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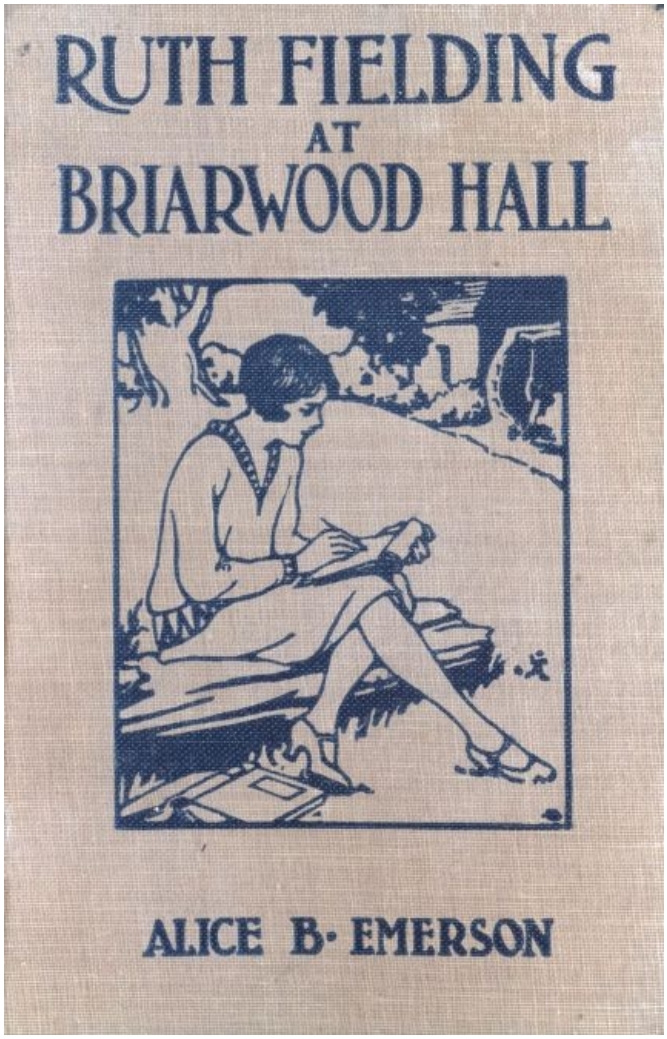

"IT'S A BEAUTIFUL OLD PLACE, HELEN," SIGHED RUTH.
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Ruth Fielding at Briarwood Hall

OR

Solving the Campus Mystery

BY

ALICE B. EMERSON

AUTHOR OF "RUTH FIELDING OF THE RED MILL," "RUTH FIELDING AT LIGHTHOUSE POINT," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED

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CUPPLES & LEON COMPANY
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Books for Girls

BY ALICE B. EMERSON

RUTH FIELDING SERIES

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RUTH FIELDING OF THE RED MILL
Or, Jasper Parloe's Secret.

RUTH FIELDING AT BRIARWOOD HALL
Or, Solving the Campus Mystery.

RUTH FIELDING AT SNOW LODGE
Or, Lost in the Backwoods.

RUTH FIELDING AT LIGHTHOUSE POINT
Or, Nita, the Girl Castaway.

RUTH FIELDING AT SILVER RANCH
Or, Schoolgirls Among the Cowboys.

CUPPLES & LEON Co., PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK.

RUTH FIELDING AT BRIARWOOD HALL

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RUTH FIELDING AT BRIARWOOD HALL

CHAPTER I

THE EXODUS

The sun was a regular lie-abed on this Autumn morning, banked about by soft clouds and draperies of mist; but they glowed pink along the horizon—perhaps blushing for Old Sol's delinquency. The mist hung tenderly over the river, too—indeed, it masked the entire Valley of the Lumano—lying thick and dank upon the marshes and the low meadows, but wreathed more lightly about the farmhouses and their outbuildings, and the fodder and haystacks upon the higher ground.

But suddenly the sun flung off the bedclothes and leaped right into the sky. That long, low bank of cloud that had been masking him, melted away and the shreds of mist were burned up in a hurry as his warm rays spread abroad, taking the entire valley in their arms.

