind about her relatives. Susie was quick to perceive this, and therefore left her alone.

When dinner came to an end, Mrs. Haddo called the three Vivians into her private sitting-room. This room was even more elegant than the beautiful bedroom which they had just vacated. "Now, my dears," she said, "I want to have a talk with you all."

Sylvia and Hester looked impatient, and shuffled from one ungainly clad foot to the other; but Mrs. Haddo fixed her eyes on Betty's face, and again there thrilled through Betty's heart the marvelous sensation that she had come across a kindred soul. She was incapable, poor child, of putting the thought into such words; but she felt it, and it thawed her rebellious spirit.

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Mrs. Haddo sat down. "Now," she said, "you call this school, and, having never been at school before, you doubtless think you are going to be very miserable?"

"If there's much discipline we shall be," said Hester, "and Betty will howl."

"*Don't* talk like that!" said Betty; and there was a tone in her voice which silenced Hetty, to the little girl's own amazement.

"There will certainly be discipline at school," said Mrs. Haddo, "just as there is discipline in life. What miserable people we should be without discipline! Why, we couldn't get on at all. I am not going to lecture you to-day. As a matter of fact, I never lecture; and I never expect any young girl to do in my school what I would not endeavor to do myself. Above all things, I wish to impress one thing upon you. If you have any sort of trouble—and, of course, dears, you will have plenty—you must come straight to me and tell me about it. This is a privilege I permit to very few girls, but I grant it to you. I give you that full privilege for the first month of your stay at Haddo Court. You are to come to me as you would to a mother, had you, my poor children, a mother living."

"Don't! It makes the lump so bad!" said Betty, clasping her rough little hand against her white throat.

"I think I have said enough on that subject for the present. I am very curious to hear all about your life on the moors—how you spent your time, and how you managed your horses and dogs and your numerous pets."

"Do you really want to hear?" said Betty.

"Certainly; I have said so."

"Do you know," said Hetty, "that Sylvia *would* bring Dickie here. Betty and I were somewhat against it, although he is a darling. He is the most precious pet in the world, and Sylvia would not part with him. We sent her to the kitchen before dinner to get a bit of raw meat for him. Would you like to see him?"

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Mrs. Haddo was silent for a minute. Then she said gently, "Yes, very much. He is a sort of pet, I suppose?"

"He is a spider," said Betty—"a great, enormous spider. We captured him when he was small, and we fed him—oh, not on little flies—that would be cruel—but on morsels of raw meat. Now he is very big, and he has wicked eyes. I would rather call him Demon than Dickie; but Sylvia named him Dickie when he was but a baby thing, so the name has stuck to him. We love him dearly."

"I will come up to your room presently, and you shall show him to me. Have you brought other pets from the country?"

"Oh, stones and shells and bits of the moor."

"Bits of the moor, my dear children!"

"Yes; we dug pieces up the day before yesterday and wrapped them in paper, and we want to plant them somewhere here. We thought they would comfort us. We'd like it awfully if you would let one of the dogs come, too. He is a great sheep-dog, and such a darling! His name is Andrew. I think Donald Macfarlane would part with him if you said we might have him."

"I am afraid I can't just at present, dear; but if you are really good girls, and try your very best to please me, you shall go back to Donald Macfarlane in the holidays, and perhaps I will go with you, and you will show me all your favorite haunts."

"Oh, will you?" said Betty. Her eyes grew softer than ever.

"You are quite a dear for a head mistress," said Sylvia. "We've always read in books that they are such horrors. It is nice for you to say you will come."

"Well, now, I want to say something else, and then we'll go up to your room and see Dickie. I am going to take you three girls up to town to-morrow to buy you the sort of dresses we wear in this part of the world. You can put away these most sensible frocks for your next visit to Craigie Muir. Not a word, dears. You have said I am a very nice head mistress, and I hope you will continue to think so. Now, let us come up to your room."

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CHAPTER V

THE VIVIANS' ATTIC

Mrs. Haddo was genuinely interested in Dickie. She never once spoke of him as a horror. She immediately named the genus to which he belonged in the spider tribe, and told the girls that they could look up full particulars with regard to him and his ways in a large book she had downstairs called "Chambers's Encyclopedia." She suggested, however, that they should have a little room in one of the attics where they could keep Dickie and his morsels of meat, and the different boxes which contained the caterpillars. She volunteered to show this minute room to the young Vivians at once.

They looked at her, as she spoke, with more and more interest and less and less dislike. Even Sylvia's little heart was melted, and Hetty at once put out her hand and touched Mrs. Haddo's. In a moment the little brown hand was held in the firm clasp of the white one, which was ornamented with sparkling rings.

As the children and Mrs. Haddo were leaving the blue room, Mrs. Haddo's eyes fell upon the deal trunks. "What very sensible trunks!" she said. "And so you brought your clothes in these?"

"Yes," replied Betty. "Donald Macfarlane made them for us. He can do all sorts of carpentering. He meant to paint them green; but we thought we'd like them best just as they are unpainted."

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"They are strong, useful boxes," replied Mrs. Haddo. "And now come with me and I will show you the room which shall be your private property and where you can keep your pets. By the way," she added, "I am exceedingly particular with regard to the neatness of the

various rooms where my pupils sleep; and these bits of heather and these curious stones—oh, I can tell you plenty about their history by and by—might also be put into what we will call ‘the Vivians’ attic.’”

“Thank you so much!” said Betty. She had forgotten all about howling—she had even forgotten for the minute that she was really at school; for great Mrs. Haddo, the wonderful head mistress, about whom Fanny had told so many stories, was really a most agreeable person—nearly, very nearly, as nice as dear Aunt Frances.

The little attic was presently reached; the pets were deposited there; and then—wonderful to relate!—Mrs. Haddo went out herself with the girls and chose the very best position in the grounds for them to plant the pieces of heather, with their roots and surrounding earth. She gave to each girl a small plot which was to be her very own, and which no other girl was to have anything whatever to do with. When presently she introduced them into the private sitting-room of the upper school, Betty’s eyes were shining quite happily; and Sylvia and Hetty, who always followed her example, were looking as merry as possible.

Fanny Crawford, being requested to do so by Susie Rushworth, now introduced the Vivians to the Specialities. Mary and Julia Bertram shook hands with them quite warmly. Margaret Grant smiled for a minute as her dark, handsome eyes met those of Betty; while Olive Repton said in her most genial tone, “Oh, do sit down, and tell us all about your life!”

“Yes, please—*please*, tell us all about your life!” exclaimed another voice; and Sibyl Ray came boldly forward and seated herself in the midst of the group, which was known in the school as the Specialities. [Pg 51]

But here Margaret interfered. “You shall hear everything presently, Sibyl,” she said; “but just now we are having a little confab with dear Fanny’s friends, so do you mind leaving us alone together?”

Sibyl colored angrily. “I am sure I don’t care,” she said; “and if you are going to be stuck-up and snappish and disagreeable just because you happen to call yourselves the Specialities, you needn’t expect *me* to take an interest in you. I am just off for a game of tennis, and shall have a far better time than you all, hobnobbing in this close room.”

“Yes, the room is very close,” exclaimed Betty. Then she added, “I do not think I shall like the South of England at all; it seems to be without air.”

“Oh, you’ll soon get over that!” laughed Susie. “Besides,” she continued, “winter is coming; and I can tell you we find winter very cold, even here.”

“I am glad of that,” said Betty. “I hate hot weather; unless, indeed,” she added, “when you can lie flat on your back, in the centre of one of the moors, and watch the sky with the sun blazing down on you.”

“But you must never lie anywhere near a flat stone,” exclaimed Sylvia, “or an adder may come out, and that isn’t a bit jolly!”

Sibyl had not yet moved off, but was standing with her mouth slightly gaping and her round eyes full of horror.

“Do go! do go, Sibyl!” said Mary Bertram; and Sibyl went, to tell wonderful stories to her own special friends all about these oddest of girls who kept monstrous spiders—spiders that had to be fed on raw meat—and who themselves lay on the moors where adders were to be found.

“Now tell us about Dickie,” said Susie, who was always the first to make friends. [Pg 52]

But Betty Vivian, for some unaccountable reason, no longer felt either amiable or sociable. “There’s nothing to tell,” she replied, “and you can’t see him.”

“Oh, please, Betty, don’t be disagreeable!” exclaimed Fanny. “We can see him any minute if we go to your bedroom.”

“No, you can’t,” said Betty, “for he isn’t there.”

Fanny burst out laughing. “Ah,” she said, “I thought as much! I thought Mrs. Haddo would soon put an end to poor Dickie’s life!”

“Then you thought wrong!” exclaimed Sylvia with flashing eyes, “for Mrs. Haddo loves him. She was down on her knees looking—Oh, what is the matter, Betty?”

“If you keep repeating our secrets with Mrs. Haddo I shall pinch you black and blue to-night,” was Betty’s response.

Sylvia instantly became silent.

"Well, tell us about the moor, anyhow," said Margaret.

"And let's go out!" cried Olive. "The day is perfectly glorious; and, of course," she continued, "we are all bound to make ourselves agreeable to you three, for we owe our delightful half-holiday to you. But for you Vivians we'd be toiling away at our lessons now instead of allowing our minds to cool down."

"Do minds get as hot as all that?" asked Hester.

"Very often, indeed, at this school," said Olive with a chuckle.

"Well, I, for one, shall be delighted to go out," said Betty.

"Then you must run upstairs and get your hats and your gloves," said Fanny, who seemed, for some extraordinary reason, to wish to make her cousins uncomfortable.

Betty looked at her very fiercely for a minute; then she beckoned to her sisters, and the three left the room in their usual fashion—each girl holding the hand of another.

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"Fan," said Olive the moment the door had closed behind them, "you don't like the Vivians! I see it in your face."

"I never said so," replied Fanny.

"Oh, Fan, dear—not with the lips, of course; but the eyes have spoken volumes. Now, I think they are great fun; they're so uncommon."

"I have never said I didn't like them," repeated Fanny, "and you will never get me to say it. They are my cousins, and of course I'll have to look after them a bit; but I think before they are a month at the school you will agree with me in my opinion with regard to them."

"How can we agree in an opinion we know nothing about?" said Margaret Grant.

Fanny looked at her, and Fanny's eyes could flash in a very significant manner at times.

"Let's come out!" exclaimed Susie Rushworth. "The girls will follow us."

This, however, turned out not to be the case. Susie, the Bertrams, Margaret Grant, Olive Repton, waited for the Vivians in every imaginable spot where they it likely the newcomers would be.

As a matter of fact, the very instant the young Vivians had left the sitting-room, Betty whispered in an eager tone, first to one sister and then to the other, "We surely needn't stay any longer with Fanny and those other horrid girls. Never mind your hats and gloves. Did we ever wear hats and gloves when we were out on the moors at Craigie Muir? There's an open door. Let's get away quite by ourselves."

The Vivians managed this quite easily. They raced down a side-walk until they came to an overhanging oak tree of enormous dimensions. Into this tree they climbed, getting up higher and higher until they were lost to view in the topmost branches. Here they contrived to make a cozy nest for themselves, where they sat very close together, not talking much, although Betty now and then said calmly, "I like Mrs. Haddo; she is the only one in the whole school I can tolerate."

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"Fan's worse than ever!" exclaimed Sylvia.

"Oh, don't let's talk of her!" said Betty.

"It will be rather fun going to London to-morrow," said Hester.

"Fun!" exclaimed Betty. "I suppose we shall be put into odious fashionable dresses, like those stuck-up dolls the other girls. But I don't think, try as they will, they'll ever turn *me* into a fashionable lady. How I do hate that sort!"

"Yes, and so do I," said Sylvia; while Hetty, who always echoed her sisters' sentiments, said ditto.

"Mrs. Haddo was kind about Dickie," said Betty after a thoughtful pause.

"And it is nice," added Sylvia, "to have the Vivian attic."

"Oh, dear!" said Hester; "I wish all those girls would keep out of sight, for then I'd dash back to the house and bring out the pieces of heather and plant them right away. They ought not to be long out of the ground."

"You had best go at once," said Betty, giving Hester a somewhat vigorous push, which very nearly upset the little girl's balance. "Go boldly back to the house; don't be afraid of any one; don't speak to any one unless it happens to be Mrs. Haddo. Be sure you are polite to her, for she is a lady. Go up to the Vivian attic and bring down the clumps of heather, and the little spade we brought with us in the very bottom of the fifth trunk."

"Oh, and there's the watering-can; don't forget that!" cried Sylvia.

"Yes, bring the watering-can, too. You had best find a pump, or a well, or something, so that you can fill it up to the brim. Bring them all along; and then just whistle 'Robin Adair' at the foot of this tree, and we two will come swarming down. Now, off with you; there's no time to lose!"

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Hester descended without a word. She was certainly born without a scrap of fear of any kind, and adventure appealed to her plucky little spirit. Betty settled herself back comfortably against one of the forked branches of the tree where she had made her nest.

"If we are careful, Sylvia, we can come up here to hide as often as we like. I rather fancy from the shape of those other girls that they're not specially good at climbing trees."

"What do you mean by their shape?" asked Sylvia.

"Oh, they're so squeezed in and pushed out; I don't know how to explain it. Now, *we* have the use of all our limbs; and I say, you silly little Sylvia, won't we use them just!"

"I always love you, Betty, when you call me 'silly little Sylvia,' for I know you are in a good humor and not inclined to howl. But, before Hetty comes back, I want to say something."

"How mysterious you look, Sylvia! What can you have to say that poor Hetty's not to hear? I am not going to have secrets that are not shared among us three, I can tell you. We share and share alike—we three. We are just desolate orphans, alone in the world; but at least we share and share alike."

"Of course, of course," said Sylvia; "but I saw—and I don't think Hetty did——"

"And what did you see?"

"I saw Fan looking at us; and then she came rather close. It was that time when we were all stifling in that odious sitting-room; Fan came and sat very close to you, and I saw her put her hand down to feel your dress. I know she felt that flat pocket where the little sealed packet is."

Betty's face grew red and then white.

"And don't you remember," continued Sylvia, "that Fan was with us on the very, very day when darling auntie told us about the packet—the day when you came out of her room with your eyes as red as a ferret's; and don't you remember how you couldn't help howling that day, and how far off we had to go for fear darlingest auntie would hear you? And can't you recall that Fan crept after us, just like the horrid sneak that she is? And I know she heard you say, 'That packet is mine; it belongs to all of us, and I—I *will* keep it, whatever happens.'"

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"She may do sneaky things of that sort every hour of every day that she likes," was Betty's cool rejoinder. "Now, don't get into a fright, silly little Sylvia. Oh, I say, hark! that's Hester's note. She is whistling 'Robin Adair'!"

Quick as thought, the girls climbed down from the great tree and stood under it. Hester was panting a little, for she had run fast and her arms were very full.

"I saw a lot of *them* scattered everywhere!" she exclaimed; "but I don't *think* they saw me, but of course I couldn't be sure. Here's the heather; its darling little bells are beginning to droop, poor sweet pets! And here's the spade; and here's the watering-can, brimful of water, too, for I saw a gardener as I was coming along, and I asked him to fill it for me, and he did so at once. Now let's go to our gardens and let's plant. We've just got a nice sod of heather each—one for each garden. Oh, do let's be quick, or those dreadful girls will see us!"

"There's no need to hurry," said Betty. "I rather think I can take care of myself. Give me the watering-can. Sylvia, take the heather; and, Hetty—your face is perfectly scarlet, you have run so fast—you follow after with the spade."

The little plots of ground which had been given over to the Vivian girls had been chosen by Mrs. Haddo on the edge of a wild, uncultivated piece of ground. The girls of Haddo Court were proud of this piece of land, which some of them—Margaret Grant, in particular—were

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fond of calling the "forest primeval." But the Vivians, fresh from the wild Scotch moors, thought but poorly of the few acres of sparse grass and tangled weed and low undergrowth. It was, however, on the very edge of this piece of land that the three little gardens were situated. Mrs. Haddo did nothing by halves; and already—wonderful to relate—the gardens had been marked out with stakes and pieces of stout string, and there was a small post planted at the edge of the center garden containing the words in white paint: THE VIVIAN'S PRIVATE GARDENS.

Even Betty laughed. "This is good!" she said. "Girls, that is quite a nice woman."

The twins naturally acknowledged as very nice indeed any one whom Betty admired.

Betty here gave a profound sigh. "Come along; let's be quick," she said. "We'll plant our heather in the very center of each plot. I'll have the middle plot, of course, being the eldest. You, silly Sylvia, shall have the one on the left-hand side; and you, Het, the one on the right-hand side. I will plant my heather first."

The others watched while Betty dug vigorously, and had soon made a hole large enough and soft enough to inclose the roots of the wild Scotch heather. She then gave her spade to Sylvia, who did likewise; then Hetty, in her turn, also planted a clump of heather. The contents of the watering-can was presently dispersed among the three clumps, and the girls turned back in the direction of the house.

"She *is* nice!" said Betty. "I will bring her here the first day she has a minute to spare and show her the heather. She said she knew all about Scotch heather, and loved it very much. I shouldn't greatly mind, for my part, letting her know about the packet."

"Oh, better not!" said Hester in a frightened tone. "Remember, she is not the only one in that huge prison of a house." Here she pointed to the great mansion which constituted the vast edifice, Haddo Court. "She is by no means the only one," continued Hester. "If she were, I could be happy here."

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"You are right, Het; you are quite a wise, small girl," said Betty. "Oh, dear," she added, "how I hate those monstrous houses! What would not I give to be back in the little, white stone house at Craigie Muir!"

"And with darling Jean and dearest old Donald!" exclaimed Sylvia.

"Yes, and the dogs," said Hester. "Oh, Andrew! oh, Fritz! are you missing us as much as we miss you? And, David, you darling! are you pricking up your ears, expecting us to come round to you with some carrots?"

"We'd best not begin too much of this sort of talk," said Betty. "We've got to make up our minds to be cheerful—that is, if we wish to please Mrs. Haddo."

The thought of Mrs. Haddo was certainly having a remarkable effect on Betty; and there is no saying how soon she might, in consequence, have been reconciled to her school-life but for an incident which took place that very evening. For Fanny Crawford, who would not tell a tale against another for the world, had been much troubled since she heard of her cousins' arrival. Her conscientious little mind had told her that they were the last sort of girls suitable to be in such a school as Haddo Court. She had found out something about them. She had not meant to spy on them during her brief visit to Craigie Muir, but she had certainly overheard some of Betty's passionate words about the little packet; and that very evening, curled up on the sofa in the tiny sitting-room at Craigie Muir Cottage, she had seen Betty—although Betty had not seen her—creep into the room in the semi-darkness and remove a little sealed packet from one of Miss Vivian's drawers. As Fanny expressed it afterwards, she felt at the moment as though her tongue would cleave to the roof of her mouth. She had tried to utter some sound, but none would come. She had never mentioned the incident to any one; and as she scarcely expected to see anything more of her cousins in the future, she tried to dismiss it from her thoughts. But as soon as ever she was told in confidence by Miss Symes that the Vivian girls were coming to Haddo Court, she recalled the incident of what she was pleased to regard as the stolen packet. It had haunted her while she was at Craigie Muir; it had even horrified her. Her whole nature recoiled against what she considered clandestine and underhand dealings. Nevertheless she could not, she would not, tell. But she had very nearly made up her mind to say something to the girls themselves—to ask Betty why she had taken the packet, and what she had done with it. But even on this course she was not fully decided.

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On the morning of that very day, however, just before Fanny bade her father good-bye, he had said to her, "Fan, my dear, there's a trifle worrying me, although I don't suppose for a single moment you can help me in the matter."

"What is it, father?" asked the girl.

"Well, the fact is this. I am going, as you know, to India for the next few years, and it is quite possible that as the cottage at Craigie Muir will belong to the Vivian girls—for poor Frances bought it and allowed those Scotch folk the Macfarlanes to live there—it is, I say, quite possible that you may go to Craigie Muir for a summer holiday with your cousins. The air is superb, and would do you much good, and of course the girls would be wild with delight. Well, my dear, if you go, I want you to look round everywhere—you have good, sharp eyes in your head, Fan, my girl—and try if you can find a little sealed packet which poor Frances left to be taken care of by me for your three cousins."

"A sealed packet?" said Fanny. She felt herself turning very pale.

"Yes. Do you know anything about it?"

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"Oh, father!" said poor Fanny; and her eyes filled with tears.

"What is the matter, my child?"

"I—I'd so much rather not talk about it, please."

"Then you do know something?"

"Please, please, father, don't question me!"

"I won't if you don't wish it; but your manner puzzles me a good deal. Well, dear, if you can get it by any chance, you had better put it into Mrs. Haddo's charge until I return. I asked those poor children if they had seen it, and they denied having done so."

Fanny felt herself shiver, and had to clasp her hands very tightly together.

"I also asked that good shepherd Donald Macfarlane and his wife, and they certainly knew nothing about it. I can't stay with you any longer now, my little girl; but if you do happen to go to Craigie Muir you might remember that I am a little anxious on the subject, for it is my wish to carry out the directions of my dear cousin Frances in all particulars. Now, try to be very, very good to your cousins, Fan; and remember how lonely they are, and how differently they have been brought up from you."

Fanny could not speak, for she was crying too hard. Sir John presently went away, and forgot all about the little packet. But Fanny remembered it; in fact, she could not get it out of her head during the entire day; and in the course of the afternoon, when she found that the Vivian girls joined the group of the Specialities, she forced a chair between Betty and Olive Repton, and seated herself on it, and purposely, hating herself all the time for doing so, felt Betty's pocket. Beyond doubt there was something hard in it. It was not a pocket-handkerchief, nor did it feel like a pencil or a knife or anything of that sort.

"I shall know no peace," thought Fanny to herself, "until I get that unhappy girl to tell the truth and return the packet to me. I shall be very firm and very kind, and I will never let out a single thing about it in the school. But the packet must be given up; and then I will manage to convey it to Mrs. Haddo, who will keep it until dear father returns."

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But although Fan intended to act the part of the very virtuous and proper girl, she did not like her cousins the more because of this unpleasant incident. Fanny Crawford had a certain strength of character; but it is sad to relate that she was somewhat overlaid with self-righteousness, and was very proud of the fact that nothing would induce *her* to do a dishonorable thing. She sadly lacked Mrs. Haddo's rare and large sympathy and deep knowledge of life, and Fanny certainly had not the slightest power of reading character.

That very evening, therefore, when the Vivian girls had gone to their room, feeling very tired and sleepy, and by no means so unhappy as they expected, Fanny first knocked at their door and then boldly entered. Each girl had removed her frock and was wearing a little, rough, gray dressing-gown, and each girl was in the act of brushing out her own very thick hair.

"Brushing-hair time!" exclaimed Fanny in a cheerful tone. "I trust I am not in the way."

"We were going to bed," remarked Betty.

"Oh, Betty, what a reproachful tone!" Fanny tried to carry matters off with a light hand. "Surely I, your own cousin, am welcome? Do say I am welcome, dear Betty! and let me bring my brush and comb, and brush my hair in your room."

"No," said Betty; "you are not welcome, and we'd all much rather that you brushed your hair in your own room."

"You certainly are sweetly polite," said Fanny, with a smile on her face which was not remarkable for sweetness. She looked quite calmly at the girls for a moment. Then she said, "This day, on account of your arrival, rules are off, so to speak, but they begin again to-morrow morning. To-morrow evening, therefore, I cannot come to your bedroom, for it would be breaking rules."

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"Oh, how just awfully jolly!" exclaimed Sylvia.

"Thanks," said Fanny. She paused again for a minute. Then she added, "But as rules are off, I may as well say that I have come here to-night on purpose. Just before father left, he told me that there was a little sealed packet"—Betty sat plump down on the side of her bed; Sylvia and Hetty caught each others hands—"a little sealed packet," continued Fanny, "which belonged to poor Miss Vivian—your aunt Frances—and which father was to take charge of for you."

"No, he wasn't," said Betty; "you make a mistake."

"Nonsense, Betty! Father never makes a mistake. Anyhow, he has Miss Vivian's letter, which proves the whole thing. Now, the packet cannot be found. Father is quite troubled about it. He says he has not an idea what it contains, but it was left to be placed under his care. He asked you three about it, and you said you knew nothing. He also asked the servants in that ugly little house——"

"How dare you call it ugly?" said Betty.

"Well, well, pray don't get into a passion! Anyhow, you all denied any knowledge of the packet. Now, I may as well confess that, although I have not breathed the subject to any one, I saw you, Betty, with my own eyes, take it out of Miss Vivian's drawer. I was lying on the sofa in the dark, or almost in the dark, and you never noticed me; but I saw you open the drawer and take the packet out. That being the case, you *do* know all about it, and you have told a lie. Please, Betty, give me the packet, and I will take it to-morrow to Mrs. Haddo, and she will look after it for you until father returns; and I promise you faithfully that I will never tell a soul what you did, nor the lie you told father about it. Now, Betty, do be sensible. Give it to me, without any delay. I felt it in the pocket under your dress to-day, so you can't deny that you have it."

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Fanny's face was very red when she had finished speaking, and there were two other faces in that room which were even redder; but another face was very pale, with shining eyes and a defiant, strange expression about the lips.

The three Vivians now came up to Fanny, who, although older than the two younger girls, was built much more slightly, and, compared with them, had no muscle at all. Betty was a very strong girl for her age.

"Come," said Betty, "we are not going to waste words on you. Just march out of this!"

"I—what do you mean?"

"March! This is our room, our private room, and therefore our castle. If you like to play the spy, you can; but you don't come in here. Go along—be quick—out you go!"

A strong hand took Fanny forcibly by her right arm, and a strong hand took her with equal force by her left, then two very powerful hands pushed from behind; so that Fanny Crawford, who considered herself one of the most dignified and lady-like girls in the school, was summarily ejected. She went into her room, looked at the cruel marks on her arms caused by the angry girls, and burst into tears.

Miss Symes came in and found Fanny crying, and did her best to comfort the girl. "What is wrong, dear?" she said.

"Oh, don't—don't ask me!" said poor Fanny.

"You are fretting about your father, darling."

"It's not that," said Fanny; "and I can't ever tell you, dear St. Cecilia. Oh, please, leave me! Oh, oh, I am unhappy!"

Miss Symes, finding she could do no good, and believing that Fanny must be a little hysterical on account of her father, went away. When she had gone Fanny dried her eyes, and stayed for a long time lost in thought. She had meant to be good, after her fashion, to the Vivian girls; but, after their treatment of her, she felt that she understood for the first time what hate really meant. If she could not force the girls to deliver up the packet, she might even consider it her duty to tell the whole story to Mrs. Haddo. Never before in the annals of that great school had a Speciality been known to tell a story of another girl. But

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Fanny reflected that there were great moments in life which required that a rule should be broken.

CHAPTER VI

A CRISIS

The Specialities had made firm rules for themselves. Their numbers were few, for only those who could really rise to a high ideal were permitted to join.

The head of the Specialities was Margaret Grant. It was she who first thought of this little scheme for bringing the girls she loved best into closer communion each with the other. She had consulted Susie Rushworth, Fanny Crawford, Mary and Julia Bertram, and Olive Repton. Up to the present there were no other members of the Speciality Club. These girls managed it their own way. They had their private meetings, their earnest conversations, and their confessions each to make to the other. They swore eternal friendship. They had all things in common—that is, concealments were not permitted amongst the Specialities; and the influence of this small and apparently unimportant club did much towards the formation of the characters of its members.

Now, as poor Fanny sat alone in her pretty room she thought, and thought again, over what had occurred. According to the rules of the club to which she belonged, she ought to consult the other girls with regard to what the Vivians had done. *The* great rule of the Specialities was “No secrets. Each must know all that the others knew. Never before in the annals of the school had there been a secret of such importance—in short, such a horrible secret—to divulge. Fanny made up her mind that she could not do it.

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There was to be a great meeting of the Specialities on the following evening. They usually met in each other’s bedrooms, taking the task of offering hospitality turn and turn about. At these little social gatherings they had cocoa, tempting cakes, and chocolate creams; here they laughed and chatted, sometimes having merely a merry evening, at others discussing gravely the larger issues of life. Fanny was the one who was to entertain the Specialities on the following evening, and she made preparations accordingly. Sir John had brought her a particularly tempting cake from Buzzard’s, a couple of pounds of the best chocolate creams, a tin of delicious cocoa, and, last but not least, a beautiful little set of charming cups and saucers and tiny plates, and real silver spoons, also little silver knives. Notwithstanding her grief at parting from her father, Fanny was delighted with her present. Hitherto there had been no attempt at style in these brief meetings of the friends. But Fanny’s next entertainment was to be done properly.

There was no secret about these gatherings. Miss Symes had been told that these special girls wanted to meet once a week between nine and ten o’clock in their respective bedrooms. She had carried the information to Mrs. Haddo, who had immediately given the desired permission, telling the girls that they might hold their meeting until the great bell rang for chapel. Prayers were always read at a quarter to ten in the beautiful chapel belonging to Haddo Court, but only the girls of the upper school attended in the evening. Fanny would have been in the highest spirits to-night were it not for the Vivians, were it not for the consciousness that she was in possession of a secret—a really terrible secret—which she must not tell to her companions. Yes, she must break her rule; she must not tell.

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She lay down on her bed at last and fell asleep, feeling tired and very miserable. She was horrified at Betty’s conduct with regard to the little packet, and could not feel a particle of sympathy for the other girls in the matter.

It was soon after midnight on that same eventful night. The great clock over the stables had struck twelve, and sweet chimes had come from the other clock in the little tower of the chapel. The whole house was wrapped in profound slumber. Even Mrs. Haddo had put away all cares, and had laid her head on her pillow; even the Rev. Edmund Fairfax and his wife had put out the lights in their special wing of the Court, and had gone to sleep.

It was shortly after the clocks had done their midnight work that Betty Vivian raised herself very slowly and cautiously on her elbow, and touched Sylvia on her low, white forehead. The little girl started, opened her eyes, and was about to utter an exclamation when Betty whispered, “Don’t make a sound, silly Sylvia! It’s only me—Betty. I want you to get very wide awake. And now you are wide awake, aren’t you?”

“Yes, oh yes,” said Sylvia; “but I don’t know where I am. Oh yes, of course I remember; I am

in——”

“You are in prison!” whispered Betty back to her. “Now, lie as still as a statue while I waken Hester.”

Soon the two little sisters were wide awake.

“Now, both of you creep very softly into my bed. We can all squeeze up together if we try hard.”

“Lovely, darlingest Betty!” whispered Sylvia.

“You are nice, Bet!” exclaimed Hester.

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“Now I want to speak,” said Betty. “You know the packet?”

The two younger girls squeezed Betty’s hands by way of answer.

“You know how *she* spoke to-night?”

Another squeeze of Betty’s hands, a squeeze which was almost ferocious this time.

“Do you think,” continued Betty, “that she is going to have her way, and we are going to give it up to her?”

“Of course not,” said Sylvia.

“I might,” said Betty—“I *might* have asked Mrs. Haddo to look after it for me; but never now—never! Girls, we’ve got to bury it!”

“Oh Bet!” whispered Sylvia.

“We can’t!” said Hester with a sort of little pant.

“We can, and we will,” said Betty. “I’ve thought it all out. I am going to bury it my own self this very minute.”

“Betty, how—where? Betty, what do you mean?”

“You must help me,” said Betty. “First of all, I am going to get up and put on my thick skirt of black serge. I won’t make a sound, for that creature Fan sleeps next door. Lie perfectly still where you are while I am getting ready.”

The girls obeyed. It was fearfully exciting, lying like this almost in the dark; for there was scarcely any moon, and the dim light in the garden could hardly be called light at all. Betty moved mysteriously about the room, and presently came up to her two sisters.

“Now, you do exactly what you are told.”

“Yes, Betty, we will.”

“I am going, first of all,” said Betty, “to fetch the little spade.”

“Oh Bet, you’ll wake the house!”

“No,” said Betty. She moved towards the door. She was a very observant girl, and had noticed that no door creaked in that well-conducted mansion, that no lock was out of order. She managed to open the door of her bedroom without making the slightest sound. She managed to creep upstairs and reach the Vivian attic. She found the little spade and brought it down again. She re-entered the beautiful big bedroom and closed the door softly.

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“Here’s the spade!” she whispered to her sisters. “Did you hear me move?”

“No, Bet. Oh, you are wonderful!”

“Now,” said Betty, “we must take the sheets off our three beds. The three top sheets will do. Sylvia, begin to knot the sheets together. Make the knots very strong, and be quick about it.”

Sylvia obeyed without a word.

“Hester, come and help me,” said Betty now. She took the other twin’s hand and led her to one of the French windows. The window happened to be a little open, for the night was a very warm and balmy one. Betty pushed it wider open, and the next minute she was standing on the balcony.

“Go back,” she whispered, speaking to Hester, “and bring Sylvia out with the sheets!”

In a very short time Sylvia appeared, dragging what looked like a tangled white rope along

with her.

"Now, then," said Betty, "you've got to let me down to the ground by means of these sheets. I am a pretty good weight, you know, and you mustn't drop me; for if you did I might break my leg or something, and that would be horrid. You two have got to hold one end of these knotted sheets as firmly as ever you can, and not let go on any account. Now, then—here goes!"

The next instant Betty had clutched hold of one of the sheets herself, and had climbed over the somewhat high parapet of the balcony. A minute later, still firmly holding the white rope, she was gradually letting herself down to the ground, hand over hand. By-and-by she reached the bottom. When she did this she held up both hands, which the girls, as they watched her from above, could just see. She was demanding the little spade. Sylvia flung it on the soft grass which lay beneath. Betty put her hand, making a sort of trumpet of it, round her lips, and whispered up, "Stay where you are till I return."

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She then marched off into the shrubbery. She was absent for about twenty minutes, during which time both Sylvia and Hetty felt exceedingly cold. She then came back, fastened the little spade securely into the broad belt of her dress, and, aided by her sisters, pulled herself up and up, and so on to the balcony once more.

The three girls re-entered the bedroom. Not a soul in that great house had heard them, or seen them, or knew anything about their adventure.

"It is quite safe now—poor, beautiful darling!" whispered Betty. "Girls, we must smooth out these sheets; they *do* look rather dragged. And now we'll get straight into bed."

"I am very cold," said Sylvia.

"You'll be warm again in a minute," replied Betty; "and what does a little cold matter when I have saved *it*? No, I am not going to tell you where it is; just because it's safer, dear, dearest, for you not to know."

"Yes, it's safer," said Sylvia.

The three sisters lay down again. By slow degrees warmth returned to the half-frozen limbs of the poor little twins, and they dropped asleep. But Betty lay awake—warm, excited, triumphant.

"I've managed things now," she thought; "and if every girl in the school asks me if I have a little packet, and if every teacher does likewise, I'll be able truthfully to say 'No.'"

Early the next morning Mrs. Haddo announced her intention to take the Vivians to London. School-work was in full swing that day; and Susie, Margaret, Olive, and the other members of the Specialities rather envied the Vivians when they saw them driving away in Mrs. Haddo's most elegant landau to the railway station.

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Sibyl Ray openly expressed her sentiments on the occasion. She turned to her companion, who was standing near. "I must say, and I may as well say it first as last, that I do not understand your adorable Mrs. Haddo. Why should she make such a fuss over common-looking girls like those?"

"Do you call the Vivians common-looking girls?" was Martha West's response.

"Of course I do, and even worse. Why, judging from their dress, they might have come out of a laborer's cottage."

"Granted," replied Martha; "but then," she added, "they have something else, each of them, better than dress."

"Oh, if you begin to talk in enigmas I for one shall cease to be your friend," answered Sibyl. "What have they got that is so wonderful?"

"It was born in them," replied Martha. "If you can't see it for yourself, Sibyl, I am not able to show it to you."

Mrs. Haddo took the girls to London and gave them a very good day. It is true they spent a time which seemed intolerably long to Betty in having pretty white blouses and smartly made skirts and neat little jackets fitted on. They spent a still more intolerable time at the dressmaker's in being measured for soft, pretty evening-dresses. They went to a hairdresser, who cut their very thick hair and tied it with broad black ribbon. They next went to a milliner and had several hats tried on. They went to a sort of all-round shop, where they bought gloves, boots, and handkerchiefs innumerable, and some very soft black cashmere and even black silk stockings. Oh, but *they* didn't care; they thought the whole

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time wasted. Nevertheless they submitted, and with a certain grace; for was not the precious packet safe—so safe that no one could possibly discover its whereabouts? And was not Betty feeling her queer, sensitive heart expanding more and more under Mrs. Haddo's kind influence?

"Now, my dears," said that good lady, "we will go back to Miss Watts the dressmaker at three o'clock; but we have still two hours to spare. During that time we'll have a little lunch, for I am sure you must be hungry; and afterwards I will take you to the Wallace Collection, which I think you will enjoy."

"What's a collection?" asked Sylvia.

"There are some rooms not far from here where beautiful things are collected—pictures and other lovely things of all sorts and descriptions. I think that you, at least, Betty, will love to look at them."

Betty afterwards felt, deep down in her heart, that this whole day was a wonderful dream. She was starvingly hungry, to begin with, and enjoyed the excellent lunch that Mrs. Haddo ordered at the confectioners. She felt a sense of curious joy and fear as she looked at one or two of the great pictures in the Wallace Collection, and so excited and uplifted was she altogether that she scarcely noticed when they returned to the shops and the coarse, ugly black serges were exchanged for pretty coats and skirts of the finest cloth, for neat little white blouses, for pretty shoes and fine stockings. She did not even object to the hat, which, with its plume of feathers, gave a look of distinction to her little face. She was not elated over her fine clothes, neither was she annoyed about them.

"Now, Miss Watts," said Mrs. Haddo in a cheerful tone, "you will hurry with the rest of the young ladies' things, and send them to me as soon as ever you can. I shall want their evening-dresses, without fail, by the beginning of next week."

They all went down into the street. Sylvia found herself casting shy glances at Betty. It seemed to her that her sister was changed—that she scarcely knew her. Dress did not make such a marked difference in Hetty's appearance; but Hetty too looked a different girl. [Pg 72]

"And now we are going to the Zoological Gardens," said Mrs. Haddo, "where we may find some spiders like Dickie, and where you will see all sorts of wonderful creatures."

"Oh Mrs. Haddo!" exclaimed Betty.

They spent an hour or two in that place so fascinating for children, and arrived back at Haddo Court just in time for supper.

"We have had a happy day, have we not?" said Mrs. Haddo, looking into Betty's face and observing the brightness of her eyes.

"Very happy, and it was you who gave it to us," answered the girl.

"And to-morrow," continued Mrs. Haddo, "must be just as happy—just as happy—because lessons will begin; and to an intelligent and clever girl there is nothing in the world so delightful as a difficulty conquered and knowledge acquired."

That evening, when the Vivian girls entered the room where supper was served, every girl in the upper school turned to look at them. The change in their appearance was at once complete and arresting. They walked well by nature. They were finely made girls, and had not a scrap of self-consciousness.

"Oh, I say, Fan," whispered Susie in her dear friend's ear, "your cousins will boss the whole school if this sort of thing goes on. To be frank with you, Fan, I have fallen in love with that magnificent Betty myself. There is nothing I wouldn't do for her."

"You ought not to whisper in English, ought you?" was Fanny's very significant response, uttered in the German tongue. [Pg 73]

Susie shrugged her shoulders. The Specialities generally sat close to each other; and she looked down the table now, and saw that Margaret, and the Bertrams, and Olive Repton were equally absorbed in watching the Vivian girls. Nothing more was said about them, however; and when the meal came to an end Miss Symes took them away with her, to give them brief directions with regard to their work for the morrow. She also supplied them with a number of new books, which Betty received with rapture, for she adored reading, and hitherto had hardly been able to indulge in it. Miss Symes tried to explain to the girls something of the school routine; and she showed each girl her own special desk in the great schoolroom, where she could keep her school-books, and her different papers, pens, pencils, ink, etc.

"I cannot tell until to-morrow what forms you will be in, my dears; but I think Betty will probably have a good deal to do with me in her daily tuition; whereas you, Sylvia, and you, Hester, will be under the charge of Miss Oxley. I must introduce you to Miss Oxley to-morrow morning. And now you would like, I am sure, to go to bed. Mrs. Haddo says that you needn't attend prayers to-night, for you have had a long and tiring day; so you may go at once to your room."

The girls thanked Miss Symes, and went. They heard voices busily conversing in Fanny's room—eager voices, joined to occasional peals of merry laughter. But they were too tired, too sleepy, and, it may be added, too happy, to worry themselves much over these matters. They were very quickly in bed and sound asleep.

Meanwhile Fanny was much enjoying the unstinted praise which her friends were bestowing on the beautiful tea-set which her father had given her.

"Oh, but it is perfectly lovely!" exclaimed Olive. "Why, Fan, you are in luck; it's real old Crown Derby!" [Pg 74]

"Yes," said Fanny; "I thought it was. Whenever father does a thing he does it well."

"We'll be almost afraid to drink out of it, Fanny!" exclaimed Julia Bertram. "Fancy, if I were to drop one of those little jewels of cups! Don't the colors just sparkle on them! Oh, if I were to drop it, and it got broken, I don't think I'd ever hold up my head again!"

"Well, dear Julia, don't drop it," said Fanny, "and then you will feel all right."

Cocoa was already prepared; the rich cake graced the center of the board; the chocolate creams were certainly in evidence; and the girls clustered round, laughing and talking. Fanny was determined to choke back that feeling of uneasiness which had worried her during the whole of that day. She could not tell the Specialities what her cousins had done; she could not—she would not. There must be a secret between them. She who belonged to a society of whom each member had to vow not to have a secret from any other member, was about to break her vow.

The girls were in high spirits to-night, and in no mood to talk "sobersides," as Mary Bertram sometimes called their graver discussions.

But when the little meal of cocoa and cake had come to an end, Margaret said, "I want to make a proposal."

"Hush! hush! Let the oracle speak!" cried Olive, her pretty face beaming with mirth.

"Oh Olive, don't be so ridiculous!" said Margaret. "You know perfectly well I am no oracle; but I have a notion in my head. It is this: why should not those splendid-looking girls, the Vivians, join the Specialities? They did look rather funny, I will admit, yesterday; but even then one could see that clothes matter little or nothing to them. But now that they're dressed like the rest of us, they give distinction to the whole school. I don't think I ever saw a face like Betty's. Fan, you, of course, will second my proposal that Betty Vivian, even if her sisters are too young, should be asked to become a Speciality?" [Pg 75]

Fanny felt that she was turning very pale. Susie Rushworth gazed at her in some wonder.

"I propose," exclaimed Margaret Grant, "that Miss Betty Vivian shall be invited to join our society and to become a Speciality. I further propose that we ask her to join our next meeting, which takes place this day week, and is, by the way, held in my room. Now, who will second my suggestion?"

"You will, of course, Fan," said Susie. "Betty is your cousin, so you are the right person to second Margaret's wish."

Fanny's face grew yet paler. After a minute she said, "Just because Betty is my cousin I would rather some one else seconded Margaret Grant's proposal."

All the girls looked at her in astonishment.

"Very well; I second it," responded Susie.

"Girls," said Margaret, "will you all agree? Those who do *not* agree, please keep their hands down. Those who *do* agree, please hold up hands. Now, then, is Betty Vivian to be invited to join the Specialities? Which has it—the 'ayes' or the 'noes'?"

All the girls' hands, with one exception, were eagerly raised in favor of Betty Vivian. Fanny sat very still, her hands locked one inside the other in her lap. Something in her attitude and in the expression of her face caused each of her companions to gaze at her in extreme wonder.

"Why, Fanny, what is the meaning of this?" asked Margaret.

"I cannot explain myself," said Fanny.

"Cannot—and you a Speciality! Don't you know that we have no secrets from one another?"

"That is true," said Fanny, speaking with a great effort. "Well, then, I will explain myself. I would rather Betty Vivian did not join our club." [Pg 76]

"But why, dear—why?"

"Yes, Fanny, why?" echoed Susie.

"What ridiculous nonsense you are talking!" cried Olive Repton.

"The most striking-looking girl I ever saw!" said Julia Bertram. "Why, Fan, what is your reason for this?"

"Call it jealousy if you like," said Fanny; "call it any name under the sun, only don't worry me about it."

As she spoke she rose deliberately and left the room, her companions looking after her in amazement.

"What does this mean?" said Julia.

"I can't understand it a bit," said Margaret. Then she added after a pause, "I suppose, girls, you fully recognize that the Speciality Club is supposed to be a club without prejudice or favor, and that, as the 'ayes' have carried the day, Miss Betty Vivian is to be invited to join?"

"Of course she must be invited to join," replied Susie; "but it is very unpleasant all the same. I cannot make out what can ail Fanny Crawford. She hasn't been a bit herself since those girls arrived."

The Specialities chatted a little longer together, but the meeting was not convivial. Fanny's absence prevented its being so; and very soon the girls broke up, leaving the pretty cups and saucers and the remains of the feast behind them. The chapel bell rang for prayers, and they all trooped in. But Fanny Crawford was not present. This, in itself, was almost without precedent, for girls were not allowed to miss prayers without leave.

As each Speciality laid her head on her pillow that night she could not but reflect on Fanny's strange behavior, and wondered much what it meant. As to Fanny herself, she lay awake for hours. Some of the girls and some of the mistresses thought that she was grieving for her father; but, as a matter of fact, she was not even thinking of him. Every thought of her mind was concentrated on what she called her present dilemma. It was almost morning before the tired girl fell asleep. [Pg 77]

At half-past six on the following day the great gong sounded through the entire upper school. Betty started up in some amazement, her sisters in some alarm.

By-and-by a kind-looking woman, dressed as a sort of housekeeper or upper servant, entered the room. "Can I help you to dress, young ladies?" she said.

The girls replied in the negative. They had always dressed themselves.

"Very well," replied the woman. "Then I will come to fetch you in half-an-hour's time, so that you will be ready for prayers in chapel."

Perhaps Betty Vivian never, as long as she lived, forgot that first day when she stood with her sisters in the beautiful little chapel and heard the Reverend Edmund Fairfax read prayers. He was a delicate, refined-looking man, with a very intellectual face and a beautiful voice. Mrs. Haddo had begged of him to accept the post of private chaplain to her great school for many reasons. First, because his health was delicate; second, because she knew she could pay him well; and also, for the greatest reason of all, because she was quite sure that Mr. Fairfax could help her girls in moments of difficulty in their spiritual life, should such moments arise.