Farmhouses, where the kitchen chimney smoke had been rising straightly into the air, immediately put on a new bustle. Doors opened and shut. There was the stamping of horses in the stables as they crunched their corn; cows lowed as the milk-pails rattled; sheep baa-a-ed in their folds, and the swine, fearing that some other of the farm stock would get *their* share of the breakfast, squealed in eager anticipation.

On a knoll by the river side stood the rambling buildings belonging to Jabez Potter, who kept the Red Mill. The great wheel beside the mill end of the main structure had not yet begun to turn, but there was plenty of bustle about the pleasant house.

The sun had scarcely popped up when a very pretty, bright-looking girl ran out upon the porch and gazed earnestly along the road that followed the Lumano toward Osago Lake. She looked out from under a shielding hand, for the sun was in her eyes. Around the corner of the house came a tall, dark-faced man whose long jaws were cleanly shaven and deeply lined. His clothing was full of milldust and it seemed to have been ground into his face for so many years that it was now a part of the grain and texture of his skin. He did not smile at the girl as he said:

"You ain't looking for them yet; air you, Ruth? It's much too early. Help your Aunt Alviry put breakfast on the table. She'll hev it all to do when you're gone."

The tone was stern, but the girl seemed to be used to it, for her face did not cloud over, and the smiles rippled about her mouth as she replied:

"I'm so full of happiness, Uncle Jabez, that you mustn't mind if I'm looking for Helen and Tom ahead of time. It doesn't seem possible that I am actually going with them."

"It seems real enough to me," grumbled Jabez Potter. "I hope you'll get enough out of it to pay us for all the trouble and cost of your going—that I do."

But even this seemingly unkind speech did not ruffle the girl's temper.

"You wait and see, Uncle Jabez—you just wait and see," she said, nodding to him. "I'll prove it the best investment you ever made."

He didn't smile—Jabez Potter was not one of the smiling kind; but his face relaxed and his eyes twinkled a little.

"I sha'n't look for cent. per cent. interest on my money, Niece Ruth," he said, and stumped

into the house in his heavy boots.

Ruth Fielding, who had come to the Red Mill only a few months before, having lost all other relatives but her great-uncle, who owned the mill, ran into the kitchen, too, where a little old woman, with bent back and very bright eyes, was hovering over the stove. The breakfast was ready to be served and this little woman was pottering about, muttering to herself a continual complaining phrase:

"Oh, my back and oh, my bones!"

Aunt Alvirah Boggs (who was everybody's Aunt Alvirah, but no blood relation to either Ruth or her uncle) was not a morose person, however, despite her rheumatic troubles. She smiled on Ruth and patted her hand as the girl sat down beside her at the table.

"Seems like we'd be lost without our pretty leetle creetur about," said Aunt Alvirah. "I don't see what the old house will do without her."

"I'll be home at Thanksgiving—if Uncle will let me," said Ruth, quickly, and glancing at the old man; "and again at Christmas, and at Easter. Why, the intervals will go like *that*," and she snapped her fingers.

"All this junketing up and down the country will cost money, Niece Ruth," admonished Uncle Jabez.

He was, by nature, a very close and careful man with money—a reputed miser, in fact. And that he did hoard up money, and loved it for itself, must be confessed. When he had lost a cash-box he kept in the mill, containing money and other valuables, it had been a great trouble to Uncle Jabez. But through a fortuitous train of circumstances Ruth Fielding had recovered the cash-box for him, with its contents untouched. It was really because he considered himself in her debt for this act, and that he prided himself upon paying his debts, that Jabez Potter had come to agree that Ruth should go away to school.

He had not done the thing in a niggardly way, when once he gave his consent. Ruth's new trunk was at the Cheslow railroad station and in it was an adequate supply of such frocks and necessities as a girl of her age would need in the school to which she was bound. Her ticket was bought, too, and in her purse was a crisp ten-dollar note—both purse and money being a special present from Uncle Jabez.

Ruth had learned that the miller was by no means as grim as he looked, and she likewise knew that now he was kindly disposed toward her and really was doing a great deal for her. She was determined to never be ungrateful to Uncle Jabez for satisfying the greatest longing she had ever had—to go to Briarwood Hall, a boarding school.

Suddenly a young man put his head in at the kitchen door, grinned, and said:

"They're a-comin', Miss Ruthie. I see 'em up the road."