Prayers came to an end; breakfast came to an end. The Vivians passed a very brisk examination with some credit. As Miss Symes had predicted, Betty was put into her special form, in which form Susie Rushworth and Fanny Crawford also had their places. The younger Vivians were allowed to remain in the upper school, but were in much lower forms. Betty took to her work as happily (to use a well-known expression) as a duck takes to water. Her eyes were bright with intelligence while she listened to Miss Symes, who could teach so charmingly and could impart knowledge in such an attractive way. [Pg 78]

In the middle of the morning there was the usual brief period when the girls might go out and amuse themselves for a short time. Betty wanted to find her sisters; but before she could attempt to seek for them she felt a hand laid on her arm, and, glancing round, saw that Fanny Crawford was by her side.

"Betty," said Fanny, "I want to speak to you, and at once. We have only a very few minutes; will you, please, listen?"

"Is it really important?" asked Betty. "For, if it is not, I do want to say something to Sylvia. She forgot to give Dickie his raw meat this morning."

"Oh, aren't you just hopeless!" exclaimed Fanny. "You think of that terrible spider when—when—Oh, I don't know what to make of you!"

"And I don't know what to make of you, Fanny!" retorted Betty. "What are you excited about? What is the matter?"

"Listen!—do listen!" said Fanny.

"Well, I am listening; but you really must be quick in getting out whatever's troubling you."

"You have heard of the Specialities, haven't you?" said Fanny.

"Good gracious, no!" exclaimed Betty. "The Specialities—what are they?"

"There is nothing *what* about them. They are people—girls; they are not things."

"Oh, girls! What a funny name to give girls! I haven't heard of them, Fanny."

"You won't be long at Haddo Court without hearing a great deal about them," remarked Fanny. "I am one, and so is Susie Rushworth, and so are the Bertrams, and so is that handsome girl Margaret Grant. You must have noticed her; she is so dark and tall and stately. And so, also, is dear little Olive Repton—"

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"And so is—and so is—and so is—" laughed Betty, putting on her most quizzical manner.

"You must listen to me. The Specialities—oh, they're not like any other girls in the school, and it's the greatest honor in the world to be asked to belong to them. Betty, it's this way. Margaret Grant is the sort of captain of the club—I don't know how to express it exactly; but she is our head, our chief—and she has taken a fancy to you; and last night we had a meeting in my bedroom—"

"Oh, that was what the row was about!" exclaimed Betty. "If we hadn't been hearty sleepers and girls straight from the Scotch moors, you would have given us a very bad night."

"Never mind about that. Margaret Grant proposed last night that you should be asked to join."

"I asked to join?"

"Yes, you, Betty. Doesn't it sound absurd? And they all voted for you—every one of them, with the exception of myself."

"And it's a great honor, isn't it?" said Betty, speaking very quietly.

"Oh yes—immense."

"Then, of course, you wouldn't vote—would you, dear little Fan?"

"Don't talk like that! We shall be returning to the schoolroom in a few minutes, and Margaret is sure to talk to you after dinner. You are elected by the majority, and you are to be invited to attend the next meeting. But I want you to refuse—yes, I do, Betty; for you can't join—you know you can't. With that awful, awful lie on your conscience, you can't be a Speciality. I shall go wild with misery if you join. Betty, you must say you won't."

Betty looked very scornfully at Fanny. "There are some people in the world," she said, "who make me feel very wicked, and I am greatly afraid you are one. Now, let me tell you plainly and frankly that if you had said nothing I should probably not have wished to become that extraordinary thing, a Speciality; but because you are in such a mortal funk I shall join your club with the utmost pleasure. So now you know."

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CHAPTER VII

SCOTCH HEATHER

Betty was true to her word. After school that day, Margaret Grant and Olive Repton came up to her and asked her in a very pretty manner if she would become a member of their Speciality Club.

"Of course," said Margret, "you don't know anything about us or our rules at present; but we think we should like you to join, so we are here now to invite you to come to our next meeting, which will take place on Thursday of next week, at eight o'clock precisely, in my bedroom."

"I don't know where your bedroom is," said Betty.

"But I know where yours is!" exclaimed Olive; "so I will fetch you, Betty, and bring you to Margaret's room. Oh, I am sure you will enjoy it—we have such fun! Sometimes we give quite big entertainments—that is, when we invite the other girls, which we do once or twice during the term. By the way, that reminds me that you will be most useful in that respect, for you and your sisters have the largest bedroom in the house. You will, of course, lend us your room when your turn comes; but that is a long way off."

"I am so glad you are coming!" said Margaret. "You are the sort of girl we want in our club. And now, please, tell me about your life in Scotland."

"I will with pleasure," replied Betty. She looked full up into Margaret's face as she spoke.

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Margaret was older than Betty, and taller; and there was something about her which commanded universal respect.

"I don't mind telling you," said Betty—"nor you," she added as Olive's dancing blue eyes met hers; "for a kind of intuition tells me that you would both love my wild moors and my beautiful heather. Oh, I say, do come, both of you, and see our three little plots of garden! There's Sylvia's plot, and Hester's, and mine; and we have a plant of heather, straight from Craigie Muir, in the midst of each. Our gardens are quite bare except for that tiny plant. Do, *do* come and see it!"

Margaret laughed.

Olive said, "Oh, what fun!" and the three began to walk quickly under the trees in the direction of the Vivians' gardens.

As they passed under the great oak-trees Betty looked up, and her eyes danced with fun. "Are you good at climbing trees?" she asked of Margaret.

"I used to be when I was very, very young; but those days are over."

"There are a few very little girls in the lower school who still climb one of the safest trees," remarked Olive.

Betty's eyes continued to dance. "You give me delightful news," she said. "I am so truly glad none of you do anything so vulgar as to climb trees."

"But why, Betty?" asked Margaret.

"I have my own reasons," replied Betty. "You can't expect me to tell you everything right away, can you?"

"You must please yourself," said Margaret.

Olive looked at Betty in a puzzled manner; and the three girls were silent, only that they quickened their steps, crunching down some broken twigs as they walked.

By-and-by they reached the three bare patches of ground, which were railed in in the simple manner which Mrs. Haddo had indicated, and in the center of which stood the wooden post with the words, "THE VIVIANS' PRIVATE GARDENS," painted on it.

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"How very funny!" exclaimed Olive.

"Yes, it is rather funny," remarked Betty. "Did you ever in the whole course of your existence see anything uglier than these three patches of ground? There is nothing whatever planted in them except our darling Scotch heather; and oh, by the way, I don't believe the precious little plants are thriving! They are drooping like anything! Oh dear! oh dear! I think I shall die if they die!" As she spoke she flung herself on the ground, near the path.

"Of course you won't, Betty," said Margaret. "Besides, why should they die? They only want

watering.”

“I’ll run and fetch a canful of water,” said Olive, who was extremely good-natured.

Betty made no response. She was still lying on the ground, resting on her elbows, while her hands tenderly touched the faded and drooping bells of the wild heather. She had entered her own special plot. Olive had disappeared to fetch the water, but Margaret still stood by Betty’s side.

“Do you think they’ll do?” said Betty at last, glancing at her companion.

Margaret noticed that her eyes were full of tears. “I don’t think they will,” she said after a pause. “But I’ll tell you what we must do, Betty: we must get the right sort of soil for them—just the sandy soil they want. We’ll go and consult Birchall; he is the oldest gardener in the place, and knows something about everything. For that matter, we are sure to get the sort of sand we require on this piece of waste ground—our ‘forest primeval,’ as Olive calls it.”

“Oh dear!” said Betty, dashing away the tears from her eyes, “you are funny when you talk of a thing like that”—she waved her hand in the direction of the uncultivated land—“as a ‘forest primeval.’ It is the poorest, shabbiest bit of waste land I ever saw in my life.”

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“Let’s walk across it,” said Margaret. “Olive can’t be back for a minute or two.”

“Why should we walk across it?”

“I want to show you where some heather grows. It is certainly not rich, nor deep in color, nor beautiful, like yours; but it has grown in that particular spot for two or three years. I am quite sure that Birchall will say that the soil round that heather is the right sort of earth to plant your Scotch heather in.”

“Well, come, and let’s be very quick,” said Betty.

The girls walked across the bit of common. Margaret pointed out the heather, which was certainly scanty and poor.

Betty looked at it with scorn. “I think,” she said after a pause, “I don’t want to consult Birchall.” Then she added after another pause, “I think, on the whole, I’d much rather have no heather than plants like those. You are very kind, Margaret; but there are some things that can’t be transplanted, just as there are some hearts—that break—yes, break—if you take them from home. That poor heather—once, doubtless, it was very flourishing; it is evidently dying now of a sort of consumption. Let’s come back to our plots of ground, please, Margaret.”

They did so, and were there greeted by Olive, who had a large can of cold water standing by her side, and was eagerly talking to Sylvia and Hester. Betty marched first into the center plot of ground.

“I’ve got lots of water,” said Olive in a cheerful tone, “so we’ll do the watering at once. Sylvia and Hester say that they must have a third each of this canful; but of course we can get a second can if we want it.”

“No!” said Betty.

Sylvia, who was gazing with lack-lustre eyes at the fading heather, now started and looked full at her sister. Hester, who always clung to Sylvia in moments of emotion, caught her sister’s hand and held it very tight.

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“No,” said Betty again; “I have made a discovery. Scotch heather does not grow here in this airless sort of place. Sylvia and Hester, Margaret was good enough to show me what she calls heather. There are a few straggling plants just at the other side of that bit of common. I don’t want ours to die slowly. Our plants shall go at once. No, we don’t water them. Sylvia, go into your garden and pull up the plant; and, Hester, you do likewise Go, girls; go at once!”

“But, Betty——” said Margaret.

“You had better not cross her now,” said Sylvia.

Margaret started when Sylvia addressed her in this tone.

Betty’s face was painfully white, except where two spots of color blazed in each cheek. As her sisters stooped obediently to pull up their heather, Betty bent and wrenched hers from the ground by which it was surrounded, which ground was already dry and hard. “Let’s make a bonfire,” she said. “I sometimes think,” she added, “that in each little bell of heather there lives the wee-est of all the fairies; and perhaps, if we burn this poor, dear

thing, the little, wee fairies may go back to their ain countree."

"It all seems quite dreadful to me," said Margaret.

"It is right," replied Betty; "and I have a box of matches in my pocket."

"Oh, have you?" exclaimed Olive. "If—if Mrs. Haddo knew——"

But Betty made no response. She set her sisters to collect some dry leaves and bits of broken twigs; and presently the bonfire was erected and kindled, and the poor heather from the north country had ceased to exist.

"Now, you must see *our* gardens," said Margaret, "for you must have gardens, you know. Olive and I will show you the sort of things that grow in the south, that flourish here, and look beautiful." [Pg 85]

"I cannot see them now," replied Betty. She brushed past Margaret, and walked rapidly across the common.

Sylvia's face turned very white, and she clutched Hetty's hand still more tightly.

"What is she going to do? What is the matter?" said Margaret, turning to the twins.

"She can't help it," said Sylvia; "she must do it. She is going to howl."

"To do what?" said Margaret Grant.

"Howl. Did you never howl? Well, perhaps you never did. Anyhow, she must get away as far as possible before she begins, and we had better go back to the house. You wouldn't like the sound of Betty's howling."

"But are you going to let her howl, as you call it, alone?"

"Let her? We have no voice in the matter," replied Hester. "Betty always does exactly what she likes. Let's go quickly; let's get away. It's the best thing she can do. She's been keeping in that howling-fit for over a week, and it must find vent. She'll be all right when you see her next. But don't, on any account, ever again mention the heather that we brought from Craigie Muir. She may get over its death some day, but not yet."

"Your sister is a very strange girl," said Margaret.

"Every one says that," replied Sylvia. "Don't they, Het?"

"Yes; we're quite tired of hearing it," said Hetty. "But do let's come quickly. Which is the farthest-off part of the grounds—the place where we are quite certain not to hear?"

"You make me feel almost nervous," said Margaret. "But come along, if you wish to."

The four girls walked rapidly. At last they found a little summer-house which was built high up on the very top of a rising mound. From here you could get a good view of the surrounding country; and very beautiful it was—at least, for those whose eyes were trained to observe the rich beauty of cultivated land, of flowing rivers, of forests, of carefully kept trees. Very lonely indeed was the scene from Haddo Court summer-house; for, in addition to every scrap of land being made to yield its abundance, there were pretty cottages dotted here and there—each cottage possessing its own gay flower-garden, and, in most cases, its own happy little band of pretty boys and girls. [Pg 86]

As soon as the four girls found themselves in the summer-house, Margaret began to praise the view to Sylvia.

Sylvia looked round to right and to left. "*We* don't admire that sort of thing," she said. "Do we, Hetty?"

Hetty shook her head with vehemence. "Oh no, no," she said. Then, coming a little closer to Margaret, she looked into her face and continued, "Are you the sort of kind girl who will keep a secret?"

Margaret thought of the Speciality Club. But surely this poor little secret belonging solely to the Vivians need not be related to any one who was not in sympathy with them. "I never tell tales, if that is what you mean," she said.

"Then that is all right," remarked Sylvia. "And are you the same sort of girl, Olive? You look very kind."

"It wouldn't be hard to be kind to one like you," was Olive's response.

Whereupon Sylvia smiled, and Hetty came close to Olive and looked into her face.

"Then we want you," continued Sylvia, "never, never to tell about the burnt sacrifice of the Scotch heather, nor about the flight of the fairies back to Scotland. It tortured Betty to have to do it; but she thought it right, therefore it was done. There are some people, however, who would not understand her; and we would much rather be able to tell our own Betty that you will never speak of it, when she has come back to herself and has got over her howling."

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"Of course we'll never tell," said Olive; and Margaret nodded her head without speaking.

"I think you are just awfully nice," said Sylvia. "We were so terrified when we came to this school. We thought we'd have an awful time. We still speak of it as a prison, you know. Do you speak of it to your dearest friend as a prison?"

"Prison!" said Margaret. "There isn't a place in the world I love as I love Haddo Court."

"Then you never, never lived in a dear little gray stone house on a wild Scotch moor; and you never had a man like Donald Macfarlane to talk to, nor a woman like Jean Macfarlane to make scones for you; and you never had dogs like our dogs up there, nor a horse like David. I pity you from my heart!"

"I never had any of those things," said Margaret; "but I shall like to hear about them from you."

"And so shall I like to hear about them," said Olive.

"We will tell you, if Betty gives us leave," said one of the twins. "We never do anything without Betty's leave. She is the person we look up to, and obey, and follow. We'd follow her to the world's end; we'd die for her, both of us, if it would do her any good."

Margaret took Sylvia's hand and began to smooth it softly. "I wish," she said then in a slow voice, "that I had friends to love me as you love your sister."

"Perhaps you aren't worthy," said Sylvia. "There is no one living like Betty in all the world, and we feel about her as we do because she is Betty."

"But, all the same," said Hester, frowning as she spoke, "our Betty has got an enemy."

"An enemy, my dear child! What do you mean? You have just been praising her so much! Did any one take a dislike to her up in that north country?"

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"It may have begun there," remarked Hetty; "but the sad and dreadful thing is that the enemy is in this house. Sylvia and I don't mind your knowing. We rather think you like her, but we don't. Her name is Fanny Crawford."

"Oh, really, though, that is quite nonsense!" said Margaret, flushing with annoyance. "Poor dear Fanny, there is not a better or sweeter girl in the school!"

Sylvia laughed. "That is your point of view," she said. "She is our enemy; she is not yours. Oh, hurrah! hurrah! I see Betty! She is coming back, walking very slowly. She has got over the worst of the howls. We must both go and meet her. Don't be anywhere about, please, either of you. Keep quite in the shade, so that she won't see you; and the next time you meet talk to her as though this had never happened."

The twins dashed out of sight. They certainly could run very fast.

When they had gone Margaret looked at Olive. "Well," she said, "that sort of scene rather takes one's breath away. What do you think, Olive?"

"It was exceedingly trying," said Olive.

"All the same," said Margaret, "I feel roused up about those girls in the most extraordinary manner. Didn't you notice, too, what Sylvia said about poor Fanny? Isn't it horrid?"

"Of course it isn't true," was Olive's remark.

"We have made up our minds not to speak evil of any one in the school," said Margaret after a pause; "but I cannot help remembering that Fanny did not wish Betty to become a Speciality. And don't you recall how angry she was, and how she would not vote with the 'ayes,' and would not give any reason, and although she was hostess she walked out of the room?"

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"It's very uncomfortable altogether," said Olive. "But I don't see that we can do anything."

"Well, perhaps not yet," said Margaret; "but I may as well say at once, Olive, that I mean to take up those girls. Until to-day I was only interested in Betty, but now I am interested in all three; and if I can, without making mischief, I must get to the bottom of what is making

poor little Betty so bitter, and what is upsetting the equanimity of our dear old Fan, whom we have always loved so dearly."

Just at that moment Fanny Crawford herself and Susie Rushworth appeared, walking together arm in arm. They saw Margaret and Olive, and came to join them. Susie was in her usual high spirits, and Fanny looked quite calm and collected. There was not even an allusion made to the Vivian girls. Margaret was most thankful, for she certainly did not wish the little episode she had witnessed to reach any one's ears but her own and Olive's. Susie was talking eagerly about a great picnic which Mrs. Haddo had arranged for the following Saturday. The whole school, both upper and lower, were to go. Mr. Fairfax and his wife, most of the teachers, and Mrs. Haddo herself would also accompany the girls. They were all going to a place about twenty miles away; and Mrs. Haddo, who kept two motor-cars of her own, had made arrangements for the hire of several more, so that the party could quickly reach their place of rendezvous and thus have a longer time there to enjoy themselves.

"She does things so well, doesn't she?" said Susie. "There never was her like. Do you know, there was a sort of insurrection in the lower school early this morning, for naughty sprites had whispered that all the small children were to go in ordinary carriages and dogcarts and wagonettes. Then came the news that Mrs. Haddo meant each girl in the school to have an equal share of enjoyment; and, lo and behold! the cloud has vanished, and the little ones are making even merrier than the older girls."

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"I wish I felt as amiable as I used to feel," said Fanny at that moment.

"Oh, but, Fan, why don't you?" asked Olive. "You ought to feel more and more amiable every day—that is, if training means anything."

"Training is all very well," answered Fanny, "and you may think you are all right; but when temptation comes——"

"Temptation!" said Margaret. "In my opinion, that is the worst of Haddo Court: we are so shielded, and treated with such extreme kindness, that temptation cannot come."

"Then you wish to be tested, do you, Margaret?" asked Fanny.

Margaret shivered slightly. "Sometimes I do wish it," she said.

"Oh, Margaret dear, don't!" said Olive. "You'll have heaps of troubles in life, for my mother says that no one yet was exempt from them. There never was a woman quite like my darling mother—except, indeed, Mrs. Haddo. Mother has quite peculiar ideas with regard to bringing up girls. She says the aim of her life is to give me a very happy childhood and early youth. She thinks that such a life will make me all the stronger to withstand temptation."

"Let us hope so, anyhow," said Fanny. Then she added, "Don't suppose I am grumbling, although it has been a trial father going away—so very far away—to India. But I think the real temptation comes to us in this way: when we have to meet girls we can't tolerate."

"Now she's going to say something dreadful!" thought Olive to herself.

Margaret rose as though she would put an end to the colloquy.

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Fanny was watching Margaret's face. "The girl I am specially thinking of now," she said, "is Sibyl Ray."

"Oh!" said Margaret. She gave a sigh of such undoubted relief that Fanny was certain she had guessed what her first thoughts were.

"And now I will tell you why I don't like Sibyl," Fanny continued. "I have nothing whatever to say against her. I have never heard of her doing anything underhand or what we might call low-down or ill-bred. At the same time, I do dislike Sibyl, just for the simple reason that she is *not* well-bred, and she never will be."

"Oh! oh, give her her chance—do!" said Olive.

"I am not going to interfere with her," remarked Fanny; "but she can never be a friend of mine. There are some girls who like her very well. There's Martha West, who is constantly with her."

"I am quite sure," said Margaret, "that there isn't a better girl in the school than Martha, and I have serious thoughts of asking her to become a Speciality." As she spoke she fixed her very dark eyes on Fanny's face.

"Do ask her; I shall be delighted," remarked Fanny. "Only, whatever you do, don't ask her friend, Sibyl Ray."

"I have no present intention of doing so. Fanny, I don't want to be nasty; but you are quite right about Sibyl. No one can say a word against her; and yet she just is not well-bred."

CHAPTER VIII

A NEW MEMBER

The picnic was a great success. The day was splendid. The sun shone in a sky which was almost cloudless. The motor-cars were all in prime condition. There were no accidents of any sort. The girls laughed and chatted, and enjoyed life to the utmost; and the Vivian girls were amongst the merriest in those large and varied groups.

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The twins invariably followed in Betty's footsteps, and Betty possessed that curious mixture of temperament which threw her into the depths of anguish one moment and sent her spirits flying like a rocket skyward the next. Betty's spirits were tending skyward on this happy day. She was also making friends in the school, and was delighted to walk with Margaret and Susie and Olive. Fanny did not trouble her at all; but Martha West chatted with her for a whole long hour, and, as Martha knew Scotland, a very strong link was immediately established between the girls.

A thoroughly happy picnic—a perfect one—is usually lived through without adventure. There are no *contretemps*, no unhappy moments, no jealousies, no heart-burnings. These are the sort of picnics which come to us very rarely in life, but they do come now and then. In one sense, however, they are uninteresting, for they have no history—there is little or nothing to say about them. Other picnics are to follow in this story which ended differently, which led to tangled knots and bitter heart-burnings. But the first picnics from Haddo Court in which Betty Vivian took part was, in a way, something like that first morning when she joined the other girls in whispering her prayers in the beautiful chapel.

The picnic came and went, and in course of time the day arrived when Betty was to be the honored guest of the Specialities. On the morning of that day Fanny made another effort to induce Betty to renounce the idea of becoming a Speciality. She had spent a sleepless night thinking over the matter, and by the morning had made up her mind what to do.

Betty was making friends rapidly in the school. But the twins, although they were quite popular, still clung very much to each other; and Fanny's idea was to get at Betty through her sisters. She knew quite well that often, during recess, Sylvia and Hester rushed upstairs, for what purpose she could not ascertain, the existence of the Vivians' attic being unknown to her. There, however, day by day, Sylvia and Hetty fed Dickie on raw meat, and watched the monstrous spider getting larger and more ferocious-looking.

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"He'd be the sort," said Sylvia, opening her eyes very wide and fixing them on her sister, "to do mischief to *some one* if *some one* were not very careful."

"Oh, don't, silly Sylvia!" said Hetty with some annoyance. "You know Mrs. Haddo would not like you to talk like that. Now let's examine our caterpillars."

"There isn't much to see at the present moment," remarked Sylvia, "for they're every one of them in the chrysalis stage."

The girls, having spent about five minutes in the Vivians' attics, now ran downstairs, and went out, as was their custom, by a side-door which opened into one of the gardens. It was here that Fanny pounced on them. She came quickly forward, trying to look as pleasant as she could.

"Well, twins," she said, "and how goes the world with you?"

"Oh, all right!" replied Sylvia. "We can't stay to talk now; can we, Het? We've got to meet a friend of ours in the lower garden—old Birchall. By the way, do you know old Birchall, Fan?"

"Doddering old creature! of course I know him," replied Fanny.

"He isn't doddering," said Sylvia; "he has a great deal more sense than most of us. I wish I had half his knowledge of worms, and spiders, and ants, and goldfish, and—and—flies of every sort. Why, there isn't a thing he doesn't know about them. I call him one of the most delightful old men I ever met."

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"Oh," said Hetty, "you shouldn't say that, Sylvia! Birchall is nice, but he isn't a patch upon

Donald Macfarlane.”

“If you want to see Birchall, I will walk with you,” said Fanny. “You can’t object to my doing that, can you?”

“We mean to run,” said Hetty.

“Oh no, you don’t!” said Fanny. Here she took Hetty’s hand, pulled it violently through her arm. “You’ve got to talk to me, both of you. I have something important I want to say.”

Sylvia laughed.

“Why do you laugh, you naughty, rude little girl?”

“Oh, please forgive me, Fanny; but it does sound so silly for you to say that you have something important to talk over with us, for of course we know perfectly well that you have nothing of the sort.”

“Then you are wrong, that’s all; and I sha’n’t waste time arguing with you.”

“That’s all right,” said Hetty. “We may be off to Birchall now, mayn’t we, Fanny?”

“No, you mayn’t. You must take a message from me to Betty.”

“I thought so,” remarked Sylvia.

Fanny had great difficulty in controlling her temper. After a minute she said, speaking quietly, “I don’t permit myself to lower myself by arguing with children like you two. But I have an important message to give your sister, and if you won’t give it you clearly understand that you will rue it to the last days of your lives—yes, to the last day of your lives.”

Sylvia began to dance. Hetty tried to tug her hand away from Fanny’s arm.

“Come, children, you can do it or not, just as you please. Tell Betty that if she is wise, and does not wish to get into a most serious and disgraceful scrape, she will not attend the meeting of some girls in Margaret Grant’s room this evening.”

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“Let’s try if we know it exactly right,” said Sylvia. “Betty will get into a serious scrape if she goes to Margaret Grant’s room to-night? What a pity! For, you see, Fan, she is going.”

“Do listen to me, Sylvia. You have more sense in your little head than you imagine. Persuade Betty not to go. Believe me, I am only acting for her best interests.”

“We’ll give her the message all right,” said Hester. “But as to persuading Betty when Betty’s mind is made up, I’d like to know who can persuade her to change it then.”

“But you are her sisters; she will do what you wish.”

“But we *don’t* wish her not to go. We’d much rather she went. Why shouldn’t she have a bit of fun? Some one told us—I forget now who it was—that there are always splendid chocolates at those funny bedroom-parties. I only wish we were asked!”

“I tell you that your sister will get into a scrape!” repeated Fanny.

“You tell us so indeed,” said Sylvia, “and it’s most frightfully annoying of you; for we sha’n’t have a minute to talk to Birchall, and he promised to have four different kinds of worms ready for us to look at this morning. Oh dear, dear! mayn’t we go? Fanny, if you are so fond of Betty, why don’t you speak to her yourself?”

“I have spoken, and she won’t listen to me.”

“There! wasn’t I right?” said Sylvia. “Oh Fanny, do you think she’d mind what we said—and coming from you, too? If she didn’t listen to you direct, she certainly won’t listen to you crookedwise—that’s not Betty.”

“I was thinking,” said Fanny, “that you might persuade her—that is, if you are very, very clever, just from yourselves—not to go. You needn’t mention my name at all; and if you really manage this, I can tell you I’ll do a wonderful lot for you. I’ll get father to send me curious spiders and other creatures, all the way from India, for you. He can if he likes. I will write to him by the very next mail.”

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“Bribes! bribes!” cried Sylvia. “No, Fan, we can’t be bribed. Good-bye, Fan. We’ll give the message, but she’ll go all the same.”

With a sudden spring, for which Fanny was not prepared, Hester loosened her hand from Fanny’s arm. The next minute she had caught Sylvia’s hand, and the two were speeding

away in the direction of the lower garden and the fascinating company of old Birchall.

Fanny could have stamped her foot with rage.

The Specialities always met at eight o'clock in the evening. They were expected to wear their pretty evening-dress, and look as much like grown-up young ladies as possible. In a great house like Haddo Court there must be all sorts of rooms, some much bigger than others. Thus, where every room was nice and comfortable, there were a few quite charming. The Vivians had one of the largest rooms, but Margaret Grant had the most beautiful. She had been for long years now in the school, and was therefore accorded many privileges. She had come to Haddo Court as a very little girl, and had worked her way steadily from the lower school to the upper. Her people were exceedingly well-off, and her beautiful room—half bedroom, half sitting-room—was furnished mostly out of her own pocket-money. She took great pride in its arrangements, and on this special evening it looked more attractive than usual. There were great vases of late roses and early chrysanthemums on the different whatnots and small tables. A very cheerful fire blazed in the grate, for it was getting cold enough now to enjoy a fire in the evenings, and Margaret's supper was all that was tasteful and elegant.

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Betty had received Fanny Crawford's message, and Betty's eyes had sparkled with suppressed fun when her sisters had delivered it to her. She had made no comment of any sort, but had asked the girls, before they got into bed, to help her to fasten on her very prettiest frock. She had not worn this frock before, and the simple, soft, white muslin suited her young face and figure as nothing else could have done. The black ribbon which tied back her thick hair, and was worn in memory of dear Aunt Frances, was also becoming to her; and the twin girls' eyes sparkled with rapture as they looked at their darling.

"Good-night, Bet!" said Sylvia.

"Have a splendid time, Bet!" whispered Hester.

Then Sylvia said, "I am glad you are going!"

"But of course I am going," said Betty. "Good-night, chickabiddies; good-night. I won't wake you when I come back. Sleep well!" Betty left the room.

In the corridor outside she met Olive Repton, who said, "Oh, there you are, Betty! Now let's come. We'll be two of the first; but that's all the better, seeing that you are a new member."

"It sounds so mysterious—a sort of freemasonry," remarked Betty, laughing as she spoke. "I never did think that exciting things of this sort happened at school."

"They don't at most schools," replied Olive. "But, then, there is only one Haddo Court in the world."

"Shall I have to take an awful vow; shall I have to write my name in blood in a queer sort of book, or anything of that sort?" asked Betty.

"No, no! You are talking nonsense now."

By this time they had reached Margaret's room, and Margaret was waiting for them. Betty gave a cry of rapture when she saw the flowers, and, going from one glass bowl to the other, she buried her face in the delicious perfume.

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By-and-by the rest of the Specialities appeared—the Bertrams (who were greatly excited at the thought of Betty joining), Susie Rushworth, and, last to enter, Fanny Crawford.

Fanny had taken great pains with her dress, and she looked her best on this occasion. She gave one quick glance at Betty. Then she went up to her and said, "Welcome, Betty!" and held out her hand.

Betty was not prepared for this most friendly greeting. She scarcely touched Fanny's hand, however, and by so doing put herself slightly in the wrong in the presence of the girls, who were watching her; while Fanny, far cleverer in these matters, put herself in the right.

"Now, then, we must all have supper," said Margaret. "After that we'll explain the rules to Betty, and she can decide whether she will join us or not. Then we can be as jolly as we please. It is our custom, you know, girls, to be extra jolly when a new member joins the Specialities."

"I'm game for all the fun in the world," said Betty. Her curious, eager, beautiful eyes were fixed on Margaret's face; and Margaret again felt that strange sense of being wonderfully drawn to her, and yet at the same time of being annoyed. What did Fanny's conduct mean? But one girl, however much she may wish to do so, cannot quite spoil the fun of six others.

Margaret, therefore, was prepared to be as amiable and merry and gay as possible.

Was there ever a more delicious supper? Did ever cake taste quite so nice? Were chocolate creams and Turkish delight ever quite so good? And was not Margaret's lemonade even more admirable than her delicate cups of cocoa? And were not the dried fruits which were presently handed round quite wonderful in flavor? And, above all things, were not the sandwiches which Margaret had provided as a sort of surprise (for as a rule they had no sandwiches at these gatherings) the greatest success of all?

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The merry supper came to an end, and the girls now clustered in a wide circle round the fire; and Margaret, as president, took the book of rules and began to read aloud.

"There are," she said, opening the book, which was bound beautifully in white vellum, "certain rules which each member receives a copy of, and which she takes to heart and obeys. If she deliberately breaks any single one of these rules, and such a lapse of principle is discovered, she is expected to withdraw from the Specialities. This club was first set on foot by a girl who has long left the school, and who was very much loved when she was here. Up to the present it has been a success, although its numbers have varied according to the tone of the girls who belong to the upper school. No girl belonging to the lower school has ever yet been asked to join. We have had at one time in the Speciality Club as many as one dozen members. At present we are six; although we hope that if you, Betty, decide to join us, we shall have seven members. That will be very nice," continued Margaret, smiling and looking across the room at Betty, whose eyes were fixed on her face, "for seven is the mystic, the perfect number. Now, I will begin to read the rules aloud to you. If you decide to think matters over, we will ask you to come to our next gathering this day week, when you will receive the badge of membership, and a copy of the rules would be made by me and sent to you to your room.

"Now I will begin by telling you that the great object of our club is to encourage the higher thought. Its object is to discourage and, if possible, put a stop to low, small, mean, foolish, uncharitable thoughts. Its object is to set kindness before each member as the best thing in life. You can judge for yourself, Betty, that we aim high. Yes, what were you going to say?"

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"I was thinking," said Betty, whose eyes were now very wide open indeed, while her cheeks grew paler than ever with some concealed emotion, "that the girl who first thought of this club must have sat on a Scotch moor one day, with the purple heather all round her, and that to her it was vouchsafed to hear the fairies speak when they rang the little purple bells of the heather."

"That may have been the case, dear," said Margaret in her kindest tone. "Now, I will read you the rules. They are quite short and to the point:

"RULE I.—Each girl who is a member of the Specialities gives perfect confidence to her fellow-members, keeps no secret to herself which those members ought to know, is ready to consider each member as though she were her own sister, to help her in time of trouble, and to rejoice with her in periods of joy.'

"That is Rule I., and I need not say, Betty, that it is a very important rule."

Betty's eyes were now lowered, so that only her very black lashes were seen as they rested against her pale cheeks.

"Rule II. is this:

"RULE II.—That the Specialities read each day, for one quarter of an hour, a book of great thoughts.'

"The books are generally selected at the beginning of term, and each member is expected to read the same amount and from the same book. This term, for instance, we occupy one quarter of an hour daily in reading Jeremy Taylor's 'Holy Living.' It is not very long, but there's a vast amount of thought in it. If we feel puzzled about anything in this wonderful book we discuss it with each other at the next meeting of the Specialities, and if, after such a discussion, the whole matter does not seem quite clear, we ask Mr. Fairfax to help us. He is most kind, although of course he is not in the secret of our club.

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"Rule III. is quite different. It is this:

"RULE III.—Each day we give ourselves up, every one of us, to real, genuine fun—to having what may be called a jolly time.'

"We never miss this part of the Speciality life. We get our fun either by chatting gaily to each other, or by enjoying the society of a favorite schoolfellow.

“Rule IV. does not come into every day life; nevertheless it is important:

“RULE IV.—We meet once a week in one of our bedrooms; but four times during the term we all subscribe together, and get up as big a party as ever we can of girls who are not Specialities. These girls have supper with us, and afterwards we have round games or music or anything that gives us pleasure.’

“Rule V. is this:

“RULE V.—That whoever else we are cross with, we are always very careful to show respect to our teachers, and, if possible, to love them. We also try to shut our eyes to their faults, even if we see them.’

“Rule VI. is perhaps the most difficult of all to follow completely. It is the old, old rule, Betty Vivian, of forgetting ourselves and living for others. It is a rule that makes the secret of happiness. It is impossible to keep it in its fullness in this world; but our aim is to have a good try for it, and I think, on the whole, we succeed.

“Now, these are the six rules. When you read them over, you will see that they are comprehensive, that they mean a vast lot. They are, every one of them, rules which tend to discipline—the sort of discipline that will help us when we leave the school and enter into the big school of the world. Betty, do you feel inclined to join the club or not?”

“I don’t know,” replied Betty. “It is impossible to answer your question on the spur of the moment. But I should greatly like to see a copy of the rules.” [Pg 102]

“I will have them copied and sent to your bedroom, Betty. Then if you decide to join, you will be admitted formally this day week, and will receive the badge of the Specialities—a little true-lovers’ knot made of silver—which you will wear when the Specialities give their entertainments, and which will remind you that we are bound together in one sisterhood of love for our fellow-creatures.”

Betty got up somewhat nervously. “I must think a great deal; and if I may come to whichever room the Specialities are to meet in this day week, I will let you know what I have decided.”

“Very well, dear,” said Margaret, shutting the book and completely altering her tone. “That is all, I think to-night. Now, you must sit down and enjoy yourself. Which girl would you like to sit close to? We are going to have some round games, and they are quite amusing.”

“I should like to sit close to you, Margaret, if I may.”

“You certainly may, Betty; and there is a seat near mine, just by that large bowl of white chrysanthemums.”

Betty took the seat; and now all the girls began to chat, each of them talking lovingly and kindly to the other. There was a tone about their conversation which was as different from the way they spoke in their ordinary life as though they were girls in a nunnery who had made solemn vows to forsake the world. Even Fanny’s face looked wonderfully kind and softened. She did not even glance at Betty; but Betty looked at her once or twice, and was astonished at the expression that Fanny wore.

“Just one minute, girls, before we begin our fun,” said Margaret. “Martha West is most anxious to join the Specialities. Betty, of course, has no vote, as she is not yet a member. But the rest of us know Martha well, and I think we would all like her to join. Those who are opposed to her, will they keep down their hands? Those who wish for her as a member, will they hold them up?” [Pg 103]

All hands were held up on this occasion, and Fanny held hers the straightest and highest of all.

“Three cheers for Martha West!” said Susie Rushworth.

“It will be splendid to have Martha!” said both the Bertrams; while Olive, always gay, spirited, and full of fun, laughed from sheer delight.

The usual formula was then gone through, and Fanny Crawford was deputed to take a note to Martha inviting her to be present at the next meeting.

“Now, we shall have about half an hour for different sorts of fun,” said Margaret. “By the way, Betty,” she continued, “sometimes our meetings are rather solemn affairs; we want to discuss the book we are reading, or something has happened that we wish to talk over. On the other hand, there are times when we have nothing but fun and frolic. We’re not a bit solemn on these occasions; we loosen all the tension, so to speak, and enjoy ourselves to

the utmost."

"And there are times, also," said Olive, "when we are just as busy as bees planning out our next entertainment. Oh Margaret, we can't have one this day week because of Betty and Martha. But don't you think we might have one this day three weeks? And don't you think it might be a very grand affair? And supposing Betty becomes a member—which, of course, you will, Betty, for you couldn't disappoint us now—supposing we have it in Betty's palatial mansion of a bedroom! We can ask no end of girls to that. Oh, won't it be fun?"

"If you ask my sisters, I don't mind at all—that is, *if* I am a member," said Betty.

"Of course we'll ask the dear twins," said Margaret. She took Betty's hand as she spoke and squeezed it with sudden affection.

Betty pressed a little nearer to her. It was worth even giving up the Scotch moors, and the society of Donald and Jean, and the dogs and the horse, to have such a friend as Margaret Grant.

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But now the fun began in earnest, and very good fun it was; for every girl had a considerable sense of humor, so much so that their games were carried on with great spirit. Their laughter was so merry as to be quite infectious; and no one was more amazed than Betty herself when the ordeal of this first visit to the Specialities was over and she was walking quickly downstairs, with Olive by her side, on her way to the chapel.

How beautifully Mr. Fairfax read the evening prayers that night! How lovely it was to listen to his melodious voice and to look at his earnest, intelligent face! How sweet, how wonderful, was the soft, soft music which Mrs. Haddo herself played on the organ!

"Oh yes," thought Betty, "one could be good here, and with the sort of help that Margaret talks about; and high thoughts are nice thoughts, they seem to be what I might call close to the angels. Nevertheless——"

A cloud seemed to fall on the little girl's spirit. She thought of Fanny, and, raising her eyes at the moment, observed that Fanny's eyes were fixed on her. Fanny's eyes were full of queer warning, even of menace; and Betty suddenly experienced a revulsion of all those noble feelings which had animated her a short time ago. Were there two Fanny Crawfords? Or could she possibly look as she looked now, and also as she had done when Margaret Grant read the rules of the Speciality Club aloud?

CHAPTER IX

STRIVING FOR A DECISION

The week passed without anything very special occurring. The weather was still warm and perfect. September had no idea of giving up her mantle of late summer. But September was drawing to a close, and October, with gusty winds and whirling, withered leaves, and much rain, would soon take her place. October was certainly not nearly such a pleasant month as September. Nevertheless, the young and healthy girls who lived their regular life at Haddo Court were indifferent to the weather. They were always busy. Each minute was planned out and fully occupied. There was time for work, and time for play, and time for happy, confidential talks in that bright and pleasant school. There were all kinds of surprises, too; now an unexpected tea-party with Mrs. Haddo, given to a few select girls; then, again, to another few who unexpectedly found themselves select. There were also delightful cocoa-parties in the big private sitting-room of the upper school, as well as games of every description, outdoor and indoor. Night came all too soon in this happy family, and each girl retired to bed wondering what could have made the day so very short.

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But during this week Betty was not quite happy. She had received a copy of the rules, and had studied them very carefully. She was, in her heart of hearts, most anxious to become a Speciality. The higher life appealed to her. It appealed to her strong sense of imagination; to her passionate and really unworldly nature; to that deep love which dwelt in her heart, and which, just at present, she felt inclined to bestow on Margaret Grant. But there was Rule I. The rules had been sent, as Margaret had promised, neatly copied and in a sealed envelope, to Betty's room. She had read them upstairs all alone in the Vivians' attic. She had read them while the queer, uncanny eyes of Dickie looked at her. She certainly was not afraid of Dickie; on the contrary, she admired him. She and her sisters were very proud of his increasing size, and each day it was the turn of one girl or the other to take Dickie out of his cage and give him exercise. He was rather alarming in his movements, going at a

tremendous rate, and giving more than one uncanny glance at the Vivian girl who was his jailer for the time.

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On this special occasion, when Betty brought the rules to the Vivian attic, she forgot all about Dickie. He was out, running round and round the attic, rushing up the walls, peering at Betty from over the top of the door, creeping as far as the ceiling and then coming down again. He was, as a rule, easily caught, for Sylvia and Hetty always kept his meal of raw meat till after he had had his exercise. But Betty had now forgotten that it was necessary to have a bait to bring Dickie once more into the shelter of his cage. She had consequently fed him first, then let him free, and then stood by the small window of the attic reading the rules of the Specialities. It was Rule I. which troubled her. Rule I. ran as follows: "Each girl gives perfect confidence to her fellow members, keeps no secret to herself which those members ought to know, is ready to consider each member as though she were her own sister, to help her in time of trouble and to rejoice with her in periods of joy."

To be quite frank, Betty did not like this rule. She was willing to give a certain amount of affection to most of the girls who belonged to the Specialities; but as to considering even nice girls like the Bertrams as her own sisters, and Susie Rushworth (who was quite agreeable and gay and kind) in that relationship, and Olive Repton also, as she would Sylvia and Hetty, she did not think she could do it. She could be kind to them—she would love to be kind to them; she would love to help each and all in times of trouble, and to rejoice with them in periods of joy; but to feel that they were her sisters—that certainly *was* difficult. She believed it possible that she could admit Margaret Grant into a special and close relationship; into a deep friendship which partook neither of sisterhood nor of anything else, but stood apart and alone—the sort of friendship that a young, enthusiastic girl will give to a friend of strong character a little older than herself. But as to Fanny—she could never love Fanny. From the very first moment she had set eyes on her—away, far away, in Scotland—she had disliked her, she had pronounced her at once in her own mind as "niminy-priminy." She had told her sisters frankly what she felt about Fanny. She had said in her bold, independent way, "Fanny is too good for the likes of me. She is the sort of girl who would turn me into a bad un. I don't want to have anything to do with her."

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Fanny, however, had taken no notice of Betty's all too evident antagonism. Fanny was, in her heart of hearts, essentially good-natured; but Betty was as impossible for her to understand as it was impossible for the moon to comprehend the brightness of the sun. Fanny had been shocked at what she had witnessed when she saw Betty take the sealed packet from the drawer. She remembered the whole thing with great distress of mind, and had felt a sense of shock when she heard that the Vivian girls were coming to the school. But her feelings were very much worse when her father had informed her that the packet could nowhere be found—that he had specially mentioned it to Betty, who declared that she knew nothing about it. Oh yes, Fanny and Betty were as the poles apart; and Betty knew now that were she to take the vows of the Specialities fifty times over she could never keep them, as far as Fanny Crawford was concerned. Then there was another unpleasant part of the same rule: "Each girl gives perfect confidence to her fellow-members, keeps no secret to herself which those members ought to know." Betty undoubtedly had a secret—a very precious one. She had even told a lie in order to hug that secret to her breast. She had brought it away with her to the school, and now it was safe—only Betty knew where.

What puzzled her was this: was it necessary for the members to know her secret? It had nothing to do with any of them. Nevertheless, she was an honest sort of girl and could not dismiss the feeling from her own mind that Rule I. was practically impossible to her. The Specialities had met on Thursday in Margaret Grant's room. The next meeting was to be held in Susie Rushworth's. Susie's room was in another wing of the building, and was not so large or luxurious as that of Margaret. The next meeting would, however, be quite formal—except for the admission of Betty to the full privileges of the club, and the reading aloud of the rules to Martha West. During the course of the week the Specialities seldom or never spoke of their meeting-day. Nevertheless, Betty from time to time caught Fanny's watchful eyes fixed on her.

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On the next Thursday morning she awoke with a slight headache. Miss Symes noticed when she came downstairs that Betty was not quite herself, and at once insisted on her going back to her room to lie down and be coddled. Betty hated being coddled. She was never coddled in the gray stone house; she was never coddled on the Scotch moors. She had occasional headaches, like every one else, and occasional colds; but they had to take care of themselves, and get well as best they could. Betty used to shake herself with anger when she thought of any one making a fuss about her when she was ill, and was consequently rather cross when Miss Symes took her upstairs, made her lie down, and put a wrap over her.

"You must lie down and try to sleep, Betty. I hope you will be quite well by dinner-time.

Don't stir till I come for you, dear."

"Oh, but I will!" said Betty, raising her head and fixing her bright, almost feverish eyes on Miss Symes's face.

"What do you mean, dear? I have desired you to stay quiet."

"And I cannot obey," replied Betty. "Please, Miss Symes, don't be angry. If I were a low-down sort of girl, I'd sneak out without telling you; but as I happen to be Betty Vivian, I can't do that. I want to get into the fresh air. Nothing will take away my headache like a walk. I want to get as far as that dreadful piece of common land you have here, and which you imagine is like a moor. I want to walk about there for a time."

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"Very well, Betty; you are a good girl to have confided in me. You have exactly two hours. Stay quiet for one hour. If at the end of that time your head is no better, out for an hour; then return to your usual duties."