Ruth jumped up at once and ran for her coat and hat.

"There, child!" cried Aunt Alvirah, "ye haven't eaten enough breakfast to keep a fly alive. Lucky I've got a good basket of lunch put up for ye. It'll be a long journey—by train, boat, and stage coach. You'll be hungry enough before ye git there—— Oh, my back and oh, my bones!" she added, as she hobbled to the dresser for the luncheon box.

Ruth flashed back into the room and cried to the youth on the porch:

"Is the car really in sight, Ben?"

"It's almost here, Miss."

Indeed, they could hear the purring of a motor-car coming up the river road. Ruth flung her arms about Uncle Jabez's neck, although he did not rise from the table where he was methodically putting his breakfast away as though nothing unusual was happening.

"You've been a dear, good uncle to me," she whispered, "and I love you for it. I'll be careful of the money, and I'll get all the learning I can for the money you pay out—now just you see if I don't!"

"I ain't sure that it'll do either of us much good," grumbled Uncle Jabez, and he did not even follow her to the door as she ran out.

But Aunt Alvirah hobbled after her, and pressed her close before she would let the girl run down the walk.

"Blessin's on ye, ye pretty creetur," she crooned over Ruth. "I'll think of ye ev'ry moment ye air away. This is your home, Ruthie; ye ain't got nary 'nother—don't fergit that. And yer old A'nt Alviry'll be waitin' for ye here, an' jest longin' for the time when ye come home."

Ruth kissed her again and again. Two excited young voices called to her from the automobile.

"Come on! Come on, Ruth. Do come away!"

She kissed Aunt Alvirah once more, waved her hand to bashful Ben, who was Uncle Jabez's man-of-all-work, and ran down to the waiting car. In the seat beside the chauffeur was a bright-looking, black-haired boy in a military uniform of blue, who seized her lunch basket and handbag and put them both in a safe place. In the tonneau was a plainly dressed lady and a brilliantly pretty girl perhaps a year older than Ruth. This young lady received the girl from the Red Mill rapturously when she sprang into the tonneau, and hugged her tightly as the car started on. She was Ruth's dearest friend, Helen Cameron. It was her brother Tom in front, and the lady was Mrs. Murchiston, who had been the governess of the Cameron twins since their babyhood, and was now to remain in the great house—"Outlook"—Mr. Macy Cameron's home, as housekeeper, while his son and daughter were away at school.

For Tom was bound for Seven Oaks Military Academy, and that was only ten miles, or so, this side of Lumberton, near which was situated Briarwood Hall, the boarding school which was the girls' destination. Tom had attended Cheslow High School for a year; but Ruth and Helen were about equally advanced in their studies and expected to be both roommates and classmates at the Hall.

Ruth stood up in the car as it rolled up the hill toward Cheslow and looked back at the Red Mill. She fluttered her handkerchief as long as she could see the little figure of Aunt Alvirah on the porch. Uncle Jabez came out and strode down the path to the mill. Then the car shot around a curve in the road and the scene was blotted out.

How much was to happen to her before she saw the Red Mill again!

CHAPTER II

THE MAN WHO PLAYED THE HARP

In the first volume of this series, entitled, "Ruth Fielding of the Red Mill; Or, Jasper Parloe's Secret," is related how Ruth and Helen and Tom came to be such close friends. The Camerons had been with Ruth when the lost cash-box belonging to Uncle Jabez Potter was found, and out of which incident Ruth's presence in the Camerons' automobile on this beautiful September morning, and the fact that she was accompanying Helen to school, arose.

Mr. Macy Cameron, a wealthy dry-goods merchant, and a widower, had selected the best school for his daughter to attend of which he could learn. Briarwood Hall, of which the preceptress was Mrs. Grace Tellingham, was a large school (there being more than two hundred scholars in attendance for the coming term), but it remained "select" in the truest sense of the word. It was not an institution particularly for the daughters of wealthy people, nor a school to which disheartened parents could send either unruly girls, or dunces.

Without Mrs. Murchiston's recommendation Helen Cameron could not have gained entrance to Briarwood; without the attested examination papers of Miss Cramp, teacher of the district school, who had prepared Ruth for entering Cheslow High School before it was supposed that she could go to Briarwood, the girl from the Red Mill would not have been starting on this journey.

"My goodness me!" exclaimed Helen, when Ruth had sat down and Cheslow was coming into view before them. "I'm just as excited as I can be. Aren't you afraid of meeting Mrs. Tellingham? She's got an A. B. after her name. And her husband is a doctor of almost everything you can think!"

Mrs. Murchiston smiled, but said with some sternness; "I really hope, Helen, that Briarwood will quell your too exuberant spirits to a degree. But you need not be afraid of Dr. Tellingham. He is the mildest old gentleman one ever saw. He is doubtless engaged upon a history of the Mound Builders of Peoria County, Illinois; or upon a pamphlet suggested by the finding of a fossilized man in the caves of Arizona."

"Is he a great writer, Mrs. Murchiston?" asked Ruth, wonderingly.

"He has written a great many histories—if that constitutes being a great writer," replied the governess, with a quiet smile. "But if it was not for Mrs. Tellingham I fear that Briarwood Hall could not exist. However, the doctor is a perfectly harmless person."

From this Ruth drew the conclusion (for she was a thoughtful girl—thoughtful beyond her years, as well as imaginative) that Mrs. Grace Tellingham was a rather strong-minded lady and that the doctor would prove to be both mild and "hen-pecked."

The car sped along the beautifully shaded road leading into Cheslow; but there was still ample time for the travelers to catch the train. On the right hand, as they advanced, appeared a gloomy-looking house with huge pillars upholding the portico roof, which was set some distance back from the road. On two posts, one either side of the arched gateway, were set green lanterns. A tall, stoop-shouldered old gentleman, with a sweeping mustache and hair that touched his coat collar, and a pair of keen, dark eyes, came striding down the walk to the street as the motor-car drew near.

"Doctor Davison!" cried Helen and Ruth together.

The chauffeur slowed down and stopped as the doctor waved his hand.

"I must bid you girls good-bye here," he said, coming to the automobile to shake hands. "I have a call and cannot be at the station. And I expect all of you to do your best in your studies. But look out for your health, too. Take plenty of gym work, girls. Tom, you rascal! I want to hear of you standing just as well in athletics as you do in your books. Ah! if Mercy was going with you, I'd think the party quite complete."

"What do you hear from her, Doctor?" questioned Ruth, eagerly.

"My little Goody Two-sticks is hopping around pretty lively. She will come home in a few days. Too bad she cannot see you before you go. But then—perhaps you'll see her, after all."

"What do you mean?" demanded Helen, looking sharply at the physician. "You're hiding something. I can see it! You've got something up your sleeve, Doctor!"

"Quite so—my wrist!" declared the physician, and now, having shaken hands all around, he hurried away, looking vastly mysterious.

"Now, what do you suppose he meant by that?" demanded Helen. "I'm suspicious of him. He's always bringing unexpected things about. And poor Mercy Curtis——"

"If she could only go to Briarwood with us," sighed Ruth.

"She would make you and Helen hustle in your work, all right," declared Tom, looking over the back of his seat. "She's the smartest little thing that I ever saw."

"That's what Dr. Davison says," Ruth observed. "If the surgeons have enabled her to walk again, and dispense with the wheel chair, why couldn't she come to Briarwood?"

"I don't think Sam Curtis is any too well fixed," said Tom, shaking his head. "And Mercy's long illness has been a great expense to them. Hello! here we are at the station, with plenty of time to spare."

Mrs. Murchiston was not going with them; the trio of young folk were to travel alone, so Tom took the tickets, got the trunk checks, and otherwise played escort to the two girls. There were several friends at the station to bid the Camerons good-bye; but there was nobody but the stationmaster to say a word to Ruth Fielding. It was his lame daughter whom they had been discussing with Dr. Davison—an unfortunate girl who had taken a strong liking for Ruth, and for whom the girl from the Red Mill, with her cheerful spirit and pleasant face, had done a world of good.

The train was made up and they got aboard. Just below Cheslow was the Y where this train branched off the main line, and took its way by a single-track, winding branch, through the hills to the shore of Lake Osago. But the young folks did not have to trouble about their baggage after leaving Cheslow, for that was checked through—Tom's grip and box to Seven Oaks, and the girls' over another road, after crossing Lake Osago, to Lumberton, on Triton Lake.