Betty lay very still for the whole of that hour. Her thoughts were busy. She was haunted by Rule I., and by the passionate temptation to ignore it and yet pretend that she would keep it—in short, to be a member of the Specialities under false colors. One minute she was struggling hard with the trouble which raged within her, the next minute she was making up her mind to decline to be associated with the Specialities.

When the hour had quite expired she sprang to her feet. Oh yes, her head still ached! But what did that matter? She could not be bothered with a trifling thing like a mere headache. She ran upstairs to the Vivian attic. Dickie was in his cage. Betty remembered what terrible trouble she had had to catch him on the day when she received a copy of the rules. She shook her head at him now, and said, "Ah Dickie, you're a bad boy! I am not going to let you out of your cage again in a hurry." Then she went out.

The wind had changed during the night, and heavy clouds were coming up from the north. Betty felt herself much colder than she had ever done in Scotland. She shivered, and walked very fast. She passed the celebrated oak-tree where she and her sisters had hidden during their first day at school. She went on to the place where the three little gardens were marked for their benefit. But up to the present no Vivian had touched the gardens, and there were the black remains of the bonfire where the poor Scotch heather had been burnt almost in the center of Betty's patch of ground.

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Oh, the school was horrible—the life was horrible! Oh why had she ever come here? She wanted to be a Speciality; but she could not, it was not in her. She hated—yes, she hated—Fanny Crawford more each minute, and she could never love those other uninteresting girls as though they were her sisters. In analyzing her feelings very carefully, she came to the conclusion that she only wanted to join the Specialities in order to be Margaret's friend. She knew quite well what privileges would be accorded to her were she a member; and she also knew—for she had been told—that it was a rare thing to allow a girl so lately come to the school to take such an important position.

Betty had a natural love of power. With a slight shudder she walked past the little patches of ground and across what she contemptuously called the miserable common. This common marked the boundaries of Mrs. Haddo's school. There were iron railings at least six feet high guarding it from the adjacent land. The sight of these railings was absolute torture to Betty. She said aloud, "Didn't I know the whole place was a prison? But prison-bars sha'n't keep me long in restraint!"

She took out her handkerchief, and, pulling up some weedy grass, put the handkerchief on one spiked bar and the grass on the other, and thus protecting herself, made a light bound over the fence. The exercise and the sense of freedom did her good. She laughed aloud, and continued her walk through unexplored regions. She could not go very fast, however; for she was hindered here by and there by a gateway, and here again by a farmstead, and yet again by a cottage, with little children running about amongst the autumn flowers.

"How can people live in a place like this?" thought Betty.

Then, all of a sudden, two ferocious dogs rushed out upon the girl, clamored round her, and tried to stop her way. Betty laughed softly. There was a delightful sound in her laugh. Probably those dogs had never heard its like before. It was also possible, notwithstanding the fact that Betty was wearing a new dress, that something of that peculiar instinct which is imparted to dogs told these desperate champions that Betty had loved a dog before.

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"Down, silly creature!" said Betty, and she patted one on the head and put her arm on the neck of the other. Soon they were fawning about her and jumping on her and licking her hands. She felt thoroughly happy now. Her headache had quite vanished. The dogs, the

darlings, were her true friends! There was a little piece of grass quite close to where they had attacked her, and she squatted deliberately down on it and invited the dogs to stretch themselves by her side. They did so without a minute's delay. They were in raptures with her, and one dog only growled when she paid too much attention to the other.

She began to whisper alternately in the shaggy ears of each. "Ah, you must have come from Scotland! You must, anyhow, have met Andrew! Do you think you are as brave as Andrew, for I doubt it?"

Then she continued to the other dog, "And you must have been born in the same litter with Fritz. Did you ever look into the eyes of Fritz and see straight down into his gallant heart? I should be ashamed of you, ashamed of you, if you were not as brave and noble as Fritz."

There was such pathos in Betty's voice that the dogs became quite penitent and abject. They had certainly never been in Scotland, and Andrew and Fritz were animals unknown to them; but for some reason the mysterious being who understood dogs was displeased with them, and they fawned and crouched at her feet.

It was just at that moment that a sturdy-looking farmer came up. He gazed at Betty, then at the two dogs, uttered a light guffaw, and vanished round the corner. In a very few minutes he returned, accompanied by his sturdy wife and his two rough, growing sons.

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"Wife," he said, "did you ever see the like in all your life—Dan and Beersheba crouching down at that young girl's feet? Why, they're the fiercest dogs in the whole place!"

"I heard them barking a while back," said Mrs. Miles, the farmer's wife, "and then they stopped sudden-like. If I'd known they were here I'd have come out to keep 'em from doing mischief to anybody; but hearing no more sound I went on with my churning. Little miss," she added, raising her voice, "you seem wonderful took with dogs."

Betty instantly rose to a standing position. "Yes, I am," she said. "Please, are these Scotch, and have they come from Aberdeenshire?"

The farmer laughed. "No, miss," he said; "we bred 'em at home."

Betty was puzzled at this.

The dogs did not take the slightest notice of the farmer, his wife, or his sons, but kept clinging to the girl and pressing their noses against her dress.

"May I come again to see them, please?" asked Betty. "They've got the spirit of the Scotch dogs. They are the first true friends I have met since I left Scotland."

"And may I make bold to ask your name, miss?" inquired the farmer's wife.

"Yes, you may," said Betty. "It isn't much of a name. It's just Betty Vivian, and I live at Haddo Court."

"My word! Be you one of them young ladies?"

"I don't know quite what you mean; but I am Betty Vivian, and I live at Haddo Court."

"But how ever did you get on the high road, miss?" asked the farmer.

Betty laughed. "I went to the edge of what they call the common," she said. "I found a fence, and I vaulted over—that is all. I don't like your country much, farmer; there's no space about it. But the dogs, they are darlings!"

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"You're the pluckiest young gel I ever come across," said the man. "How you managed to tame 'em is more than I can say. Why, they are real brutes when any one comes nigh the farm; and over and over I has said to the wife, 'You ought to lock them brutes up, wife.' But she's rare and kindhearted, and is very fond of them, whelps that they be."

"I wonder," said the woman, "if missie would come into the house and have a bite of summat to eat? We makes butter for the Court, miss; and we sends up all our eggs, and many a pair of fat chickens and turkeys and other fowl. We're just setting down to dinner, and can give you some potatoes and pork."

Betty laughed gleefully. "I'd love potatoes and pork more than anything," she said. "May Dan and Beersheba dine with us?"

"Well, miss, I don't expect you'll find it easy to get 'em parted from you."

So Betty entered the farmyard, and walked through, in her direct fashion, without picking her steps; for she loved, as she expressed it, a sense of confusion and the sight of different animals. She had a knack of making herself absolutely at home, and did so on the present

occasion. Soon she was seated in the big bright kitchen of the farmhouse, and was served with an excellent meal of the best fresh pork and the most mealy potatoes she had seen since she left Scotland. Mrs. Miles gave her a great big glass of rich milk, but she preferred water. Dan sat at one side of her, Beersheba at the other. They did not ask for food; but they asked imploringly for the pat of a firm, brown little hand, and for the look of love in Betty's eyes.

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"I have enjoyed myself," said the girl, jumping up. "I do think you are the nicest people anywhere; and as to your dogs, they are simply glorious. Might not I come here again some day, and—and bring my sisters with me? They are twins, you know. Do you mind twins?"

"Bless your sweet voice!" said Mrs. Miles; "is it a-minding twins we be when we has two sets ourselves?"

"My sisters are very nice, considering that they are twins," said Betty, who was always careful not to overpraise her own people; "and they are just as fond of dogs as I am. Oh, by the way, we have a lovely spider—a huge, glorious creature. His name is Dickie, and he lives in an attic at the Court. He's as big as this." Betty made an apt illustration with her fingers.

"Lor', miss, he must be an awful beast! We're dead nuts agen spiders at the Stoke Farm."

Betty looked sad. "It is strange," she said, "how no one loves Dickie except our three selves. We won't bring him, then; but may we come?"

"It all depends, miss, on whether Mrs. Haddo gives you leave. 'Tain't the custom, sure and certain, for young ladies from the Court to come a-visiting at Stoke Farm; but if so be she says yes, you'll be heartily welcome, and more than welcome. I can't say more, can I, miss?"

"Well, I have had a happy time," said Betty; "and now I must be going back."

"But," said the farmer, "missie, you surely ain't going to get over that big fence the same way as you come here?"

"And what else should I do?" said Betty.

"'Taint to be done, miss. There's a drop at our side which makes the fence ever so much higher, and how you didn't hurt yourself is little less than a miracle to me. I'll have the horse put to the cart and drive you round to the front entrance in a jiffy. Dan and Beersheba can follow, the run'll do them no end of good."

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"Yes, missie, you really must let my husband do what he wishes," said Mrs. Miles.

"Thank you," said Betty in a quiet voice. Then she added, looking up into Mrs. Miles's face, "I love Mrs. Haddo very much, and there is one girl at the school whom I love. I think I shall love you too, for I think you have understanding. And when I come to see you next—for of course Mrs. Haddo will give me leave—I will tell you about Scotland, and the heather, and the fairies that live in the heather-bells; and I will tell you about our little gray stone house, and about Donald Macfarlane and Jean Macfarlane. Oh, you will love to hear! You are something like them, except that unfortunately you are English."

"Don't put that agen me," said Mrs. Miles, "for I wouldn't be nothing else if you was to pay me fifty pounds down. There, now, I can't speak squarer than that!"

Just at that moment the farmer's voice was heard announcing that the trap was ready. Betty hugged Mrs. Miles, and was followed out of the farm-kitchen by the excited dogs.

The next minute they were driving in the direction of the Court, and Betty was put down just outside the heavy wrought-iron gates. "Good-bye, Farmer Miles," she said, "and take my best thanks. I am coming again to see those darling dogs. Good-bye, dears, good-bye."

She pressed a kiss on each very rough forehead, passed through the little postern door, heard the dogs whining behind her, did not dare to look back, and ran as fast as she could to the house. She was quite late for the midday dinner; and the first person she met was Miss Symes, who came up to her in a state of great excitement. "Why, Betty!" she said, "where have you been? We have all been terribly anxious about you."

"I went out for a walk," said Betty, "and——"

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"Did you go beyond the grounds? We looked everywhere."

"Oh yes," said Betty. "I couldn't be kept in by rails or bars or anything of that sort. I am a free creature, you know, Miss Symes."

"Come, Betty," said Miss Symes, "you have broken a rule; and you have no excuse, for a

copy of the rules of the school is in every sitting-room and every classroom. You must see Mrs. Haddo about this."

"I am more than willing," replied Betty.

Betty felt full of courage, and keen and well, after her morning's adventure. Miss Symes took Betty's hand, and led her in the direction of Mrs. Haddo's private sitting-room. That good lady was busy over some work which she generally managed to accomplish at that special hour. She was seated at her desk, putting her signature to several notes and letters which she had dictated early that morning to her secretary. She looked up as Betty and Miss Symes entered.

"Ah, Miss Symes!" said Mrs. Haddo. "How do you do, Betty? Sit down. Will you just wait a minute, please?" she added, looking up into the face of her favorite governess. "I want you to take these letters as you are here, and so save my ringing for a servant. Get Miss Edgeworth to stamp them all, and put them into their envelopes, and send them off without fail by next post."

A pile of letters was placed in Miss Symes's hands. She went away at once; and Mrs. Haddo, in her usual leisurely and gracious manner, turned and looked at Betty.

"Well, Betty Vivian," she said kindly, "I have seen you for some time at prayers and in the different classrooms, and also at chapel; but I have not had an opportunity of a chat with you, dear, for several days. Sit down, please, or, rather, come nearer to the fire."

"Oh, I am so hot!" said Betty.

"Well, loosen your jacket and take off your hat. Now, what is the matter? Before we refer to pleasant things, shall we get the unpleasant ones over? What has gone wrong with you, Betty Vivian?"

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"But how can you tell that anything has gone wrong?"

"I know, dear, because Miss Symes would not bring you to my private sitting-room at this hour for any other reason."

"Well, I don't think anything has gone wrong," said Betty; "but Miss Symes does not quite agree with me. I will tell you, of course; I am only longing to."

"Begin, dear, and be as brief as possible."

"I had a headache this morning, and went to lie down," began Betty. "Miss Symes wanted me to stay lying down until dinner-time, but afterwards she gave me leave to go out when I had been in my room for an hour. I did so. I went as far as that bit of common of yours."

"Our 'forest primeval'?" said Mrs. Haddo with a gracious smile.

"Oh, but it isn't really!" said Betty.

"Some of us think it so, Betty."

Betty gave a curious smile; then with an effort she kept back certain words from her lips, and continued abruptly, "I got to the end of the common, and there was a railing——"

"The boundary of my estate, dear."

"Well," said Betty, "it drove me mad. I felt I was in prison, and that the railing formed my prison bars. I vaulted over, and got into the road. I walked along for a good bit—I can't quite tell how far—but at last two dogs came bounding out of a farmyard near by. They barked at first very loudly; but I looked at them and spoke to them, and after that we were friends of course. I sat on the grass and played with them, and they—I think they loved me. All dogs do—there is nothing in that. The farmer and his wife came out presently and seemed surprised, for they said that Dan and Beersheba were very furious."

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"My dear girl—Dan and Beersheba—*those* dogs!"

"Those were the names they called them. We call our dogs on the Scotch moors Andrew and Fritz. They are much bigger dogs than Dan and Beersheba; but Dan and Beersheba are darlings for all that. I went into the Mileses' house and had my dinner with them. It was a splendid dinner—pork and really *nice* potatoes—and the dogs sat one on each side of me. Mrs. Haddo, I want to go to the Mileses' again some day to tea, and I want to take Sylvia and Hester with me. The Mileses don't mind about their being twins, and they'll be quite glad to see them, and Sylvia and Hester are about as fond of dogs as I am. Mrs. Miles said she was quite willing to have us if you gave leave, but not otherwise."

"Betty!" said Mrs. Haddo when the girl had ceased. She raised her head, and looked full into the wonderful, pathetic, half-humorous, half-defiant eyes, and once again between her soul and Betty's was felt that firm, sure bond of sympathy. Involuntarily the girl came two or three steps closer. Mrs. Haddo, with a gesture, invited her to kneel by her, and took one of her hands. "Betty, my child, you know why you have come to this school?"

"I am sure I don't," said Betty, "unless it is to be with you and—and Margaret Grant."

"I am glad you have made Margaret your friend. She is a splendid girl—quite the best girl in the whole school; and she likes you, Betty—she has told me so. I am given to understand that you are to have the honorable distinction of becoming a Speciality. The club is a most distinguished one, and has a beneficial effect on the tone of the upper school. I am glad that you are considered worthy to join. I know nothing about the rules; I can only say that I admire the results of its discipline on its members. But now to turn to the matter in hand. You broke a very stringent rule of the school when you got over that fence, and the breaking of a rule must be punished."

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"I don't mind," said Betty in a low tone.

"But I want you to mind, Betty. I want you to be truly sorry that you broke one of my rules."

"When you put it like that," said Betty, "I do get a bit choky. Don't say too much, or perhaps I'll howl. I am not so happy as you think. I am fighting hard with myself every minute of the time."

"Poor little girl! can you tell me why you are fighting?"

"No, Mrs. Haddo, I cannot tell you."

"I will not press you, dear. Well, Betty, one of my rules is that the girls never leave the grounds without leave; and as you have broken that rule you must receive the punishment, which is that you remain in your room for the rest of the day until eight o'clock this evening, when I understand that you are due at the meeting of the Specialities."

"I will go to my room," said Betty. "I don't mind punishment at all."

"You ran a very great risk, dear, when you went into that byroad and were attacked by those fierce dogs. It was a marvel that they took to you. It is extremely wrong of Farmer Miles to have them loose, and I must speak to him."

"And please," said Betty, "may we go to tea there—we three—one evening?"

"I will see about that. Try to keep every rule. Try, with all your might and main, to conquer yourself. I am not angry with you, dear. It is impossible to tame a nature like yours, and I am the last person on earth to break your spirit. But go up to your room now, and—kiss me first."

Betty almost choked when she gave that kiss, when her eyes looked still deeper into Mrs. Haddo's beautiful eyes, and when she felt her whole heart tingle within her with that new, wonderful sensation of a love for her mistress which even exceeded her love for Margaret Grant.

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CHAPTER X

RULE I. ACCEPTED

Betty's room was empty, and at that time of day was rather chill, for the three big windows were wide open in order to let in the fresh, keen air. Betty walked into the room still feeling that mysterious tingling all over her, that tingling which had been awakened by her sudden and unexpected love for Mrs. Haddo. That love had been more or less dormant within her heart from the very first; but to-day it had received a new impetus, and the curious fact was that she was almost glad to accept punishment because it was inflicted by Mrs. Haddo. Being the sort of girl she was, it occurred to her that the more severe she herself made the punishment the more efficacious it would be.

She accordingly sat down by one of the open windows, and, as a natural consequence, soon got very chilled. As she did not wish to catch cold and become a nuisance in the school, she proceeded to shut the windows, and had just done so—her fingers blue and all the beautiful glow gone from her young body—when there came a tap at the room door. Betty at first did not reply. She hoped the person, whoever that person might be, would go away. But the tap

was repeated, and she was obliged in desperation to go to the door and see who was there.

"I, and I want to speak to you," replied the voice of Fanny Crawford.

Instantly there rose a violent rebellion in Betty's heart. All her love for Mrs. Haddo, with its softening influence, vanished; it melted slowly out of sight, although, of course, it was still there. Her pleasant time at the Mileses' farm, the delightful affection of the furious dogs, the excellent dinner, the quick drive back, were forgotten as though they had never existed; and Betty only remembered Rule I., and that she hated Fanny Crawford. She stood perfectly still in the middle of the room.

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Fanny boldly opened the door and entered. "I want to speak to you, Betty," she said.

"But I don't want to speak to you," replied Betty.

"Oh, how bitterly cold this room is!" said Fanny, not taking much notice of this remark. "I shall light the fire myself; yes, I insist. It is all laid ready; and as it is absolutely necessary for us to have a little chat together, I may as well make the room comfortable for us both."

"But I don't want you to light the fire; I want you to go."

Fanny smiled. "Betty, dear," she said, "don't be unreasonable. You can't dislike me as much as you imagine you do! Why should you go on in this fashion?" As Fanny spoke she knelt down by the guard, put a match to the already well-laid fire, and soon it was crackling and roaring up the chimney.

"You are here," said Fanny, "because you broke a rule. We all know, every one in the school knows, Mrs. Haddo is not angry, but she insists on punishment. She never, never excuses a girl who breaks a rule. The girl must pay the penalty; afterwards, things are as they were before. It is amazing what an effect this has in keeping us all up to the mark and in order. Now, Betty—Bettina, dear—come and sit by the fire and let me hold your hands. Why, they're as blue as possible; you are quite frozen, you poor child!"

Fanny spoke in quite a nice, soothing voice. She had the same look on her face which she had worn that evening in Margaret Grant's bedroom. She seemed really desirous to be nice to Betty. She knew that Betty was easily influenced by kindness; this was the case, for even Fanny did not seem quite so objectionable when she smiled sweetly and spoke gently. She now drew two chairs forward, one for herself and one for Betty. Betty had been intensely cold, and the pleasant glow of the fire was grateful. She sank into the chair which Fanny offered her with very much the air of being the proprietor of the room, and not Betty, and waited for her companion to speak. She did not notice that Fanny had placed her own chair so that the back was to the light, whereas Betty sat where the full light from the three big windows fell on her face.

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"Well, now, I call this real comfy!" said Fanny. "They will send up your tea, you know, and you can have a book from the school library if you like. I should recommend 'The Daisy Chain' or 'The Heir of Redclyffe.'"

"I don't want any books, thanks," said Betty.

"But don't you love reading?"

"I can't tell you. Perhaps I do, perhaps I don't."

"Betty, won't you tell me anything?"

"Fanny, I have nothing to tell you."

"Oh, Betty, with a face like yours—nothing!"

"Nothing at all—to you," replied Betty.

"But to others—for instance," said Fanny, still keeping her good temper, "to Margaret Grant, or to Mrs. Haddo?"

"They are different," said Betty.

Fanny was silent for a minute. Then she said, "I want to tell you something, and I want to be quite frank. You have made a very great impression so far in the school. For your age and your little experience, you are in a high class, and all your teachers speak well of you. You are the sort of girl who is extremely likely to be popular—to have, in short, a following. Now, I don't suppose there is in all the world anything, Betty Vivian, that would appeal to a nature like yours so strongly as to have a following—to have other girls hanging on your words, understanding your motives, listening to what you say, perhaps even trying to copy you. You will be very difficult to copy, Betty, because you are a rare piece of original

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matter. Nevertheless, all these things lie before you if you act warily now."

"Go on," said Betty; "it is interesting to hear one's self discussed. Of course, Fan, you have a motive for saying all this to me. What is it?"

"I have," said Fanny.

"You had better explain your motive. Things will be easier for us both afterwards, won't they?"

"Yes," said Fanny in a low tone, "that is true."

"Go on, then," said Betty.

"I want to speak about the Specialities."

"Oh, I thought you were coming to them! They are to meet to-night, are they not, in Susie Rushworth's room?"

"That is correct."

"And I am to be present?" said Betty.

"You are to be present, if you will."

"Why do you say 'if you will?' You know quite well that I shall be present."

"Martha West will also be there," continued Fanny. "She will go through very much the sort of thing you went through last week, and she will be given a week to consider before she finally decides whether she will join. Betty, have you made up your mind what to do? You might tell me, mightn't you? I am your own—your very own—cousin, and it was through my father you got admitted to this school."

"Thanks for reminding me," said Betty; "but I don't know that I do feel as grateful as I ought. Perhaps that is one of the many defects in my nature. You have praised me in a kind way, but you don't know me a bit. I am full of faults. There is nothing good or great about me at all. You had best understand that from the beginning. Now, I may as well say at once that I intend to be present at the Specialities' meeting to-night."

"You do! Have you read Rule I.?"

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"Oh, yes, I have read it. I have read all the rules."

"Don't you understand," said Fanny, speaking deliberately, "that there is one dark spot in your life, Betty Vivian, that ought to preclude you from joining the Specialities? That dark spot can only be removed by confession and restitution. You know to what I allude?"

Betty stood up. Her face was as white as death. After a minute she said, "Are you going to do anything?"

"I ought; it has troubled me sorely. To tell you the truth, I did not want you to be admitted to the club; but the majority were in your favor. If ever they know of this they will not be in your favor. Oh, Betty, you cannot join because of Rule I.!"

"And I will join," said Betty, "and I dare you to do your very worst!"

"Very well, I have nothing more to say. I am sorry for you, Betty Vivian. From this moment on remember that, whatever wrong thing you did in the past, you are going to do doubly and trebly wrong in the future. You are going to take a false vow, a vow you cannot keep. God help you! you will be miserable enough! But even now there is time, for it is not yet four o'clock. Oh, Betty, I haven't spoken of this to a soul; but can you not reconsider?"

"I mean to join," said Betty. "Rule I. will not, in my opinion, be broken. The rule is that each member keeps no secret to herself which the other members ought to know. Why ought they know what concerns only me—me and my sisters?"

"Do you think," said Fanny, bending towards her, and a queer change coming over her face—"do you think for a single moment that you would be made a Speciality if the girls of this school knew that you had told my father a *lie*? I leave it to your conscience. I will say no more."

Fanny walked out of the room, shutting the door carefully behind her. Miss Symes came up presently. It was the custom of St. Cecilia to be particularly kind to the girls who were in disgrace. Often and often this most sweet woman brought them to see the error of their ways. Mrs. Haddo had told her about Betty, and how endearing she had found her, and what a splendid nature she fully believed the girl to possess. But when Miss Symes, full of

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thoughts for Betty's comfort, entered the room, followed by a servant bringing a little tray of temptingly prepared tea, Betty's look was, to say the least of it, dour; she did not smile, she scarcely looked up, there was no brightness in her eyes, and there were certainly no smiles round her lips.

"The tray there, please, Hawkins," said Miss Symes. The woman obeyed and withdrew.

"I am glad you have a fire, Betty, dear," said Miss Symes when the two were alone. "Now, you must be really hungry, for you had what I consider only a snatch-dinner. Shall I leave you alone to have your tea in comfort, or would you like me to sit with you for a little?"

"Oh, thanks so much!" replied Betty; "but I really would rather be alone. I have a good deal to think over."

"I am afraid, my dear child, you are not very well."

"On the contrary, I never was better," was Betty's response.

"Your headache quite gone?"

"Quite," said Betty with an emphatic nod.

"Well, dear, I am sorry you have had to undergo this unpleasant time of solitary confinement. But our dear Mrs. Haddo is not really angry; she knows quite well that you did not consider. She takes the deepest interest in you, Betty, my child."

"Oh, don't speak of her now, please!" said Betty with a sort of groan. "I would rather be alone."

"Haven't you a book of any sort? I will go and fetch one for you; and you can turn on the electric light when it gets dark."

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"If you have something really interesting—that will make me forget everything in the world except what I am reading—I should like it."

Miss Symes went away, and returned in a few minutes with "Treasure Island." Strange as it may seem, Betty had not yet read this wonderful book.

Without glancing at the girl, Miss Symes again left the room. In the corridor she met Fanny Crawford. "Fanny," she said, "do you know what is the matter with Betty Vivian?"

Fanny smiled. "I have been to see her," she said. "Is she in bad spirits? It didn't occur to me that she was."

"Oh, you have been to see her, have you?"

"Yes, only a short time ago. She looked very cold when I entered the room; but I took the liberty to light the fire, and sat with her until suddenly she got cross and turned me out. She is a very queer girl is Betty."

"A very fine girl, my dear!"

Fanny made no response of any sort. She waited respectfully in case Miss Symes should wish to say anything further. But Miss Symes had nothing more to say; she only guessed that the change between the Betty in whom Mrs. Haddo had been so interested, and the Betty she had found, must be caused in some inexplicable way by Fanny Crawford. What was the matter with Fanny? It seemed to Miss Symes that, since the day when she had taken the girl into her full confidence with regard to the coming of the Vivians, she was changed, and not for the better. There was a coldness, an impatience, a want of spontaneity about her, which the teacher's observant eye noticed, but, being in the dark as to the cause, could not account for.

Meanwhile Betty ate her tea ravenously, and when it was finished turned on the electric light and read "Treasure Island." This book was so fascinating that she forgot everything else in its perusal: the sealed packet in its safe hiding-place, the Specialities themselves, the odious Fanny Crawford, Rule I.—everything was forgotten. Presently she raised her head with a start. It was half-past seven. Olive Repton was coming to fetch her at five minutes to eight, when the Specialities were all expected to assemble in Susie Rushworth's room.

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Betty put on a black dress that evening. It was made of a soft and clinging material, and was sufficiently open at the neck to show the rounded purity of the young girl's throat, and short in the sleeves to exhibit the moldings of her arms. She was a beautifully made creature, and black suited her almost better than white. Her curiously pale face—which never had color, and yet never showed the slightest indication of weak health—was paler

than usual to-night; but her eyes were darker and brighter, and there was a determination about her which slightly altered the character of her expression.

The twins came rushing in at ten minutes to eight.

"Oh, Bet, you are ready!" exclaimed Sylvia. "You are going to become a real Speciality! What glorious fun! How honored we'll be! I suppose you won't let us into any of the secrets?"

"Of course not, silly Sylvia!" replied Betty, smiling again at sight of her sisters. "But I tell you what," she added; "if you both happen to be awake when I come back, which I think very doubtful, I am going to tell you what happened this morning—something too wonderful. Don't be too excited about it, for it will keep until to-morrow; but think that I had a marvelous adventure, and, oh, my dears, it had to do with dogs!"

"Dogs!" cried both twins simultaneously.

"Yes, such glorious darlings! Oh, I've no time now—I must be off! Good-bye, both of you. Go to sleep if you like; I can tell you everything in the morning."

"I think we'll lie awake if it has anything to do with dogs," said Hetty. "We have been starving for them ever since we came here."

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But Betty was gone. Olive took her hand. "Betty," she said as they walked very quickly towards the other wing of the house, "I like you better in black than in white. Black seems to bring out the wonderful—oh, I don't know what to call it!—the wonderful difference between you and other people."

"Don't talk about me now," said Betty. "I am only one, and we shall be seven in a very short time. Seven in one! Isn't it curious? A sort of body composed of seven people!"

"There'll be eight before long. The Specialities are going to be the most important people this term, that I am quite sure of," said Olive. "Well, here's Susie's room, and it wants two minutes to eight."

Susie greeted her guests with much cordiality. They all found seats. Supper was laid on a round table in one corner of the room. Olive, being an old member, was quite at home, and handed round cups of cocoa and delicious cakes to each of the girls. They ate and chatted, and when Martha West made her appearance there was a shout of welcome from every one.

"Hail to the new Speciality!" exclaimed each girl in the room, Betty Vivian alone excepted.

Martha was a heavily made girl, with a big, sallow face; quantities of black hair, which grew low on her forehead, and which, as no effort on her part would keep it from falling down on one side, gave her a somewhat untidy appearance; she had heavy brows, too, which were in keeping with the general contour of her face, and rather small gray eyes. There was no one, however, in the whole school who was better loved than Martha West. Big and ungainly though she was, her voice was one of the sweetest imaginable. She had also great force of character, and was regarded as one of the strong girls of the school. She was always helping others, was the soul of unselfishness, and although not exactly clever, was plodding and persevering. She was absolutely without self-consciousness; and when her companions welcomed her in this cheery manner she smiled broadly, showing a row of pearly white teeth, and then sat down on the nearest chair.

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When supper was over, Margaret Grant came forward and stood by the little center-table, on which lay the vellum-bound book of the rules of the club. Margaret opened it with great solemnity, and called to Betty Vivian to stand up.

"Betty Vivian," she said, "we agreed a week ago to-day to admit you to the full membership of a Speciality. According to our usual custom, we sent you a copy of the rules in order that you might study them in their fullness. We now ask you if you have done so?"

"I have," replied Betty. "I have read them, I should think, thirty or forty times."

"Are you prepared, Betty Vivian, to accept our rules and become a member of the Specialities, or do you prefer your full liberty and to return to the ordinary routine of the school? We, none of us, wish you to adopt the rules as part of your daily life unless you are prepared to keep them in their entirety."

"I wish to be a Speciality," replied Betty. Then she added slowly—and as she spoke she raised her brilliant eyes and fixed them on Fanny Crawford's face—"I am prepared to keep the rules."

"Thank you, Betty! Then I think, members, Betty Vivian can be admitted as a member of our

little society. Betty, simple as our rules are, they comprise much: openness of heart, sisterly love, converse with great thoughts, pleasure in its truest sense (carrying that pleasure still further by seeing that others enjoy it as well as ourselves), respect to all our teachers, and, above all things, forgetting ourselves and living for others. You see, Betty Vivian, that though the rules are quite simple, they are very comprehensive. You have had a week to study them. Again I ask, are you prepared to accept them?"

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"Yes, I am prepared," said Betty; and again she flashed a glance at Fanny Crawford.

"Then I, as head of this little society for the time being, admit you as a member. Please, Betty, accept this little true-lovers' knot, and wear it this evening in your dress. Now, girls, let us every one cheer Betty Vivian, and take her to our hearts as our true sister in the highest sense of the word."

The girls flocked round Betty and shook hands with her. Amongst those who did so was Fanny Crawford. She squeezed Betty's hand significantly, and at the same moment put her finger to her lips. This action was so quick that only Betty observed it; but it told the girl that, now that she had "crossed the Rubicon," Fanny would not be the one to betray her.

Betty sank down on a chair. She felt excited, elated, pleased, and horrified. The rest of the evening passed as a sort of dream. She could scarcely comprehend what she had done. She was a Speciality. She was bound by great and holy rules, and yet in reality she was a far lower girl than she had ever been in all her life before.

The rules were read aloud in their fullness to Martha West, and the usual week's grace was accorded her. Then followed the fun, during the whole of which time Betty was made the heroine of the occasion, as Martha would doubtless be that day week. The girls chatted a great deal to-night, and Betty was told of all the privileges which would now be hers. She had never known until that moment that Mrs. Haddo, when she found what excellent work the Speciality Club did in the school, had fitted up a charming sitting-room for its members. Here, in winter, the fire burned all day. Fresh flowers were always to be seen. Here were to be found such books as those of Ruskin, Tennyson, Browning—in short, a fine collection of the greater writers. Betty was told that she was now free to enter this room; that, being a Speciality, she would be exempt from certain small and irksome duties in order to give her more time to attend to those broad rules of life which she had now adopted as her code.

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Betty listened, and all the time, as she listened, her heart sank lower and lower. Fanny did not even pretend to watch Betty now. She had, so to speak, done with her. Fanny felt as sure as though some angel in the room were recording the fact that Betty was now well started on the downward track. She felt ashamed of her as a cousin. She felt the greatest possible contempt for her. But if she was herself to keep Rule I., she must force these feelings out of sight, and tolerate Betty until she saw the error of her ways.

"The less I have to do with her in the future the better," thought Fanny. "It would be exceedingly unpleasant for me if it were known that I had allowed her to be admitted without telling Margaret what I knew. But, somehow, I couldn't do it. I thought Betty herself would be great enough to withstand a paltry temptation of this sort. How different Martha West is! She will be a famous stand-by for us all."

The evening came to an end. The girls went down to prayers.

Betty was now a Speciality. She wore the beautiful little silver badge shining in the folds of her black evening frock. But she did not enjoy the music in the chapel nor Mr. Fairfax's rendering of the evening prayers as she had done when last she was there. Betty had a curious faculty, however, which she now exercised. Hers was a somewhat complex nature, and she could shut away unpleasant thoughts when she so desired. She was a Speciality. She might not have become one but for Fanny. Mrs. Haddo's influence, though unspoken, might have held her back. Margaret Grant might have kept her from doing what she herself would have scorned to do. But Fanny! Fanny had managed to bring out the worst in Betty; and the worst in a character like hers was very vigorous, very strong, very determined while it was in the ascendant. Instead of praying to-night, she turned her thoughts to the various and delightful things which would now be hers in the school. She would be regarded on all hands with added respect. She would have the entrée to the Specialities' delightful sitting-room. She would be consulted by the other girls of the upper school, for every one consulted the Specialities on all manner of subjects. People would cease to speak of her as "that new girl Betty Vivian;" but they would say when they saw her approach, "Oh, she is one of the Specialities!" Her position in the school to-night was assured. She was safe; and Fanny, with that swift gesture, had indicated to her that she need not fear anything from her lips. Fanny would be silent. No one else knew what Fanny knew. And, after all, she had done no wrong, because her secret had nothing whatever to do with the other members of the club. The wrong—the one wrong—which she felt she had committed

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was in promising to love each member as though she were her sister, especially as she had to include Fanny Crawford in that number. But she would be kind to all, and perhaps love might come—she was not sure. Fanny would be kind to her, of course. In a sort of way they must be friends in the future. Oh, yes, it was all right.

She was startled when Olive Repton touched her. She rose from her knees with a hot blush on her face. She had forgotten chapel, she had not heard the words of the benediction. The girls streamed out, and went at once to their respective bedrooms.

Betty was glad to find her sisters asleep. After the exciting events of that evening, even Dan and Beersheba had lost their charm. So weary was she at that moment that she dropped her head on her pillow and fell sound asleep.

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CHAPTER XI

A SPECIALITY ENTERTAINMENT

Certainly it was nice to be a Speciality. Even Fanny Crawford completely altered her manner to Betty Vivian. There were constant and earnest consultations amongst the members of the club in that charming sitting-room. Betty, of course, was eagerly questioned, and Betty was able to give daring and original advice. Whenever Betty spoke some one laughed, or some one looked with admiration at her; and when she was silent one or other of the girls said anxiously, "But do you approve, Betty? If you don't approve we must think out something else."

Betty soon entered into the full spirit of the thing, and one and all of the girls—Fanny excepted—said that she was the most delightful Speciality who had ever come to Haddo Court. During this time she was bravely trying to keep her vows. She had bought a little copy of Jeremy Taylor's "Holy Living," and read the required portion every day, but she did not like it; it had to do with a life which at one time she would have adored, but which now did not appeal to her. She liked that part of each day which was given up to fun and frolic, and she dearly loved the respect and consideration and admiration shown her by the other girls of the school.

It was soon decided that the next great entertainment of the Specialities was to be given in Betty Vivian's bedroom. Each girl was to subscribe three shillings, and the supper, in consequence, was to be quite sumptuous. Fanny Crawford, as the most practical member, was to provide the viands. She was to go into the village, accompanied by one of the teachers, two days before the date arranged in order to secure the most tempting cakes and pastry, and ginger-beer, and cocoa, and potted meat for sandwiches. Betty wondered how the provisions could be procured for so small a sum; but Fanny was by no means doubtful.

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Now, Betty had of worldly wealth the exact sum of two pounds ten shillings; and when it is said that Betty possessed two pounds ten shillings, this money was really not Betty's at all, but had to be divided into three portions, for it was equally her sisters'. But as Sylvia and Hester always looked upon Betty as their chief, and as nothing mattered to them provided Betty was pleased, she gave three shillings from this minute fund without even telling them that she had done so. Then the invitations were sent round, and very neatly were they penned by Susie Rushworth and Olive Repton. It was impossible to ask all the girls of the school; but a select list from the girls in the upper school was carefully made, each Speciality being consulted on this point.

Martha West, who was now a full-blown member, suggested Sibyl Ray at once.

Fanny gave a little frown of disapproval. "Martha," she said, "I must say that I don't care for your Sibyl."

"And I like her," replied Martha. "She is not your style, Fan; but she just needs the sort of little help we can give her. We cannot expect every one to be exactly like every one else, and Sibyl is not half bad. It would hurt her frightfully if she were not invited to the first entertainment after I have become a Speciality."

"Well, that settles it," said Fanny in a cheerful tone; "she gets an invitation of course."

The teachers were never invited to these assemblies, but there was a murmur of anticipation in the whole school when the invitations went round. Who were to be the lucky ones? Who was to go? Who was not to go? As a rule, it was so managed by the Specialities

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that the whole of the upper school was invited once during the term to a delightful evening in one of the special bedrooms. But the first invitation of the season—the one after the admission of two new members, that extraordinary Betty Vivian and dear, good old Martha West—oh, it was of intense interest to know who were to go and who to stay behind!

“I’ve got my invitation,” said a fat young girl of the name of Sarah Butt.

“And I,” “And I,” “And I,” said others.

“I am left out,” said a fifth.

“Well, Janie, don’t fret,” said Sarah Butt; “your turn will come next time.”

“But I did so want to see Betty Vivian! They say she is the life of the whole club.”

“Silly!” exclaimed Sarah; “why, you see her every day.”

“Yes, but not as she is in the club. They all say that she is too wonderful! Sometimes she sits down cross-legged and tells them stories, and they get so excited they can’t move. Oh, I say, do—do look! look what is in the corner of your card, Sarah! ‘After supper, story-telling by Betty Vivian. Most of the lights down.’ There, isn’t it maddening! I do call it a shame; they might have asked me!”

“Well, I will tell you all the stories to-morrow,” said Sarah.

“You!” The voice was one of scorn. “Why, you can’t tell a story to save your life; whereas Betty, she looks a story herself all the time. She has it in her face. I can never take my eyes off her when she is in the room.”

“Well, I can’t help it,” answered Sarah. “I am glad I’m going, that is all. The whole school could not be asked, for the simple reason that the room wouldn’t hold us. I shall be as green as grass when your invitation comes, and now you must bear your present disappointment.”

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Fanny Crawford made successful and admirable purchases. On the nights when the Specialities entertained, unless it was midsummer, the girls met at six-thirty, and the entertainment continued until nine.

On that special evening Mrs. Haddo, for wise reasons all her own, excused the Specialities and their guests from attending prayers in the chapel. She had once made a little speech about this. “You will pray earnestly in your rooms, dears, and thank God for your happy evening,” she had said; and from that moment the Specialities knew that they might continue their enjoyment until nine o’clock.

Oh, it was all fascinating! Betty was very grave. Her high spirits deserted her that morning, and she went boldly to Mrs. Haddo—a thing which few girls dared to do.

Mrs. Haddo was seated by her fire. She was reading a new book which had just been sent to her by post. “Betty, what do you want?” she said when the girl entered.

“May I take a very long walk all alone? Do you mind, Mrs. Haddo?”

“Anywhere you like, dear, provided you do not leave the grounds.”

“But I want to leave the grounds, Mrs. Haddo.”

“No, dear Betty—not alone.”

Betty avoided the gaze of Mrs. Haddo, who looked up at her. Betty’s brilliant eyes were lowered, and the black, curling lashes lay on her cheeks.

Mrs. Haddo wanted to catch Betty’s soul by means of her eyes, and so draw her into communion with herself. “Betty, why do you want to walk outside the grounds, and all alone?”

“Restless, I suppose,” answered Betty.

“Is this club too exciting for you, my child?”

“Oh no, I love it!” said Betty. Her manner changed at the moment. “And, please, don’t take my hand. I—oh, it isn’t that I don’t want to hold your hand; but I—I am not worthy! Of course I will stay in the grounds to please you. Good-bye.”

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CHAPTER XII

A VERY EVENTFUL DAY

Having got leave to take her walk, Betty started off with vigor. The fresh, keen air soothed her depressed spirits; and soon she was racing wildly against the gale, the late autumn leaves falling against her dress and face as she ran. She would certainly keep her word to Mrs. Haddo, although her desire—if she had a very keen desire at that moment—was again to vault over those hideous prison-bars, and reach the farm, and receive the caresses of Dan and Beersheba. But a promise is a promise, and this could not be thought of. She determined, therefore, to tire herself out by walking.

She had managed to avoid all her companions. The Specialities were very much occupied making arrangements for the evening. The twins had found friends of their own, and were happily engaged. No one noticed Betty as she set forth. She walked as far as the deserted gardens. Then she crossed the waste land, and stood for a minute looking at that poor semblance of Scotch heather which grew in an exposed corner. She felt inclined to kick it, so great was her contempt for the flower which could not bloom out of its native soil. Then suddenly her mood changed. She fell on her knees, found a bit of heather which still had a few nearly withered bells on it; and, raising it tenderly to her lips, kissed it. "Poor little exile!" she said. "Well, I am an exile too!"

She rose and skirted the waste land; at one side there was a somewhat steep incline which led through a plantation to a more cultivated part of the extensive grounds. Betty had never been right round the grounds of Haddo Court before, and was pleased at their size, and, on a day like this, at their wildness. She tried to picture herself back in Scotland. Once she shut her eyes for a minute, and bringing her vivid imagination to her aid, seemed to see Donald Macfarlane and Jean Macfarlane in their cosy kitchen; while Donald said, "It'll be a braw day to-morrow;" or perhaps it was the other way round, and Jean remarked, "There'll be a guid sprinklin' o' snaw before mornin', or I am much mistook."

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Betty sighed, and walked faster. By-and-by, however, she stood still. She had come suddenly to the stump of an old tree. It was a broken and very aged stump, and hollow inside. Betty stood close to it. The next moment, prompted by an uncontrollable instinct, she thrust in her hand and pulled out a little sealed packet. She looked at it wildly for a minute, then put it back again. It was quite safe in this hiding-place, for she had placed it in a corner of the old stump where it was sheltered from the weather, and yet could never by any possibility be seen unless the stump was cut down. She had scarcely completed this action before a voice from behind caused her to jump and start.

"Whatever are you doing by that old stump of a tree, Betty?"

Betty turned swiftly. The color rushed to her face, leaving it the next instant paler than ever. She was confronted by the uninteresting and very small personality of Sibyl Ray.

"I am doing nothing," said Betty. "What affair is it of yours?"

"Oh, I am not interested," said Sibyl. "I was just taking a walk all alone, and I saw you in the distance; and I rushed up that steep path yonder as fast as I could, hoping you would let me join you and talk to you. You know I am going to be present at your Speciality party to-night. I do admire you so very much, Betty! Then, just as I was coming near, you thrust your hand down into that old stump, and you certainly did take something out. Was it a piece of wood, or what? I saw you looking at it, and then you dropped it in again. It looked like a square piece of wood, as far as I could tell from the distance. What were you doing with it? It was wood, was it not?"

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"If you like to think it was wood, it was wood," replied Betty. Here was another lie! Betty's heart sank very low. "I wish you would go away, Sibyl," she said, "and not worry me."

"Oh, but mayn't I walk with you? What harm can I do? And I do admire you so immensely! And won't you take the thing out of the tree again and let me see it? I want to see it ever so badly."

"No, I am sure I won't. You can poke for it yourself whenever you please," said Betty. "Now, come on, if you are coming."

"Oh, may I come with you really?"

"I can't prevent you, Sibyl. As a matter of fact, I was going out for a walk all alone; but as you are determined to bear me company, you must."

Betty felt seriously alarmed. She must take the first possible opportunity to get the precious

packet out of its present hiding-place and dispose of it elsewhere. But where? That was the puzzle. And how soon could she manage this? How quickly could she get rid of Sibyl Ray?

Sibyl's small, pale-blue eyes were glittering with curiosity. Betty felt she must manage her. Then suddenly, by one of those quick transitions of thought, Rule VI. occurred to her. It was her duty to be kind to Sibyl, even though she did not like her. She would, therefore, now put forth her charm for the benefit of this small, unattractive girl. She accordingly began to chatter in her wildest and most fascinating way. Sibyl was instantly convulsed with laughter, and forgot all about the old stump of tree and the bit of wood that Betty had fished out, looked at, and put back again. The whole matter would, of course, recur to Sibyl by-and-by; but at present she was absorbed in the great delight of Betty's conversation.

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"Oh, Betty, I do admire you!" she said.

"Well, now, listen to one thing," said Betty. "I hate flattery."

"But it isn't flattery if I mean what I say. If I do admire a person I say so. Now, I admire our darling Martha West. She has always been kind to me. Martha is a dear, a duck; but, of course, she doesn't fascinate in the way you do. Several of the other girls in my form—I'm in the upper fifth, you know—have been talking about you and wondering where your charm lay. For you couldn't be called exactly pretty; although, of course, that very black hair of yours, and those curious eyes which are no color in particular, and yet seem to be every color, and your pale face, make you quite out of the common. We love your sisters too; they are darlings, but neither of them is like you. Still, you're not exactly pretty. You haven't nearly such straight and regular features as Olive Repton; you're not as pretty, even, as Fanny Crawford. Of course Fan's a dear old thing—one of the very best girls in the school; and she is your cousin, isn't she, Betty?"

"Yes."

"Betty, it is delightful to walk with you! And isn't it just wonderful to think that you've not been more than a few weeks in the school before you are made a Speciality, and with all the advantages of one? Oh, it does seem quite too wonderful!"

"I am glad you think so," said Betty.

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"But it is very extraordinary. I don't think it has ever been done before. You see, your arrival at the school and everything else was completely out of the common. You didn't come at the beginning of term, as most new girls do; you came when term was quite a fortnight old; and you were put straight away into the upper school without going through the drudgery, or whatever you may like to call it, of the lower school. Oh, I do—yes, I do—call it perfectly wonderful! I suppose you are eaten up with conceit?"

"No, I am not," said Betty. "I am not conceited at all. Now listen, Sibyl. You are to be a guest, are you not, at our Speciality party to-night?"

"Of course I am; and I am so fearfully excited, more particularly as you are going to tell stories with the lights down. I'm going to wear a green dress; it's a gauzy sort of stuff that my aunt has just sent me, and I think it will suit me very well indeed. Oh, it is fun to think of this evening!"

"Yes, of course it's fun," said Betty. "Now, I tell you what. Why don't you go into the front garden and ask the gardener for permission to get a few small marguerite daisies, and then make them into a very simple wreath to twine round your hair? The daisies would suit you so well; you don't know how nice they'll make you look."

"Will they?" said Sibyl, her eyes sparkling. "Do you really think so?"

"Of course I think so. I have pictures of all the girls in my mind; and I often shut my eyes and think how such a girl would look if she were dressed in such a way, and how such another girl would look if she wore something else."

"And when you think of me?" said Sibyl.

But Betty had never thought of Sibyl. She was silent.

"And when you think of me?" repeated Sibyl, her face beaming all over with delight. "You think of me, do you, darling Betty, as wearing green, with a wreath of marguerites in my hair?"

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"Yes, that is how I think of you," said Betty.

"Very well, I'll go and find the gardener. Mrs. Haddo always allows us to have cut flowers that the gardener gives us."

"Don't have the wreath too big," said Betty; "and be sure you get the gardener to choose small marguerites. Now, be off—won't you?—for I want to continue my walk."

Sibyl, in wild delight, rushed into one of the flower-gardens. Betty watched her till she was quite out of sight. Then, quick as thought, she retraced her steps. She must find another hiding-place for the packet. With Sibyl's knowledge, her present position was one of absolute danger. Sibyl would tell every girl she knew all about Betty's action when she stood by the broken stump of the old tree. She would describe how Betty thrust in her hand and took something out, looked at it, and put it back again. The girls would go in a body, and poke, and examine, and try to discover for themselves what Betty had taken out of the trunk of the old oak-tree. Betty must remove the sealed packet at once, or it would be discovered.

"What a horrible danger!" thought the girl. "But I am equal to it."

She ran with all her might and main, and presently, reaching the tree, thrust her hand in, found the brown packet carefully tied up and sealed, and slipped it into her pocket. Quite close by was a little broken square of wood. Betty, hating herself for doing so, dropped it into the hollow of the tree. The bit of wood would satisfy the girls, for Sibyl had said that Betty had doubtless found some wood. Having done this, she set off to retrace her steps again, going now in the direction of the deserted gardens and the patch of common. She had no spade with her, but that did not matter. She went to the corner where the heather was growing. Very carefully working round a piece with her fingers, she loosened the roots; they had gone deep down, as is the fashion with heather. She slipped the packet underneath, replaced the heather, kissed it, said, "I am sorry to disturb you, darling, but you are doing a great work now;" and then, wiping the mud from her fingers, she walked slowly home.

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The packet would certainly be safe for a day or two under the Scotch heather, which, as a matter of fact, no one thought of interfering with from one end of the year to another. Before Betty left this corner of the common she took great care to remove all trace of having disturbed the heather. Then she walked back to the Court, her heart beating high. The tension within her was so great as to be almost unendurable. But she would not swerve from the path she had chosen.

On the occasion of the Specialities' first entertainment, Betty Vivian, by request, wore white. Her sisters, who of course would be amongst the guests, also wore white. The little beds had been removed to a distant part of the room, where a screen was placed round them. All the toilet apparatus was put out of sight. Easy-chairs and elegant bits of furniture were brought from the other rooms. Margaret Grant lent her own lovely vases, which were filled with flowers from the gardens. The beautiful big room looked fresh and fragrant when the Specialities assembled to welcome their guests. Betty stood behind Margaret. Martha West—a little ungainly as usual, but with her strong, firm, reliable face looking even stronger and more reliable since she had joined the great club of the school—was also in evidence. Fanny Crawford stood close to Betty. Just once she looked at her, and then smiled. Betty turned when she did so, and greeted that smile with a distinct frown of displeasure. Yet every one knew that Betty was to be the heroine of the evening.

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Punctual to the minute the guests arrived—Sibyl Ray in her vivid-green dress, with the marguerites in her hair.

No one made any comment as the little girl came forward; only, a minute later, Fanny whispered to Betty, "What a ridiculous and conceited idea! I wonder who put it into her head?"

"I did," said Betty very calmly; "But she hasn't arranged them quite right." She left her place, and going up to Sibyl, said a few words to her. Sibyl flushed and looked lovingly into Betty's face. Betty then took Sibyl behind the screen, and, lo and behold! her deft fingers put the tiny wreath into a graceful position; arranged the soft, light hair so as to produce the best possible effect; twisted a white sash round the gaudy green dress, to carry out the idea of the marguerites; and brought Sibyl back, charmed with her appearance, and looking for once almost pretty.

"What a wonder you are, Betty!" said Martha West in a pleased tone. "Poor little Sib, she doesn't understand how to manage the flowers!"

"She looks very nice now," said Betty.

"It was sweet of you to do it for her," said Martha. "And, you know, she quite worships you; she does, really."

"There was nothing in my doing it," replied Betty. She felt inclined to add, "For she was

particularly obliging to me to-day;" but she changed these words into, "I suggested the idea, so of course I had to see it carried out properly."

"The white sash makes all the difference," said Martha. "You are quite a genius, Betty!"

"Oh no," said Betty. She looked for a minute into Martha's small, gray, very honest eyes, and wished with all her heart and soul that she could change with her.

The usual high-jinks and merriment went on while the eatables were being discussed. But when every one had had as much as she could consume with comfort, and the oranges, walnuts, and crackers were put aside for the final entertainment, Margaret (being at present head-girl of the Specialities) proposed round games for an hour. "After that," she said, "we will ask Betty Vivian to tell us stories."

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"Oh, but we all want the stories now!" exclaimed several voices.

Margaret laughed. "Do you know," she said, "it is only a little past seven o'clock, and we cannot expect poor Betty to tell stories for close on two hours? We'll play all sorts of pleasant and exciting games until eight o'clock, and then perhaps Betty will keep her word."

Betty had purposely asked to be excused from joining in these games, and every one said she understood the reason. Betty was too precious and valuable and altogether fascinating to be expected to rush about playing Blind-Man's Buff, and Puss-in-the-Corner, and Charades, and Telegrams, and all those games which schoolgirls love.

The sound from the Vivians' bedroom was very hilarious for the next three-quarters of an hour; but presently Margaret came forward and asked all the girls if they would seat themselves, as Betty was going to tell stories.

"With the lights down! Oh, please, please, don't forget that! All the lights down except one," said Susie Rushworth.

"Yes, with all the lights down except one," said Margaret. "Betty, will you come and sit here? We will cluster round in a semi-circle. We shall be in shadow, but there must be sufficient light for us to see your face."

The lights were arranged to produce this effect. There was now only one light in the room, and that streamed over Betty as she sat cross-legged on the floor, her customary attitude when she was thoroughly at home and excited. There was not a scrap of self-consciousness about Betty at these moments. She had been working herself up all day for the time when she might pour out her heart. At home she used to do so for the benefit of Donald and Jean Macfarlane and of her little sisters. But, up to the present, no one at school had heard of Betty's wild stories. At last, however, an opportunity had come. She forgot all her pain in the exercise of her strong faculty for narrative.

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"I see something," she began. She had rather a thrilling voice—not high, but very clear, and with a sweet ring in it. "I see," she continued, looking straight before her as she spoke, "a great, great, a very great plain. And it is night, or nearly so—I mean it is dusk; for there is never actual night in my Scotland in the middle of summer. I see the great plain, and a girl sitting in the middle of it, and the heather is beginning to come out. It has been asleep all the winter; but it is coming out now, and the air is full of music. For, of course, you all understand," she continued—bending forward so that her eyes shone, growing very large, and at the same moment black and bright—"you all know that the great heather-plants are the last homes left in England for the fairies. The fairies live in the heather-bells; and during the winter, when the heather is dead, the poor fairies are cold, being turned out of their homes."

"Where do they go, then, I wonder?" asked a muffled voice in the darkened circle of listeners.

"Back to the fairies' palace, of course, underground," said Betty. "But they like the world best, they're such sociable little darlings; and when the heather-bells are coming out they all return, and each fairy takes possession of a bell and lives there. She makes it her home. And the brownies—they live under the leaves of the heather, and attend to the fairies, and dance with them at night just over the vast heather commons. Then, by a magical kind of movement, each little fairy sets her own heather-bell ringing, and you can't by any possibility imagine what the music is like. It is so sweet—oh, it is so sweet that no music one has ever heard, made by man, can compare to it! You can imagine for yourselves what it is like—millions upon millions of bells of heather, and millions upon millions of fairies, and each little bell ringing its own sweet chime, but all in the most perfect harmony. Well, that is what the fairies do."

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"Have you ever seen them?" asked the much-excited voice of Susie Rushworth.

"I see them now," said Betty. She shut her eyes as she spoke.

"Oh, do tell us what they are like?" asked a girl in the background.

Betty opened her eyes wide. "I couldn't," she answered. "No one can describe a fairy. You've got to see it to know what it is like."

"Tell us more, please, Betty?" asked an eager voice.

"Give me a minute," said Betty. She shut her eyes. Her face was deadly white. Presently she opened her eyes again. "I see the same great, vast moor, and it is winter-time, and the moor from one end to the other is covered—yes, covered—with snow. And there's a gray house built of great blocks of stone—a very strong house, but small; and there's a kitchen in that house, and an old man with grizzled hair sits by the fire, and a dear old woman sits near him, and there are two dogs lying by the hearth. I won't tell you their names, for their names are—well, sacred. The old man and woman talk together, and presently girls come in and join them and talk to them for a little bit. Then one of the girls goes out all alone, for she wants air and freedom, and she is never afraid on the vast white moor. She walks and walks and walks. Presently she loses sight of the gray house; but she is not afraid, for fear never enters her breast. She walks so fast that her blood gets very warm and tingles within her, and she feels her spirits rising higher and higher; and she thinks that the moor covered with snow is even more lovely and glorious than the moor was in summer, when the fairy bells were ringing and the fairies were dancing all over the place.

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"I see her," continued Betty; "she is tired, and yet not tired. She has walked a very long way, and has not met one soul. She is very glad of that; she loves great solitudes, and she passionately loves nature and cold cannot hurt her when her heart is so warm and so happy. But by-and-by she thinks of the old couple by the fireside and of the girls she has left behind. She turns to go back. I see her when she turns." Betty paused a minute. "The sky is very still," she continued. "The sky has millions of stars blazing in its blue, and there isn't a cloud anywhere; and she clasps her hands with ecstasy, and thanks God for having made such a beautiful world. Then she starts to go home; but—"

Up to this point Betty's voice was glad and triumphant. Now its tone altered. "I see her. She is warm still, and her heart glows with happiness; and she does not want anything else in all the world except the gray house and the girls she left behind, and the dogs by the fireside, and the old couple in the kitchen. But presently she discovers that, try as she will, and walk as hard as she may, she cannot find the gray stone house. She is not frightened—that isn't a bit her way; but she knows at once what has happened, for she has heard of such things happening to others.

"It is midnight—a bitterly cold midnight—and she is lost in the snow! She knows it. She does not hesitate for a single minute what to do, for the old man in the gray house has told her so many stories about other people who have been lost in the snow. He has told her how they fell asleep and died, and she knows quite well that she must not fall asleep. When the morning dawns she will find her way back right enough; but there are long, long hours between now and the morning. She finds a place where the snow is soft, and she digs and digs in it, and then lies down in it and covers herself up. The snow is so dry that even with the heat of her body it hardly melts at all, and the great weight of snow over her keeps her warm. So now she knows she is all right, provided always she does not go to sleep.

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"She is the sort of girls who will never, by any possibility, give in while there is the most remote chance of her saving the situation. She has covered every scrap of herself except her face, and she is—oh, quite warm and comfortable! And she knows that if she keeps her thoughts very busy she may not sleep. There is no clock anywhere near, there is no sound whatever to break the deep stillness. The only way she can keep herself awake is by thinking. So she thinks very hard. That girl has often had a hard think—a very hard think—in the course of her life; but never, never one like this before, when she buries herself in the snow and forces her brain to keep her body awake.

"She tries first of all to count the minutes as they pass; but that is sleepy work, more particularly as she is tired, and really sometimes almost forgets herself for a minute. So she works away at some stiff, long sums in arithmetic, doing mental arithmetic as rapidly as ever she can. And so one hour passes, perhaps two. At the end of the second hour something very strange happens. All of a sudden she feels that arithmetic is pure nonsense—that it never leads anywhere nor does any one any good; and she feels also that never in the whole course of her life has she lain in a snuggler bed than her snow-bed. And she remembers the fairies and their music in the middle of the summer night; and—hark! hark!—she hears them again! Why have they left their palace underground to come and see her?

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It is sweet of them, it is beautiful! They sit on her chest, they press close to her face, they kiss her with their wee lips, they bring comforting thoughts into her heart, they whisper lovely things into her ears. She has not felt alone from the very first; but now that the fairies have come she never, never could be happier than she is now. And then, away from the fairies (who stay close to her all the time), she lifts her eyes and looks at the stars; and oh, the stars are so bright! And, somehow, she remembers that God is up there; and she thinks about white-clad angels who came down once, straight from the stars, by means of a ladder, to help a good man in a Bible story; and she really sees the ladder again, and the angels going up and coming down—going up and coming down—and she gives a cry and says, ‘Oh, take me too! Oh, take me too!’ One angel more beautiful than she could possibly describe comes towards her, and the fairies give a little cry—for, sweet as they are, they have nothing to do with angels—and disappear. The angel has his strong arms round her, and he says, ‘Your bed of snow is not so beautiful as where you shall lie in the land where no trouble can come.’ Then she remembers no more.”

At this point in her narrative Betty made a dramatic pause. Then she continued abruptly and in an ordinary tone, “It is the dogs who find her, and they dig her out of the snow, and the dear old shepherd and his wife and some other people come with them; and so she is brought back to the gray house, and never reaches the open doors where the angels ladder would have led her through. She is sorry—for days she is terribly sorry; for she is ill, and suffers a good bit of pain. But she is all right again now; only, somehow, she can never forget that experience. I think I have told you all I can tell you to-night.”

Instantly, at a touch, the lights were turned on again, and the room was full of brilliancy. Betty jumped up from her posture on the floor. The girls flocked round her.

“But, oh Betty! Betty! say, please say, was it you?”

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“I am going to reveal no secrets,” said Betty. “I said I saw the girl. Well, I did see her.”

“Then she must have been you! She must have been you!” echoed voice after voice. “And were you really nearly killed in the snow? And did you fall asleep in your snow-bed? And did—oh, did the fairies come, and afterwards the angels? Oh Betty, do tell!”

But Betty’s lips were mute.

CHAPTER XIII

A SPOKE IN HER WHEEL

If Betty Vivian really wished to keep her miserable secret, she had done wisely in removing the little packet from its shelter in the trunk of the old oak-tree; for of course Sibyl remembered it in the night, although Betty’s wonderful story had carried her thoughts far away from such trivial matters for the time being. Nevertheless, when she awoke in the night, and thought of the fairies in the heather, and of the girl lying in the snow-bed, she thought also of Betty standing by the stump of a tree and removing something from within, looking at it, and putting it back again.

Sibyl, therefore, took the earliest opportunity of telling her special friends that there was a treasure hidden in the stump of the old tree. In short, she repeated Betty’s exact action, doing so in the presence of Martha West.

Martha was a girl who invariably kept in touch with the younger girls. There are girls who in being removed from a lower to an upper school cannot stand their elevation, and are apt to be a little queer and giddy; they have not quite got their balance. Such girls could not fall into more excellent hands than those of Martha. She heard Sibyl now chatting to a host of these younger girls, and, catching Betty’s name, asked immediately what it was all about. Sibyl repeated the story with much gusto.

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“And Betty did look queer!” she added. “I asked her if it was a piece of wood, and she said ‘Yes;’ but, all the same, she didn’t like me to see her. Of course she’s a darling—there’s no one like her; and she recovered herself in a minute, and walked with me a long way, and then suggested that I should wear the marguerites. Of course I had to go into the flower-garden to find Birchall and coax him to cut enough for me. Then I had to get Sarah Butt to help me to make the wreath, for I never made a wreath before in my life. But Sarah would do anything in the world that Betty suggested, she is so frightfully fond of her.”

“We are all fond of her, I think,” said Martha.

"Well, then she went off for a walk by herself, and I don't think she came in until quite late."

"You don't know anything about it," said Martha. "Now, look here, girls, don't waste your time talking rubbish. You are very low down in the school compared to Betty Vivian, and, compared to Betty Vivian, you are of no account whatever, for she is a Speciality, and therefore holds a position all her own. Love her as much as you like, and admire her, for she is worthy of admiration. But if I were you, Sibyl, I wouldn't tell tales out of school. Let me tell you frankly that you had no right to rush up to Betty when she was alone and ask her what she was doing. She was quite at liberty to thrust her hand into an old tree as often as ever she liked, and take some rubbish out, and look at it, and drop it in again. You are talking sheer folly. Do attend to your work, or you'll be late for Miss Skeene when she comes to give her lecture on English literature."

No girl could ever be offended by Martha, and the work continued happily. But during recess that day Sibyl beckoned her companions away with her; and she, followed by five or six girls of the lower fifth, visited the spot where Betty had stood on the previous evening. Betty was much taller than any of these girls, and they found when they reached the old stump that it was impossible for them to thrust their hands in. But this difficulty was overcome by Sibyl volunteering to sit on Mabel Lee's shoulders—and, if necessary, even to stand on her shoulders while the other girls held her firm—in order that she might thrust her hand into the hollow of the oak-tree. This feat was accomplished with some difficulty, but nothing whatever was brought up except withered leaves and debris and a broken piece of wood much saturated with rain.

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"This must have been what she saw," said Sibyl. "I asked her if it was wood, and I think she said it was. Only, why did she look so very queer?"

The girls continued their walk, but Martha West stayed at home. She had hushed the remarks made by the younger girls that morning, nevertheless, she could not get them out of her mind. Sibyl's story was circumstantial. She had described Betty's annoyance and distress when they met, Betty's almost confusion. She had then said that it was Betty who suggested that she was to wear the marguerites.

Now Martha, in her heart of hearts, thought this suggestion of Betty's very far-fetched; and being a very shrewd, practical sort of girl, there came an awful moment when she almost made up her mind that Betty had done this in order to get rid of Sibyl. Why did she want to get rid of her? Martha began to believe that she was growing quite uncharitable.

At that moment, who should appear in sight, who should utter a cry of satisfaction and seat herself cosily by Martha's side, but Fanny Crawford!

"This is nice," said Fanny with a sigh. "I did so want to chat with you, Martha. I so seldom see you quite all by yourself."

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"I am always to be seen if you really wish to find me, Fanny," replied Martha. "I am never too busy not to be delighted to see my friends."

"Well, of course we are friends, being Specialities," was Fanny's remark.

"Yes," answered Martha, "and I think we were friends before. I always liked you just awfully, Fan."

"Ditto, ditto," replied Fanny. "It is curious," she continued, speaking in a somewhat sententious voice, "how one is drawn irresistibly to one girl and repelled by another. Now, I was always drawn to you, Matty; I always liked you from the very, very first. I was more than delighted when I heard that you were to become one of us."

Martha was silent. It was not her habit to praise herself, nor did she care to hear herself praised. She was essentially downright and honest. She did not think highly of herself, for she knew quite well that she had very few outward charms.

Fanny, however, who was the essence of daintiness, looked at her now with blue-gray eyes full of affection. "Martha," she said, "I have such a lot to talk over! What did you think of last night?"

"I thought it splendid," replied Martha.

"And Betty—what did you think of Betty?"

"Your cousin? She is very dramatic," said Martha.

"Yes, that is it," replied Fanny; "she is dramatic in everything. I doubt if she is ever natural or her true self."

"Fanny!"

"Oh, dear old Martha, don't be so frightfully prim! I don't intend to break Rule No. I. Of course I love Betty. As a matter of fact, I have loved her before any of you set eyes on her. She is my very own cousin, and but for father's strong influence would never have been at this school at all. Still, I repeat that she is dramatic and hardly ever herself."

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"She puzzles me, I confess," said Martha, a little dubiously; "but then," she added, "I can't help yielding to her charm."

"That is it," said Fanny—"her charm. But look down deep into your heart, Martha, and tell me if you think her charm healthy."

"Well, I see nothing wrong about it." Then Martha became abruptly silent.

"For instance," said Fanny, pressing a little closer to her companion, "why ever did she make your special protégé Sibyl Ray such a figure of fun last night?"

"I thought Sibyl looked rather pretty."

"When she entered the room, Martha?"

"Oh no; she was quite hideous then, poor little thing! But Betty soon put that all right; she had very deft fingers."

"I know," said Fanny. "But what I want to have explained is this: why Betty, a girl who is more or less worshiped by half the girls in the school, should trouble herself with such a very unimportant person as Sibyl Ray, I want to know. Can you tell me?"

"Even if I could tell you, remembering Rule No. I., I don't think I would," said Martha.

Fanny sat very still for a minute or two. Then she got up. "I don't see," she remarked, "why Rule No. I. should make us unsociable each with the other. The very object of our club is that we should have no secrets, but should be quite open and above-board. Now, Martha West, look me straight in the face!"

"I will, Fanny Crawford. What in the world are you accusing me of?"

"Of keeping something back from me which, as a member of the Specialities, you have no right whatever to do."

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A slow, heavy blush crept over Martha's face. She got up. "I am going to look over my German lesson," she said. "Fräulein will want me almost immediately." Then she left Fanny, who stared after her retreating figure.

"I will find out," thought Fanny, "what Martha is keeping to herself. That little horror Betty will sow all kinds of evil seed in the school if I don't watch her. I did wrong to promise her, by putting my finger to my lips, that I would be silent with regard to her conduct. I see it now. But if Betty supposes that she can keep her secret to herself she is vastly mistaken. Hurrah, there's Sibyl Ray! Sib, come here, child; I want to have a chat with you."

It was a bitterly cold and windy day outside; there were even sleet-showers falling at intervals. Winter was coming on early, and with a vengeance.

"Why have you come in?" asked Fanny.

"It's so bitterly cold out, Fanny."

"Well, sit down now you are in. You are a nice little thing, you know, Sib, although at present you are very unimportant. You know that, of course?"

"Yes," said Sibyl; "I am told it nearly every hour of the day." She spoke in a wistful tone. "Sometimes," she added, "I could almost wish I were back in the lower school, where I was looked up to by the smaller girls and had a right good time."

"We can never go back, Sib; that is the law of life."

"Of course not."

"Well, sit down and talk to me. Now, I have something to say to you. Do you know that I am devoured with curiosity, and all about a small girl like yourself?"

"Oh Fanny," said Sibyl, immensely flattered, "I am glad you take an interest in me!"

"I must be frank," said Fanny. "Up to the present I have taken no special interest in you, except in so far as you are Martha's protégé; but when I saw you in that extraordinary dress last night I singled you out at once as a girl with original ideas. Do look me in the

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face, Sib!"

Sibyl turned. Fanny's face was exquisitely chiselled. Each neat little feature was perfect. Her eyes were large and well-shaped, her brows delicately marked, her complexion pure lilies and roses; her hair was thick and smooth, and yet there were little ripples about it which gave it, even in its schoolgirl form, a look of distinction. Sibyl, on the contrary, was an undersized girl, with the fair, colorless face, pale-blue eyes, the lack of eyebrows and eyelashes, the hair thin and small in quantity, which make the most hopeless type of all as regards good looks.

"I wonder, Sib," said Fanny, "if you, you little mite, are really eaten up with vanity?"

"I—vain! Why should you say so?"

"I only thought it from your peculiar dress last night."

Sibyl colored and spoke eagerly. "Oh, but that wasn't me at all; it was that quite too darling Betty!"

"Do you mean my cousin, Betty Vivian?"

"Of course, who else?"

"Well, what had she to do with it?"

"I will tell you if you like, Fanny. She didn't expect me to keep it a secret. I met her when I was out——"

"You—met Betty—when you were out?"

"Yes." There was a kind of reserve in Sibyl's tone which made Fanny scent a possible mystery.

"Where did you meet her?" was the next inquiry.

"Well, she was standing by the stump of an old tree which is hollow inside. It is just at the top of the hill by the bend, exactly where the hill goes down towards the 'forest primeval.'"

"Can't say I remember it," said Fanny. "Go on, Sib. So Betty was standing there?"

"Yes, oh yes. I saw her in the distance. I was expecting to meet Clarice and Mary Moss; but they failed me, although they had faithfully promised to come. So when I saw Betty I could not resist running up to her; but when I got quite close I stood still."

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"Well, you stood still. Why?"

"Oh Fan, she was doing such a funny thing! She was bending down and looking over into the hollow of the tree. Then, all of a sudden, she thrust her hand in—far down—and took something out of the tree and looked at it. I could just catch sight of what it was——"

"Yes, go on. What was it? Don't be afraid of me, Sib. I have a lot of chocolates in my pocket that I will give you presently."

"Oh thank you, Fanny! It is nice to talk to you. I couldn't see very distinctly what she had in her hand, only she was staring at it, and staring at it; and then she dropped it in again, right down into the depths of the tree; and I saw her bending more than ever, as though she were covering it up."

"But you surely saw what it was like?"

"It might have been anything—I wasn't very near then. I ran up to her, and asked her what it was."

"And what did she say?"

"Oh, she said it was a piece of wood, and that she had dropped it into the tree."

Fanny sat very still. A coldness came over her. She was nearly stunned with what she considered the horror of Betty's conduct.

"What is the matter?" asked Sibyl.

"Nothing at all, Sib; nothing at all. And then, what happened?"

"Betty was very cross at being disturbed."

"That is quite probable," said Fanny with a laugh.

"She certainly was, and I—I—I am afraid I annoyed her; but after a minute or two she got

up and allowed me to walk with her. We walked towards the house, and she told me all kinds of funny stories; she really made me scream with laughter. She is the jolliest girl! Then, all of a sudden, we came in sight of the flower-gardens; and she asked me what I was going to wear last night, and I told her about the green chiffon dress which auntie had sent me; and then she suggested a wreath of small marguerites, and told me to get Birchall to cut some for me. She said they would be very becoming, and of course I believed her. There's nothing in my story, is there, Fanny?"

"That depends on the point of view," answered Fanny.

"I don't understand you."

"Nor do I mean you to, kiddy."

"Well, there's one thing more," continued Sibyl, who felt much elated at being allowed to talk to one of the most supercilious of all the Specialities. "I couldn't get out of my head about Betty and the oak-tree; so just now—a few minutes ago—I got some of my friends to come with me, and we went to the oak-tree, and I stood on Mabel Lee's shoulder, and I poked and poked amongst the débris and rubbish in the hollow of the trunk, and there was nothing there at all—nothing except just a piece of wood. So, of course, Betty spoke the truth—it was wood."

"How many chocolates would you like?" was Fanny's rejoinder.

"Oh Fanny, are you going to give me some?"

"Yes, if you are a good girl, and don't tell any one that you repeated this very harmless and uninteresting little story to me about my Cousin Betty. Of course she is my cousin, and I don't like anything said against her."

"But I wasn't speaking against darling Betty!" Sibyl's eyes filled with tears.

"Of course not, monkey; but you were telling me a little tale which might be construed in different ways."

"Yes, yes; only I don't understand. Betty had a perfect right to poke her hand into the hollow of the tree, and to bring up a piece of wood, and look at it, and put it back again; and I don't understand your expression, Fanny, that it all depends on the point of view."

"Keep this to yourself, and I will give you some more chocolates sometime," was Fanny's answer. "I can be your friend as well as Martha—that is, if you are nice, and don't repeat every single thing you hear. The worst sin in a schoolgirl—at least, the worst minor sin—is to be breaking confidences. No schoolgirl with a shade of honor in her composition would ever do that, and certainly no girl trained at Haddo Court ought to be noted for such a characteristic. Now, Sibyl, you are no fool; and, when I talk to you, you are not to repeat things. I may possibly want to talk to you again, and then there'll be more chocolates and—and—other things; and as you are in the upper school, and are really quite a nice girl, I shouldn't be at all surprised if I invited you to have tea with me in my bedroom some night—oh, not quite yet, but some evening not far off. Now, off with you, and let me see how well you can keep an innocent little confidence between you and me!"

Sibyl ran off, munching her chocolates, wondering a good deal at Fanny's manner, but in the excitement of her school-life, soon forgetting both her and Betty Vivian. For, after all, there was no story worth thinking about. There was nothing in the hollow of the old tree but the piece of wood, and nothing—nothing in the wide world—could be made interesting out of that.

Meanwhile, Fanny thought for a time. The first great entertainment of the Specialities was over. Betty was now a full-blown member, and as such must be treated in a manner which Fanny could not possibly have assumed towards her before this event took place. Fanny blamed herself for her weakness in consenting to keep Betty's secret. She had done so on the spur of the moment, influenced by the curious look in the girl's eyes, and wondering if she would turn to her with affection if she, Fanny, were so magnanimous. But Betty had not turned to her with either love or affection. Betty was precisely the Betty she had been before she joined the club. It is true she was very much sought after and consulted on all sorts of matters, and her name was whispered in varying notes of admiration among the girls, and she was likely (unless a spoke were put in her wheel) to rise to one of the highest positions in the great school. Betty had committed one act of flagrant wickedness. Fanny was not going to mince matters; she could not call it by any other name. There were no extenuating circumstances, in her opinion, to excuse this act of Betty's. The fact that she had first stolen the packet, and then told Sir John Crawford a direct lie with regard to it, was the sort of thing that Fanny could never get over.

"One act of wickedness leads to another," thought Fanny. "Contrary to my advice, my beseechings, she has joined our club. She has taken a vow which she cannot by any possibility keep, which she breaks every hour of every day; for she holds a secret which, according to Rule No. I., the other Specialities ought to know. What was she doing by the old stump? What did she take out and look at so earnestly? It was not a piece of wood. That idea is sheer nonsense."

Fanny thought and thought, and the more she thought the more uncomfortable did she grow. "It is perfectly horrible!" she kept saying to herself. "I loathe myself for even thinking about it, but I am afraid I must put a spoke in her wheel. The whole school may be contaminated at this rate. If Betty could do what she did she may do worse, and there isn't a girl in the place who isn't prepared to worship her. Oh, of course I'm not jealous; why should I be? I should be a very unworthy member of the Specialities if I were. Nevertheless —"

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Just then Sylvia and Hetty Vivian walked through the great recreation-hall arm in arm.

Fanny called them to her. "Where's Betty?" she asked.

"She told us she'd be very busy for half an hour in our room, and that then she was going downstairs to have a sort of conference—with you, I suppose, Fanny, and the rest of the Specialities."

Sylvia gave a very impatient shrug of her shoulders.

"Why do you look like that, Sylvia?" asked Fanny.

"Well, the fact is, Hetty and I do hate our own Betty belonging to your club. Whenever we want her now she is engaged; and she has such funny talk all about committee meetings and private conferences in your odious sitting-room. We don't like it a bit. We much, much preferred our Betty before she joined the Specialities."

"All the same," said Fanny, "you must have felt very proud of your Betty last night."

Hester laughed. "She wasn't half her true self," said the girl. "Oh, of course she was wonderful, and much greater than others; but I wish you could have heard her tell stories in Scotland. We used to have just one blink of light from the fire, and we sat and held each other's hands, and I tell you Betty made us thrill."

"Well, now that you have reminded me," said Fanny, rising as she spoke, "I must go and attend that committee meeting. I really forgot it, so I am greatly obliged to you girls for reminding me. And you mustn't be jealous of your sister; that is a very wrong feeling."

The girls laughed and ran off, while Fanny slowly walked down the recreation-hall and then ascended some stairs, until she found herself in that particularly cosy and bright sitting-room which was set apart for the Specialities.

Martha West was there, also Susie Rushworth, the two Bertrams, and Olive Repton. But Margaret Grant had not yet appeared, nor had Betty Vivian. Fanny took her seat near Olive. The girls began to chat, and the subject of last night's entertainment was discussed pretty fully. Most of the girls present agreed that it was remarkably silly of Sibyl Ray to wear marguerites in her hair, that they were very sorry for her, and hoped she would not be so childish again. It was just at that moment that Margaret Grant appeared, and immediately afterwards Betty Vivian. The minutes of the last committee meeting were read aloud, and then Margaret turned and asked the girls if they were thoroughly satisfied with the entertainment of the previous night. They all answered in the affirmative except Fanny, who was silent. Neither did Betty speak, for she had been the chief contributor to the entertainment.

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"Well," continued Margaret, "I may as well say at once that I was delighted. Betty, I didn't know that you possessed so great a gift. I wish you would improvise as you did last night one evening for Mrs. Haddo."

Betty turned a little whiter than usual. Then she said slowly, "Alone with her—and with you—I could."

"I think she would love it," said Margaret. "It would surprise her just to picture the scene as you threw yourself into it last night."

"I could do it," said Betty, "alone with her and with you."

There was not a scrap of vanity in Betty's manner. She spoke seriously, just as one who, knowing she possesses a gift, accepts it and is thankful.

"I couldn't get it out of my head all night," continued Margaret, "more particularly that part where the angels came. It was a very beautiful idea, Betty dear, and I congratulate you on being able to conjure up such fine images in your mind."

It was with great difficulty that Fanny could suppress her feelings, but the next instant an opportunity occurred for her to give vent to them. [Pg 164]

"Now," said Margaret, "as the great object of our society is in all things to be in harmony, I want to put it to the vote: How did the entertainment go off last night?"

"I liked every single thing about it," said Susie Rushworth; "the supper, the games, and, above all things, the story-telling."

The same feeling was expressed in more or less different words by each girl in succession, until Fanny's turn came.

"And you, Fanny—what did you think?"

"I liked the supper and the games, of course," said Fanny.

"And the story-telling, Fanny? You ought to be proud of having such a gifted cousin."

"I didn't like the story-telling, and Betty knows why I didn't like it."

The unmistakable look of hatred on Fanny's face, the queer flash in her eyes as she glanced at Betty, and Betty's momentary quiver as she looked back at her, could not fail to be observed by each girl present.

"Fanny, I am astonished at you!" said Margaret Grant in a voice of marked displeasure.

"You asked a plain question, Margaret. I should have said nothing if nothing had been asked; but you surely don't wish me to commit myself to a lie?"

"Oh no, no!" said Margaret. "But sisterly love, and—and your own cousin too!"

"I want to say something in private to Betty Vivian; and I would earnestly beg of you, Margaret, not to propose to Mrs. Haddo that Betty should tell her any story until after I have spoken. I have my reasons for doing this; and I do not think, all things considered, that I am really breaking Rule No. I. in adopting this course of action."

"This is most strange!" said Margaret. [Pg 165]

Betty rose and came straight up to Fanny. "Where and when do you want to speak to me, Fanny?" she asked.

"I will go with you now," said Fanny.

"Then I think," said Margaret, "our meeting has broken up. The next meeting of the Specialities will be held in Olive Repton's room on Thursday next. There are several days between now and then; but to-morrow at four o'clock I mean to give a tea to all the club here. I invite you, one and all, to be present; and afterwards we can talk folly to our hearts' content. Listen, please, girls: the next item on my programme is that we invite dear Mr. Fairfax to tea with us, and ask him a few questions with regard to the difficulties we find in the reading of Jeremy Taylor's 'Holy Living.'"

"I don't suppose, Margaret, it is absolutely necessary for me to attend that meeting?" said Betty.

"Certainly not, Betty. No one is expected to attend who does not wish to."

"You see, I have no difficulties to speak about," said Betty with a light laugh.

Margaret glanced at her with surprise.

"Come, Betty," said Fanny; and the two left the room.

"Where am I to go to?" asked Betty when they found themselves outside.

"Out, if you like," said Fanny.

"No, thank you. The day is very cold."

"Then come to my room with me, will you, Betty?"

"No," said Betty, "I don't want to go to your room."

"I must see you somewhere by yourself," said Fanny. "I have something important to say to you."

"Oh, all right then," said Betty, shrugging her shoulders. "Your room will do as well as any other place. Let's get it over."

The girls ran upstairs. They presently entered Fanny's bedroom, which was a small apartment, but very neat and cheerful. It was next door to the Vivians' own spacious one.

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The moment they were inside Betty turned and faced Fanny. "Do you always intend to remain my enemy, Fanny?" she asked.

"Far from that, Betty; I want to be your truest friend."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, don't talk humbug! If you are my truest friend you will act as such. Now, what is the matter—what is up?"

"I will tell you."

"I am all attention," said Betty. "Pray begin."

"I hurt your feelings downstairs just now by saying that I did not care for your story-telling."

"You didn't hurt them in the least, for I never expected you to care. The story-telling wasn't meant for you."

"But I must mention now why I didn't care," continued Fanny, speaking as quickly as she could. "Had you been the Betty the rest of the school think you I could have lost myself, too, in your narrative, and I could have seen the picture you endeavored to portray. But knowing you as you are, Betty Vivian, I could only look down into your wicked heart——"

"What an agreeable occupation!" said Betty with a laugh which she tried to make light, but did not quite succeed.

Fanny was silent.

After a minute Betty spoke again. "Do you spend all your time, Fanny, gazing into my depraved heart?"

"Whenever I think of you, Betty—and I confess I do think of you very often—I remember the sin you have sinned, the lack of repentance you have shown, and, above all things, your daring spirit in joining our club. It is true that when you joined—after all my advice to you to the contrary, my beseeching of you to withstand this temptation—I gave you to understand that I would be silent. But my conscience torments me because of that tacit promise I gave you. Nevertheless I will keep it. But remember, you are in danger. You know perfectly well where the missing packet is. It is—or was, at least—in the hollow stump of the old oak-tree at the top of the hill, and you positively told Sibyl Ray a lie about it when she saw you looking at it yesterday. Afterwards, in order to divert her attention from yourself, you sent her to gather marguerites to make a wreath for her hair—a most ridiculous thing for the child to wear. What you did afterwards I don't know, and don't care to inquire. But, Betty, the fact is that you, instead of being an inspiring influence in this school, will undermine it—will ruin its morals. You are a dangerous girl, Betty Vivian; and I tell you so to your face. You are bound—bound to come to grief. Now, I will say no more. I leave it to your conscience what to do and what not to do. There are some fine points about you; and you could be magnificent, but you are not. There, I have spoken!"

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"Thank you, Fanny," replied Betty in a very gentle tone. She waited for a full minute; then she said, "Is that all?"

"Yes, that is all."

Betty went away to her own room. As soon as ever she entered, she went straight to the looking-glass and gazed at her reflection. She then turned a succession of somersaults from one end of the big apartment to the other. Having done this, she washed her face and hands in ice-cold water, rubbed her cheeks until they glowed, brushed her black hair, and felt better. She ran downstairs, and a few minutes later was in the midst of a very hilarious group, who were all chatting and laughing and hailing Betty Vivian as the best comrade in the wide world.

Betty was not only brilliant socially; at the same time she had fine intellectual powers. She was the delight of her teachers, for she could imbibe knowledge as a sponge absorbs water. On this particular day she was at her best during a very difficult lesson at the piano from a professor who came from London. Betty had always a passionate love of music, and to-day she revelled in it. She had been learning one of Chopin's Nocturnes, and now rendered it with exquisite pathos. The professor was delighted, and in the midst of the performance Mrs. Haddo came into the music-room. She listened with approval, and when the girl rose,

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said, "Well done!"

Another girl took her place; and Betty, running up to Mrs. Haddo, said, "Oh, may I speak to you?"

"Yes, dear; what is it? Come to my room for a minute, if you wish, Betty."

"It isn't important enough for that. Dear Mrs. Haddo, it's just that I am mad for a bit of frolic."

"Frolic, my child! You seem to have plenty."

"Not enough—not enough—not nearly enough for a wild girl of Aberdeenshire, a girl who has lived on the moors and loved them."

"What do you want, dear child?"

"I want most awfully, with your permission, to go with my two sisters Sylvia and Hester to have tea with the Mileses. I want to pet those dogs again, and I want to go particularly badly between now and next Thursday."

"And why especially between now and next Thursday?"

"Ah, I can't quite give you the reason. There is a reason. Please—please—please say yes!"

"It is certainly against my rules."

"But, dear Mrs. Haddo, it isn't against your rules if you give leave," pleaded the girl.

"You are very clever at arguing, Betty. I certainly have liberty to break rules in individual cases. Well, dear child, it shall be so. I will send a line to Mrs. Miles to ask her to expect you and your sisters to-morrow. A servant shall accompany you, and will call again later on. You can only stay about one hour at the farm. To-morrow is a half-holiday, so it will be all right."

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"Oh, how kind of you!" said Betty.

But again Mrs. Haddo noticed that Betty avoided looking into her eyes. "Betty," she said, "this is a small matter—my yielding to the whim of an impetuous girl in whom I take an interest. But, my dear child, I have to congratulate you. You made a marvellous success—a marvellous success—last night. Several of the girls in the school have spoken of it, and in particular dear Margaret Grant. I wonder if you would improvise for me some evening?"

"Gladly!" replied Betty. And now for one minute her brilliant eyes were raised and fixed on those of Mrs. Haddo. "Gladly," she repeated—and she shivered slightly—"if you will hear me after next Thursday."

CHAPTER XIV

TEA AT FARMER MILES'S

"It's all right, girls!" said Betty in her most joyful tone.

"What is all right, Betty and Bess?" asked Sylvia saucily.

"Oh, kiss me, girls," said Betty, "and let's have a real frolic! To-morrow is Saturday—a half-holiday, of course—and we're going to the Mileses' to have tea."

"The Mileses'!"

"Yes, you silly children; those dear farmer-folk who keep the dogs."

"Dan and Beersheba?" cried Hetty.

"Yes, Dan and Beersheba; and we're going to have a real jolly time, and we're going to forget dull care. It'll be quite the most delightful sport we've had since we came to Haddo Court. What I should love most would be to vault over the fence and go all by our lonesome selves. But we must have a maid—a horrid, stupid maid; only, of course, she'll walk behind, and she'll leave us alone when we get to the farm. She'll fetch us again by-and-by—that'll be another nuisance. Still, somehow, I don't know what there is about school, but I'm not game enough to go without leave."

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"You are changed a good bit," said Hetty. "I think myself it's since you were made a

Speciality.”

“Perhaps so,” said Betty thoughtfully.

Sylvia nestled close to her sister; while Hetty knelt down beside her, laid her elbows on Betty’s knee, and looked up into her face.

“I wonder,” said Sylvia, “if you like being a Special, or whatever they call themselves, Betty mine?”

Betty did not speak.

“Do you like it?” said Hester, giving her sister a poke in the side as she uttered the words.

“I can’t quite tell you, girls; it’s all new to me at present. Everything is new and strange. Oh girls, England is a cold, cold country!”

“But it is declared by all the geography-books to be warmer than Scotland,” said Sylvia, speaking in a thoughtful voice.

“I don’t mean physical cold,” said Betty, half-laughing as she spoke.

“I begin to like school,” said Hetty. “Lessons aren’t really a bit hard.”

“I think school is very stimulating,” said Sylvia. “The teachers are all so kind, and we are making friends by degrees. The only thing that Hetty and I don’t like is this, Bet, that we see so very little of you.”

“Although I see little of you I never forget you,” was Betty’s answer.

“And then,” continued Sylvia, “we sleep in the same room, which is a great blessing. That is something to be thankful for.” [Pg 171]

“And perhaps,” said Betty, “we’ll see more of each other in the future.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, nothing—nothing.”

“Betty, you are growing very mysterious.”

“I hope not,” replied Betty. “I should just hate to be mysterious.”

“Well, you are growing it, all the same,” said Hester. “But, oh Bet, you’re becoming the most wonderful favorite in the school! I can’t tell you what the other girls say about you, for I really think it would make you conceited. It does us a lot of good to have a sister like you; for whenever we are spoken to or introduced to a new girl—I mean a girl we haven’t spoken to before—the remark invariably is, ‘Oh, are you related to Betty Vivian, the Speciality?’ And then—and then everything is all right, and the girls look as if they would do anything for us. We are the moon and stars, you are the sun; and it’s very nice to have a sister like you.”

“Well, listen, girls. We’re going to have a real good time to-morrow, and we’ll forget all about school and the lessons and the chapel.”

“Oh, but I do like the chapel!” said Sylvia in a thoughtful voice. “I love to hear Mr. Fairfax when he reads the lessons; and I think if I were in trouble about anything I could tell him, somehow.”

“Could you?” said Betty. She started slightly, and stared very hard at her sister. “Perhaps one could,” she said after a moment’s pause. “Mr. Fairfax is very wonderful.”

“Oh yes, isn’t he?” said Hester.

“But we won’t think of him to-night or to-morrow,” continued Betty, rising to her feet as she spoke. “We must imagine ourselves back in Scotland again. Oh, it will be splendid to have that time at the Mileses’ farm!” [Pg 172]

The rest of the evening passed without anything remarkable occurring. Betty, as usual, was surrounded by her friends. The younger Vivian girls chatted gaily with others. Every one was quite kind and pleasant to Betty, and Fanny Crawford left her alone. As this was quite the very best thing Fanny could do, Betty thanked her in her heart. But that evening, just before prayer-time, Betty crossed the hall, where she had been sitting surrounded by a group of animated schoolfellows, and went up to Miss Symes. “Have I your permission, Miss Symes,” she said, “not to attend prayers in chapel to-night?”

“Aren’t you well, Betty dear?” asked Miss Symes a little anxiously.

Betty remained silent for a minute. Then she said, "Physically I am quite well; mentally I am not."