Lake Osago was a beautiful body of water, some thirty miles long, and wide in proportion; island-dotted and bordered by a rolling country. There were several large towns upon its shores, and, in one place, a great summer camp of an educational society. Steamboats plied the lake, and up and down the rivers which either emptied into the Osago, or flowed out of it, as far as the dams.

The trio of school-bound young folk left the train very demurely and walked down the long wharf to the puffy little steamboat that was to take them the length of the lake to Portageton. Tom had been adjured by his father to take good care of his sister and Ruth, and he felt the burden of this responsibility. Helen declared, in a whisper to Ruth, that she had never known her twin brother to be so overpoweringly polite and thoughtful.

Nevertheless, the fact that they were for the very first time traveling alone (at least, the Camerons had never traveled alone before) did not spoil their enjoyment of the journey. The trip down the lake on the little side-wheel steamer was very interesting to all three. First the Camerons and Ruth Fielding went about to see if they could find any other girl or boy who appeared to be bound to school like themselves. But Tom said he was alone in that intention among the few boys aboard; and there were no girls upon the *Lanawaxa*, as the little steamboat was named, save Ruth and Helen.

Tom did not neglect the comfort of the girls, but he really could not keep away from the engine-room of the *Lanawaxa*. Tom was mightily interested in all things mechanical, and in engines especially. So the girls were left to themselves for a while upon the upper deck of the steamboat. They were very comfortable under the awning, and had books, and their luncheon, and a box of candy that Tom had bought and given to Ruth, and altogether they enjoyed the trip quite as much as anybody.

The breeze was quite fresh and there were not many passengers on the forward deck where the girls were seated. But one lady sitting near attracted their attention almost at first. She was such a little, doll-like lady; so very plainly and neatly dressed, yet with a style about her that carried the plain frock she wore, and the little hat, as though they were both of the richest materials. She was dark, had brilliant eyes, and her figure was youthful. Yet, when she chanced to raise her veil, Ruth noted that her face was marred by innumerable fine wrinkles—just like cracks in the face of a wax doll that had been exposed to frost.

"Isn't she a cunning little thing?" whispered Helen, seeing how much Ruth was attracted by the little lady.

"She's not a dwarf. There's nothing wrong with her," said Ruth. "She's just a lady in miniature; isn't she? Why, Helen, she's no taller than you are."

"She's dainty," repeated her chum. "But she looks odd."

Below, on the other deck, the music of a little orchestra had been tinkling pleasantly. Now a man with the harp, another with a violin, and a third with a huge guitar, came up the companionway and grouped themselves to play upon the upper deck. The three musicians were all foreigners—French or Italian. The man who played the harp was a huge, fleshy man, with a red waistcoat and long, black mustache. The waistcoat and mustache were the two most noticeable things about him. He sat on a little campstool while he played.

The musicians struck into some rollicking ditty that pleased the ear. The two girls enjoyed the music, and Helen searched her purse for a coin to give whichever of the musicians came around for the collection at the end of the concert. There was but one person on the forward deck who did not seem to care for the music. The little lady, whose back was to the orchestra, did not even look around.

All the time he was playing the huge man who thrummed the harp seemed to have his eyes fixed upon the little lady. This both Ruth and Helen noted. He was so big and she was so fairy-like, that the girls could not help becoming interested in the fact that the harpist was so deeply "smitten."

"Isn't he funny?" whispered Helen to Ruth. "He's so big and she's so little. And he pays more attention to her than he does to playing the tune."

Just then the orchestra of three pieces finished its third tune. That was all it ever jingled forth before making a collection. The man who played the guitar slipped the broad strap over his shoulders and stood up as though to pass his cap. But instantly the huge harpist arose and muttered something to him in a guttural tone. The other sat down and the big man seized the cap and began to move about the deck to make such collection as the audience was disposed to give for the music.

Although he had stared so at the unconscious lady's back, the big man did not go in her direction at first, as the two girls quite expected him to do. He went around to the other side of the deck after taking Helen's toll, and so manoeuvred as to come to the end of the lady's bench and suddenly face her.

"See him watch her, Ruth?" whispered Helen again. "I believe he knows her."

There was such a sly smile on the fat man's face that he seemed to be having a joke all to himself; yet his eyebrows were drawn down over his nose in a scowl. It was not a pleasant expression that he carried on his countenance to the little lady, before whom he appeared with a suddenness that would have startled almost anybody. He wheeled around the end of the settee on which she sat and hissed some word or phrase in her ear, leaning over to do so.

The little woman sprang up with a smothered shriek. The girls heard her chatter something, in which the word "*merci*" was plain. She shrank from the big man; but he was only bowing very low before her, with the cap held out for a contribution, and his grinning face aside.

"She is French," whispered Helen, excitedly, in Ruth's ear. "And he spoke in the same language. How frightened she is!"

Indeed, the little lady fumbled in her handbag for something which she dropped into the insistent cap of the harpist. Then, almost running along the deck, she whisked into the cabin. She had pulled the veil over her face again, but as she passed the girls they felt quite sure that she was sobbing.

The big harpist, with the same unpleasant leer upon his face, rolled down the deck in her

wake, carelessly humming a fragment of the tune he had just been playing. He had collected all the contributions in his big hand—a pitiful little collection of nickels and dimes—and he tossed them into the air and caught them expertly as he joined the other players. Then all three went aft to repeat their concert.

An hour later the *Lanawaxa* docked at Portageton. When our young friends went ashore and walked up the freight-littered wharf, Ruth suddenly pulled Helen's sleeve.

"Look there! There—behind the bales of rags going to the paper-mill. Do you see them?" whispered Ruth.

"I declare!" returned her chum. "Isn't that mysterious? It's the little foreign lady and the big man who played the harp—and how earnestly they are talking."

"You see, she knew him after all," said Ruth. "But what a wicked-looking man he is! And she *was* frightened when he spoke to her."

"He looks villainous enough to be a brigand," returned her chum, laughing. "Yet, whoever heard of a *fat* brigand? That would take the romance all out of the profession; wouldn't it?"

"And fat villains are not so common; are they?" returned Ruth, echoing the laugh.

CHAPTER III

APPROACHING THE PROMISED LAND

Tom had tried to remove the smut of the steamboat engine-room from his face with his handkerchief; but as his sister told him, his martial appearance in the uniform of the Seven Oaks cadets was rather spoiled by "a smootchy face." There wasn't time then, however, to make any toilet before the train left. They were off on the short run to Seven Oaks in a very few minutes after leaving the *Lanawaxa*.

Tom was very much excited now. He craned his head out of the car window to catch the first glimpse of the red brick barracks and dome of the gymnasium, which were the two most prominent buildings belonging to the Academy. Finally the hill on which the school buildings stood flashed into view. They occupied the summit of the knoll, while the seven great oaks, standing in a sort of druidical circle, dotted the smooth, sloping lawn that descended to the railroad cut.

"Oh, how ugly!" cried Helen, who had never seen the place before. "I do hope that Briarwood Hall will be prettier than *that*, or I shall want to run back home the very first week."

Her brother smiled in a most superior way.

"That's just like a girl," he said. "Wanting a school to look pretty! Pshaw! I want to see a jolly crowd of fellows, that's what I want. I hope I'll get in with a good crowd. I know Gil Wentworth, who came here last year, and he says he'll put me in with a nice bunch. That's what I'm looking forward to."

The train was slowing down. There was a handsome brick station and a long platform. This was crowded with boys, all in military garb like Tom's own. They looked so very trim and handsome that Helen and Ruth were quite excited. There were boys ranging from little fellows of ten, in knickerbockers, to big chaps whose mustaches were sprouting on their upper lips.

"Oh, dear me!" gasped Ruth. "See what a crowd we have got to go through. All those boys!"

"That's all right," Tom said, gruffly. "I'll see you to the stage. There it stands yonder—and a jolly old scarecrow of a carriage it is, too!"

He was evidently feeling somewhat flurried himself. He was going to meet more than half the great school informally right there at the station. They had gathered to meet and greet "freshmen."

But the car in which our friends rode stopped well along the platform and very near the spot where the old, brown, battered, and dust-covered stage coach, drawn by two great, bony horses, stood in the fall sunshine. Most of the Academy boys were at the other end of the platform.