"Dear Betty!"

"I can't explain it," said Betty. "I would just rather not attend prayers to-night. Do you mind?"

"No, dear. You haven't perhaps yet been acquainted with the fact that the Specialities are never coerced to attend prayers. They are expected to attend; but if for any reason they prefer not, questions are not asked."

"Oh, thank you!" said Betty. She turned and went slowly and thoughtfully upstairs. When she got to her own room she sat quite still, evidently thinking very hard. But when her sisters joined her (and they all went to bed earlier than usual), Betty was the first to drop asleep.

As has already been stated, Betty's pretty little bed was placed between Sylvia's and Hetty's; and now, as she slept, the two younger girls bent across, clasped hands, and looked down at her small white face. They could just get a glimmer of that face in the moonlight, which happened to be shining brilliantly through the three big windows.

All of a sudden, Sylvia crept very softly out of bed, and, running round to Hester's side, whispered to her, "What is the matter?"

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"I don't know," replied Hester.

"But something is," remarked Sylvia.

"Yes, something is," said Hester. "Best not worry her."

Sylvia nodded and returned to her own bed.

On the following morning, however, all Betty's apparent low spirits had vanished. She was in that wild state of hilarity when she seemed to carry all before her. Her sisters could not help laughing every time Betty opened her lips, and it was the same during recess. When many girls clustered round her with their gay jokes, they became convulsed with laughter at her comic replies.

It was arranged by Mrs. Haddo that Betty and her two sisters were to start for the Mileses' farm at three o'clock exactly. It would not take them more than half an hour to walk there. Mrs. Miles was requested to give them tea not later than four o'clock, and they were to be called for at half-past four. Thus they would be back at Haddo Court about five.

"Only two hours!" thought Betty to herself. "But one can get a great deal of pleasure into two hours."

Betty felt highly excited. Her sisters' delight at being able to go failed to interest her. As a rule, with all her fun and nonsense and hilarity, Betty possessed an abundance of self-control. But to-day she seemed to have lost it.

The very staid-looking maid, Harris by name, who accompanied them, could scarcely keep pace with the Vivian girls. They ran, they shouted, they laughed. When they were about half-way to the Mileses' farm they came to a piece of common which had not yet been inclosed. The day was dry and comparatively warm, and the grass on the common was green, owing to the recent rains.

"Harris," said Betty, turning to the maid, "would you like to see some Catharine wheels?"

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Harris stared in some amazement at the young lady.

"Come along, girls, do!" said Betty. "Harris must have fun as well as the rest of us. You like fun, don't you Harris?"

"Love it, miss!" said Harris.

"Well, then, here goes!" said Betty. "Harris, please hold our hats."

The next instant the three were turning somersaults on the green grass of the common, to the unbounded amazement of the maid, who felt quite shocked, and shouted to the young ladies to come back and behave themselves. Betty stopped at once when she heard the pleading note in Harris's voice.

"You hadn't ought to have done it," said Harris; "and if my missis was to know! Oh, what shows you all three do look! Now, let me put your hats on tidy-like. There, that's better!"

"I feel much happier in my mind now, Harris—and that's a good thing, isn't it?" said Betty.

"Yes, miss, it's a very good thing. But I shouldn't say, to look at you, that you knew the meaning of the least bit of unhappiness."

"Of course I don't," said Betty; "nor does my sister Sylvia, nor does my sister Hester."

"We did up in Scotland for a time," said Hester, who could not understand Betty at all, and felt more and more puzzled at her queer behavior.

"Well, now, we'll walk sober and steady," said Harris. "You may reckon on one thing, missies—that I won't tell what you done on the common, for if I did you'd be punished pretty sharp."

"You may tell if you like, Harris," said Betty. "I shouldn't dream of asking you to keep a secret."

"I won't, all the same," said Harris.

The walk continued without any more exciting occurrences; and when the girls reached the farm they were greeted by Mrs. Miles, her two big boys, and the farmer himself. Here Harris dropped a curtsy and disappeared.

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"Oh, I must kiss you, Mrs. Miles!" said Betty. "And, please, this is my sister Sylvia, and this is Hester. They are twins; but, having two sets yourself, you said you did not mind seeing them and giving them tea, even though they are twins."

"'Tain't no disgrace, missie, as I've heerd tell on," said the farmer.

"Oh Farmer Miles, I am glad to see you!" said Betty. "Fancy dear, kind Mrs. Haddo giving us leave to come and have tea with you!—I do hope, Mrs. Miles, you've got a very nice tea, for I can tell you I am hungry. I've given myself an appetite on purpose; for I would hardly touch any breakfast, and at dinner I took the very teeniest bit."

"And so did I," said Sylvia in a low tone.

"And I also," remarked Hester.

"Well, missies, I ha' got the best tea I could think of, and right glad we are to see you. You haven't spoken to poor Ben yet, missie."

Here Mrs. Miles indicated her eldest son, an uncouth-looking lad of about twelve years of age.

"Nor Sammy neither," said the farmer, laying his hand on Sammy's broad shoulder, and bringing the red-haired and freckled boy forward.

"I am just delighted to see you, Ben; and to see you, Sammy. And these are my sisters. And, please, Mrs. Miles, where are the twins?"

"The twinses are upstairs, sound asleep; but they'll be down by tea-time," said Mrs. Miles.

"And, above all things, where are the dogs?" said Betty.

"Now, missie," said the farmer, "them dogs has been very rampageous lately, and, try as we would, we couldn't tame 'em; so we have 'em fastened up in their kennels, and only lets 'em out at night. You shall come and see 'em in their kennels, missie."

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"Oh, but they must be let out!" said Betty, tears brimming to her eyes. "My sisters love dogs just as much as I do. They must see the dogs. Oh, we must have a game with them!"

"I wouldn't take it upon me, I wouldn't really," said the farmer, "to let them dogs free to-day. They're that remarkable rampageous."

"Well, take me to them anyhow," said Betty.

The farmer, his wife, Ben and Sammy, and the three Vivian girls tramped across the yard, and presently arrived opposite the kennels where Dan and Beersheba were straining at the end of their chains. When they heard footsteps they began to bark vociferously, but the moment they saw Betty their barking ceased; they whined and strained harder than ever in their wild rapture. Betty instantly flung herself on her knees by Dan's side and kissed him on the forehead. The dog licked her little hand, and was almost beside himself with delight. As to poor Beersheba, he very nearly went mad with jealousy over the attention paid to Dan.

"You see for yourself," said Betty, looking into the farmer's face, "the dogs will be all right with me. You must let them loose while I am here."

"It do seem quite wonderful," said the farmer. "Now, don't it, wife?"

"A'most uncanny, I call it," said Mrs. Miles.

"But before you let them loose I must introduce my sisters to them," said Betty. "Sylvia, come here. Sylvia, kneel by me."

The girl did so. The dogs were not quite so much excited over Sylvia as they were over Betty, but they also licked their hands and wagged their tails in great delight. Hester went through the same form of introduction; and then, somewhat against his will, the farmer gave the dogs their liberty. Betty said, in a commanding tone, "To heel, good boys, at once!" and the wild and savage dogs obeyed her.

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She paced up and down the yard in a state of rapture at her conquest over these fierce animals. Then she whispered something to Sylvia, who in her turn whispered to Mrs. Miles, who in her turn whispered to Ben; the result of which was that three wicker chairs were brought from the house, Betty and her sisters seated themselves, and the dogs sprawled in ecstasy at their side.

"Oh, we are happy!" said Betty. "Mrs. Miles, was your heart ever very starv'ingly empty?"

"Times, maybe," said Mrs. Miles, who had gone, like most of her sex, through a chequered career.

"And weren't you glad when it got filled up to the brim again?"

"That I was," said Mrs. Miles.

"My heart was a bit starved this morning," said Betty; "but it feels full to the brim now. Please, dear, good Mrs. Miles, leave us five alone together. Go all of you away, and let us stay alone together."

"Meanin' by that you three ladies and them dogs?"

"Yes, that is what I mean."

The farmer bent and whispered something to his wife, the result of which was that a minute later Betty and her sisters were alone with the animals. They did not know, however, that the farmer had hidden himself in the big barn ready to spring out should "them fierce uns," as he termed the animals, become refractory. Then began an extraordinary scene. Betty whispered in the dogs' ears, and they grovelled at her feet. Then she sang a low song to them; and they stood upright, quivering with rapture. The two girls kept behind Betty, who was evidently the first in the hearts of these extraordinary dogs.

"I could teach them no end of tricks. They could be almost as lively and delightful as Andrew and Fritz," said Betty, turning to her sisters.

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"Oh yes," they replied. Then Sylvia burst out crying.

"Silly Sylvia! What is the matter?" said Betty.

"It's only that I didn't know my heart was hungry until—until this very minute," said Sylvia. "Oh, it is awful to live in a house without dogs!"

"I have felt that all along," said Betty. "But I suppose, after a fashion, we've got to endure. Oh do stop crying, Sylvia! Let's make the most of a happy time."

The culmination of that happy time was when Mrs. Miles appeared on the scene, accompanied by four little children—two very pretty little girls, dressed in white, their short sleeves tied up with blue ribbons for the occasion; and two little boys a year or two older.

"These be the twinses," said Mrs. Miles. "These two be Moses and Ephraim, and these two be Deborah and Anna. The elder of the twinses are Moses and Ephraim, and the younger Deborah and Anna. Now, then children, you jest drop your curtsies to the young ladies, and say you are glad to see them."

"But, indeed, they shall do nothing of the kind," said Betty. "Oh, aren't they the sweetest darlings! Deborah, I must kiss you. Anna, put your sweet little arms round my neck."

The children were in wild delight, for all children took immediately to Betty. But, lo and behold! one of the dogs gave an ominous growl. Was not his idol devoting herself to some one else? In one instant the brute might have sprung upon poor little Deborah had not Betty turned and laid her hand on his forehead. Instantly he gave a sound between a groan and a moan, and crouched at her feet.

"There! I never!" said Mrs. Miles. "You be a reg'lar out-and-out lion-tamer, miss."

"I'm getting more and more hungry every minute," said Betty. "Will—will tea be ready soon, Mrs. Miles?"

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"I was coming out to fetch you in, my loves."

The whole party then migrated to the kitchen, which was ornamented especially for the occasion. The long center-table was covered with a snowy cloth, and on it were spread all sorts of appetizing viands—great slabs of honey in the comb, cakes of every description, hot griddle-cakes, scones, muffins, cold chicken, cold ham, and the most delicious jams of every variety. Added to these good things was a great bowl full of Devonshire cream, which Mrs. Miles had made herself from a well-known Devonshire recipe that morning.

"Oh, but doesn't this look good!" said Betty. She sat down with a twin girl at each side of her, and with a dog resting his head on the lap of each of the twins, and their beseeching eyes fixed on Betty's face.

"I ha' got a treat for 'em afterwards, missie," said Mrs. Miles; "two strong beef-bones. They shall eat 'em, and they'll never forget you arter that."

Betty became so lively now that at a whispered word from Sylvia she began to tell stories—by no means the sort of stories she had told at the Specialities' entertainment, but funny tales, sparkling with wit and humor—tales quite within the comprehension of her intelligent but unlearned audience. Even the farmer roared with laughter, and said over and over to his wife, as he wiped the tears of enjoyment from his eyes, "Well, that do cap all!"

Meanwhile the important ceremony of eating the many good things provided went steadily on, until at last even Betty had to own that she was satisfied.

All rose from their seats, and as they did so Mrs. Miles put a pretty little basket into each girl's hand. "A few new-laid eggs, dearies," she said, "and a comb of honey for each of you. You must ask Mrs. Haddo's leave afore you eats 'em, but I know she won't mind. And there's some very late roses, the last of the season, that I've put into the top of your basket, Miss Betty."

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Alack and alas, how good it all was! How pleasant was the air, how genial the simple life! How Betty and Sylvia and Hester rejoiced in it, and how quickly it was over!

Harris appeared, and at this signal the girls knew they must go. Betty presented her canine darlings with a beef-bone each; and then, with a hug to Mrs. Miles, a hearty hand-clasp to the farmer and the boys, and further hugs to both sets of twins, the girls returned to Haddo Court.

CHAPTER XV

A GREAT DETERMINATION

The visit to the farm was long remembered by Betty Vivian. It was the one bright oasis, the one brilliant spark of intense enjoyment, in a dark week. For each day the shadow of what lay before her—and of what she, Betty Vivian, had made up her mind to do—seemed to creep lower and lower over her horizon, until, when Thursday morning dawned, it seemed to Betty that there was neither sun, moon, nor stars in her heaven.

But if Betty lacked much and was full of grave and serious thoughts, there was one quality, admirable in itself, which she had to perfection, and that was her undoubted bravery. To make up her mind to do a certain thing was, with Betty Vivian, to do it. She had not quite made up her mind on Saturday; but on Sunday morning she had very nearly done so, and on Sunday evening she had quite done so. On Sunday evening, therefore, she knelt rather longer than the others, struggling and praying in the beautiful chapel; and when she raised her small white face, and met the eyes of the chaplain fixed on her, a thrill went through her. He, at least, would understand, and, if necessary, give her sympathy. But just at present she did not need sympathy, or rather she would not ask for it. She had great self-control, and she kept her emotions so absolutely to herself that no one guessed what she was suffering. Every day, every hour, she was becoming more and more the popular girl of the school; for Betty had nothing mean in her nature, and could love frankly and generously. She could listen to endless confidences without dreaming of betraying them, and the girls got to know that Betty Vivian invariably meant what she said. One person, however, she avoided, and that person was Fanny Crawford.

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Thursday passed in its accustomed way: school in the morning, with recess; school in the

afternoon, followed by play, games of all sorts, and many another delightful pastime. Betty went for a walk with her two sisters; and presently, almost before they knew, they found themselves surveying their three little plots of ground in the gardens, which they had hitherto neglected. While they were so employed, Mrs. Haddo quite unexpectedly joined them.

"Oh, my dear girls, why, you have done nothing here—nothing at all!"

Sylvia said, "We are going to almost immediately, Mrs. Haddo."

And Hetty said, "I quite love gardening. I was only waiting until Betty gave the word."

"So you two little girls obey Betty in all things?" said Mrs. Haddo, glancing at the elder girl's face.

"We only do it because we love to," was the response.

"Well, my dears, I am surprised! Why, there isn't a sight of your Scotch heather! Has it died? What has happened to it?"

"We made a burnt-offering of it," said Betty suddenly.

"You did what?" said Mrs. Haddo in some astonishment.

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"You see," said Betty, "it was this way." She now looked full up at her mistress. "The Scotch heather could not live in exile. So we burnt it, and set all the fairies free. They are in Aberdeenshire now, and quite happy."

"What a quaint idea!" said Mrs. Haddo. "You must tell me more about this by-and-by, Betty."

Betty made no answer.

"Meanwhile," continued Mrs. Haddo, who felt puzzled at the girl's manner, she scarcely knew why, "I will tell a gardener to have the gardens well dug and laid out in little walks. I will also have the beds prepared, and then you must consult Birchall about the sort of things that grow best in this special plot of ground. Let me see, this is Thursday. I have no doubt Birchall could have a consultation with you on the subject this very minute if you like to see him."

"Oh yes, please!" said Sylvia.

But Betty drew back. "Do you greatly mind if we do nothing about our gardens until next week?" she asked.

"If you prefer it, certainly," answered Mrs. Haddo. "The plots of ground are your property while you stay at Haddo Court. You can neglect them, or you can tend them. Some of the girls of this school have very beautiful gardens, full of sweet, smiling flowers; others, again, do nothing at all in them. I never praise those who cultivate their little patch of garden-ground, and I never blame those who neglect it. It is all a matter of feeling. In my opinion, the garden is meant to be a delight; those who do not care for it miss a wonderful joy, but I don't interfere." As Mrs. Haddo spoke she nodded to the girls, and then walked quietly back towards the house.

"Wasn't it funny of her to say that a garden was meant to be a delight?" said Sylvia. "Oh Betty, don't you love her very much?"

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"Don't ask me," said Betty, and her voice was a little choked.

"Betty," said Sylvia, "you seem to get paler and paler. I am sure you miss Aberdeenshire."

"Miss it!" said Betty; "miss it! Need you ask?"

This was the one peep that her sisters were permitted to get into Betty Vivian's heart before the meeting of the Specialities that evening.

Olive Repton was quite excited preparing for her guests. School had become much more interesting to her since Betty's arrival. Martha was also a sort of rock of comfort to lean upon. Margaret, of course, was always charming. Margaret Grant was Margaret Grant, and there never could be her second; but the two additional members gave undoubted satisfaction to the others—that is, with the exception of Fanny Crawford, who had, however, been most careful not to say one word against Betty since she became a Speciality.

Olive's room was not very far from the Vivians', and as Betty on this special night was hurrying towards the appointed meeting-place she came across Fanny. Between Fanny and

herself not a word had been exchanged for several days.

Fanny stopped her now. "Are you ill, Betty?" she said.

Betty shook her head.

"I wish to tell you," said Fanny, "that, after very carefully considering everything, I have made up my mind that it is not my place to interfere with you. If your conscience allows you to keep silent I shall not speak. That is all."

"Thank you, Fanny," replied Betty. She stood aside and motioned to Fanny to pass her. Fanny felt, for some unaccountable reason, strangely uncomfortable. The cloud which had been hanging over Betty seemed to visit Fanny's heart also. For the first time since her cousin's arrival she almost pitied her.

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Olive's room was very bright. She had a good deal of individual taste, and as the gardeners were always allowed to supply the Specialities with flowers for their weekly meetings and their special entertainments, Olive had her room quite gaily decorated. Smilax hung in graceful festoons from several vases and trailed in a cunning pattern round the little supper-table; cyclamen, in pots, further added to the decorations; and there were still some very beautiful white chrysanthemums left in the green-house, a careful selection of which had been made by Birchall that day for the young ladies' festivities.

And now all the girls were present, and supper began. Hitherto, during the few meetings of the Specialities that had taken place since she became a member, Betty's voice had sounded brisk and lively; Betty's merry, sweet laugh had floated like music in the air; and Betty's charming face had won all hearts, except that of her cousin. But to-night she was quite grave. She sat a little apart from the others, hardly eating or speaking. Suddenly she got up, took a book from a shelf, and began to read. This action on her part caused the other girls to gaze at her in astonishment.

Margaret said, "Is anything the matter, Betty? You neither eat nor speak. You are not at all like our dear, lively Speciality to-night."

"I don't want to eat, and I have nothing to say just yet," answered Betty. "Please don't let me spoil sport. I saw this book of yours, Olive, and I wanted to find a certain verse in it. Ah, here it is!"

"What is the verse?" asked Olive. "Please read it aloud, Betty."

Betty obeyed at once.

"Does the road wind uphill all the way?
Yes, to the very end.
Will the day's journey take the whole long day?
From morn to night, my friend."

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There was a dead silence after Betty had read these few words of Christina Rossetti. The girls glanced from one to another. For a minute or so, at least, they could not be frivolous. Then Olive made a pert remark; another girl laughed; and the cloud, small at present as a man's hand, seemed to vanish. Betty replaced her book on Olive's book-shelf, and sat quite still and quiet. She knew she was a wet blanket—not the life and soul of the meeting, as was generally the case. She knew well that Margaret Grant was watching her with anxiety, that Martha West and also Fanny Crawford were puzzled at her conduct. As to the rest of the Specialities, it seemed to Betty that they did not go as far down into the root of things as did Margaret and Martha.

This evening was to be one of the ordinary entertainments of the guild or club. There was nothing particular to discuss. The girls were, therefore, to enjoy themselves by innocent chatter and happy confidences, and games if necessary.

When, therefore, they all left the supper-table, Margaret, as president, said, "We have no new member to elect to-night, therefore our six rules need not be read aloud; and we have no entertainment to talk over, for our next entertainment will not take place for some little time. I say, therefore, girls, that the club is open to the amusement of all the members. We are free agents, and can do what we like. Our object, of course, will be to promote the happiness of each and all. Now, Susie Rushworth, what do you propose that we shall do this evening?"

Susie said in an excited voice that she would like to spend a good hour over that exceedingly difficult and delightful game of "telegrams" and added further that she had brought slips of paper and pencils for the purpose.

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A similar question was asked of each girl, and each girl made a proposal according to her state of mind.

Betty was about the fourth girl to be asked. She rose to her feet and said gravely, "I would propose that Susie Rushworth and the other members of the Specialities have their games and fun afterwards; but I have a short story to tell, and I should like to tell it first, if those present are agreeable."

Margaret felt that the little cloud as big as a man's hand had returned, and that it had grown much bigger. A curious sense of alarm stole over her. Martha, meanwhile, stared full at Betty, wondering what the girl was going to do. Her whole manner was strange, aloof, and mysterious.

"We will, of course, allow you to speak, Betty dear. We are always interested in what you say," said Margaret in her gentlest tone.

Betty came forward into the room. She stood almost in the center, unsupported by any chair, her hands clasped in front of her, her eyes fixed on Margaret Grant's face. Just for a minute there was a dead silence, for the girl's face expressed tragedy; and it was impossible for any one to think of "telegrams," or frivolous games, or of anything in the world but Betty Vivian at the present moment.

"I have something to say," she began. "It has only come to me very gradually that it is necessary for me to say it. I think the necessity for speech arose when I found I could not go to chapel."

"My dear Betty!" said Margaret.

"There were one or two nights," continued Betty, "when I could not attend."

"Betty," said the voice of Fanny Crawford, "don't you think this room is a little hot, and that you are feeling slightly hysterical? Wouldn't you rather—rather go away?"

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"No, Fanny," said Betty as she almost turned her back on the other girl. Her nervousness had now left her, and she began to speak with her old animation. "May I repeat a part of Rule No. I.: 'Each girl who is a member of the Specialities keeps no secret to herself which the other members ought to know?'"

"That is perfectly true," said Margaret.

"I *have* a secret," said Betty. After having uttered these words she looked straight before her. "At one time," she continued, "I thought I'd tell. Then I thought I wouldn't. Now I am going to tell. I could have told Mrs. Haddo had I seen enough of her—and you, Margaret, if ever you had drawn me out. I could have told you two quite differently from the manner in which I am going to tell that which I ought to speak of. I stand now before the rest of you members of the Speciality Club as guilty, for I have deliberately broken Rule No. I."

"Go on, Betty," said Margaret. She pushed a chair towards the girl, hoping she would put her hand upon it in order to steady herself.

But Betty seemed to have gathered firmness and strength from her determination to speak out. She was trembling no longer, nor was her face so deadly pale. "I will tell you all my secret," she said. "Before I came here I had great trouble. One I loved most dearly and who was a mother to me, died. She died in a little lonely house in Scotland. She was poor, and could not do much either for my sisters or myself. Before her death she sent for me one day, and told me that we should be poor, but she hoped we would be well-educated; and then she said that she was leaving us girls something of value which was in a small, brown, sealed packet, and that the packet was to be found in a certain drawer in her writing-table. She told me that it would be of great use to us three when we most needed it.

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"We were quite heartbroken when she died. I left her room feeling stunned. Then I thought of the packet, and I went into the little drawing-room where all my aunt's treasures were kept. It was dusk when I went in. I found the packet, and took it away. I meant to keep it carefully. I did keep it carefully. I still keep it carefully. I don't know what is in it.

"I have told you as much as I can tell you with regard to the packet, but there is something else to follow. I had made up my mind to keep the packet, being fully persuaded in my heart that Aunt Frances meant me to do so; but when Sir John Crawford came to Aberdeenshire, and visited Craigie Muir, and spent a night with us in the little gray house preparatory to bringing us to Haddo Court, he mentioned that he had received, amongst different papers of my aunt's, a document or letter—I forget which—alluding to this packet. He said she was anxious that the packet should be carefully kept for me and for my sisters, and he asked me boldly and directly if I knew anything about it. I don't excuse myself in the least, and, as a

matter of fact, I don't blame myself. I told him I didn't know anything about it. He believed me. You see, girls, that I told a lie, and was not at all sorry.

"We came here. I put the packet away into a safe hiding-place. Then, somehow or other, you all took me up and were specially kind to me, and I think my head was a bit turned; it seemed so charming to be a Speciality and to have a great deal to do with you, Margaret, and indeed with you all more or less. So I said to myself, I haven't broken Rule No. I., for that rule says that 'no secret is to be kept by one Speciality from another if the other ought really to know about it.' I tried to persuade myself that you need not know about the packet—that it was no concern of yours. But, somehow, I could not go on. There was something about the life here, and—and Mrs. Haddo, and the chapel, and you, Margaret, which made the whole thing impossible. I have not been one scrap frightened into telling you this. But now I have told you. I do possess the packet, and I did tell a lie about it. That is all."

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Betty ceased speaking. There was profound stillness in the room.

Then Margaret said very gently, "Betty, I am sure that I am speaking in the interests of all who love you. You will tell this story to-morrow morning to dear Mrs. Haddo, and it will rest with her whether you remain a member of the Specialities or not. Your frank confession to us, although it is a little late in the day, and the peculiar circumstances attending your gaining possession of the packet, incline us to be lenient to you—if only, Betty, you will now do the one thing left to you, and give the packet up—put it, in short, into Mrs. Haddo's hands, so that she may keep it until Sir John Crawford, who is your guardian, returns."

Betty's face had altered in expression. The sweetness and penitence had gone. "I have told you everything," she said. "I should have told you long ago. I blame myself bitterly for not doing so. But I may as well add that this story is not for Mrs. Haddo; that what I tell you in confidence you cannot by any possibility relate to her—for that, surely, must be against the rules of the club; also, that I will not give the packet up, nor will I tell any one in this room where I have hidden it."

If Betty Vivian had looked interesting, and in the opinion of some of the girls almost penitent, up to this moment, she now looked so no longer. The expression on her face was bold and defiant. Her curious eyes flashed fire, and a faint color came into her usually pale cheeks. She had never looked more beautiful, but the spirit of defiance was in her. She was daring the school. She meant to go on daring it.

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The girls were absolutely silent. Never before in their sheltered and quiet lives had they come across a character like Betty's. Such a character was bound to interest them from the very first. It interested them now up to a point that thrilled them. They could scarcely contain themselves. They considered Betty extremely wicked; but in their hearts they admired her for this, and wondered at her amazing courage.

Margaret, who saw deeper, broke the spell. "Betty," she said, "will you go away now? You have told us, and we understand. We will talk this matter over, and let you know our decision to-morrow. But, first, just say once again what you have said already—that you will not give the packet up, nor tell any one where you have hidden it."

"I have spoken," answered Betty; "further words are useless."

She walked towards the door. Susie Rushworth sprang to open it for her. She passed out, and walked proudly down the corridor. The remaining girls were left to themselves.

Margaret said, "Well, I am bewildered!"

The others said nothing at all. This evening was one of the most exciting they had ever spent. What were "telegrams" or any stupid games compared to that extraordinary girl and her extraordinary revelation?

Margaret was, of course, the first to recover her self-control. "Now, girls," she said, "we must talk about this; and, first, I want to ask a question: Was there any member of the Specialities who knew of this—I am afraid I must call it by its right name—this crime of Betty Vivian's?"

"I knew," said Fanny. Her voice was very low and subdued.

"Then, Fanny, please come forward and tell us what you knew."

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"I don't think I can add to Betty's own narrative," said Fanny, "only I happened to be a witness to the action. I was lying down on the sofa in the little drawing-room at Craigie Muir when Betty stole in and took the packet out of Miss Vivian's writing-table drawer. She did not see me, and went away at once, holding the packet in her hand. I thought it queer of her at the time, but did not feel called upon to make any remark. You must well remember,

girls, that I alone of all the Specialities was unwilling to have Betty admitted as a member of the club. I could see by your faces that you were surprised at my conduct. You were amazed that I, her cousin, should have tried to stop Betty's receiving this extreme honor. I did so because of that packet. The knowledge that she had taken it oppressed me in a strange way at the time, but it oppressed me much more strongly when my father said to me that there was a little sealed packet belonging to Miss Vivian which could not be found. I immediately remembered that Betty had taken away a sealed packet. I asked him if he had spoken about it, and he said he had; in especial he had spoken to Betty, who had denied all knowledge of it."

"Well," said Margaret, "she told us that herself to-night. You have not added to or embellished her story or strengthened it in any way, Fanny."

"I know that," said Fanny. "But I have to add now that I did not wish her to join the club, and did my very utmost to dissuade her. When I saw that it was useless I held my tongue; but you must all have noticed that, although she is my cousin, we have not been special friends."

"Yes, we have noticed it," said Olive gloomily, "and—and wondered at it," she continued.

"I am sorry for Betty, of course," continued Fanny.

"It was very fine of her to confess when she did," said Margaret.

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"It would have been fine of her," replied Fanny, "if she had carried her confession to its right conclusion—if what she told us she had told to Mrs. Haddo and given up the packet. Now, you see, she refuses to do either of these things; so I don't see that her confession amounts to anything more than a mere spirit of bravado."

"Oh no, I cannot agree with you there," said Margaret. "It is my opinion (of course, not knowing all the circumstances) that Betty's sin consisted in telling your father a lie—not in taking the little packet, which she believed she had a right to keep. But we need not discuss her sins, for we all of us have many—perhaps many more than poor dear Betty Vivian. What we must consider is what we are to do at the present time. The Specialities have hitherto kept constantly to their rules. I greatly fear, girls, that we cannot keep Betty as a member of the club unless she changes her mind with regard to the packet. If she does, I think I must put it to the vote whether we will overlook this sin of hers and keep her as one of the members, for we love her notwithstanding her sin."

"Yes, put it to the vote—put it to the vote!" said Susie Rushworth.

Again all hands were raised except Fanny's.

"Fan—Fanny Crawford, you surely agree with us?" said Margaret.

"No, I do not," said Fanny. "I think if the club is worth anything we ought not to have a girl in it who told a lie."

"Ah," said Margaret, "don't you remember that very old story: 'Let him who is without sin among you cast the first stone'?" Then she continued, speaking in her sweet and noble voice, "I will own there is something about Betty which most wonderfully attracts me."

"That sort of charm is fatal," said Fanny.

"But," continued Margaret, taking no notice of Fanny's remark, "that sort of charm which she possesses, that sort of fascination—call it what you will—may be at once her ruin or her salvation. If we Specialities are unkind to her now, if we don't show her all due compassion and tenderness, she may grow hard. We are certainly bound by every honorable rule not to mention one word of this to Mrs. Haddo or to any of the teachers. Are we, or are we not, to turn our backs on Betty Vivian?"

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"If she confesses," said Fanny, "and returns the packet, you have already decided by a majority of votes to allow her to retain her position in the club."

"Yes," said Margaret, "that is quite true. But suppose she does not confess, suppose she sticks to her resolve to keep the packet and not tell any one where she has hidden it, what then?"

"Ah, what then?" said they all.

Olive, the Bertrams, Susie, Martha, Margaret herself, looked full of trouble. Fanny's cheeks were pink with excitement. She had never liked Betty. In her heart of hearts she knew that she was full of uncharitable thoughts against her own cousin. And how was it, notwithstanding Betty's ignoble confession, the other girls still loved her?

"What do you intend to do, supposing she does not confess?" said Fanny after a pause.

"In that case," answered Margaret, "having due regard to the rules of the club, I fear we have no alternative—she must resign her membership, she must cease to be a Speciality. We shall miss her, and beyond doubt we shall still love her. But she must not continue to be a Speciality unless she restores the packet."

Fanny simulated a slight yawn. She knew well that Betty's days as a Speciality were numbered.

"She was so brilliant, so vivid!" exclaimed Susie.

"There was no one like her," said Olive, "for suggesting all kinds of lovely things. And then her story-telling—wasn't she just glorious!" [Pg 194]

"We mustn't think of any of those things," said Margaret. "But I think we may all pray—yes, pray—for Betty herself. I, for one, love her dearly. I love her notwithstanding what she said to-night."

"I think it was uncommonly plucky of her to stand up and tell us what she did," remarked Martha, speaking for the first time. "She needn't have done it, you know. It was entirely a case of conscience."

"Yes, that is it; it was fine of her," said Margaret. "Now, girls, suppose we have a Speciality meeting to-morrow night? You know by our rules we are allowed to have particular meetings. I will give my room for the purpose; and suppose we ask Betty to join us there?"

"Agreed!" said they all; and after a little more conversation the Specialities separated, having no room in their hearts for games or any other frivolous nonsense that evening.

CHAPTER XVI

AFTERWARDS

When Betty had made her confession, and had left Susie Rushworth's room, she went straight to bed; she went without leave, and dropped immediately into profound slumber. When she awoke in the morning her head felt clear and light, and she experienced a sense of rejoicing at what she had done.

"I have told them, and they know," she said to herself. "I have given them the whole story in a nutshell. I don't really care what follows."

Mingled with her feeling of rejoicing was a curious sense of defiance. Her sisters asked her what was the matter. She said "Nothing." They remarked on her sound sleep of the night before, on the early time she had retired from the Specialities' meeting. They again ventured to ask if anything was the matter. She said "No." [Pg 195]

Then Sylvia began to break a very painful piece of information: "Dickie's gone!"

"Oh," said Betty, her eyes flashing with anger, "how can you possibly have been so careless as to let the spider loose?"

"He found a little hole just above the door in the attic, and crept into it, and we couldn't get him out," said Sylvia.

"No, he wouldn't come out," added Hetty, "though we climbed on two chairs, one on top of the other, and poked at him with a bit of stick."

"Oh, I dare say he's all right now," said Betty. "You will probably find him again to-day. He's sure to come for his raw meat."

"But don't you care, Bet? Won't it be truly awful if our own Dickie is dead?"

"Dead! He won't die," said Betty; "but there's quite a possibility he may frighten some one. I know one person I'd like to frighten."

"Oh Bet, who do you mean?"

"That horrid girl—that cousin of ours, Fanny Crawford."

"We don't like her either," said the twins.

"She'd be scared to death at Dickie," said Betty. "She's a rare old coward, you know. But never mind, don't bother; you'll probably find him this morning when you go up with his raw meat. He's sure to come out of his hole in order to get his food."

"I don't think so," said Hester in a gloomy voice; "for there are lots and lots of flies in that attic, and Dickie will eat them and think them nicer than raw meat."

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"Well, it's time to go downstairs now," said Betty.

She was very lively and bright at her lessons all day, and forgot Dickie in the other cares which engrossed her mind. That said mind was in a most curious state. She was at once greatly relieved and rebellious. Sylvia and Hetty watched her, when they could, from afar. Betty's life as a member of the Specialities separated her a good deal from her sisters. She seldom saw them during the working-hours; but they were quite happy, for they had made some friends for themselves, and the three were always together at night. Betty was not specially reproachful of herself on their account. She could not help being cleverer than they, more brilliant, more able on all occasions to leap to a right conclusion—to discover the meaning of each involved mystery as it was presented to her. All the teachers remarked on her great intelligence, on her curious and wonderful gift for dramatization. The girls in her form were expected once a week to recite from Shakespeare; and Betty's recitations were sufficiently striking to arrest the attention of the entire room. She flung herself into the part. She was Desdemona, she was Portia, she was Rosalind. She was whatever character she wished to personate. Once she chose that of Shylock; and most uncanny became the expression of her face, and her words were hurled forth with a defiance worthy of the immortal Jew.

All these things made Betty a great favorite with the teachers as well as with the girls. She was, as a rule, neither cross nor bad-tempered. She was not vain for her gifts. She was always ready to help the others by every means in her power.

During recess that day Betty received a small three-cornered note in Margaret Grant's handwriting. She opened it, and saw that it was a brief request that she, Betty Vivian, should meet Margaret and the other members of the Speciality Club in Margaret's room at half-past seven that evening. "Our meeting will be quite informal, but we earnestly beg for your attendance."

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Betty slipped the note into her pocket. As she did so she observed that Fanny Crawford's eyes were fixed on her.

"Are you going to attend?" asked Fanny.

"You will know," replied Betty, "when you go into the room to-night at half-past seven and find me there or not there. Surely that is enough for you!"

"Thanks!" replied Fanny. Then, summoning a certain degree of courage, she came a step nearer. "Betty, if I might consult with you, if I might warn you——"

"But as you may not consult with me, and as you may not warn me, there is nothing to be done, is there?" said Betty. "Hallo!" she cried the next minute, as a schoolgirl whose friendship she had made during the last day or two appeared in sight, "I want to have a word with you, Jessie. Forgive me, Fan; I am very much occupied just at present."

"Her fall is certain," thought Fanny to herself. "I wonder how she will like what lies before her to-night. I at least have done my best."

Punctual to the hour, the Specialities met in Margaret's room. There was no supper on this occasion, nor any appearance of festivity. The pretty flowers which Margaret usually favored were conspicuous by their absence. Even the electric light was used but sparingly. None of the girls dressed for this evening, but wore their usual afternoon frocks. Betty, however, wore white, and walked into the room with her head well erect and her step firm.

"Sit down, Betty, won't you?" said Margaret.

"Thanks, Margaret!" answered Betty; and she sank into a chair. She chose one that was in such a position that she could face the six girls who were now prepared to judge her on her own merits. She looked at them very quietly. Her face was pale, and her eyes not as bright as usual.

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"I am deputed by the others to speak to you, Betty," said Margaret. "We will make no comment whatsoever with regard to what you told us last night. It isn't for us to punish you for having told a lie. We have ourselves done very wrong in our lives, and we doubtless have not been tempted as you have been; and then, Betty Vivian, I can assure you that, although you have been but a short time in the school, we all—I think I may say all—love

you.”

Betty’s eyes softened. She hitched her chair round a little, so that she no longer saw Fanny, but could look at Margaret Grant and Martha West, who were sitting side by side. Susie’s pretty face was fairly shining with eagerness, and Olive’s eyes were full of tears. The Bertrams clasped each other’s hands, and but for Margaret’s restraining presence would have rushed to Betty’s there and then and embraced her.

“But,” said Margaret, “although we do love you—and I think will always love you, Betty—we must do our duty by the club. You confessed a sin to us—not at the time, as you ought to have done, but later on. No one compelled you to confess what you did last night. There was no outside pressure brought to bear on you. It must have been your conscience.”

“I told you so,” said Betty.

“Therefore,” continued Margaret, “your conscience must be very wide-awake, Betty, and you have done—well, so far—very nobly; so nobly that nothing will induce us to ask you to withdraw from our club, provided—”

Betty’s eyes brightened, and some of the tension in her face relaxed.

“I have taken the votes of the members on that point,” Margaret continued, “therefore I know what I am speaking about. What we do most emphatically require is that you carry your confession to its logical conclusion—that what you have said to us you say to the kindest woman in all the world, to dear Mrs. Haddo, and that you put the little packet which has cost you such misery into Mrs. Haddo’s hands. Don’t speak for a minute, please, Betty. We have been praying about you, all of us; we have been longing—longing for you to do this thing. Please don’t speak for a minute. It is not in our power to turn you from the school, nor to relate to Mrs. Haddo nor to any of the teachers what you have told us. But we can dismiss you from the Speciality Club—that does lie in our province; and we must do so, bitterly as we shall regret it, if you do not carry your confession to its logical conclusion.”

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“Then I must go,” said Betty very gently.

“Oh Betty!” exclaimed Olive; and she burst into a flood of weeping. “Dear, dear, dear Betty, don’t go—please don’t go!”

“We will all support you if you are nervous,” continued Margaret. “I think we may say we will all support you, and Mrs. Haddo is so sweet; and then, if you want to see him, there’s Mr. Fairfax, who could tell you what to do better than we can. Don’t decide now, dear Betty. Please, please consider this question, and let us know.”

“But I have decided,” said Betty. “I told you what I thought right. I love the club, and every single member of it—except my cousin, Fanny Crawford. I don’t love Fanny, and she doesn’t love me—I say so quite plainly; therefore, once again, I break Rule I. You see, girls, I cannot stay. I must become again an undistinguished member of this great school. Don’t suppose it will hurt my vanity; but it will touch deeper things in me, and I shall never, never forget your kindness. I can by no possibility do more than I have done. Good-bye, dear Margaret; I am more than sorry that I have given you all this trouble.”

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As Betty spoke she unclasped the little silver true-lover’s knot from the bosom of her dress and put it into Margaret’s hand. Then she walked out of the room, a Speciality no longer.

When she had gone, the girls talked softly together. They were terribly depressed.

“We never had a member like her. What a pity our rules are so strict!” said Olive.

“Nonsense, Olive!” said Margaret. “We must do our best, our very best; and even yet I have great hopes of Betty. She can be re-elected some day, perhaps.”

“Oh, she is like no one else!” said one girl after another.

The girls soon dispersed; but as Fanny was going to her room Martha West joined her. “Fanny,” she said, “I, as the youngest member of the Specialities, would like to ask you a question. Why is it that your cousin dislikes you so much?”

“I can’t tell,” replied Fanny. “I have always tried to be kind to her.”

“But you don’t cordially like her yourself!”

“That is quite true,” said Fanny; “but then I have seen her at home, when you have not. She has great gifts of fascination; but I know her for what she really is.”

“When you speak like that, Fanny Crawford, I no longer like you,” remarked Martha; and she walked away in the direction of her room.

All the Speciality girls, including Betty, were present at prayers in the chapel that evening. Betty sat a little apart from her companions, she stood apart from them, she prayed apart from them. She seemed like one isolated and alone. Her face was very white, her eyes large and dark and anxious. From time to time the girls who loved her looked at her with intense compassion. But Fanny gave her very different glances. Fanny rejoiced in her discomfort, and heartily hoped that she would now lose her prestige in the school.

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Until the advent of Betty Vivian, Fanny was rather a favorite at Haddo Court. She was certainly not the least bit original. She was prim and smug and self-satisfied to the last degree, but she always did the right thing in the right way. She always looked pretty, and no one ever detected any fault in her. Her mistresses trusted her, and some of the girls thought it worth their while to become chums with her.

Fanny, however, now saw at a glance that she was in the black looks of the other Specialities. This fact angered her uncontrollably, and she made up her mind to bring Betty to further shame. It was not sufficient that she should be expelled from the Speciality Club; the usual formula must be gone through. All the girls knew of this formula; and they all, with the exception of Fanny, wished it not to be observed in the case of Betty Vivian. But Fanny knew her power, and was resolved to use it. The Speciality Club exercised too great an influence in the school for its existence to be lightly regarded. A member of the club, as has been said, enjoyed many privileges besides being accorded certain exemptions from various irksome duties. It was long, long years since any member had been dismissed in disgrace; it was certainly not within the memory of any girl now in the school. But Fanny had searched the old annals, and had come across the fact that about thirty years ago a Speciality had done something which brought discredit on herself and the club, and had therefore been expelled; she had also discovered that the fact of her expulsion had been put up in large letters on a blackboard. This board hung in the central hall, and generally contained notices of entertainments or class-work of a special order for the day's programme. Miss Symes wrote out this programme day by day.

On the morning after Betty had been expelled from the Specialities, Fanny ran up to Miss Symes. "By the way," she said, "I am afraid you will have to do it, for it is the rule of the club."

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"I shall have to do what, my dear Fanny?"

"You will just have to say, please, on the blackboard that Betty Vivian is no longer a member of the Specialities."

Miss Symes stopped writing. She was busily engaged notifying the hour of a very important German lesson to be given by a professor who came from town. "What do you mean, Fanny?"

"What I say. By the rules of the club we can give no reasons, but must merely state that Betty Vivian is no longer a member. It ought to be known. Will you write it on the blackboard?"

Miss Symes looked at Fanny with a curious expression on her face. "Thank you for telling me," she said. She then crossed the great hall to where Margaret and some other girls of the Specialities were assembled. She told Margaret what Fanny had already imparted to her, and asked if it was true.

"It is true, alas!" said Margaret.

"But I thought Betty was such a prime favorite with you all," said Miss Symes; "and she really is such a sweet girl! I have never been more attracted by any one."

"I cannot give you any particulars, Miss Symes; but I think we have done right," said Margaret.

"If you have had any hand in it, dear, I make no doubt on the subject," replied Miss Symes. "It is a sad pity. Fanny says it is one of your rules that an expelled member has her name published on the blackboard, the fact being also stated that she has been expelled."

"Oh," said Margaret, "that is a very old rule. We don't want it to be carried into effect in Betty's case."

"But if it is a rule, dear, and if it has never been abolished——"

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"It has not been abolished," said Margaret. "It would distress Betty very much."

"Nevertheless, Margaret, if it is right to expel Betty it is right to publish that fact on the blackboard, always provided it is a rule of the Specialities."

"I am afraid it is a rule," said Margaret. "But we are all unhappy about her. We hate having her expelled."

"Can I help you in any way, dear Margaret?"

"No, Miss Symes; no one can help us, and the deed is done now."

Miss Symes went very slowly to the blackboard, and wrote on it simply: "Betty Vivian has resigned her membership of the Speciality Club."

This notice caused flocks of girls to surround the blackboard during the morning, and the news flew like wildfire all over the school. Betty herself approached as an eager group were scrutinizing the words, saw her name, read it calmly (her lips curling slightly with scorn), and turned away. No one dared to question her, but all looked at her in wonder.

Betty went through her lessons with her accustomed force and animation, and there was no difference to be observed between her manner of to-day and that of yesterday. After school she very simply told her sisters that she had withdrawn from the Specialities, and then begged of them not to pursue the subject. "I am not going to explain," she said, "so you needn't ask me. I shall have more time to devote to you in the future, and that'll be a good thing." She then left them and went for a long walk by herself.

Now, it is one of those dreadful things which most surely happen to weak human nature that when an evil and jealous and unkind thought gets into the heart, that same thought, though quite unimportant at first, gradually increases in dimensions until it overshadows all other thoughts and gains complete and overwhelming mastery of the mind. Had any one said to Fanny Crawford a fortnight or three weeks before the Vivians' arrival at the school that she would have felt towards Betty as she now did, Fanny would have been the first to recoil at the monstrous fungus of hatred which existed in her mind. Had Betty been a very plain, unattractive, uninteresting girl, Fanny would have patronized her, kept her in her place, but at the same time been kind to her. But Fanny's rage towards Betty now was almost breaking its bounds. Was not Fanny's own father educating the Vivians? Was it not he who had persuaded Mrs. Haddo to admit them to the school? She herself was the only daughter of a rich and distinguished man. The Vivians were nobodies. Why should they be fussed about, and talked of, and even loved—yes, loved—while she, Fanny, was losing her friends? The thought was unbearable! Fanny had managed by judicious precaution to get Betty to reveal part of her secret, and Betty was no longer a member of the Specialities. Betty's name was on the blackboard too, and by no means honorably mentioned. But more things could be done.