Gil Wentworth, Tom's friend, had given young Cameron several pointers as to his attitude on arrival at the Seven Oaks station. He had been advised to wear the school uniform (he had passed the entrance examinations two months before) so as to be less noticeable in the crowd.

Very soon a slow and dirge-like chant arose from the cadets gathered on the station platform. From the rear cars of the train had stepped several boys in citizen's garb, some with parents or guardians and some alone, and all burdened with more or less baggage and a doubtful air that proclaimed them immediately "new boys." The hymn of greeting rose in mournful cadence:

"Freshie! Freshie! How-de-do!
We're all waiting here for you.
  Hold your head up!
  Square each shoulder!
  Thrust your chest out!
  Do look bolder!

Mamma's precious—papa's man—
Keep the tears back if you can.
  Sob! Sob! Sob!
  It's an awful job—
Freshie's leaving home and mo-o-ther!"

The mournful wailing of that last word cannot be expressed by mere type. There were other verses, too, and as the new boys filed off into the path leading up to the Academy with their bags and other encumbrances, the uniformed boys, *en masse*, got into step behind them and tramped up the hill, singing this dreadful dirge. The unfortunate new arrivals had to listen to the chant all the way up the hill. If they ran to get away from the crowd, it only made them look the more ridiculous; the only sensible way was to endure it with a grin.

Tom grinned widely himself, for he had certainly been overlooked. Or, he thought so until he had placed the two girls safely in the big omnibus, had kissed Helen good-bye, and shaken hands with Ruth. But the girls, looking out of the open door of the coach, saw him descend from the step into the midst of a group of solemn-faced boys who had only held back out of politeness to the girls whom Tom escorted.

Helen and Ruth, stifling their amusement, heard and saw poor Tom put through a much more severe examination than the other boys, for the very reason that he had come dressed in his uniform. He was forced to endure a searching inquiry regarding his upbringing and private affairs, right within the delighted hearing of the wickedly giggling girls. And then a tall fellow started to put him through the manual of arms.

Poor Tom was all at sea in that, and the youth, with gravity, declared that he was insulting the uniform by his ignorance and caused him to remove his coat and turn it inside out; and so Helen and Ruth saw him marched away with his stern escort, in a most ridiculous red flannel garment (the lining of the coat) which made him conspicuous from every barrack window and, indeed, from every part of the academy hill.

"Oh, dear me!" sighed Helen, wiping her eyes and almost sobbing after her laughter. "And Tommy thought he would escape any form of hazing! He wasn't so cute as he thought he was."

But Ruth suddenly became serious. "Suppose we are greeted in any such way at Briarwood?" she exclaimed. "I believe some girls are horrid. They have hazing in some girls' schools, I've read. Of course, it won't hurt us, Helen——"

"It'll be just fun, I think!" cried the enthusiastic Helen and then she stopped with an explosive "Oh!"

There was being helped into the coach by the roughly dressed and bewhiskered driver, the little, doll-like, foreign woman whom they thought had been left behind at Portageton.

"There ye air, Ma'mzell!" this old fellow said. "An' here's yer bag—an' yer umbrella—an' yer parcel. All there, be ye? Wal, wal, wal! So I got two more gals fer Briarwood; hev I?"

He was a jovial, rough old fellow, with a wind-blown face and beard and hair enough to make his head look to be as big as a bushel basket. He was dressed in a long, faded "duster" over his other nondescript garments, and his battered hat was after the shape of those worn by Grand Army men. He limped, too, and was slow in his movements and deliberate in his speech.

"I s'pose ye *be* goin' ter Briarwood, gals?" he added, curiously.

"Yes," replied Ruth.

"Where's yer baggage?" he asked.

"We only have our bags. Our trunks have gone by the way of Lumberton," explained Ruth.

"Ah! Well! All right!" grunted the driver, and started to shut the door. Then he glanced from Ruth and Helen to the little foreign lady. "I leave ye in good hands," he said, with a hoarse chuckle. "This here lady is one o' yer teachers, Ma'mzell Picolet." He pronounced the little lady's name quite as outlandishly as he did "mademoiselle." It sounded like "Pickle-yet" on his tongue.

"That will do, M'sieur Dolliver," said the little lady, rather tartly. "I may venture to introduce myself—is it not?"