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For Fanny felt that the school was turning against her—the upper school, whose praise she so prized. The Specialities asked her boldly why she did not love Betty Vivian. There would be no peace for Fanny until Mrs. Haddo knew everything, and dismissed the Vivians to another school. This she would, of course, do at once if she knew the full extent of Betty's sin. Fanny felt that she must proceed very warily. Betty had hidden the packet, and boldly declared that she would not give it up to any one—that she would rather leave the Specialities than tell her story to Mrs. Haddo and put the little sealed packet into her keeping. Fanny's present aim, therefore, was to find the packet. She wondered how she could accomplish this, and looked round her for a ready tool. Presently she made up her mind that the one girl who might help her was Sibyl Ray. Sibyl was by no means strong-minded. Sibyl was unpopular—she pined for notice. Sibyl adored Betty; but suppose—oh, suppose!—Fanny could offer her, as a price for the dirty work she wanted her to undertake, membership in the Speciality Club? Martha West would be on Sibyl's side, for Martha was always friendly to the plain, uninteresting, somewhat lonely girl. Fanny felt at once that the one tool who could further her aims was Sibyl Ray. There was no time to lose.

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Sibyl had been frightfully perturbed at seeing Betty's name on the blackboard, and she was as eager to talk to Fanny as Fanny was pleased to listen to her.

"Oh Fan!" she said, running up to her on the afternoon of that same day, "may I go for a very little walk with you? I do want to ask you about poor darling Betty!"

"Poor darling Betty indeed!" said Fanny.

"Oh, but don't you pity her? What can have happened to cause her to be no longer a member of the Specialities?"

"Now, Sibyl, you must be a little goose! Do you suppose for a moment it is within my power to enlighten you?"

"I suppose it isn't; but I am very unhappy about her, and so are we all. We are all fond of Betty. We think her wonderful."

Fanny was silent.

"'Tis good of you, Fan, to let me walk with you!"

"I have something to say to you, Sibyl; but before I begin you must promise me most faithfully that you won't repeat anything I am going to say."

"Of course not," said Sibyl. "As if I could!"

"I don't suppose you would dare. You see, I am one of the older girls of the school, and have been a Speciality for some little time, and it wouldn't be at all to your advantage if you did anything to annoy me. I should find out at once, for instance, if you whispered a syllable of this to Martha West, Margaret Grant, or any other member of the Speciality Club."

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"I won't! I won't! You may trust me, indeed you may," said Sibyl.

"I think I may," answered Fanny, looking down at Sibyl's poor little apology of a face. "I think you are the sort who would be faithful."

Sibyl's small heart swelled with pride. "Betty was kind to me too," she said; "and she did make me look nice—didn't she?—when she suggested that I should wear the marguerites."

"To tell you the truth, Sibyl, you were a figure of fun that night. Betty was laughing in her sleeve at you all the time."

Sibyl colored, and her small light-blue eyes contracted. "Betty laughing at me! I don't believe it."

"Of course she was, child. We all spoke of it afterwards. Why, you don't know what you looked like when you came into the room in that green dress, with that hideous wreath on your head."

"I know," said Sibyl in a humble tone. "I couldn't make it look all right; but Betty took me behind a screen, and managed it in a twinkling, and put a white sash round my waist, and—oh, I felt nice anyhow!"

"I am glad you felt nice," said Fanny, "for I can assure you it was more than you looked."

"Oh Fanny, don't hurt me! You know I can't afford very pretty dresses like you. We are rather poor at home, and there are so many of us."

"I don't want to hurt you, child; only, haven't you a grain of sense? Don't you know perfectly well why Betty wanted you to wear the wreath of marguerites?"

"Just because she was sweet," said Sibyl, "and she thought I'd look really nice in them."

"That is all you know! Now, recall something, Sibyl."

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"Yes?"

"Do you remember when you saw Betty stoop over that broken stump of the old oak and take something out?"

"Of course I do," said Sibyl. "It was a piece of wood. I found it the next day."

"Well, it wasn't a piece of wood," said Fanny.

"What can you mean?" asked Sibyl. She stood perfectly still, staring at her companion. Then she burst into a sort of frightened laugh. "But it was a piece of wood, really," she added. "You are mistaken, Fanny. Of course you know a great deal, but even you can't know more than I have proved by my own eyesight. It looked in the distance like a small brown piece of wood; and I asked Betty if it was, and she admitted it."

"Just like her! just like her!" said Fanny.

"Well, then, the very next day," continued Sibyl, "several girls and I went to the old stump and poked and poked, and found it; so, you see——"

"I don't see," replied Fanny. "And now, if you will allow me, Sibyl, and if you won't chatter quite so fast, I will tell you what I really do know about this matter. I don't think for a single moment—in fact, I am certain—that Betty Vivian did not trouble herself to poke amongst withered leaves in the stump of the old oak-tree in order to produce a piece of sodden wood. There was something else; and when you asked her if it was a piece of wood she told you—remember, Sibyl, this is in absolute confidence—an untruth. Oh, I am trying to put it mildly; but I must mention the fact—Betty told you an untruth. Did you observe, or did you not, that she was excited and looked slightly annoyed when you suddenly called to her and ran up to her side?"

"I—yes, I think she did look a little put out; but then she is very proud, is Betty, and I am not her special friend, although I love her so hard," replied Sibyl.

"She walked with you afterwards, did she not?"

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"Yes."

"She went towards the house with you?"

"Of course. I have told you all that, Fanny."

"When you both reached the gardens she suggested that you should wear the marguerites in your hair?"

"She did, Fanny; and I thought it was such a charming idea."

"Did it not once occur to you that she wanted to get you out of the way, that she did not care one scrap how you looked at the Speciality entertainment?"

"That certainly did not occur to me," answered Sibyl; then she added stoutly, for she was a faithful little thing at heart, "and I don't believe it either."

"Well, believe it or not as you please; I know it to have been a fact. And now I'll just tell you something. You must never, never repeat it; if you do, I sha'n't speak to you again. I know what I am saying to be a fact: I know the reason why Betty Vivian is no longer a Speciality."

"Oh! oh!" said Sibyl. She colored deeply.

"No longer a Speciality," repeated Fanny; "and I know the reason why; only, of course, I can never say. But there's a vacancy in the Speciality Club now for a girl who is faithful and zealous, and who can prove herself my friend."

Sibyl's heart began to beat very fast. "A vacancy in the Specialities!" she said in a low tone.

Fanny turned quickly round and faced her. "I could get you in if I liked," she said. "Would it suit you to be a Speciality?"

"Would it suit me?" said Sibyl. "Oh Fanny, it sounds like heaven! I don't know what I wouldn't do—I don't know what I wouldn't do to become a member of that club."

"And Martha West would second any suggestions I made," continued Fanny. "Of course I don't know that I could get you in; but I'd have a good try, provided you help me now."

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"Fanny, what is it you want me to do?"

"I want you, Sibyl, to use your intelligence; and I want you, all alone and without consulting any one, to find out where Betty Vivian has put the treasure which she told you was a piece of wood and which she hid in the old oak stump. You can manage it quite well if you like."

"I don't understand!" gasped Sibyl.

"If you repeat a word of this conversation I shall use my influence to have you boycotted in the school," said Fanny. "My power is great to help or to mar your career in the school. If you do what I want—well, my dear, all I can say is this, that I shall do my utmost to get you into the club. You cannot imagine how nice it is when you are a member. Think what poor Betty has lost, and think how you will feel when you are a Speciality and she is not."

"I don't know that I shall feel anything," replied Sibyl. "Somehow or other, I don't like this thing you want me to do, Fanny."

"Well, don't do it. I will get some one else."

"And, in the second place," continued Sibyl, "even if I were willing to do it, I don't know how. If Betty chooses to hide things—parcels or anything of that sort—I can't find out where she puts them."

"You can watch her," said Fanny. "Now, if you have any gumption about you—and it is my strong belief that you have—you will be able to tell me this time to-morrow something about Betty Vivian and her movements. If by this time to-morrow you know nothing—why, I will relieve you of the task, and you will be as you were before. But if, on the other hand, you help me to save the honor of a great school—which is, I assure you, at the present moment in serious peril—I shall do my utmost to get you admitted to the Speciality Club. Now, I think that is all."

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As Fanny concluded she shouted to Susie Rushworth, who was going towards the arbor at the top of the grounds, and Sibyl found herself all alone. Fanny had taken her a good long way. They had passed through a plantation of young fir-trees to one of the vegetable-

gardens, and thence through an orchard, where the grass was long and dank at this time of year. Somehow or other, Sibyl felt chilled to the bone and very miserable. She had never liked Fanny less than she did at this moment. But she was not strong-minded, and Fanny was one of the most important girls in the school. She was rich, her father was a man of great distinction; she might be head-girl of the school, and probably would when Margaret Grant left; she was also quite an old member of the Specialities. Besides Fanny, even Martha West seemed to fade into insignificance. It was as though the friend of the Prime Minister—the greatest possible friend—had held out a helping hand to a struggling nobody, and offered that nobody a dazzling position. Sibyl was that poor little nobody, and Fanny's words were weighted with such power that the girl trembled and felt herself shaking all over.

Sibyl's love for Martha was innocent, pure, and good. Her admiration for Betty was the generous and romantic affection which a little schoolgirl gives to another girl older than herself who is both brilliant and captivating. But, after all, Betty had lost her sceptre and laid down her crown. Betty, for some extraordinary reason, was in disgrace, and Fanny was in the zenith of her power. It would be magnificent to be a Speciality! How those girls who thought little or nothing of Sibyl now would admire her when she passed into that glorious state! She thought of herself as joining the other Specialities in arranging programmes, in devising entertainments; she thought of the privileges which would be hers; she thought of that delightful private sitting-room into which she had once dared to peep, and then shot out her little face again, half-terrified at her own audacity. There was no one in the room at the moment; but it did look cosy—the chairs so easy and comfortable, and all covered with such a delicate shade of blue. Sibyl knew that blue became her. She thought how nice she would look sitting in one of those chairs and being hail-fellow-well-met with Margaret Grant, and Martha her own friend, and all the others. Even Betty would envy her then. She and Betty would change places. It would be her part to advise Betty what to do and what to wear. Oh, it was a very dazzling prospect! And she could gain the coveted distinction—but how?

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Sibyl felt her heart beating very fast. She had not been trained in a high school of morals. Her father was a very hard-working clergyman with a large family of eight children. Her mother was dead; her elder sisters were earning their own living. Mrs. Haddo had heard of Sibyl, and had taken her into the school on special terms, feeling sure that charity was well expended in such a case. Mr. Ray was far too busy over his numerous duties to look after Sibyl as her mother would have done had she lived. The little girl was brought up anyhow, and her new life at Haddo Court was a revelation to her in more ways than one. She was not pretty; she was not clever; she was not strong-minded; she was very easily influenced. A good girl could have done much for her—Martha had done her very best; but a bad girl could do even more.

While Sibyl was dallying with temptation, thinking to herself how attractive it would be to feel such an important person as Fanny Crawford, she looked down from the height where she was standing and saw Betty Vivian walking slowly across the common.

Betty was alone. Her head was slightly bent, but the rest of her young figure was bolt upright. She was going towards the spot where those sparse clumps of heather occupied their neglected position at one side of the "forest primeval."

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When first Sibyl saw Betty her heart gave a great throb of longing to rush to her, to fling her arms round her, to kiss her, to cling to her side. But she suppressed that impulse. She loved Betty, but she was afraid of her. Betty was the last sort of girl to put up with what she considered liberties; Sibyl was a person to whom she was utterly indifferent, and she would by no means have liked Sibyl to kiss her. From Sibyl's vantage-ground, therefore, she watched Betty, herself unseen. Then it suddenly occurred to her that she might continue to watch her, but from a more favorable point of view.

There was a little knoll at one end of the orchard, and there was a very old gnarled apple-tree at the edge of the knoll. If Sibyl ran fast she could climb into the apple-tree and look right down on to the common. No sooner did the thought come to her than she resolved to act on it. Knowledge is always power, and she need not tell Fanny anything at all unless she liked. She could be faithful to poor Betty, who was in disgrace, and at the same time she might know something about her. It was so very odd that Betty was expelled from the Specialities. She could not possibly have resigned, for had she done so there would have been a great fuss, and everything would have been explained to the satisfaction of the school; whereas that mysterious sentence on the blackboard left the whole thing involved in darkest night. What had Betty done? Had she really told a lie about what she had found in the old stump of oak? Was it not a piece of wood after all? Had she really sent Sibyl into the flower-garden to gather marguerites and make herself a figure of fun at the Specialities' entertainment? Had she done it to get rid of her just because—because she wanted—she

wanted to remove something from the stump of the old oak-tree? Oh, if Betty were that sort—if it were possible—even Sibyl Ray felt that she could not love her any longer! It was Fanny, after all, who was a noble girl. Fanny wanted to get to the bottom of things. Fanny herself could not do what an unimportant little girl like Sibyl could do. After all, there was nothing shabby in it. If it were shabby, Fanny Crawford, the last girl in the school to do wrong, would not have asked her to attend to the matter.

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Sibyl therefore climbed into the old apple-tree and perched amongst its branches, and gazed eagerly down on the bit of common land. She was far nearer to Betty than Betty had the least idea of. She saw her walk towards the pieces of heather, but could not, from her point of view, see what the plants were. She had really no idea that there was any special heather in the grounds; she was not interested in a stupid thing like heather. But she did see Betty go on her knees, and she did see her pull up a root of some sort or other, and she did see her take something out and look at it and put it back again. Then Betty returned very slowly across the common towards the house.

Sibyl was fairly panting now with excitement. Was there ever, ever in all the world, such an easy way of becoming a Speciality? Betty had a secret; and she, Sibyl, had found it out without the slightest difficulty. Betty had hidden something in the old oak, and now she had buried it under some plants at the edge of the common. Sibyl forgot pretence, she forgot honor, she forgot everything but the luring voice of Fanny Crawford and her keen desire to perfect her quest. At that time of year few girls troubled themselves to walk across the "forest primeval." It was a sort of place that was pleasant enough in warm days of summer, but damp and dull and dreary at this season, when the girls of Haddo Court preferred the upper walks, or the hockey-ground, or the different places where the various games were played. Certainly the "forest primeval" did not occupy much of their attention.

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It was getting a little dusk; but Sibyl, too excited to care, scrambled down from her tree, and a few minutes later had dashed across the common, and had discovered by the loosened earth the exact spot where Betty had stooped. She was now beside herself with excitement. It was her turn to go on her knees. She was doing good work; she was, according to Fanny Crawford, saving the honor of the school. She poked and poked with her fingers, and soon got up the already loosened roots of the piece of heather. Down went her hard little hands into the cold clay until at last they touched the tiny packet, which was sealed and tied firmly with strong string.

"Eureka! I have found it!" was Sibyl's exclamation. She slipped the packet into her pocket, put the heather back into its place, tried to give the disturbed earth the appearance of not having been disturbed at all, and went back to the house. She was so excited she could scarcely contain herself.

The days were getting shorter. Tea was at half-past four, and a kind of light supper at seven o'clock. The girls of the lower school had this meal a little earlier. Sibyl was just in time for tea, which was always served in the great refectory; and here the various members of the upper school were all assembled—except the Specialities, who had tea in their own private room.

"Well, Sibyl, you are late!" said Sarah Butt. "I wanted to take a long walk with you. Where have you been?"

"I have been for a walk with Fanny Crawford," replied Sibyl with an important air.

Betty, who was helping herself to a cup of tea, glanced up at that moment and fixed her eyes on Sibyl. Sibyl colored furiously and looked away. Betty took no further notice of her, but began to chat with a girl near her. Soon a crowd of girls collected round Betty, and laughed heartily at her remarks.

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On any other occasion Sibyl would have joined this group, and been the first to giggle over Betty's witticisms. But the little parcel in her pocket seemed to weigh like lead. It was a weight on her spirits too. She was most anxious to deliver it over to Fanny Crawford, and to keep Fanny to her word, in order that she might be proposed as a Speciality at the next meeting. She knew this would not be until Thursday. Oh, it was all too long to wait! But she could put on airs already, for would she not very soon cease to be drinking this weak tea in the refectory? Would she not be having her own dainty meal in the Specialities' private room?

"How red you are, Sibyl!" was Sarah Butt's remark. "I suppose the cold wind has caught your cheeks."

"I wish you wouldn't remark on my appearance," said Sibyl.

"Dear, dear! Hoity-toity! How grand we are getting all of a sudden!"

"You needn't snub me in the way you do, Sarah. You'll be treating me very differently before long."

"Indeed, your Royal Highness! And may I ask how and why?"

"You may neither ask how nor why; but events will prove," said Sibyl. She raised her voice a little incautiously, and once again Betty looked at her. There was something about Betty's glance, at once sorrowful and aloof, which stung Sibyl. Just because she had done Betty a wrong she no longer loved her half as much as she had done. After a pause, she said in a distinct voice, "I am a very great friend of Fanny Crawford, and I am going to see her now on special business." With these words she marched out of the refectory.

Some of the girls laughed. Betty was quite silent. No one dared question Betty Vivian with regard to her withdrawal from the Speciality Club, nor did she enlighten them. But when tea was over she went up to Sylvia and Hetty and said a few words to them both. They looked at her in amazement, but made no kind of protest. After speaking to her sisters, Betty left the refectory.

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"What can be the matter with your Betty?" asked one of the girls, addressing the twins.

"There's nothing the matter with her," said Sylvia in a stout voice.

"Why are your eyes so red, then?"

"My eyes are red because Dickie's lost."

"Who's Dickie?"

"He is the largest spider I ever saw, and he grows bigger and fatter every day. But he is lost. We brought him from Scotland. He'd sting any one who tried to hurt him; so if any of you see him in your bedrooms or hiding under your pillows you'd best shriek out, for he is a dangerous sort, and ought not to be interfered with."

"How perfectly appalling!" said the girl now addressed. "You really oughtn't to keep horrid pets of that sort. And I loathe spiders."

"Oh, well, you're not Scotch," replied Sylvia with a disdainful gesture. "Dickie is a darling to those he loves, but very fierce to those he hates."

"And is that really why your eyes are so red?" continued the girl—Hilda Morton by name. "Has it nothing to do with that wonderful sister of yours, and the strange fact that she has been expelled from the Speciality Club?"

"She hasn't been expelled!" said Sylvia in a voice of fury.

"Don't talk nonsense! The fact was mentioned on the blackboard. If you don't believe it, you can come and see for yourself."

"She has left the club, but was not expelled," said Sylvia. "And I hate you, Hilda! You have no right to speak of my sister like that."

Meanwhile two girls were pursuing their different ways. Betty was going towards that wing of the building where Mr. Fairfax's suite of rooms was to be found. She had never yet spoken to him. She wished to speak to him now. The rooms occupied by the Fairfaxes formed a complete little dwelling, with its own kitchen and special servants. These rooms adjoined the chapel; but his family lived apart from the school. It was understood, however, that any girl at Haddo Court was at liberty to ask the chaplain a question in a moment of difficulty.

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Betty now rang the bell of the little house. A neat servant opened the door. On inquiring if Mr. Fairfax were within, Betty was told "Yes," and was admitted at once into that gentleman's study.

The clergyman rose at her entrance. He recognized her face, spoke to her kindly, said he was glad she had come to see him, and asked her to sit down. "Is anything the matter, my dear? Is there any way in which I can help you?"

"I don't know," answered the girl. "I thought perhaps you could; it flashed through my mind to-day that perhaps you could. You have seen me in the chapel?"

"Oh yes; yours is not the sort of face one is likely to forget."

"I am not happy," said Betty.

"I am sorry to hear that. But don't you agree with me that we poor human creatures think too much of our own individual happiness and too little of the happiness of others? It seems

to me that the golden rule to live by in this: Provided my brother is happy, all is well with me."

"That is true to a certain extent," said Betty; "but—" She paused a minute. Then she said abruptly, "I am not at all the cringing sort, and I am not the girl to grumble, and I love Mrs. Haddo; and, sir, there have been moments when your voice in chapel has given me great consolation. I also love one or two of my schoolfellows. But the fact is, there is something weighing on my conscience, and I cannot tell you what it is. I cannot do the right thing, sir; and I do not see my way ever to do what I suppose you would say was the right thing. I will tell you this much about myself. You have heard of our Speciality Club?"

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"Of course I have."

"The girls were very good to me when I came here—for I am a comparative stranger in the school—and they elected me to be a Speciality."

"Indeed!" said Mr. Fairfax. "That is a very great honor."

"I know it is; and I was given the rules, and I read them all carefully. But, sir, in a sudden moment of temptation, before I came to Haddo Court, I did something which was wrong, and I am determined not to mend my ways with regard to that matter. Nevertheless, I became a Speciality, knowing that by so doing I should break the first rule of the club."

Mr. Fairfax was too courteous ever to interrupt any one who came to him to talk over a difficulty. He was silent now, his hands clasped tightly together, his deep-set eyes fixed on Betty's vivid face.

"I was a Speciality for about a fortnight," she continued—"perhaps a little longer. But at the last meeting I made up my mind that I could not go on, so I told the girls what I had done. It is unnecessary to trouble you with those particulars, sir. After I had told them they asked me to leave the room, and I went. They had a special meeting of the club last night to consult over my case, and I was invited to be present. I was then told that, notwithstanding the fact that I had broken Rule No. I., I might continue to be a member of the club if I would give up something which I possess and to which I believe I have a full right, and if I would relate my story in detail to Mrs. Haddo. I absolutely refused to do either of these things. I was then *expelled* from the club, sir—that is the only word to use; and the fact was notified on the blackboard in the great hall to-day."

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"Well," said Mr. Fairfax when Betty paused, "I understand that you repent, and you do not repent, and that you are no longer a Speciality."

"That is the case, sir."

"Can you not take me further into your confidence?"

"There is no use," said Betty, shaking her head.

"I am not surprised, Miss Vivian, that you are unhappy."

"I am accustomed to that," said Betty.

"May I ask what you have come to see me about?"

"I wanted to know this: ought I, or ought I not, being unrepentant of my sin, to come to the chapel with the other girls, to kneel with them, to pray with them, and to listen to your words?"

"I must leave that to yourself. If your conscience says, 'Come,' it is not for me to turn you out. But it is a very dangerous thing to trifle with conscience. Of course you know that. I can see, too, that you are peculiarly sensitive. Forgive me, but I have often noticed your face, and with extreme interest. You have good abilities, and a great future before you in the upward direction—that is, if you choose. Although you won't take me into your confidence, I am well aware that the present is a turning-point in your career. You must at least know that I, as a clergyman, would not repeat to any one a word of what you say to me. Can you not trust me?"

"No, no; it is too painful!" said Betty. "I see that, in your heart of hearts, you think that I—I ought not—I ought *not* to come to chapel. I am indeed outcast!"

"No, child, you are not. Kneel down now, and let me pray with you."

"I cannot stand it—no, I cannot!" said Betty; and she turned away.

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When she had gone Mr. Fairfax dropped on his knees. He prayed for a long time with fervor. But that night he missed Betty Vivian at prayers in the beautiful little chapel.

Meanwhile Betty—struggling, battling with herself, determined not to yield, feeling fully convinced that the only wrong thing she had done was telling the lie to Sir John Crawford and prevaricating to Sibyl—was nothing like so much to be pitied as Sibyl Ray herself.

Sibyl had lingered about the different corridors and passages until she found Fanny, who was talking to Martha West. Sibyl was so startled when the two girls came out of the private sitting-room that she almost squinted, and Fanny at once perceived that the girl had something important to tell her. She must not, however, appear to notice Sibyl specially in the presence of Martha.

Martha, on the contrary, went up at once to Sibyl and said in her pleasant voice, "Why, my dear child, it is quite a long time since we have met! And now, I wonder what I can do for you or how I can possibly help you. Would you like to come and have a cosy chat with me in my bedroom for a little? The fact is this," continued Martha: "we Specialities are so terribly spoilt in the school that we hardly know ourselves. Fancy having a fire in one's bedroom, not only at night, but at this hour! Would you like to come with me, Sib?"

At another moment Sibyl would have hailed this invitation with rapture. On the present occasion she was about to refuse it; but Fanny said with a quick glance, which was not altogether lost on Martha, "Of course go with Martha, Sibyl. You are in great luck to have such a friend."

Sibyl departed, therefore, very unwillingly, with the friend she had once adored. Martha's bedroom was very plain and without ornaments, but there were snug easy-chairs and the fire burned brightly. Martha invited the little girl to sit down, and asked her how she was.

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"Oh, I am all right," said Sibyl.

Martha looked at her attentively. "I don't quite understand you, Sib. You have rather avoided me during the last day or two. Is it because I am a Speciality? I do hope that will make no difference with my old friends."

"Oh no," said Sibyl. "There's nothing so wonderful in being a Speciality, is there?"

Martha stared. "Well, to me it is very wonderful," she said; "and I cannot imagine how those other noble-minded girls think me good enough to join them."

"Oh Martha, are they so good as all that?"

"They are," said Martha; and her tone was very gloomy. She was thinking of Betty, whom she longed to comfort, whom she earnestly longed to help.

"It's so queer about Betty," said Sibyl after a pause. "She seemed to be such a very popular Speciality. Then, all of a sudden, she ceased to be one at all. I can't understand it."

"And you are never likely to, Sibyl. What happens in the club is only known to its members."

Sibyl grew red. What was coming over her? Two or three hours ago she was a girl—weak, it is true; insignificant, it is true—with a passion for Martha West and a most genuine love and admiration for Betty Vivian. Now she almost disliked Betty; and she could not make out what charm she had ever discovered in poor, plain Martha. She got up impatiently. "You will forgive me, Martha," she said; "but I have lots of things I want to do. I don't think I will stay just now. Perhaps you will ask me to come and talk to you another day."

"No, Sibyl, I sha'n't. When you want me you must try to find me yourself. I don't understand what is the matter with you to-day."

Sibyl grew that fiery red which always distressed her inexpressibly. The next minute she had disappeared. She ran straight to Fanny's room, hoping and trusting that she might find its inmate within. She was not disappointed, for Fanny was there alone; she was fully expecting Sibyl to come and see her. To Sibyl's knock she said, "Come in!" and the girl entered at once.

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"Well?" said Fanny.

"I have done what you wanted," said Sibyl. "I watched her, and I saw. Afterwards I went to the place where she had hidden it. I took it. It is in my pocket. Please take it from me. I have done what you wished. I want to get rid of it, and never to think of it again. Fanny, when shall I be elected a Speciality?"

But Fanny did not speak. She had snatched the little packet from Sibyl's hand and was gazing at it, her eyes almost starting from her head.

"When shall I become a Speciality?" whispered Sibyl.

"Don't whisper, child! The Vivians' room is next to mine. Sibyl, we must keep this a most profound secret, I am awfully obliged to you! You have been very clever and prompt. I don't wish to ask any questions at all. Thank you, Sibyl, from my heart. I will certainly keep my promise, and at the next meeting will propose you as a member. Whether you are elected or not must, of course, depend on the votes of the majority. In the meanwhile forget all this. Be as usual with your schoolfellows. Rest assured of my undying friendship and gratitude. Keep what you have done a profound secret; if anything leaks out there is no chance of your becoming a Speciality. Now, good-bye Sibyl. I mustn't be seen to take any special notice of you; people are very watchful in cases of this sort. But remember, though I don't talk to you a great deal, I shall be your true friend; and after you have become a member of our club there will, of course, be no difficulty."

"Oh, I should love to be a member!" said Sibyl. "I do so hate the tea in the refectory, and you do seem to have such cosy times in your sitting-room." [Pg 223]

Fanny smiled very slightly. "May I give you one word of warning?" she said. "You made a very great mistake to-day when you did not seem willing to pay Martha West a visit. Your election depends far more on Martha than on me. Between now and Thursday—when I mean to propose you as a member in place of Betty Vivian, who has forfeited her right for ever—Martha will be your most valuable ally. I do not say you will be elected—for the rules of the club are very strict, and we are most exclusive—but I will do my utmost."

"But you promised! I thought I was sure!" said Sibyl, beginning to whimper.

"Nonsense, nonsense, child! I said I would do my best. Now, keep up your friendship with Martha—that is, if you are wise."

Sibyl left the room. Her momentary elation was over, and she began to hate herself for what she had done. In all probability she would not be elected a Speciality, and then what reward would she have for acting the spy? She had acted the spy. The plain truth seemed now to flash before her eyes. She had been very mean and hard; and she had taken something which, after all, did not belong to her at all, and given it to Fanny. She could never get that something back. She felt that she did not dare to look at Betty Vivian. Why should not Betty hide things if she liked in the stump of an old oak-tree or under a bit of tiresome heather in the "forest primeval?" After all, Betty had not said the thing was wood; but when Sibyl had asked her she had said, "Have it so if you like." Oh! Sibyl felt just now that she had been made a sort of cat's-paw, and that she did not like Fanny Crawford one bit.

CHAPTER XVII

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A TURNING-POINT

After this exciting day matters seemed to move rather languidly in the school. Betty was beyond doubt in low spirits. She did not complain; she did not take any one into her confidence. Even to her sisters she was gloomy and silent. She took long walks by herself. She neglected no duty—that is, no apparent duty—and her lessons progressed swimmingly. Her two great talents—the one for music, the other for recitation—were bringing her into special notice amongst the different teachers. She was looked upon by the educational staff as a girl who might bring marked distinction to the school. Thus the last few days of that miserable week passed.

On Tuesday evening Miss Symes had a little talk with Mrs. Haddo.

"What is it, dear St. Cecilia?" asked the head mistress, looking lovingly into the face of her favorite teacher.

"I am anxious about Betty," was the reply.

"Sit down, dear, won't you? Emma, I have been also anxious. I cannot understand why that notice was put up on the blackboard, and why Betty has left the club. Have you any clue, dear?"

"None whatsoever," was Miss Symes's answer. "Of course I, as a teacher, cannot possibly question any of the girls, and they are none of them willing to confide in me."

"We certainly cannot question them," said Mrs. Haddo. "But now I wish to say something to you. Betty has been absent from evening prayers at the chapel so often lately that I think it is my duty to speak to her on the subject."

"I have also observed that fact," replied Miss Symes. "Betty does not look well. There is something, beyond doubt, weighing on her mind. She avoids her fellow-pupils, whereas she used to be, I may almost say, the favorite of the school. She scarcely speaks to any one now. When she walks she walks alone. Even her dear little sisters are anxious about her; I can see it, although they are far too discreet to say a word. Poor Betty's little face seems to me to grow paler every day, and her eyes more pathetic. Mrs. Haddo, can you not do something?"

"You know, Emma, that I never force confidences; I think it a great mistake. If a girl wishes to speak to me, she understands me well enough to be sure I shall respect every word she says; otherwise, I think it best to allow a girl of Betty Vivian's age to fight out her difficulties alone."

"As her teacher, I have nothing to complain of," said Miss Symes. "She is just brilliant. She seems to leap over mental difficulties as though they did not exist. Her intuition is something marvellous, and she will grasp an idea almost as soon as it is uttered. I should like you to hear her play; it is a perfect delight to teach her; her little fingers seem to be endowed with the very spirit of music. And then that delightful voice of hers thrills one when she recites aloud, as she does twice a week in my recitation-class. As a matter of fact, dear Mrs. Haddo, I am deeply attached to Betty; but I feel there is something wrong just now."

"A turning-point," said Mrs. Haddo. "How often we come to them in life!"

"God grant she may take the right turning!" was Miss Symes's remark. She sat silent, gazing gloomily into the fire.

"It is not like you, Emma, to be so despondent," said the head mistress.

"I cannot help feeling despondent, for I think there is mischief afoot and that Betty is suffering. I wonder if——"

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At that moment there came a tap at the door. Mrs. Haddo said, "Come in," and Mr. Fairfax entered.

"Ah," said Mrs. Haddo, "you are just the very man we want, Mr. Fairfax! Please sit down."

Mr. Fairfax immediately took the chair which was offered to him. "I have come," he said, "to speak to you and to Miss Symes with regard to one of your pupils—Betty Vivian."

"How strange!" said Mrs. Haddo. "Miss Symes and I were talking about Betty only this very moment. Can you throw any light on what is troubling her?"

"No," said Mr. Fairfax. "I came here to ask if you could."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you know in my capacity as chaplain different things come to my ears; but I am under a promise not to repeat them. I am, however, under no promise in this instance. I was walking through the shrubbery half-an-hour ago—I was, in fact, thinking out the little address I want to give the dear girls next Sunday morning—when I suddenly heard a low sob. I paused to listen; it was some way off, but I heard it quite distinctly. I did not like to approach—you understand one's feeling of delicacy in such a matter; but it came again, and was so very heartrending that I could not help saying, 'Who is there? Is any one in trouble?' To my amazement, a girl started to her feet; she had been lying full-length, with her face downwards, on the damp grass. She came up to me, and I recognized her at once. She was Betty Vivian. There was very little light, but I could see that she was in terrible distress. She could scarcely get out her words. 'It is lost!' she said—'lost! Some one has stolen it!' And then she rushed away from me in the direction of the house. I thought it my duty to come and tell you, Mrs. Haddo. The girl's grief was quite remarkable and out of the common. The tone in which she said, 'It is lost—lost!' was tragic."

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Mrs. Haddo sat very still for a minute. Then she said gently, "Would you rather speak to her, or shall I?"

"Under the circumstances," said Mr. Fairfax, "it is only right for me to say something more. Betty Vivian came to see me some days ago, and said that she had been expelled from the Specialities; and she asked me if, under such conditions, she ought to attend evening prayers in the chapel. I begged for her full confidence. She would not give it."

"And what did you say about evening prayers?"

"I said that was a matter between her own conscience and God. I could not get anything further out of her; but since then you may have observed that she has hardly attended

chapel at all.”

“I certainly have noticed it,” said Miss Symes.

Mrs. Haddo did not speak for a minute. Then she said in an authoritative voice, “Thank you, Mr. Fairfax; I am deeply obliged to you for having come to me and taken me so far into your confidence. Emma, will you ask Betty to come to me here? If she resists, bring her, dear; if she still resists, I will go to her. Dear Mr. Fairfax, we must pray for this child. There is something very seriously wrong; but she has won my heart, and I cannot give her up. Will you leave me also, dear friend, for I must see Betty by herself?”

Miss Symes immediately left the room. The clergyman shortly afterwards followed her example.

Of all the teachers, Miss Symes was the greatest favorite in the upper school. She went swiftly through the lounge, where the girls were usually to be found at this hour chatting, laughing, amusing themselves with different games; for this was the relaxation-hour of the day, when every girl might do precisely what she liked. Miss Symes did not for a moment expect to find Betty in such an animated, lively, almost noisy group. To her amazement, however, she was attracted by peals of laughter; and—looking in the direction whence they came, she perceived that Betty herself was the center of a circle of girls, who were all urging her to “take-off” different girls and teachers in the school.

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Betty was an inimitable mimic. At that very moment it seemed to Miss Symes that she heard her own voice speaking—her own very gentle, cultivated, high-bred voice. Amongst the girls who listened and roared with laughter might have been seen Sarah Butt, Sibyl Ray, and several more who had only recently been moved to the upper school.

“Now, please, take-off Mademoiselle. Whoever you neglect, please bestow some attention on Mademoiselle, dear Betty!” cried several voices.

Betty drew herself up, perked her head a little to one side, put on the very slightest suspicion of a squint, and spoke in the high-pitched, rapid tone of the Frenchwoman. She looked her part, and she acted it.

“And now Fräulein—Fräulein!” said another voice.

But before Betty could change herself into a stout German Fräulein, Miss Symes laid a quiet hand on her shoulder. “May I speak to you for a minute, Betty?”

“Why, certainly,” said Betty, starting and reddening faintly.

“Oh, dear St. Cecilia,” exclaimed several of the girls, “don’t take Betty from us now! She is such fun!”

“I was amusing the girls by doing a little bit of mimicry,” said Betty. “Miss Symes, did you see me mimicking you?”

“I both saw and heard you, my dear. Your imitation was excellent.”

“Oh, please, dear St. Cecilia, don’t say you are hurt!” cried Sarah Butt.

“Not in the least,” said Miss Symes. “The gift of mimicry is a somewhat dangerous one, but I don’t think Betty meant it unkindly. I would ask her, however, to spare our good and noble head mistress.”

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“We begged of her to be Mrs. Haddo, but she wouldn’t,” said Sibyl.

“Come, Betty,” said Miss Symes. She took the girl’s hand and led her away.

“What do you want with me?” said Betty. The brilliance in her eyes which had been so remarkable a few minutes ago had now faded; her cheeks looked pale; her small face wore a hungry expression.

“Mrs. Haddo wants to see you, Betty.”

“Oh—but—must I go?”

“Need you ask, Betty Vivian? The head mistress commands your presence.”

“Then I will go.”

“Remember, I trust you,” said Miss Symes.

“You may,” answered the girl. She drew herself up and walked quickly and with great dignity through the lounge into the great corridor beyond, and so towards Mrs. Haddo’s sitting-room. Here she knocked, and was immediately admitted.

"Betty, I wish to speak to you," said Mrs. Haddo. "Sit down, dear. You and I have not had a chat for some time."

"A very weary and long time ago!" answered Betty. All the vivacity which had marked her face in the lounge had left it.

But Mrs. Haddo, who could read character so rapidly and with such unerring instinct, knew that the girl was, so to speak, on guard. She was guarding herself, and was under a very strong tension. "I have something to say to you, Betty," said Mrs. Haddo.

Betty lowered her eyes.

"Look at me, my child."

With an effort Betty raised her eyes, glanced at Mrs. Haddo, and then looked down again. [Pg 230]
"Wait, please, will you?" she said.

"I am about to do so. You are unhappy."

Betty nodded.

"Will you tell me what is the matter?"

Betty shook her head.

"Do you think it is right for you to be unhappy in a school like mine, and not to tell me—not to tell the one who is placed over you as a mother would be placed were she alive—what is troubling you?"

"It may be wrong," said Betty; "but even so, I cannot tell you."

"You must understand," said Mrs. Haddo, speaking with great restraint and extreme distinctness, "that it is impossible for me to allow this state of things to continue. I know nothing, and yet in one sense I know all. Nothing has been told me with regard to the true story of your unhappiness, but the knowledge that you are unhappy reached me before you yourself confirmed it. To-night Mr. Fairfax found you out of doors—a broken rule, Betty, but I pass that over. He heard you sobbing in the bitterness of your distress, and discovered that you were lying face downwards on the grass in the fir-plantation. When he called you, you went to him and told him you had lost something."

"So I have," answered Betty.

"Is it because of that you are unhappy?"

"Yes, because of that—altogether because of that."

"What have you lost, dear?"

"Mrs. Haddo, I cannot tell you."

"Betty, I ask you to do so. I have a right to know. I stand to you in the place of a mother. I repeat that I have a right to know."

"I cannot—I cannot tell you!" replied Betty.

Mrs. Haddo, who had been seated, now rose, went over to the girl, and put one hand on her shoulder. [Pg 231]

Betty shivered from head to foot. Then she sprang to her feet and moved a little away. "Don't!" she said. "When you touch me it is like fire!"

"My touch, Betty Vivian, like fire!"

"Oh, you know that I love you!" sobbed poor Betty.

"Prove it, then, dear, by giving me your confidence."

"I would," said Betty, speaking rapidly, "if that which is causing me suffering had anything at all to do with you. But it has nothing to do with you, Mrs. Haddo, nor with the school, nor with the girls in the school. It is my own private trouble. Once I had a treasure. The treasure is gone."

"You would, perhaps, like it back again?" said Mrs. Haddo.

"Ah yes—yes! but I cannot get it. Some one has taken it. It is gone."

"Once again, Betty, I ask you to give me your confidence."

"I cannot."

Mrs. Haddo resumed her seat. "Is that your very last—your final—decision, Betty Vivian?"

"It is, Mrs. Haddo."

"How old are you, dear?"

"I have told you. I was sixteen and a half when I came. I am rather more now."

"You are only a child, dear Betty."

"Not in mind, nor in life, nor in circumstances," replied Betty.

"We will suppose that all that is true," answered Mrs. Haddo. "We will suppose, also, that you are cast upon the world friendless and alone. Were such a thing to happen, what would you do?"

Betty shivered. "I don't know," she replied.

"Now, Betty, I cannot take your answer as final. I will give you a few days longer; at the end of that time I will again beg for your confidence. In the meanwhile I must say something very plainly. You came to this school with your sisters under special conditions which you, my poor child, had nothing to do with. But I must say frankly that I was unwilling to admit you three into the school after term had begun, and it was contrary to my rules to take girls straight into the upper school who had never been in the lower school. Nevertheless, for the sake of my old friend Sir John Crawford, I did this."

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"Not for Fanny's sake, I hope?" said Betty, her eyes flashing for a minute, and a queer change coming over her face.

"I have done what I did, Betty, for the sake of my dear friend Sir John Crawford, who is your guardian and your sisters' guardian, and who is now in India. I was unwilling to have you, my dears; but when you arrived and I saw you, Betty, I thanked God, for I thought that I perceived in you one whom I could love, whom I could train, whom I could help. I was interested in you, very deeply interested, from the first. I perceived with pleasure that my feelings towards you were shared by your schoolfellows. You became a favorite, and you became so just because of that beautiful birthright of yours—your keen wit, your unselfishness, and your pleasant and bright ways. I did an extraordinary thing when I admitted you into the school, and your schoolfellows did a thing quite as extraordinary when they allowed you, a newcomer, to join that special club which, more than anything else, has laid the foundation of sound and noble morals in the school. You were made a Speciality. I have nothing to do with the club, my dear; but I was pleased—nay, I was proud—when I saw that my girls had such discernment as to select you as one of their, I might really say august, number. You took your honors in precisely the spirit I should have expected of you—sweetly, modestly, without any undue sense of pride or hateful self-righteousness. Then, a few days ago, there came a thunderclap; and teachers and girls were alike amazed to find that you were no longer a member. By the rules of the club we were not permitted to ask any questions—"

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"But I, as a late member, am permitted to tell you this much, Mrs. Haddo. I was, and I think quite rightly, expelled from the club."

"Betty!"

"It is true," answered Betty.

"And you will not tell me why?"

"No more can I tell you why than I can explain to you what I have lost."

"Betty, my poor child, there is a mystery somewhere. I am deeply puzzled and terribly distressed. This is Wednesday evening. This day week, at the same hour, I will send for you again and ask for your full and absolute confidence. If you refuse to give it to me, Betty, I will not expel you, my child; but I must send you from Haddo Court. I have an old friend who will receive you until I can get into communication with Sir John Crawford, for the sort of mystery which now exists is bad for the school as a whole. You are intelligent enough to perceive that."

"Yes, Mrs. Haddo, I am quite intelligent enough to perceive it." Betty stood up as she spoke.

"Have you anything more to say?"

"Nothing," replied Betty.

"This day week, then, my child. And one word before we part. The chapel where Mr. Fairfax reads prayers—where God, I hope, is worshiped both in spirit and in truth—is meant as

much for the sorrowful, the erring, the sinners, as for those who think themselves close to Him. For, Betty, the God whom I believe in is a very present Help in time of trouble. I want you to realize that at least, and not to cease attending prayers, my dear."

Betty bent her head. The next minute she went up to Mrs. Haddo, flung herself on her knees by that lady's side, took her long white hand, kissed it with passion, and left the room.

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CHAPTER XVIII

NOT ACCEPTABLE

It was Thursday evening, and Fanny Crawford did not altogether like the prospect which lay before her. Ever since Sibyl had put the little sealed packet into her hands, that packet had lain on Fanny's heart with the weight of lead. Now that she had obtained the packet she did not want it; she did not dare to let any one guess how it had come into her hands. Fanny the proud, the looked-up-to, the respected, the girl whose conduct had hitherto been so immaculate, had stooped to employ another girl to act as a spy. Fanny was absolutely in the power of that very insignificant person, Sibyl Ray. Sibyl demanded her reward. Fanny must do her utmost to get Sibyl admitted to the club.

On that very evening, as Fanny was going towards the Bertrams' room, where the meeting was to be held, she was waylaid by Sibyl.

"You won't forget?—you have promised."

"Of course I won't forget, Sibyl. What a tease you are!"

"Can you possibly give me a hint afterwards? You might come to my room just for an instant, or you might push a little note under the door. I am so panting to know. I do so dreadfully want to belong to the club. I have been counting up all the privileges. I shall go mad with joy if I am admitted."

"I will do my best for you; but whether I can tell you anything or not to-night is more than I can possibly say," replied Fanny. "Now, do go away, Sibyl; go away, and be quick about it!"

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"All right," said Sibyl. "Of course you know, or perhaps you don't know, that Betty isn't well? The doctor came an hour ago, and he says she is to be kept very quiet. I am ever so sorry for her, she is so—so—Oh dear, I am almost sorry now that I took that little packet from under the root of the Scotch heather!"

"Go, Sibyl. If we are seen together it will be much more difficult for me to get you elected," was Fanny's response; and at last, to Fanny's infinite relief, Sibyl took her departure.

All the other members of the club were present when Fanny made her appearance. They were talking in low tones, and as Fanny entered she heard Betty's name being passed from lip to lip.

"She does look bad, poor thing!" said Olive.

"Did you know," exclaimed Susie Rushworth, "that after doing that splendid piece of recitation in the class to-day she fainted right off? Miss Symes was quite terrified about her."

"They say the doctor has been sent for," said Martha. "Oh dear," she added, "I never felt so unhappy about a girl before in my life!"

Fanny was not too gratified to hear these remarks. She perceived all too quickly that, notwithstanding the fact that Betty was no longer a member of the club, she still reigned in the hearts of the girls.

"Well, Fan, here you are!" exclaimed Margaret. "Is there anything very special for us to do to-night? I have no inclination to do anything. We are all so dreadfully anxious about Betty and those darling little twins. Do you know, the doctor has ordered them not to sleep in Betty's room to-night; so Miss Symes is going to look after them. They are such sweet pets! The doctor isn't very happy about Betty. Sometimes I think we made a mistake—that we were cruel to Betty to turn her out of the club."

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Fanny felt that if she did not quickly assert herself all would be lost. She therefore said quietly, "I don't pretend to share your raptures with regard to Betty Vivian, and I certainly

think that if rules are worth anything they ought not to be broken."

"I suppose you are right," remarked Olive; "only, Betty seemed to make an exception to every rule."

"Well," said Fanny, "if we want a new member——"

"Another Speciality?" said Margaret.

"I was thinking," continued Fanny, her pretty pink cheeks glowing brightly and her eyes shining, "that we might be doing a kindness to a very worthy little girl who will most certainly not break any of the rules."

"Whom in the world do you mean?" asked Susie.

"I suppose you will be surprised at my choice; but although seven is the perfect number, there is no rule whatever against our having eight, nine, ten, or even more members of the club."

"There is no rule against our having twenty members, if those members are worthy," said Margaret Grant. "But whom have you in the back of your head, Fanny? You look so mysterious."

"I cannot think of any one myself," said Martha West.

When Martha said this Fanny made a little gesture of despair. "Well," she said, "I have taken a fancy to her. I think she is very nice; and I know she is poor, and I know she wants help, and I know that Mrs. Haddo takes a great interest in her. I allude to that dear little thing, Sibyl Ray. You, Martha, surely will support me?"

"Sibyl Ray!" The girls looked at each other in unbounded astonishment. Martha was quite silent, and her cheeks turned pale.

After a long pause Margaret spoke, "May I ask, Fanny, what one single qualification Sibyl Ray has for election to membership in the Speciality Club?"

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"But what possible reason is there against her being a member?" retorted Fanny.

"A great many, I should say," was Margaret's answer. "In the first place, she is too young; in the second place, she has only just been admitted to the upper school."

"You can't keep her out on that account," objected Fanny, "for she has been longer in the upper school than Betty Vivian."

"Oh, please don't mention Betty and Sibyl in the same breath!" was Margaret's answer.

"I do not," said Fanny, who was fast losing her temper. "Sibyl is a good, straightforward, honorable girl. Betty is the reverse."

"Oh Fanny," exclaimed Martha, "I wouldn't abuse my own cousin if I were you!"

"Nonsense!" said Fanny. "Whether she is a cousin, or even a sister, I cannot be blind to her most flagrant faults."

"Of course you have a right to propose Sibyl Ray as a possible member of this club," said Margaret, "for it is one of our by-laws that any member can propose the election of another. But I don't really think you will carry the thing through. In the first place, what do you know about Sibyl? I have observed you talking to her once or twice lately; but until the last week or so, I think, you hardly knew of her existence."

"That is quite true," said Fanny boldly; "but during the last few days I have discovered that Sibyl is a sweet girl—most charming, most unselfish, most obliging. She is very timid, however, and lacks self-confidence; and I have observed that she is constantly snubbed by girls who are not fit to hold a candle to her and yet look down upon her, just because she is poor. Now, if she were made a member of the club all that would be put a stop to, and she would have a great chance of doing her utmost in the school. We should be holding out a helping hand to a girl who certainly is neither beautiful nor clever, but who can be made a fine character. Martha, you at least will stand up for Sibyl? You have always been her close friend."

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"And I am fond of her still," said Martha; "but I don't look upon her at all in the light in which you do, Fanny. Sibyl, at present, would be injured, not improved, by her sudden elevation to the rank of a Speciality. The only thing I would suggest is that you propose her again in a year's time; and if during the course of that year she has proved in any sense of the word what you say, I for one will give her my cordial support. At present I cannot

honestly feel justified in voting for her, and I will not."

"Well spoken, Martha!" said Margaret. "Fanny, your suggestion is really ill-timed. We are all unhappy about Betty just now; and to see poor little Sibyl—of course, no one wants to say a word against her—in Betty's shoes would make our loss seem more irreparable than ever."

Fanny saw that her cause was lost. She had the grace not to say anything more, but sat back in her chair with her eyes fixed on Margaret's face. Fanny began to perceive for the first time that some of the girls in this club had immensely strong characters. Margaret Grant and Martha West had, for instance, characters so strong that Fanny discovered herself to be a very unimportant little shadow beside them. The Bertrams were the sort of girls to take sides at once and firmly with what was good and noble, Susie Rushworth was devoted to Margaret, and Olive had been the prime favorite in the club until Betty's advent. Now it seemed to Fanny that each one of the Specialities was opposed to her, that she stood alone. She did not like the situation. She was so exceedingly anxious; for, strong in the belief that she herself was a person of great importance, and in the further belief that Martha would support her, she had been practically sure of getting Sibyl admitted to the club. Now Sibyl had no chance whatever, and Sibyl knew things which might make Fanny's position in the school the reverse of comfortable.

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Fanny Crawford on this occasion sat lost in thought, by no means inclined to add her quota to the entertainment of the others, and looking eagerly for the first moment when she might escape from the meeting. Games were proposed; but games went languidly, and once again Betty and Betty's illness became the subject of conversation.

When this took place Fanny rose impatiently. "There are no further questions to be discussed to-night?" she asked, turning to Margaret.

"None that I know of."

"Then, if you will excuse me, girls, I will go. I must tell poor little Sibyl——"

"You don't mean to say you spoke to Sibyl about it?" interrupted Martha.

"Well, yes, I did." Fanny could almost have bitten out her tongue for having made this unwary admission. "She was so keen, poor little thing, that I told her I would do my best for her. I must say, once and for all, that I have never seen my sister members so hard and cold and indifferent to the interests of a very deserving little girl before. I am, of course, sorry I spoke to her on the matter."

"You really did very wrong, Fan," said Margaret in an annoyed voice. "You know perfectly well that we never allude to the possibility of a girl being proposed for membership to that girl herself until we have first made up our minds whether she is worthy or not. Now, you have placed us at a great disadvantage; but, of course, you forgot yourself, Fan. You must tell Sibyl that the thing is not to be thought of. You can put it down to her age or any other cause you like."

"Of course I must speak the truth," said Fanny, raising her voice to a somewhat insolent tone. "The club does not permit the slightest vestige of prevarication. Is that not so?"

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"Yes, it is certainly so."

The next minute Fanny had left the room. It was one of the rules of the club that gossip, in the ordinary sense of the world, with regard to any member was strictly forbidden; so no one made any comment when Fanny had taken her departure. There was a sense of relief, however, felt by the girls who remained behind. The meeting was a sorrowful one, and broke up rather earlier than usual.

At prayers that night in the chapel Margaret Grant and the other girls of the Specialities were startled when Mr. Fairfax made special mention of Betty Vivian, praying God to comfort her in sore distress and to heal her sickness. The prayer was extempore, and roused the girls to amazed attention.

Fanny was not present that night at chapel. She was so angry that she felt she must give vent to her feelings to some one; therefore, why not speak to Sibyl at once?

Sibyl was not considered very strong, and though she did belong to the upper school, usually went to bed before prayers. She was in her small room to-night. It was a pretty, neatly furnished room in the west wing—one of those usually given to a lower-school girl on first entering the upper school. Sibyl had no intention, however, of going to bed. She sat by her fire, her heart beating high, her thoughts full of the privileges which would so soon be hers. She was composing, in her own mind, a wonderful letter to send to her people at

home; she pictured to herself their looks of delight when they heard that this great honor had been bestowed upon her. For, of course, Sibyl, as a member of the lower school at Haddo Court, had heard much of the Specialities, and what she had heard she had repeated; so that when she wanted to amuse her select friends in her father's parish, she frequently gave them some information on this most interesting subject. Now she was on the point of being a member herself! How she would enjoy her Christmas holidays! How she would be feted and fussed over and petted! How carefully she would guard the secrets of the club, and how very high she would hold her own small head! She a member of the great Haddo Court School, and also a Speciality!

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While Sibyl was thus engaged, seeing pictures in the fire and smiling quietly to herself, she suddenly heard a light tap at her room door. She started to her feet, and the next minute she had flown across the room and opened the door. Fanny stood without.

"Oh, you dear, darling Fan!" exclaimed Sibyl. "You are good! Come in—do come in! Is the meeting over? And—and—oh, Fanny! what have they said? Has my name been put to the vote? Of course you and Martha would be on my side, and you and Martha are so strong that you would carry the rest of the members with you. Fan, am I to have a copy of the rules? And—and—oh, Fan! is it settled? Do—do tell me!"

"I wish you weren't quite so excited, Sibyl! Let me sit down; I have a bad headache."

Fanny sank languidly into the chair which Sibyl herself had been occupying. There was only one easy-chair in this tiny room. Sibyl had, therefore, to draw forward a hard and high one for herself. But she was far too excited to mind this at the present moment.

"And what a fearful blaze of light you have!" continued Fanny, looking round fretfully. "Don't you know, Sibyl, that, unless we are occupied over our studies, we are not allowed to turn on such a lot of light? Here, let me put the room in shadow."

"Let's have firelight only," laughed Sibyl, who was not quick at guessing things, and felt absolute confidence in Fanny's powers. The next instant she had switched off the light and was kneeling by Fanny's side. "Now, Fanny—now, do put me out of suspense!"

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"I will," said Fanny. "I have come here for the purpose. I did what I could for you, Sib. You must bear your disappointment as best you can. I am truly sorry for you, but things can't be helped."

"You are truly sorry for me—and—and—things can't be helped!" exclaimed Sibyl, amazement in her voice. "What do you mean?"

"Well, they won't have you at any price as a member of the Specialities; and the person who spoke most strongly against you was your dear and special friend, Martha West. I am not at liberty to quote a single word of what she did say; but you are not to be a Speciality—at least, not for a year. If at the end of a year you have done something wonderful—the sort of thing which you, poor Sibyl, could never possibly do—the matter may be brought up again for reconsideration. As things stand, you are not to be elected; so the sooner you put the matter out of your head the better."

Sibyl turned very white. Then her face became suffused with small patches of vivid color.

Fanny was not looking at her; had she looked she might have perceived that Sibyl's expression was anything but amiable at that moment. The girl's extraordinary silence, however—the absence of all remark—the absence, even, of any expression of sorrow—presently caused Fanny to glance round at her. "Well," she said, "I thought I'd tell you at once. You must put it out of your head. I think I will go to bed now. Good-night, Sibyl. Sorry I couldn't do more for you."

"Don't go!" said Sibyl. "What do you mean?"

There was a quality in Sibyl's voice which made Fanny feel uncomfortable.

"I am much too tired," Fanny said, "to stay up any longer chatting with an insignificant little girl like you. I could not even stay to the conclusion of our meeting, and I certainly don't want to be seen in your room. I did my best for you. I have failed. I am sorry, and there's an end of it."

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"Oh no, there isn't an end of it!" said Sibyl.

"What do you mean, Sibyl?"

"I mean," said Sibyl, "that you have got to reward me for doing your horrid—*horrid*, dirty work!"

"You odious little creature! what do you mean? My dirty work! Sibyl, I perceive that I was mistaken in you. I also perceive that Martha West and the others were right. You are indeed unworthy to be a Speciality."

"If all were known," said Sibyl, "I don't think I am half as unworthy as you are, Fanny Crawford. Anyhow, if I am not to be made a Speciality, and if every one is going to despise me and look down on me, why, I have nothing to lose, and I may as well make an example of you."

"You odious child! what *do* you mean?"

"Why, I can tell Mrs. Haddo as well as anybody else. Every one in the school knows that Betty is ill to-night. Something seems to have gone wrong with her head, and she is crying out about a packet—a lost packet. Now, *you* know how the packet was lost. You and I both know how it was found—and lost again. You have it, Fanny. You are the one who can cure Betty Vivian—Betty, who never was unkind to any one; Betty, who did not mean me to be a figure of fun, as you suggested, on the night of the entertainment; Betty, who has been kind to me, as she has been kind to every one else since she came to the school. *You* have done nothing for me, Fanny; so I—I can take care of myself in future, and perhaps Betty too."

To say that Fanny was utterly amazed and horrified at Sibyl's speech—to say that Fanny was thunderstruck when she perceived that this poor little worm, as she considered Sibyl Ray, had turned at last—would be but very inadequately to describe the situation. Fanny lost her headache on the spot. Here was danger, grave and imminent; here was the possibility of her immaculate character being dragged through the mud; here was the terrible possibility of Fanny Crawford being seen in her true colors. She had now to collect her scattered senses—in short, to pull herself together.

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"Oh Sibyl," she said after a pause, "you frightened me for a minute—you really did! Who would suppose that you were such a spirited girl?"

"I am not spirited, Fanny; but I love Betty, notwithstanding all you have tried to do to put me against her. And if I am not to be a Speciality I would ever so much rather be Betty's friend than yours. There! Now I have spoken. Perhaps you would like to go now, Fan, as your head is aching so badly?"

"It doesn't ache now," said Fanny; "your conduct has frightened all the aches away. Sibyl, you really are the very queerest girl! I came here to-night full of the kindest feelings towards you. You can ask Martha West how I spoke of you at the club."

"But she won't tell me. Anything that you say in the club isn't allowed to be breathed outside it."

"I know that. Anyhow, I have been doing my utmost to get the school to see you in your true light. I have taken great notice of you, and you have been proud to receive my notice. It is certainly true that I have failed to get you what I hoped I could manage; but there are other things——"

"Other things!" said Sibyl. She stood in a defiant attitude quite foreign to her usual manner.

"Oh yes, my dear child, lots and lots of other things! For instance, in the Christmas holidays I can have you to stay with me at Brighton. What do you say to that? Don't you think that would be a feather in your cap? I have an aunt who lives there, Aunt Amelia Crawford; and she generally allows me—that is, when father cannot have me—to bring one of my school-friends with me to stay in her lovely house. I had a letter from her only yesterday, asking me which girl I would like to bring with me this year. I thought of Olive—Olive is such fun; but I'd just as soon have you—that is, if you would like to come."

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Alas for poor Sibyl! She was not proof against such a tempting bait.

"As far as you are concerned," continued Fanny, who saw that she was making way with Sibyl, and breaking down, as she expressed it, her silly little defences, "you would gain far more prestige in being Aunt Amelia's guest than if you belonged to twenty Speciality Clubs. Aunt Amelia is good to the girls who come to stay with her as my friends. And I'd help you, Sib; I'd make the best of your dresses. We'd go to the theatre, and the pantomime, and all kinds of jolly things. We'd have a rattling fine time."

"Do you really mean it?" said Sibyl.

"Yes—that is, if you will give me your solemn word that you will refer no more to that silly matter about Betty Vivian. Betty Vivian had no right to that packet. It belonged to my father, and I have got it back for him. Don't think of it any more, Sibyl, and you shall be my guest this Christmas. But if you prefer to make a fuss, and drag me into an unpleasant

position, and get yourself, in all probability, expelled from the school, then you must do as you please."

"But if I were expelled, you'd be expelled too," said Sibyl.

Fanny laughed. "I think not," she said. "I think, without any undue pride, that my position in the school is sufficiently strong to prevent such a catastrophe. No; you would be cutting off your nose to spite your face—that is all you would be doing with this nice little scheme of yours. Give it up, Sibyl, and you shall come to Brighton."

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"It is dull at home at Christmas," said Sibyl. "We are so dreadfully poor, and father has such a lot to do; and there are always those half-starved, smelly sort of people coming to the house—the sort that want coal-tickets, you know, and grocery-tickets; and—and—we have to help to give great big Christmas dinners. We are all day long getting up entertainments for those dull sort of people. I often think they are not a bit grateful, and after being at a school like this I really feel quite squeamish about them."

Fanny laughed. She saw, or believed she saw, that her cause was won. "You'll have nothing to make you squeamish at Aunt Amelia's," she said. "And now I must say good-night. Sorry about the Specialities; but, after the little exhibition you have just made of yourself, I agree with the other girls that you are not fit to be a member. Now, ta-ta for the present."

CHAPTER XIX

"IT'S DICKIE!"

Fanny went straight to her own room. "What a nasty time I have lived through!" she thought as she was about to enter. Then she opened the door and started back.

The whole room had undergone a metamorphosis. There was a shaded light in one corner, and the door between Fanny's room and Betty's was thrown open. A grave, kind-looking nurse was seated by a table, on which was a shaded lamp; and on seeing Fanny enter she held up her hand with a warning gesture. The next minute she had beckoned the girl out on the landing.

"What is the meaning of this?" asked Fanny. "What are you doing in my room?"

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"The doctor wished the door to be opened and the room to be given up to me," replied the nurse. "My name is Sister Helen, and I am looking after dear little Miss Vivian. We couldn't find you to tell you about the necessary alterations, which were made in a hurry. Ah, I mustn't leave my patient! I hear her calling out again. She is terribly troubled about something she has lost. Do you hear her?"

"I won't give it up! I won't give it up!" called poor Betty's voice.

"I was asked to tell you," said Sister Helen, "to go straight to Miss Symes, who has arranged another room for you to sleep in—that is, if you *are* Miss Crawford."

"Yes, that is my name. Have my things been removed?"

"I suppose so, but I don't know. I am going back to my patient."

The nurse re-entered the room, closing the door on Fanny, who stood by herself in the corridor. She heard Betty's voice, and Betty's voice sounded so high and piercing and full of pain that her first feeling was one of intense thankfulness that she had been moved from close proximity to the girl. The next minute she was speeding down the corridor in the direction of Miss Symes's room. Half-way there she met St. Cecilia coming to meet her.

"Ah, Fanny, dear," said Miss Symes, "I thought your little meeting would have been over by now. Do you greatly mind sharing my room with me to-night? I cannot get another ready for you in time. Dr. Ashley wishes the nurse who is looking after Betty to have your room for the present. There was no time to tell you, dear; but I have collected the few things I think you will want till the morning. To-morrow we will arrange another room for you. In the meantime I hope you will put up with me. I have had a bed put into a corner of my room and a screen around it, so you will be quite comfortable."

"Thank you," said Fanny. She wondered what further unpleasantness was about to happen to her on that inauspicious night.

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"You would like to go to bed, dear, wouldn't you?" said Miss Symes.

"Yes, thank you."

"Well, you shall do so. I cannot go for a couple of hours, as Mrs. Haddo wants me to sit up with her until the specialist arrives from London."

"The specialist from London!" exclaimed Fanny, turning first red and then white. "Do you mean that Mrs. Haddo has sent for a London doctor?"

"Indeed she has. My dear, poor little Betty is dangerously ill. Dr. Ashley is by no means satisfied about her."

By this time the two had reached Miss Symes's beautiful room. Fanny gave a quick sigh. Then, like a flash, a horrible thought occurred to her. Her room had to be given up to-morrow. Her things would be removed. Among her possessions—put safely away, it is true, but still not *too* safely—was the little sealed packet. If that packet were found, Fanny felt that the world would be at an end as far as she was concerned.

"You don't look well yourself, Fanny," said Miss Symes, glancing kindly at the girl. "Of course you are sorry about Betty; we are all sorry, for we all love her. If you had been at prayers to-night you would have been astonished at the gloom which was felt in our beautiful little chapel when Mr. Fairfax prayed for her."

"But she can't be as ill as all that?" said Fanny.

"She is—very, very ill, dear. The child has evidently got a bad chill, together with a most severe mental shock. We none of us can make out what is the matter; but it is highly probable that the specialist—Dr. Jephson of Harley Street—will insist on the Specialities being questioned as to the reason why Betty was expelled from the club. It is absolutely essential that the girl's mind should be relieved, and that as soon as possible. She is under the influence now of a composing draught, and, we greatly trust, may be more like herself in the morning. Don't look too sad, dear Fanny! I can quite understand that you must feel this very deeply, for Betty is your cousin; and somehow, dear—forgive me for saying it—but you do not act quite the cousin's part to that poor, sweet child. Now I must leave you. Go to bed, dear. Pray for Betty, and then sleep all you can."

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"Where are the twins?" suddenly asked Fanny.

"They are sleeping to-night in the lower school. It was necessary to put the poor darlings as far from Betty as possible, for they are in a fearful state about her. Now I will leave you, Fanny. I am wanted elsewhere. When I do come to bed I will be as quiet as possible, so as not to disturb you."

Fanny made no answer, and the next minute Miss Symes had left her.

Fanny now went over to the corner of the room where a snug little white bed had been put up, a washhand-stand was placed and where a small chest of drawers stood—empty at present, for only a few of Fanny's things had been taken out of her own room. The girl looked round her in a bewildered way. The packet!—the sealed packet! To-morrow all her possessions would be removed into a room which would be got ready for her. There were always one or two rooms to spare at Haddo Court, and Fanny would be given a room to herself again. She was far too important a member of that little community not to have the best possible done for her. Deft and skillful servants would take her things out of the various drawers and move them to another room. They would find the packet. Fanny knew quite well where she had placed it. She had put it under a pile of linen which she herself took charge of, and which was always kept in the bottom drawer of her wardrobe. Fanny had put the packet there in a moment of excitement and hurry. She had not yet decided what to do with it; she had to make a plan in her own mind, and in the meantime it was safe enough among Fanny's various and pretty articles of toilet. For it was one of the rules of Haddo Court that each girl, be she rich or poor, should take care of her own underclothing. All that the servants had to do was to see that the things were properly aired; but the girls had to mend their own clothes and keep them tidy.

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Absolute horror filled Fanny's mind now. What was she to do? She was so bewildered that for a time she could scarcely think coherently. Then she made up her mind that, come what would, she must get that packet out of her own bedroom before the servants came in on the following day. She was so absorbed with the thought of her own danger that she had no time to think of the very grave danger which assailed poor little Betty Vivian. If she had disliked Betty before, she hated her now. Oh, how right she had been when, in her heart of hearts, she had opposed Betty's entrance into the school! What trouble those three tiresome, wild, uncontrollable girls had brought in their wake! And now Betty—Betty, who was so adored—Betty, who, in Fanny's opinion, was both a thief and a liar—was dangerously ill; and she (Fanny) would in all probability have to appear in a most sorry

position. For, whatever Betty's sin, Fanny knew well that nothing could excuse her own conduct. She had spied on Betty; she had employed Sibyl Ray as a tool; she had got Sibyl to take the packet from under the piece of heather; and that very night she had excited the astonishment of her companions in the Speciality Club by proposing a ridiculously unsuitable person for membership as poor Sibyl.

"Things look as black as night," thought Fanny to herself. "I don't want to go to bed. I wish I could get out of this. How odious things are!"

Just then she heard footsteps outside her door—footsteps that came up close and waited. Then, all of a sudden, the door was flung violently open, and Sylvia and Hester entered. They had been crying so hard that their poor little faces were disfigured almost beyond recognition. Sylvia held a small tin box in her hand.

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"What are you doing, girls? You had better go to bed," said Fanny.

Neither girl took the slightest notice of this injunction. They looked round the room, noting the position of the different articles of furniture. Then Sylvia walked straight up to the screen behind which Fanny's bed was placed. With a sudden movement she pulled down the bedclothes, opened the little tin box, and put something into Fanny's bed.

"It's Dickie!" said Sylvia. "I hope you will like his company. Come, Hetty."

Before Fanny could find words the girls had vanished. But the look of hatred on Sylvia's face, the look of defiance and horror on Hetty's, Fanny was not likely to forget. They shut the door somewhat noisily behind them. Then, all of a sudden, Hetty opened it again, pushed in her small face, and said, "You had better be careful. His bite is dangerous!"

The next instant quick feet were heard running away from Miss Symes's room, in the center of which Fanny stood stunned and really frightened. What had those awful children put into her bed? She had heard vague rumors of a pet of theirs called Dickie, but had never been interested enough even to inquire about him. Who was Dickie? What was Dickie? Why was his bite dangerous? Why was he put into her bed? Fanny, for all her careful training, for all her airs and graces, was by no means remarkable for physical courage. She approached the bed once or twice, and went back again. She was really afraid to pull down the bedclothes. At last, summoning up courage, she did so. To her horror, she saw an enormous spider, the largest she had ever beheld, in the center of the bed! This, then, was Dickie! He was curled up as though he were asleep. But as Fanny ventured to approach a step nearer it seemed to her that one wicked, protruding eye fastened itself on her face. The next instant Dickie began to run, and when Dickie ran he ran towards her. Fanny uttered a shriek. It was the culmination of all she had lived through during that miserable evening. One shriek followed another, and in a minute Susie Rushworth and Olive Repton ran into the room.

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"Oh, save me! Save me!" said Fanny. "Those little horrors have done it! I don't know where it is! Oh, it is such an odious, dangerous, awful kind of reptile! It's the biggest spider I ever saw in all my life, and those horrible twins came and put it into my bed! Oh, girls, what I am suffering! Do have pity on me! Do help me to find it! Do help me to kill it!"

"To kill Dickie!" said Susie. "Why, the poor little twins were heartbroken for two or three days because they thought he was lost. I for one certainly won't kill Dickie."

"Nor I," said Olive.

"Oh, dear! what shall I do?" said poor Fanny. "I really never was in such miserable confusion and wretchedness in my life."

"Do, Fanny, cease to be such a coward!" said Susie. "I must say I am surprised at you. The poor little twins are almost beside themselves—that is, on account of darling Betty. Betty is so ill; and they think—the twins do—I mean, they have got it into their heads that you—you don't like Betty, although she is your cousin and the very sweetest girl in all the world. But as to your being afraid of a spider! We'll have a good hunt for him, and find him. Fanny, I never thought you could scream out as you did. What a mercy that Miss Symes's room is a good way off from poor darling Betty's!"

"Do try to think of some one besides Betty for a minute!" said Fanny; "and you find that horror and put him into his box, or put him into anything, only don't have him loose in the room."

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"Well, we'll have a good search," said both the girls, "and we may find him."

But this was a thing easier said than done; for if there was a knowing spider anywhere in the world, that spider was Dickie of Scotland. Dickie was not going to be easily caught. Perhaps Dickie had a secret sense of humor and enjoyed the situation—the terror of the one

girl, the efforts of the others to put him back into captivity. In vain Susie laid baits for Dickie all over the room—bits of raw meat, even one or two dead flies which she found in a corner. But Dickie had secured a hiding-place for himself, and would not come out at present.

"I can't sleep in the room—that's all!" said Fanny. "I really can't—that's flat."

"Oh, stop talking for a minute!" said Olive suddenly. "There! didn't you hear it? Yes, that is the sound of the carriage coming back from the station. Dr. Jephson has come. Oh, I wonder what he will say about her!"

"Don't leave me, girls, please!" said Fanny. "I never was so utterly knocked to bits in my whole life!"

"Well, we must go to bed or we'll be punished," said Susie.

"Susie, you are not a bit afraid of reptiles; won't you change rooms with me?" asked Fanny.

"I would, only it's against the rules," said Susie at once.

Olive also shook her head. "It's against the rules, Fanny; and, really, if I were you I'd pull myself together, and on a night like this, when the whole house is in such a state of turmoil, I'd try to show a spark of courage and not be afraid of a poor little spider."

"A *little* spider! You haven't seen him," said Fanny. "Why, he's nearly as big as an egg! I tell you he is most dangerous."

"That's the doctor! Oh, I wonder what he is going to say!" exclaimed Olive. "Come, Susie," she continued, turning to her companion, "we must go to bed. Good-night, Fanny; good-night."

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CHAPTER XX

A TIME OF DANGER

Fanny was left alone with Dickie. It was really awful to be quite alone in a room where a spider nearly the size of an egg had concealed himself. If Dickie would only come out and show himself Fanny thought she could fight him; but he was at once big enough to bite and terrify her up to the point of danger, and small enough effectually to hide his presence. Fanny was really nervous; all the events of the day had conspired to make her so. She, who, as a rule, knew nothing whatever about nerves, was oppressed by them now. There had been the meeting of the Specialities; there had been the blunt refusal to make Sibyl one of their number. Then there was the appalling fact that she (Fanny) was turned out of her bedroom. There was also the unpleasantness of Sibyl's insurrection; and last, but not least, a spider had been put into her bed by those wicked girls.

Oh, what horrors all the Vivians were! What turmoil they had created in the hitherto orderly, happy school! "No wonder I hate them!" thought Fanny. "Well, I can't sleep here—that's plain." She stood by the fire. The fire began to get low; the hour waxed late. There was no sound whatever in the house. Betty's beautiful room was in a distant wing. The doctors might consult in the adjoining room that used to be Fanny's as much as they pleased, but not one sound of their voices or footsteps could reach the girl. The other schoolgirls had gone to bed. They were all anxious, all more or less unhappy; but, compared to Fanny, they were blessed with sweet peace, and could slumber without any sense of reproach.

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Fanny found herself turning cold. She was also hungry. She looked at the clock on the mantelpiece; the hour was past midnight. As a rule, she was in bed and sound asleep long before this time. Her cold and hunger made her look at the fire; it was getting low.

Mrs. Haddo was so determined to give the girls of her school every possible comfort that she never allowed them to feel cold in the house. The passages were therefore heated in winter-time with steam, and each bedroom had its own cheery fire. The governesses were treated almost better than the pupils. But then people were not expected to sit up all night.

Fanny opened the coal-hod, intending to put fresh coals on the dying fire; but, to her distress, found that the hod was empty. This happened to be a mistake on the part of the housemaid who had charge of this special room.

Fanny felt herself growing colder and colder, and yet she dared not go to bed. She had

turned on all the electric lights, and the room itself was bright as day. Suddenly she heard the sound of wheels crunching on the gravel outside. She rushed to the window, and was relieved to observe that the doctor's carriage was bowling down the avenue. The doctors had therefore gone. Miss Symes would come to bed very soon now. Perhaps Miss Symes would know how to catch Dickie. Anyhow, Fanny would not be alone. She crouched in her chair near the dying embers of the fire. The minutes ticked slowly on until at last it was a quarter to one o'clock. Then Miss Symes opened the door and came in. She hardly noticed the fact that Fanny was up, and the further fact that her fire was nothing but embers did not affect her in the very least. Her eyes were very bright, and there were red spots on each cheek. The expression on her face brought Fanny to the momentary consciousness that they were all in a house where the great Angel of Death might enter at any moment.

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Miss Symes sat down on the nearest chair, folded her hands on her lap, and looked at Fanny. "Well," she said, "have you nothing to ask me?"

"I am a very miserable girl!" said Fanny. "To begin with, I am hungry, for I scarcely ate any supper to-night; I did not care for the food provided by the Specialities. Hours and hours have passed by, and I could not go to bed."

"And why not, Fanny?" asked Miss Symes. "Why did you stay up against the rules? And why do you think of yourself in a moment like the present?"

"I am sorry," said Fanny; "but one must always think of one's self—at least, I am afraid I must. Not that I mean to be selfish," she added, seeing a look of consternation spread over Miss Symes's face. "The fact is this, St. Cecilia, I have had the most horrible fright. Those ghastly little creatures the twins—the Vivian twins—brought a most enormous spider into your room, hid it in the center of my bed, and then ran away again. I never saw such a monster! I was afraid to go near the creature at first; and when I did it looked at me—yes, absolutely looked at me! I turned cold with horror. Then, before I could find my voice, it began to run—and towards me! Oh, St. Cecilia, I screamed! I did. Susie and Olive heard me, and came to the rescue. Of course they knew that the spider was Dickie, that horrid reptile those girls brought from Scotland. He has hidden himself somewhere in the room. The twins themselves said that his bite was dangerous, so I am quite afraid to go to bed; I am, really."

"Come, Fanny, don't talk nonsense!" said Miss Symes. "The poor little twins are to be excused to-night, for they are really beside themselves. I have just left the poor little children, and Martha West is going to spend the night with them. Martha is a splendid creature!"

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"I cannot possibly go to bed, Miss Symes."

"But you really must turn in. We don't want to have more illnesses in the house than we can help; so, my dear Fanny, get between the sheets and go to sleep."

"And you really think that Dickie won't hurt me?"

"Of course not; and you surely can take care of yourself. If you are nervous you can keep one of the electric lights on. Now, do go to bed. I am going to change into a warm dressing-gown, for I want to help the nurse in Betty's room."

"And how is Betty?" asked Fanny in a low tone. "Why is there such a frightful fuss about her? Is she so very ill?"

"Yes, Fanny; your cousin, Betty Vivian, is dangerously ill. No one can quite account for what is wrong; but that her brain is affected there is not the slightest doubt, and the doctor from London says that unless she gets relief soon he fears very much for the result. The child is suffering from a very severe shock, and to-morrow Mrs. Haddo intends to make most urgent inquiries as to the nature of what went wrong. But I needn't talk to you any longer about her now. Go to bed and to sleep."

While Miss Symes was speaking she was changing her morning-dress and putting on a very warm woolen dressing-gown. The next minute she had left the room without taking any further notice of Fanny. Fanny, terrified, cold, afraid to undress, but unable from sheer sleepiness to stay up any longer, got between the sheets and soon dropped into undisturbed slumber. If Dickie watched her in the distance he left her alone. There were worse enemies waiting to spy on poor Fanny than even Dickie.

In a school like Haddo Court dangerous illness must affect each member of the large and as a rule deeply attached family. Betty Vivian had come like a bright meteor into the midst of the school. She had delighted her companions; she had fascinated them; she had drawn forth love. She could do what no other girl had ever done in the school. No one supposed

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Betty to be free from faults, but every one also knew that her faults were exceeded by her virtues. She was loved because she was lovable. The only one who really hated her was her cousin Fanny.

Now, Fanny knew well that inquiries would be made; for the favorite must not be ill if anything could be done to save her, nor must a stone be left unturned to effect her recovery.

Fanny awoke the next morning with a genuine headache, fearing she knew not what. The great gong which always awoke the school was not sounded that day; but a servant came in and brought Fanny's hot water, waking her at the same time. Fanny rubbed her eyes, tried to recall where she was, and then asked the woman how Miss Vivian was.

"I don't know, miss. It's a little late, but if you are quick you'll be down in hall at the usual time."

Fanny felt that she hated the woman. As she dressed, however, she forgot all about her, so intensely anxious was she to recover the packet from its hiding-place in her own bedroom. She wondered much if she could accomplish this, and presently, prompted by the motto, "Nothing venture, nothing win," tidied her dress, smoothed back her hair, washed her face, tried to look as she might have looked on an ordinary morning, and finding that she had quite ten minutes to spare before she must appear in hall, ran swiftly in the direction of her own room.

She was sufficiently early to know that there was very little chance of her meeting another girl en route, and even if she did she could easily explain that she was going to her room to fetch some article of wardrobe which had been forgotten.

She reached the room. The door was shut. Very softly she turned the handle; it yielded to her pressure, and she went in. [Pg 259]

The nurse turned at once to confront her. "You mustn't come in here, miss."

"I just want to fetch something from one of my drawers; I won't make the slightest noise," said Fanny. "Please let me in."

Sister Helen said nothing further. Fanny softly opened one of the drawers. She knew the exact spot where the packet lay hidden. A moment later she had folded it up in some of her under-linen and conveyed it outside the room without Sister Helen suspecting anything. As soon as she found herself in the corridor she removed the packet from its wrappings and slipped it into her inner pocket. It must stay on her person for the present, for in no other place could it possibly be safe. When she regained Miss Symes's room she found that lady already there. She was making her toilet.

"Why, Fanny," she said, "what have you been doing? You haven't, surely, been to your own room! Did Sister Helen let you in?"

"She didn't want to; but I required some—some handkerchiefs and things of that sort," said Fanny.

"Well, you haven't brought any handkerchiefs," said Miss Symes. "You have only brought a couple of night-dresses."

"Sister Helen rather frightened me, and I just took these and ran away," answered the girl. Then she added, lowering her voice, "How is Betty to-day?"

"You will hear all about Betty downstairs. It is time for you to go into the hall. Don't keep me, Fanny."

Fanny, only too delighted, left the room. Now she was safe. The worst of all could not happen to her. When she reached the great central hall, where the girls usually met for a few minutes before breakfast, she immediately joined a large circle of girls of the upper school. They were talking about Betty. Among the group was Sibyl Ray. Sibyl was crying, and when Fanny appeared she turned abruptly aside as though she did not wish to be seen. Fanny, who had been almost jubilant at having secured the packet, felt a new sense of horror at Sibyl's tears. Sibyl was the sort of girl to be very easily affected. [Pg 260]

As Fanny came near she heard Susie Rushworth say to Sibyl, "Yes, it is true; Betty has lost something, and if she doesn't find it she will—the doctor, the great London doctor, says that she will—die."

Sibyl gave another great, choking sob.

Fanny took her arm. "Sibyl," she said, "don't you want to come for a walk with me during

recess this morning?"

"Oh, I don't know, Fanny!" said poor Sibyl, raising her eyes, streaming with tears, to Fanny's face.

"Well, I want you," said Fanny. Then she added in a low tone, "Don't forget Brighton and Aunt Amelia, and the excellent time you will have, and the positive certainty that before a year is up you will be a Speciality. Don't lose all these things for the sake of a little sentiment. Understand, too, that doctors are often wrong about people. It is ridiculous to suppose that a strong, hearty girl like Betty Vivian should have her life in danger because you happened to find——"

"Oh, don't!" said Sibyl. "I—I *can't* bear it! I saw Sylvia and Hetty last night. I can't bear it!"

"You are a little goose, Sibyl! It's my opinion you are not well. You must cling to me, dear, and I will pull you through—see if I don't."

As Fanny took her usual place at the breakfast-table Susie Rushworth said to her, "You really are kind to that poor little Sibyl, Fan. After all, we must have been a little hard on her last night. She certainly shows the greatest distress and affection for poor dear Betty."

"I said she was a nice child. I shouldn't be likely to propose her for the club if she were not," said Fanny.

Susie said nothing more. All the girls were dull, grave, distressed. The twins were nowhere to be seen. Betty's sweet face, Betty's sparkling eyes, Betty's gay laugh, were conspicuous by their absence. Miss Symes did not appear at all. [Pg 261]

When breakfast was over, and the brief morning prayers had been gone through by Mr. Fairfax—for these prayers were not said in the chapel—Mrs. Haddo rose and faced the school. "Girls," she said, "I wish to let you all know that one of your number—one exceedingly dear to us all—is lying now at the point of death. Whether God will spare her or not depends altogether on her mind being given a certain measure of relief. I need not tell you her name, for you all know it, and I believe you are all extremely grieved at what has occurred. It is impossible for any of you to help her at this moment except by being extra quiet, and by praying to God to be good to her and her two little sisters. I propose, therefore, to make a complete alteration in the arrangements of to-day. I am going to send the whole of the upper school—with the exception of the members of the Speciality Club—to London by train. Two of the teachers, Mademoiselle and Miss Oxley, will accompany you. You will all be driven to the station, and win return to-night—having, I hope, enjoyed a pleasant day. By that time there may be good news to greet you. No lessons to-day for any of the upper school; so, girls, go at once and get ready."

All the girls began now to leave the great hall, with the exception of the Specialities and Sibyl Ray.

"Go, Sibyl!" said Fanny. "What are you lingering for?"

"Yes, Sibyl, be quick; don't delay!" said Mrs. Haddo, speaking rather sharply. "You will all be back in time to-night to hear the latest report of dear Betty, and we trust we may have good news to tell you."

Sibyl went with extreme slowness and extreme unwillingness. But for the fact that Fanny kept her eye fixed on Sibyl she might have refused to budge. As it was, she left the hall; and a very few minutes later wagonettes and motors appeared in view, and the girls of the upper school drove to the railway station. [Pg 262]

As Fanny saw Sibyl driving off with the others she became conscious of a new sense of relief. She had been so anxious with regard to Sibyl that she had not had time to wonder why the Specialities were not included in the entertainment. Now, however, her thoughts were turned into a different channel.

Susie Rushworth came up to Fanny. "Fanny," she said, "you and I, and the Bertrams, and Olive, and Margaret, and Martha are all to go immediately to Mrs. Haddo's private sitting-room."

"What for?" asked Fanny.

"I expect that she will explain. We are to go, and at once."

Fanny did not dare to say any more. They all went slowly together in the direction of that beautiful room where Mrs. Haddo, usually so bright, so cheery, so full of enthusiasm, invited her young pupils to meet her. But there was no smile of welcome on that lady's fine face on the present occasion. She did not even shake hands with the girls as they

approached. All she did was to ask them to sit down.

Fanny took her place between Olive and one of the Bertrams. She could not help noticing a great change in their manner towards her. As a rule she was a prime favorite, and to sit next Fanny Crawford was considered a very rare honor. On this occasion, however, the girls rather edged away from Fanny.

Mrs. Haddo seated herself near the fire. Then she turned and spoke to Margaret Grant. "Margaret," she said, "I ask you, in the name of the other members of your club, to give me full and exact particulars with regard to your expulsion of Betty Vivian. I must know, and fully, why Betty was expelled. Pause a minute before you speak, dear. For long years I have allowed this club to exist in the school, believing much in its good influence—in its power to ennoble and raise the impressionable character of a young girl. I have not interfered with it; on the contrary, I have been proud of it. To each girl who became a Speciality I immediately granted certain privileges, knowing well that no girl would be lightly admitted to a club with so high an aim and so noble a standard.

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"When Betty first came I perceived at once that she was fearless, very affectionate, and possessed a strong, pronounced, willful character; I saw, in short, that she was worth winning and loving. I liked her sisters also; but Betty was superior to her sisters. I departed from several established customs when I admitted the Vivians to this school, and I will own that I had my qualms of conscience notwithstanding the fact that my old friend Sir John Crawford was so anxious for me to have them here. Nevertheless, when first I saw Betty I knew that he was right and I was wrong. That such a girl might stir up deep interest, and perhaps even bring sorrow into the school, I knew was within the bounds of probability; but I did not think it possible that she could ever disgrace it. I own I was a little surprised when I was told that so new a girl was made a member of your club; but as you, Margaret, were secretary, and as Susie Rushworth and my dear friend Fanny were members, I naturally had not a word to say, and only admired your discernment in reading aright that young character.

"Then there came the news—the terrible news—that Betty was expelled; and since then there has been confusion, sorrow, and now this most alarming illness. The girl is dying of a broken heart. She has lost something that she treasures. Margaret, the rules of the club must give place to the greater rules of the school; and I demand a full explanation from you of the exact reason why Betty Vivian is no longer a member of the Specialities."

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Margaret looked round at the other members. All their faces were white. No one spoke for a minute.

Then Fanny rose and said, "Is it fair, for Betty's sake, that we should break our own rules? The reason of her being no longer a member is at present known only to the rest of us. Is it right that it should be made public property?"

"It must be made *my* property, Fanny Crawford; and I do not ask you, much as I esteem your father's friendship, to dictate to me in this matter."

Fanny sat down again. She felt the little packet in her pocket. That, at least, was secure; that, at least, would not rise up and betray her.

Margaret gave a very simple explanation of the reason why Betty could not remain in the club. She said that Betty had taken the rules and studied them carefully; had most faithfully promised to obey them; and then, a fortnight later, had stood up and stated that she had broken Rule No. I., for she had a secret which she had not divulged to the other members.

"And that secret, Margaret?" asked Mrs. Haddo.

"She had, she said, a packet—a sealed packet of great value—that she did not wish any one in the school to know about. It had been given to her by one she loved. She was extremely reticent about it, and seemed to be in great trouble. She explained why she had not spoken of it at first by saying that she did not think that the secret concerned any one in the school, but since she had joined the club she had felt that she ought to tell. We asked her all the questions we could; and she certainly gave us to understand that the packet was hers by right, but that, rather than give it up, she had told an untruth about it to Fanny's father, Sir John Crawford. We were very much stunned and distressed at her revelation, and we begged of her to go with the story to you, and also to put the packet in your charge, and tell you what she had already told us. This she emphatically refused to do, saying that she would never give the packet up under any conditions whatever. We had a special meeting of the club on the following night, when we again asked Betty what she meant to do. She said her intention was to keep firmly to her resolve that she would never give up the packet nor tell where she had hidden it. We then felt it to be our bounden duty to ask her to withdraw from the club. She did so. I think that is all."

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"Only," said Mrs. Haddo, speaking in a voice of great distress, "that the poor, unhappy child seems to have lost the packet—which contained nobody knows what, but some treasure which she prized—and that the loss and the shock together are affecting her life to the point of danger. Girls, do any of you know—have you any clue whatsoever to—where the packet is now? Please remember, dear girls, that Betty's life—that beautiful, vivid young life—depends on that packet being restored. Don't keep it a secret if you have any clue whatsoever to give me, for I am miserable about this whole thing."

"Indeed we wouldn't keep it a secret," said Margaret. "How could we? We'd give all the world to find it for her. Who can have taken it?"

"Some one has, beyond doubt," said Mrs. Haddo. "Children, this is a terrible day for me. I have tried to be kind to you all. Won't you help me now in my sorrow?"

The girls crowded round her, some of them kneeling by her side, some of them venturing to kiss her hand; but from every pair of lips came the same words, "We know nothing of the packet." Even Fanny, who kept it in her pocket, and who heartily wished that it was lying at the bottom of the sea, repeated the same words as her companions.

CHAPTER XXI

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A RAY OF HOPE

A few minutes later the Speciality girls had left Mrs. Haddo's room. There were to be no lessons that day; therefore they could spend their time as they liked best. But an enforced holiday of this kind was no pleasure to any of them.

Martha said at once that she was going to seek the twins. "I have left them in my room," she said. "They hardly slept all night. I never saw such dear, affectionate little creatures. They are absolutely broken-hearted. I promised to come to them as soon as I could."

"Have you asked them to trust you—to treat you as a true friend?" asked Fanny Crawford.

"I have, Fanny; and the strange thing is, that although beyond doubt they know pretty nearly as much about Betty's secret and about the lost packet as she does herself, poor child, they are just as reticent with regard to it. They will not tell. Nothing will induce them to betray Betty. Over and over again I have implored of them, for the sake of her life, to take me into their confidence; but I might as well have spoken to adamant. They will not do it."

"They have exactly the same stubborn nature," said Fanny.

The other girls looked reproachfully at her.

Then Olive said, "You have never liked your cousins, Fanny; and it does pain us all that you should speak against them at a moment like the present."

"Then I will go away," said Fanny. "I can see quite well that my presence is uncongenial to you all. I will find my own amusements. But I may as well state that if I am to be tortured and looked down on in the school, I shall write to Aunt Amelia and ask her to take me in until father writes to Mrs. Haddo about me. You must admit, all of you, that it has been a miserable time for me since the Vivians came to the school."

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"You have made it miserable yourself, Fanny," was Susie's retort.

Then Fanny got up and went away. A moment later she was joined by Martha West.

"Fanny, dear Fanny," said Martha, "won't you tell me what is changing you so completely?"

"There is nothing changing me," said Fanny in some alarm. "What do you mean, Martha?"

"Oh, but you look so changed! You are not a bit what you used to be—so jolly, so bright, so—so very pretty. Now you have a careworn, anxious expression. I don't understand you in the very least."

"And I don't want you to," said Fanny. "You are all bewitched with regard to that tiresome girl; even I, your old and tried friend, have no chance against her influence. When I tell you I know her far better than any of you can possibly do, you don't believe me. You suspect me of harboring unkind and jealous thoughts against her; as if I, Fanny Crawford, could be jealous of a nobody like Betty Vivian!"

"Fanny, you know perfectly well that Betty will never be a nobody. There is something in her which raises her altogether above the low standard to which you assign her. Oh, Fanny, what is the matter with you?"

"Please leave me alone, Martha. If you had spent the wretched night I have spent you might look tired and worn out too. I was turned out of my bedroom, to begin with, because Sister Helen required it."

"Well, surely there was no hardship in that?" said Martha. "I, for instance, spent the night gladly with dear little Sylvia and Hester; we all had a room together in the lower school. Do you think I grumbled?"

"Oh, of course you are a saint!" said Fanny with a sneer.

"I am not, but I think I am human; and just at present, for some extraordinary reason, you are not." [Pg 268]

"Well, you haven't heard the history of my woes. I had to share Miss Symes's room with her."

"St. Cecilia's delightful room! Surely that was no great hardship?"

"Wait until you hear. St. Cecilia was quite kind, as she always is; and I was told that I could have a room to myself to-night. I found, to begin with, however, that most of the clothes I wanted had been left behind in my own room. Still, I made no complaint; although, of course, it was not comfortable, particularly as Miss Symes intended to sit up in order to see the doctors. But as I was preparing to get into bed, those twins—those horrid girls that you make such a fuss about, Martha—rushed into the room and put an awful spider into the center of my bed, and when I tried to get rid of it, it rushed towards me. Then I screamed out, and Susie and Olive came in. But we couldn't catch the spider nor find it anywhere. You don't suppose I was likely to go to bed with *that* thing in the room? The fire went nearly out. I was hungry, sleepy, cold. I assure you I have my own share of misery. Then Miss Symes came in and ordered me to bed. I went, but hardly slept a wink. And now you expect me to be as cheerful and bright and busy as a bee this morning!"

"Oh, not cheerful, poor Fanny!—we can none of us be that with Betty in such great danger; but you can at least be busy, you can at least help others."

"Thank you," replied Fanny; "self comes first now and then, and it does on the present occasion;" and Fanny marched to Miss Symes's room.

Martha looked after her until she disappeared from view; then, with a heavy sigh, she went towards her own room. Here a fire was burning. Some breakfast had been brought up for the twins, for they were not expected to appear downstairs that morning. The untasted breakfast, however, remained on the little, round table beside the fire, and Sylvia and Hetty were nowhere to be seen. [Pg 269]

"Where have they gone?" thought Martha. "Oh, I trust they haven't been so mad as to go to Betty's room!"

She considered for a few minutes. She must find the children, and she must not trouble any one else in the school about them. Dr. Ashley had paid his morning visit, and there was quietness in the corridor just outside Betty's room. Martha went there and listened. The high-strung, anxious voice was no longer heard crying aloud piteously for what it could not obtain. The door of the room was slightly ajar. Martha ventured to peep in. Betty was lying with her face towards the wall, her long, thick black hair covering the pillow, and one small hand flung restlessly outside the counterpane.

Sister Helen saw Martha, and with a wave of her hand, beckoned the girl not to come in. Martha retreated to the corridor. Sister Helen followed her.

"What do you want, dear?" said the nurse. "You cannot possibly disturb Betty. She is asleep. Both the doctor and I most earnestly hope that she may awake slightly better. Dr. Jephson is coming to see her again this evening. If by that time her symptoms have not improved he is going to bring another brain specialist down with him. Dr. Ashley is to wire him in the middle of the day, stating exactly how Betty Vivian is. If she is the least bit better, Dr. Jephson will come alone; if worse, he will bring Dr. Stephen Reynolds with him. Why, what is the matter? How pale you look!"

"You think badly of Betty, Sister Helen?"

Sister Helen did not speak for a moment except by a certain look expressed in her eyes. "Another nurse will arrive within an hour," she said, "and then I shall be off duty for a short time. What can I do for you? I mustn't stay whispering here."

"I have come to find dear Betty's little sisters."

"Oh, they left the room some time ago."

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"Left the room!" said Martha. "Oh, Sister Helen, have they been here?"

"Yes, both of them, poor children. I went away to fetch some hot water. Betty was lying very quiet; she had not spoken for nearly an hour. I hoped she was dropping asleep. When I came back I saw a sight which would bring tears to any eyes. Her two little sisters had climbed on to the bed and were lying close to her, one on each side. They didn't notice me at all; but as I came in I heard one of them say, 'Don't fret, Bettina; we are going now, at once, to find it.' And then the other said, 'And we won't come back until we've got it.' There came the ghost of a smile over my poor little patient's face. She tried to speak, but was too weak. I went up to one of the little girls and took her arm, and whispered to her gently; and then they both got up at once, as meekly as mice, and said, 'Betty, we won't come back until we've found it.' And poor little Betty smiled again. For some extraordinary reason their visit seemed to comfort her; for she sighed faintly, turned on her side, and dropped asleep, just as she is now. I must go back to her at once, Miss—Miss—"

"West," replied Martha. "Martha West is my name."

The nurse said nothing further, but returned to the sickroom. Martha went very quickly back to her own. She felt she had a task cut out for her. The twins had in all probability gone out. Their curious reticence had been the most painful part of poor Martha's night-vigil. She had to try to comfort the little girls who would not confide one particle of their trouble to her. At intervals they had broken into violent fits of sobbing, but they had never spoken; they had not even mentioned Betty's name. By and by, towards morning, they each allowed Martha to clasp one arm around them, and had dropped off into an uneasy slumber.

Now they were doubtless out of doors. But where? Martha was by no means acquainted with the haunts of the twins. She knew Sibyl Ray fairly well, and had always been kind to her; but up to the present the younger Vivian girls had not seemed to need any special kindness. They were hearty, merry children; they were popular in the school, and had made friends of their own. She wanted to seek for them now, but it never occurred to her for a single moment where they might possibly be discovered.

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The grounds round Haddo Court were very extensive, and Martha did not leave a yard of these grounds unexplored, yet nowhere could she find the twins. At last she came back to the house, tired out and very miserable. She ran once more to her own room, wondering if they were now there. The room was quite empty. The housemaid had removed the breakfast-things and built up the fire. Martha had been told as a great secret that the Vivians possessed an attic, where they kept their pets. She found the attic, but it was empty. Even Dickie had forsaken it, and the different caterpillars were all buried in their chrysalis state. Martha quickly left the Vivians' attic. She wandered restlessly and miserably through the lower school, and visited the room where she had slept, or tried to sleep, the night before. Nowhere could she find them.

Meanwhile Sylvia and Hester had done a very bold deed. They were reckless of school rules at a moment like the present. Their one and only desire was to save Betty at any cost. They knew quite well that Betty had hidden the packet, but where they could not tell. Betty had said to them in her confident young voice, "The less you know the better;" and they had trusted her, as they always would trust her as long as they lived, for Betty, to them, meant all that was noble and great and magnificent in the world.

It flashed now, however, through Sylvia's little brain that perhaps Betty had taken the lost treasure to Mrs. Miles to keep. She whispered her thought to Hester, who seized it with sudden rapture.

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"We can, at least, confide in Mrs. Miles," said Hetty; "and we can tell the dogs. Perhaps the dogs could scent it out; dogs are such wonders."

"We will go straight to Mrs. Miles," said Sylvia.

Betty had told them with great glee—ah, how merry Betty was in those days!—how she had first reached the farm, of her delightful time with Dan and Beersheba, of her dinner, of her drive back. Had not they themselves also visited Stoke Farm? What a delightful, what a glorious, time they had had there! That indeed was a time of joy. Now was a time of fearful trouble. But they felt, poor little things! though they could not possibly confide either in kind Martha West or in any of their school-friends, that they might confide in Mrs. Miles.

Accordingly they managed to vault over the iron railings, get on to the roadside, and in

course of time to reach Stoke Farm. The dogs rushed out to meet them. But Dan and Beersheba were sagacious beasts. They hated frivolity, they hated unfeeling people, but they respected great sorrow; and when Hetty said with a burst of tears, "Oh, Dan, Dan, darling Dan, Betty, your Betty and ours, is so dreadfully ill!" Dan fawned upon the little girl, licked her hands, and looked into her face with all the pathos in the world in his brown doggy eyes. Beersheba, of course, followed his brother's example. So the poor little twins, accompanied by the dogs, entered Mrs. Miles's kitchen.

Mrs. Miles sprang up with a cry of rapture and surprise at the sight of them. "Why, my dears! my dears!" she said. "And wherever is the elder of you? Where do she be? Oh, then it's me is right glad to see you both!"

"We want to talk to you, Mrs. Miles," said Sylvia.

"And we want to kiss you, Mrs. Miles," said Hester.

Then they flung themselves upon her and burst into floods of most bitter weeping.

Mrs. Miles had not brought up a large family of children for nothing. She was accustomed to childish griefs. She knew how violent, how tempestuous, such griefs might be, and yet how quickly the storms would pass, the sunshine come, and how smiles would replace tears. She treated the twins, therefore, now, just as though they were her own children. She allowed them to cry on her breast, and murmured, "Dear, dear! Poor lambs! poor lambs! Now, this is dreadful bad, to be sure! But don't you mind how many tears you shed when you've got Mrs. Miles close to you. Cry on, pretties, cry on, and God comfort you!"

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So the children, who felt so lonely and desolate, did cry until they could cry no longer. Then Mrs. Miles immediately did the sort of thing she invariably found effectual in the case of her own children. She put the exhausted girls into a comfortable chair each by the fire, and brought them some hot milk and a slice of seed-cake, and told them they must sip the milk and eat the cake before they said any more.

Now, as a matter of fact, Sylvia and Hetty were, without knowing it in the least, in a starving condition. From the instant that Betty's serious illness was announced they had absolutely refused all food, turning from it with loathing. Supper the night before was not for them, and breakfast had remained untasted that morning. Mrs. Miles had therefore done the right thing when she provided them with a comforting and nourishing meal. They would have refused to touch the cake had one of their schoolfellows offered it, but they obeyed Mrs. Miles just as though she were their real mother.

And while they ate, and drank their hot milk, the good woman went on with her cooking operations. "I am having a fine joint to-day," she said: "corned beef that couldn't be beat in any county in England, and that's saying a good deal. It'll be on the table, with dumplings to match and a big apple-tart, sharp at one o'clock. I might ha' guessed that some o' them dear little missies were coming to dinner, for I don't always have a hot joint like this in the middle o' the week."

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The girls suddenly felt that of all things in the world they would like corned beef best; that dumplings would be a delicious accompaniment; and that apple-tart, eaten with Mrs. Miles's rich cream, would go well with such a dinner. They became almost cheerful. Matters were not quite so black, and they had a sort of feeling that Mrs. Miles would certainly help them to find the lost treasure.

Having got her dinner into perfect order, and laid the table, and put everything right for the arrival of her good man, Mrs. Miles shut the kitchen door and drew her chair close to the children.

"Now you are warm," she said, "and fed, you don't look half so miserable as you did when you came in. I expect the good food nourished you up a bit. And now, whatever's the matter? And where is that darling, Miss Betty? Bless her heart! but she twined herself round us all entirely, that she did."

It would be wrong to say that Sylvia did not burst into fresh weeping at the sound of Betty's name.

But Hester was of stronger mettle. "We have come to you," she said—"Oh, Sylvia, do stop crying! it does no manner of good to cry all the time—we have come to you, Mrs. Miles, to help us to save Betty."

"Lawk-a-mercy! and whatever's wrong with the dear lamb?"

"We are going to tell you everything," said Hester. "We have quite made up our minds. Betty is very, very ill."

"Yes," said Sylvia, "she is so ill that Dr. Ashley came to see her twice yesterday, and then again a third time with a great, wonderful special doctor from London; and we were not allowed to sleep in her room last night, and she's—oh, she's dreadfully bad!"

"They whispered in the school," continued Sylvia in a low tone—"I heard them; they *did* whisper it in the school—that perhaps Betty would—would *die*. Mrs. Miles, that can't be true! God doesn't take away young, young girls like our Betty. God couldn't be so cruel." [Pg 275]

"We won't call it cruelty," said Mrs. Miles; "but God does do it, all the same, for His own wise purposes, no doubt. We'll not talk o' that, my lambs; we'll let that pass by. The thing is for you to tell me what has gone wrong with that bonny, strong-looking girl. Why, when she was here last, although she was a bit pale, she looked downright healthy and strong enough for anything. Eh, my dear dears! you can't mention her name even now to Dan and Beersheba that they ain't took with fits o' delight about her, dancing and scampering like half-mad dogs, and whining for her to come to them. There, to be sure! they know you belong to her, and they're lying down as contented as anything at your feet. I don't expect, somehow, your sister will die, my loves, although gels as young as she have passed into the Better Land. Oh, dear, I'm making you cry again! It's good corned beef and dumplings you want. You mustn't give way, my dears; people who give way in times o' trouble ain't worth their salt."

"We thought perhaps you'd help us," said Sylvia.

"Help you, darlings! That I will! I'd help you to this extent—I'd help you even to the giving up o' the custom o' Haddo Court. Now, what can I do more than that?"

"Oh, but your help—the help you can give us—won't do you any harm," said Hester. "We'll tell you about Betty, for we know that you'll never let it out—except, indeed, to your husband. We don't mind a bit his knowing. Now, this is what has happened. You know we had great trouble—or perhaps you don't know. Anyhow, we had great trouble—away, away in beautiful Scotland. One we loved died. Before she died she left something for Betty to take care of, and Betty took what she had left her. It was only a little packet, quite small, tied up in brown paper, and sealed with a good many seals. We don't know what the packet contained; but we thought perhaps it might be money, and Betty said to us that it would be a very good thing for us to have some money to fall back upon in case we didn't like the school." [Pg 276]

"Now, whatever for?" asked Mrs. Miles. "And who could dislike a school like Haddo Court?"

"Of course we couldn't tell," said Sylvia, "not having been there; but Betty, who is always very wise, said it was best be on the safe side, and that perhaps the packet contained money, and if it did we'd have enough to live on in case we chose to run away."

"Oh, missies, did I ever hear tell o' the like! To run away from a beautiful school like Haddo Court! Why, there's young ladies all over England trying to get into it! But you didn't know, poor lambs! Well, go on; tell me the rest."

"There was a man who was made our guardian," continued Sylvia, "and he was quite kind, and we had nothing to say against him. His name is Sir John Crawford."

"Miss Fanny's father, bless her!" said Mrs. Miles; "and a pretty young lady she do be."

"Fanny Crawford is our cousin," said Sylvia, "and we hate her most awfully."

"Oh, my dear young missies! but hate is a weed—a noxious weed that ought to be pulled up out o' the ground o' your hearts."

"It is taking deep root in mine," said Sylvia.

"And in mine," said Hester.

"But please let us tell you the rest, Mrs. Miles. Sir John Crawford had a letter from our dear aunt, who left the packet for Betty; and we cannot understand it, but she seemed to wish Sir John Crawford to take care of the packet for the present. He looked for it everywhere, and could not find it. Was he likely to when Betty had taken it? Then he asked Betty quite suddenly if she knew anything about it, and Betty stood up and said 'No.' She told a huge, monstrous lie, and she didn't even change color, and he believed her. So we came here. Well, Betty was terribly anxious for fear the packet should be found, and one night we helped her to climb down from the balcony out of our bedroom. No one saw her go, and no one saw her return, and she put the packet away somewhere—we don't know where. Well, after that, wonderful things happened, and Betty was made a tremendous fuss of in the school. There was no one like her, and she was loved like anything, and we were as proud as Punch of her. But all of a sudden everything changed, and our Betty was disgraced." [Pg 277]

There were horrid things written on a blackboard about her. She was quite innocent, poor darling! But the things were written, and Betty is the sort of girl to feel such disgrace frightfully. We were quite preparing to run away with her, for we thought she wouldn't care to stay much longer in the school—notwithstanding your opinion of it, Mrs. Miles. But all of a sudden Betty seemed to go right down, as though some one had felled her with an awful blow. She kept crying out, and crying out, that the packet was lost. Anyhow, she thinks it is lost; she hasn't an idea where it can be. And the doctors say that Betty's brain is in such a curious state that unless the packet is found she—she may die.

"So we went to her, both of us, and we told her we would go and find it," continued Sylvia. "We have got to find it. That is what we have come about. We don't suppose for a minute that it was right of Betty to tell the lie; but that was the only thing she did wrong. Anyhow, we don't care whether she did right or wrong; she is our Betty, the most splendid, the very dearest girl in all the world, and she sha'n't die. We thought perhaps you would help us to find the packet."

"Well," said Mrs. Miles, "that's a wonderful story, and it's a queer sort o' job to put upon a very busy farmer's wife. *Me* to find the packet?"

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"Yes; you or your husband, whichever of you can or will do it. It is Betty's life that depends upon it. Couldn't your dogs help us? In Scotland we have dogs that scent anything. Are yours that sort?"

"They haven't been trained," said Mrs. Miles, "and that's the simple truth. Poor darlings! you must bear up as best you can. It's a very queer story, but of course the packet must be found. You stay here for the present, and I'll go out and meet my husband as he comes along to his dinner. I reckon, when all's said and done, I'm a right good wife and a right good mother, and that there ain't a farm kept better than ours anywhere in the neighborhood, nor finer fowls for the table, nor better ducks, nor more tender geese and turkeys. Then as to our pigs—why, the pigs themselves be a sight. And we rears horses, too, and very good many o' them turn out. And in the spring-time we have young lambs and young heifers; in fact, there ain't a young thing that can be born that don't seem to have a right to take up its abode at Stoke Farm. And I does for 'em all, the small twinses being too young and the old twinses too rough and big for the sort o' work. Well, my dears, I'm good at all that sort o' thing; but when it comes to dertective business I am nowhere, and I may as well confess it. I am sorry for you, my loves; but this is a job for the farmer and not for me, for he's always down on the poachers, and very bitter he feels towards 'em. He has to be sharp and sudden and swift and knowing, whereas I have to be tender and loving and petting and true. That's the differ between us. He's more the person for this 'ere job, and I'll go and speak to him while you sit by the kitchen fire."

"Do, please, please, Mrs. Miles!" said both the twins.

Then she left them, and they sat very still in the warm, silent kitchen; and by and by Sylvia, worn out with grief, and not having slept at all during the previous night, dropped into an uneasy slumber, while Hetty stroked her sister's hand and Dan's head until she also fell asleep.

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The dogs, seeing that the girls were asleep, thought that they might do the same. When, therefore, Farmer Miles and his wife entered the kitchen, it was to find the two girls and the dogs sound asleep.

"Poor little lambs! Do look at 'em!" said Mrs. Miles. "They be wore out, and no mistake."

"Let's lay 'em on the sofa along here," said Miles. "While they're having their sleep out you get the dinner up, wife, and I'll go out and put on my considering-cap."

The farmer had no sooner said this than—whispering to the dogs, who very unwillingly accompanied him—he left the kitchen. He went into the farmyard and began to pace up and down. Mrs. Miles had told her story with some skill, the farmer having kept his attention fixed on the salient points.

Miss Betty—even he had succumbed utterly to the charms of Miss Betty—had lost a packet of great value. She had hidden it, doubtless in the grounds of Haddo Court. She had gone had gone to look for it, and it was no longer there. Some one had stolen it. Who that person could be was what the farmer wanted to "get at," as he expressed it. "Until you can get at the thief," he muttered under his breath, "you are nowhere at all."

But at present he was without any clue, and, true man of business that he was, he felt altogether at a loose end. Meanwhile, as he was pacing up and down towards the farther edge of the prosperous-looking farmyard, Dan uttered a growl and sprang into the road. The next minute there was a piercing cry, and Farmer Miles, brandishing his long whip,

followed the dog. Dan was holding the skirts of a very young girl and shaking them ferociously in his mouth. His eyes glared into the face of the girl, and his whole aspect was that of anger personified. Luckily, Beersheba was not present, or the girl might have had a sorry time of it. With a couple of strides the farmer advanced towards her; dealt some swift lashes with his heavy whip on the dog's head, which drove him back; then, taking the girl's small hand, he said to her kindly, "Don't you be frightened, miss; his bark's a sight worse nor his bite."

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"Oh, he did terrify me so!" was the answer; "and I've been running for such a long time, and I'm very, very tired."

"Well, miss, I don't know your name nor anything about you; but this land happens to be private property—belonging to me, and to me alone. Of course, if it weren't for that I'd have no right to have fierce dogs about ready to molest human beings. It was a lucky thing for you, miss, that I was so close by. And whatever be your name, if I may be so bold as to ask, and where be you going now?"

"My name is Sibyl Ray, and I belong to Haddo Court."

"Dear, dear, dear! seems to me, somehow, that Haddo Court and Stoke Farm are going to have a right good connection. I don't complain o' the butter, and the bread, and the cheese, and the eggs, and the fowls as we sarve to the school; but I never counted on the young ladies taking their abode in my quarters."

"What do you mean, and who are you?" said Sibyl in great amazement.

"My name, miss, is Farmer Miles; and this house"—he pointed to his dwelling—"is my homestead; and there are two young ladies belonging to your school lying fast asleep at the present moment in my wife's kitchen, and they has given me a problem to think out. It's a mighty stiff one, but it means life or death; so of course I have, so to speak, my knife in it, and I'll get the kernel out afore I'm many hours older."

Sibyl, who had been very miserable before she started, who had endured her drive with what patience she could, and whose heart was burning with hatred to Fanny and passionate, despairing love for Betty Vivian, was so exhausted now that she very nearly fainted.

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The farmer looked at her out of his shrewd eyes. "Being a member o' the school, Miss Ray," he said, "you doubtless are acquainted with them particularly charming young ladies, the Misses Vivian?"

"Indeed I know them all, and love them all," said Sibyl.

"Now, that's good hearing; for they be a pretty lot, that they be. And as to the elder, I never see'd a face like hers—so wonderful, and with such a light about it; and her courage—bless you, miss! the dogs wouldn't harm *her*. It was fawning on her, and licking her hand, and petting her they were. Is it true, miss, that Miss Betty is so mighty bad?"

"It is true," said Sibyl; "and I wonder—Oh; please don't leave me standing here alone on the road. I am so miserable and frightened! I wonder if it's Sylvia and Hester who are in your house?"

"Yes, they be the missies, and dear little things they be."

"And have they told you anything?" asked Sibyl.

"Well, yes; they have set me a conundrum—a mighty stiff one. It seems that Miss Betty Vivian has lost a parcel, and she be that fretted about it that she's nigh to death, and the little uns have promised to get it back for her; and, poor children! they've set me on the job, and how ever I'm to do it I don't know."

"I think perhaps I can help you," said Sibyl suddenly. "I'll tell you this much, Farmer Miles. I can get that packet back, and I'd much rather get it back with your help than without it."

"Shake hands on that, missie. I wouldn't like to be, so to speak, in a thing, and then cast out o' it again afore the right moment. But whatever do you mean?"

"You shall know all at the right time," said Sibyl. "Mrs. Haddo is so unhappy about Betty that she wouldn't allow any of the upper-school girls to have lessons to-day, so she sent them off to spend the day in London. I happened to be one of them, and was perfectly wretched at having to go; so while I was driving to the railway station in one of the wagonettes I made up my mind. I settled that whatever happened I'd never, never, never endure another night like the last; and I couldn't go to London and see pictures or museums or whatever places we were to be taken to while Betty was lying at death's door,

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and when I knew that it was possible for me to save her. So when we got to the station there was rather a confusion—that is, while the tickets were being bought—and I suddenly slipped away by myself and got outside the station, and ran, and ran, and ran—oh, so fast!—until at last I got quite beyond the town, and then I found myself in the country; and all the time I kept saying, and saying, ‘I will tell. She sha’n’t die; nothing else matters; Betty shall not die.’”

“Then what do you want me to help you for, missie?”

“Because,” said Sibyl, holding out her little hand, “I am very weak and you are very strong, and you will keep me up to it. Please do come with me straight back to the school!”

“Well, there’s a time for all things,” said the farmer; “and I’m willing to give up my arternoon’s work, but I’m by no means willing to give up my midday meal, for we farmers don’t work for nothing—as doubtless you know, missie. So, if you’ll come along o’ me and eat a morsel, we’ll set off afterwards, sure and direct, to Haddo Court; and I’ll keep you up to the mark if you’re likely to fail.”

CHAPTER XXII

FARMER MILES TO THE RESCUE

Sylvia and Hetty had awakened when the farmer brought Sibyl Ray into the pleasant farmhouse kitchen. The twin-boys were absent at school, and only the little twins came down to dinner. The beef, potatoes, dumplings, apple-tart and cream were all A1, and Sibyl was just as glad of the meal as were the two Vivian girls.

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The Vivians did not know Sibyl very well, and had not the least idea that she guessed their secret. She rather avoided glancing at them, and was very shy and retiring, and stole up close to the farmer when the dogs were admitted. But Dan and Beersheba knew what was expected of them. Any one in the Stoke Farm kitchen had a right to be there; and were they going to waste their precious time and affection on the sort of girl they would love to bite, when Sylvia and Hetty were present? So they fawned on the twin-girls, taking up a good deal of their attention; and by and by the dinner came to an end.

When it was quite over the farmer got up, wiped his mouth with a big, red-silk handkerchief, and, going up to the Vivian twins, said quietly, “You can go home, whenever you like; and I think the job you have put upon me will be managed. Meanwhile, me and this young party will make off to Haddo Court as fast as we can.”

As this “young party” happened to be Sibyl Ray, the girls looked up in astonishment; but the farmer gave no information of any kind, not even bestowing a wink on his wife, who told the little twins when he had left the kitchen accompanied by Sibyl that she would be ready to walk back with them to the school in about half an hour.

“You need have no frets now, my loves,” she said. “The farmer would never have said words like he’ve spoken to you if he hadn’t got his knife right down deep into the kernel. He’s fond o’ using that expression, dears, when he’s nailed a poacher, and he wouldn’t say no less nor no more for a job like you’ve set him to.”

During their walk the farmer and Sibyl hardly exchanged a word. As they went up the avenue they saw that the place was nearly empty. The day was a fine one; but the girls of the lower school had one special playground some distance away, and the girls of the upper school were supposed to be in London. Certainly no one expected Sibyl Ray to put in an appearance here at this hour.

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As they approached quite close to the mansion, Sibyl turned her very pale face and stole her small hand into that of the farmer. “I am so frightened!” she said; “and I know quite well this is going to ruin me, and I shall have to go back home to be a burden to father, who is very poor, and who thinks so much of my being educated here. But I—I will do it all the same.”

“Of course you will, missie; and poverty don’t matter a mite.”

“Perhaps it doesn’t,” said Sibyl.

“Compared to a light heart, it don’t matter a gossoon, as they say in Ireland,” remarked the farmer.

Sibyl felt suddenly uplifted.

"I'll see you through, missie," he added as they came up to the wide front entrance.

A doctor's carriage was standing there, and it was quite evident that one or two doctors were in the house.

"Oh," said Sibyl with a gasp, "suppose we are betrayed!"

"No, we won't be that," said the farmer.

Sibyl pushed open the door, and then, standing in the hall, she rang a bell. A servant presently appeared.

Before Sibyl could find her voice Farmer Miles said, "Will you have the goodness to find Mrs. Haddo and tell her that I, Farmer Miles of the Stoke Farm, have come here accompanied by one o' her young ladies, who has something o' great importance to tell her at once?"

"Perhaps you will both come into Mrs. Haddo's private sitting-room?" said the girl.

The farmer nodded assent, and he and Sibyl entered. When they were inside the room Sibyl uttered a faint sigh. The farmer took out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead.

"What a lot o' fal-lals, to be sure!" he said, looking round in a by no means appreciative manner. [Pg 285]

Sibyl and the farmer had to wait for some little time before Mrs. Haddo made her appearance. When she did so a great change was noticeable in her face; it was exceedingly pale. Her lips had lost their firm, their even noble, expression of self-restraint; they were tremulous, as though she had been suffering terribly. Her eyes were slightly red, as though some of those rare tears which she so seldom shed had visited them. She looked first at Farmer Miles and then in great amazement at Sibyl.

"Why are you here, Sibyl Ray?" she said. "I sent you to London with the other girls of the upper school this morning. What are you doing here?"

"Perhaps I can tell you best, ma'am, if you will permit me to speak," said the farmer.

"I hope you will be very brief, Farmer Miles. I could not refuse your request, but we are all in great trouble to-day at the school. One of our young ladies—one greatly beloved by us all—is exceedingly, indeed I must add most dangerously, ill."

"It's about her we've come," said the farmer.

Here Mrs. Haddo sank into a seat. "Why, what do you know about Miss Betty Vivian?"

"Ah, I met her myself, not once, but twice," said Miles; "and I love her, too, just as the wife loves her, and the big twins, and the little twins, and the dogs—bless 'em! We all love Miss Betty Vivian. And now, ma'am, I must tell you that Miss Betty's little sisters came to see the good wife this morning."

Mrs. Haddo was silent.

"They told their whole story to the good wife. A packet has been lost, and Miss Betty lies at death's door because o' the grief o' that loss. The little uns—bless 'em!—thought that the wife could find the packet. That ain't in her line; it's mothering and coddling and loving as is in her line. So she put the job on me; and, to be plain, ma'am, I never were more flabbergasted in the whole o' my life. For to catch a poacher is one thing, and to catch a lost packet—nobody knowing where it be nor how it were lost—is another." [Pg 286]

"Well, why have you come to me?" said Mrs. Haddo.

"Because, ma'am, I've got a clue, and a big one; and this young lady's the clue."

"You, Sibyl Ray—you?"

"Yes," said Sibyl.

"Speak out now, missie; don't be frightened. There are miles worse things than poverty; there's disgrace and heart-burnings. Speak you out bold, missie, and don't lose your courage."

"I was miserable," said Sibyl. "I didn't want to go to town, and when I got to the station I slipped away; and I got into the lane outside Stoke Farm and a dog came out and frightened me, and—and—then this man came—this kind man——"

"Well, go on, Sibyl," said Mrs. Haddo; "moments are precious just now."

"I—took the packet," said Sibyl.

"*You—took—the packet?*"

"Yes. I don't want to speak against another. It was my fault—or mostly my fault. I did love Betty, and it didn't matter at all to me that she was expelled from the Specialities; I should love her just as much if she were expelled from fifty Specialities. But Fanny—she—she—put me against her."

"Fanny! What Fanny do you mean?"

"Fanny Crawford."

Mrs. Haddo rose at once and rang her bell. When the servant appeared she said, "Send Miss Crawford here immediately, and don't mention that any one is in my study. Now, Sibyl, keep the rest of your story until Fanny Crawford is present."

In about five minutes' time Fanny appeared. She was very white, and looked rather worn and miserable. "Oh, dear!" she said as she entered, "I am so glad you have sent for me, Mrs. Haddo; and I do trust I shall have a room to myself to-night, for I didn't sleep at all last night, and—Why, whatever is the matter? Sibyl, what are you doing here? And who—who is that man?"

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"Sit down, Fanny—or stand, just as you please," said Mrs. Haddo; "only have the goodness not to speak until Sibyl has finished her story. Now, Sibyl, go on. You had come to that part where you explained that Fanny put you against Betty Vivian. No, Fanny, you do not go towards the door. Stay quietly where you are."

Fanny, seeing that all chance of exit was cut off, stood perfectly still, her eyes fixed on the ground.

"Now, Sibyl, go on."

"Fanny was very anxious about the packet, and she wanted me to watch," continued Sibyl, "so that I might discover where Betty had hidden it. I did watch, and I found that Betty had put it under one of the plants of wild-heather in the 'forest primeval.' I saw her take it out and look at it and put it back again, and when she was gone I went to the place and took the packet out myself and brought it to Fanny. I don't know where the packet is now."

"Fanny, where is the packet?" said Mrs. Haddo.

"Sibyl is talking the wildest nonsense," said Fanny. "How can you possibly believe her? I know nothing about Betty Vivian or her concerns."

"Perhaps, miss," said the farmer, coming forward at that moment, "that pointed thing sticking out o' your pocket might have something to do with it. You will permit me, miss, seeing that the young lady's life is trembling in the balance."

Before either Mrs. Haddo or Fanny could utter a word Farmer Miles had strode across the room, thrust his big, rough hand into Fanny's neat little pocket, and taken out the brown paper-packet.

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"There, now," he said, "that's the kernel of the nut. I thought I'd do it somehow. Thank you kindly, ma'am, for listening to me. Miss Sibyl Ray, you may be poor in the future, but at least you'll have a light heart; and as to the dirty trick you did, I guess you won't do a second, for you have learned your lesson. I'll be wishing you good-morning now, ma'am," he added, turning to Mrs. Haddo, "for I must get back to my work. It's twelve pounds o' butter the cook wants sent up without fail to-night, ma'am; and I'm much obliged for the order."

The farmer left the room. Fanny had flung herself on a chair and covered her face with her hands. Sibyl stood motionless, awaiting Mrs. Haddo's verdict.

Once again Mrs. Haddo rang the bell. "Send Miss Symes to me," she said.

Miss Symes appeared.

"The doctor's last opinion, please, Miss Symes?"

"Dr. Ashley says that Betty is much the same. The question now is how to keep up her strength. He thinks it better to have two specialists from London, as, if she continues in such intense excitement, further complications may arise."

"Do you know where Betty's sisters are?" was Mrs. Haddo's next inquiry.

"I haven't seen them for some time, but I will find out where they are."

"As soon as ever you find them, send them straight to me. I shall be here for the present."

Miss Symes glanced in some wonder from Sibyl to Fanny; then she went out of the room without further comment.

When she was quite alone with the girls Mrs. Haddo said, "Fanny, a fresh bedroom has been prepared for you, and I shall be glad if you will go and spend the rest of this day there. I do not feel capable of speaking to you at present. As to you, Sibyl, your conduct has been bad enough; but at the eleventh hour—and, we may hope, in time—you have made restitution. You may, therefore, rejoin the girls of the lower school."

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"Of the lower school?" said Sibyl.

"Yes. Your punishment is that you return to the lower school for at least a year, until you are more capable of guiding your own conduct, and less likely to be influenced by the wicked passions of girls who have had more experience than yourself. You can go to your room also for the present, and to-morrow morning you will resume your duties in the lower school."

Fanny and Sibyl both turned away, neither of them saying a word to the other. They had scarcely done so before Miss Symes came in, her face flushed with excitement, and accompanied by the twins.

"My dear girls, where have you been?" said Mrs. Haddo.

"With Mrs. Miles," said Sylvia.

"I cannot blame you, under the circumstances, although you have broken a rule. My dears, thank God for His mercies. Here is the lost packet."

Sylvia grasped it.

Hester rushed towards Sylvia and laid her hand over her sister's. "Oh! oh!" she said.

"Now, girls, can I trust you? I was told what took place this morning—how you went to Betty without leave, and promised to return with the packet. Is Betty awake at present, Miss Symes?"

"Yes," said Miss Symes, "she has been awake for a long time."

"Will you take the girls up to Betty's room? Do not go in yourself. Now, girls, I trust to your wisdom, and to your love of Betty, to do this thing very quietly."

"You may trust us," said Hetty.

They left the room. They followed Miss Symes upstairs. They entered the beautiful room where Betty was lying, her eyes shining brightly, fever high on her cheeks.

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It was Hetty who put the packet into her hand. "Here it is, Betty darling. We said we'd find it for you."

Then a wonderful thing happened; for Betty looked at the packet, then she smiled, then she raised it to her lips and kissed it, then she put it under her pillow. Finally she said, "Oh, I am sleepy! Oh, I am tired!"

CHAPTER XXIII

RESTORATION

Notwithstanding the fact that the lost packet was restored, Betty's life hung in the balance for at least another twenty-four hours. During that time she tossed and sighed and groaned. The fever ran high, and her little voice kept on saying, "Oh, that I could find the packet!"

It was in this emergency that Miss Symes came to the rescue. She called Sylvia and Hester to her, and desired Hester to stand at one side of Betty's little, narrow, white bed, and Sylvia to place herself at the other.

Betty did not seem even to know her sisters. Her eyes were glassy, her cheeks deeply flushed, and there was a look of intense restlessness and great pain in her face. "Oh, that I might find the packet!" she murmured.

"Do what your heart prompts you, Sylvia," said Miss Symes.

Sylvia immediately pushed her hand under Betty's pillow, and, taking up the lost packet, took one of the girl's little, feverish hands and closed her fingers round the brown-paper parcel.

"It is found, Bettina! it is found!" said Sylvia. "Here it is. You need not fret any more."

"What! what!" said Betty. Into her eyes there crept a new expression, into her voice a new note. "Oh, I can't believe it!" she exclaimed. [Pg 291]

But here Hetty threw in a word of affection and entreaty. "Why, Bettina," she said, "it is in your hand. Feel it, darling! feel it! We got it back for you, just as we said we would. Feel it, Bettina! feel it!"

Betty felt. Her fingers were half-numbered; but she was able to perceive the difference between the brown paper and the thick, strong cord, and again the difference between the thick cord and the sealing-wax. "How many seals are there?" she asked in a breathless, eager voice, turning and looking full at her sisters.

"Eight in all," said Sylvia, speaking rapidly: "two in front, two at each side, and two, again, fastening down the naps at the back."

"I knew there were eight," said Betty. "Let me feel them."

Sylvia conducted Betty's fingers over the unbroken seals.

"Count for me, darling, silly Sylvia!" said Betty.

Sylvia began to count: One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight.

"It is my lost packet!" said Betty with a cry.

"It is, Betty! it is!"

"And is any one going to take it from me?"

"No one, Betty, ever again."

"Let me hold it in my hand," said Betty.

Sister Helen came up with a restorative; and when Betty had taken the nourishing contents of the little, white china cup, she again made use of that extraordinary expression, "Oh, I am so sleepy! Oh, I am tired!"

Still holding the packet in her hand, Betty dropped off into slumber; and when she came to herself the doctors said that the crisis was past.

Betty Vivian recovered very slowly, during which time the rules of the school were altogether relaxed, not only in her favor, but also in favor of the twins, Sylvia and Hetty. They were allowed to spend some hours every day with Betty, and although they spoke very little, they were able to comfort their sister immensely. At last Betty was well enough to leave her bed and creep to any easy-chair, where she would sit, feeling more dead than alive; and, by slow degrees, the girls of the school whom she loved best came to see her and comfort her and fuss over her. Margaret Grant looked very strong and full of sympathy; Martha West had that delightful voice which could not but attract all who heard her speak. Susie Rushworth, the Bertrams, Olive, and all the other Specialities, with the exception of Fanny, came to visit Betty, who, in her turn, loved to see them, and grew better each day, and stronger, and more inclined to eat the good, nourishing food which was provided for her. [Pg 292]

All this time she had never once spoke of Fanny Crawford. The other Speciality girls were rather nervous on this account. They wondered how Betty would feel when she heard what had happened to Fanny; for Fanny, after spending a whole day and night in the small and somewhat dismal bedroom prepared for her by Mrs. Haddo's orders, refused to appear at prayers the following morning, and, further, requested that her breakfast should be taken up to her.

Betty's life was still hanging in the balance, although the doctors were not nearly so anxious as they had been the day before. Fanny was biding her time. She knew all the rules of the school, having spent so many years there. She also knew well what desolation awaited her in the future in this bright and pleasant school; for, during that painful day and that terrible night, and this, if possible, more dreadful morning, no one had come near her but the servant who brought her meals, no one had spoken to her. To all appearance she, one of the prime favorites of the school and Sir John Crawford's only daughter, was [Pg 293]

forgotten as though she had never existed. To Fanny's proud heart this sense of desertion was almost intolerable. She could have cried aloud but that she did not dare to give way; she could have set aside Mrs. Haddo's punishment, but in her heart of hearts she felt convinced that none of the girls would take her part. All the time, however, she was making up her mind. Her nicely assorted garments—her pretty evening frocks, her day-dresses of summer and winter, her underclothing, her jackets, her hats, gloves, and handkerchiefs—had all been conveyed to the small, dull room which she was now occupying. To herself she called it Punishment Chamber, and felt that she could not endure the life there even for another hour.

Being well acquainted with the usual routine of the school, Fanny busied herself immediately after breakfast in packing her different belongings into two neat cane trunks which she had desired a servant to bring to her from the box-room. Having done this, she changed the dress she was wearing for a coat and skirt of neat blue serge and a little cap to match. She wrote out labels at her desk and gummed them on the trunks. She examined the contents of her purse; she had two or three pounds of her own. She could, therefore, do pretty much what she pleased.

But although Fanny Crawford had acted perhaps worse than any other girl had acted in the school before, she scorned to run away. She would go openly; she would defy Mrs. Haddo. Mrs. Haddo could not possibly keep a girl of Fanny's age—for she would soon be seventeen—against her will. Having packed her trunks, Fanny went downstairs. The rest of the upper school were busy at their lessons. Sibyl Ray, who had returned to the lower school, was of course nowhere in sight. Fanny marched bravely down the corridor, along which she had hurried yesterday in nameless fear and trepidation. She knocked at Mrs. Haddo's door. Mrs. Haddo said, "Come in," and she entered.

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"Oh, it's you, Fanny Crawford! I haven't sent for you."

"I know that," replied Fanny. "But I cannot stay any longer in disgrace in one room. I have had enough of it. I wish to tell you, Mrs. Haddo, that Haddo Court is no longer the place for me. I suppose I ought to repent of what I have done; and, of course, I never for a moment thought that Betty would be so absurd and silly to get an illness which would nearly kill her. As a matter of fact, I do not repent. The wicked person was Betty Vivian. She first stole the packet, and then told a lie about it. I happened to see her steal it, for I was saying at Craigie Muir at the time. When Miss Symes told me that the Vivians were coming to the school I disliked the idea, and said so; but I wouldn't complain, and my dislike received no attention whatsoever. Betty has great powers of fascination, and she won hearts here at once. She was asked to join the Specialities—an unheard-of-thing for a new girl at the school. I begged and implored of her not to join, referring her to Rule No. I., which prohibits any girl who is in possession of such a secret as Betty had to become a member. She would not listen to me; she *would* join. Then she became miserable, and confessed what she had done, but would not carry her confession to its logical conclusion—namely, confession to you and restoration of the lost packet."

"I wish to interrupt you for a minute here, Fanny," said Mrs. Haddo. "Since your father left he has sent me several letters of the late Miss Vivian's to read. In one of them she certainly did allude to a packet which was to be kept safely until Betty was old enough to appreciate it; but in another, which I do not think your father ever read, Miss Vivian said that she had changed her mind, and had put the packet altogether into Betty's charge. I do not wish to condone Betty's sins; but her only sin in this affair was the lie she told, which was evidently uttered in a moment of swift temptation. She had a right to the packet, according to this letter of Miss Frances Vivian's."

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Fanny stood very still. "I didn't know that," she replied.

"I dare say you didn't; but had you treated Betty differently, and been kind to her from the first, she would probably have explained things to you."

"I never liked her, and I never shall," said Fanny with a toss of her head. "She may suit you, Mrs. Haddo, but she doesn't suit me. And I wish to say that I want you to send me, at once, to stay with my aunt Amelia at Brighton until I can hear from my father with regard to my future arrangements. If you don't send me, I have money in my pocket, and will go in spite of you. I don't like your school any longer. I did love it, but now I hate it; and it is all—all because of Betty Vivian."

"Oh, Fanny, what a pity!" said Mrs. Haddo. Tears filled her eyes. But Fanny would not look up.

"May I go?" said Fanny.

"Yes, my dear. Anderson shall take you, and I will write a note to your aunt. Fanny, is there

no chance of your turning to our Divine Father to ask Him to forgive you for your sins of cruelty to one unhappy but very splendid girl?"

"Oh, don't talk to me of her splendor!" said Fanny. "I am sick of it."

"Very well, I will say no more."

Mrs. Haddo sank into the nearest chair. After a minute's pause she turned to her writing-table and wrote a letter. She then rang her bell, and desired Anderson to get ready for a short journey.

About three o'clock that day Fanny, accompanied by Anderson, with her trunks and belongings heaped on top of a station-cab, drove from Haddo Court never to return. There were no girls to say farewell; in fact, not one of her friends even knew of her departure until Mrs. Haddo mentioned it on the following morning.

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"Fanny did right to go," she said. "And now we will try to live down all that has been so painful, and turn our faces once again towards the light."

Betty recovered all in good time; but it was not until Christmas had long passed that she first asked for Fanny Crawford. When she heard that Fanny had gone, a queer look—half of pleasure, half of pain—flitted across her little face.

"You're glad, aren't you? You're very, very glad, Bettina?" whispered Sylvia in her sister's ear.

"No, I am not glad," replied Betty. "If I had known she was going I might have spoken to her just once. As it is, I am sorry."

"Oh Bettina, why?"

"Because she has lost the influence of so noble a woman as dear Mrs. Haddo, and of so faithful a friend as Margaret Grant, and of so dear a girl as Martha West. Oh, why did I ever come here to upset things? And why did I ever tell that wicked, wicked lie?"

"You have repented now, poor darling, if any one ever did!" said both the twins.

As they spoke Mrs. Haddo entered the room. "Betty," she said, "I wish to tell you something. You certainly did exceedingly wrong when you told Sir John Crawford that you knew nothing of the packet. But I know you did not steal it, dear, for I hold a letter in my hand from your aunt, in which she told Sir John that she had given the packet absolutely into your care. Sir John could never have read that letter; but I have read it, dear, and I have written to him on the subject."

"Then I may keep the packet?" asked Betty in a very low voice.

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"Yes, Betty."

"And it will read me a lesson," said Betty. "Oh, thank you! thank you!" Then she sprang to her feet and kissed Mrs. Haddo's white hands first, and then pressed a light kiss on that good lady's beautiful lips. "God will help me to do better in the future," she added.

And she was helped.

THE END



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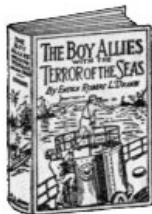
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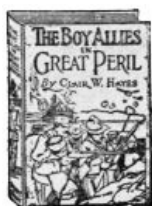
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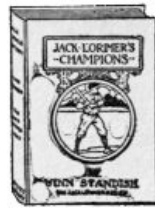
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