She did not raise her veil. She spoke English with scarcely any accent. Occasionally she arranged her phrases in an oddly foreign way; but her pronunciation could not be criticised. Old Dolliver, the stage driver, grinned broadly as he closed the door.

"Ye allus make me feel like a Frenchman myself, when ye say 'moosher,' Ma'mzell," he chuckled.

"You are going to Briarwood Hall, then, my young ladies?" said Miss Picolet.

"Yes, Ma'am," said Ruth, shyly.

"I shall be your teacher in the French language—perhaps in deportment and the graces of life," the little lady said, pleasantly. "You will both enter into advanced classes, I hope?"

Helen, after all, was more shy than Ruth with strangers. When she became acquainted she gained confidence rapidly. But now Ruth answered again for both:

"I was ready to enter the Cheslow High School; Helen is as far advanced as I am in all studies, Miss Picolet."

"Good!" returned the teacher. "We shall get on famously with such bright girls," and she nodded several times.

But she was not really companionable. She never raised her veil. And she only talked with the girls by fits and starts. There were long spaces of time when she sat huddled in the corner of her seat, with her face turned from them, and never said a word.

But the nearer the rumbling old stagecoach approached the promised land of Briarwood Hall the more excited Ruth and Helen became. They gazed out of the open windows of the coach doors and thought the country through which they traveled ever so pretty. Occasionally old Dolliver would lean out from his seat, twist himself around in a most impossible attitude so as to see into the coach, and bawl out to the two girls some announcement of the historical or other interest of the localities they passed.

Suddenly, as they surmounted a long ridge and came out upon the more open summit, they espied a bridle path making down the slope, through an open grove and across uncultivated fields beyond—a vast blueberry pasture. Up this path a girl was coming. She swung her hat by its strings in her hand and commenced to run up the hill when she spied the coach.

She was a thin, wiry, long-limbed girl. She swung her hat excitedly and although the girls in the coach could not hear her, they knew that she shouted to Old Dolliver. He pulled up, braking the lumbering wheels grumblingly. The newcomer's sharp, freckled face grew plainer to the interested gaze of Ruth and Helen as she came out of the shadow of the trees into the sunlight of the dusty highway.

"Got any Infants, Dolliver?" the girl asked, breathlessly.

"Two on 'em, Miss Cox," replied the stage driver.

"Then I'm in time. Of course, nobody's met 'em?"

"Hist! Ma'mzell's in there," whispered Dolliver, hoarsely.

"Oh! She!" exclaimed Miss Cox, with plain scorn of the French teacher. "That's all right, Dolliver. I'll get in. Ten cents, mind you, from here to Briarwood. That's enough."

"All right, Miss Cox. Ye allus was a sharp one," chuckled Dolliver, as the sharp-faced girl jerked open the nearest door of the coach and stared in, blinking, out of the sunlight.

CHAPTER IV

THE RIVALRY OF THE UPEDES AND THE FUSSY CURLS

The passengers in the Seven Oaks and Lumberton stage sat facing one another on the two broad seats. Mademoiselle Picolet had established herself in one corner of the forward seat, riding with her back to the driver. Ruth and Helen were side by side upon the other seat, and this newcomer slid quickly in beside them and smiled a very broad and friendly smile at the two chums.

"When you've been a little while at Briarwood Hall," she said, in her quick, pert way, "you'll learn that that's the only way to do with Old Dolliver. Make your bargain before you get into the Ark—that's what we call this stage—or he surely will overcharge you. Oh! how-do, Miss Picolet!"

She spoke to the French teacher so carelessly—indeed, in so scornful a tone—that Ruth was startled. Miss Picolet bowed gravely and said something in return in her own language which made Miss Cox flush, and her eyes sparkle. It was doubtless of an admonishing nature, but Ruth and Helen did not understand it.

"Of course, you are the two girls whom we ex—that is, who were expected to-day?" the girl asked the chums, quickly.

"We are going to Briarwood Hall," said Ruth, timidly.

"Well, I'm glad I happened to be out walking and overtook the stage," their new acquaintance said, with apparent frankness and cordiality. "I'm Mary Cox. I'm a Junior. The school is divided into Primary, Junior and Senior. Of course, there are many younger girls than either of you at Briarwood, but all newcomers are called Infants. Probably, however, you two will soon be in the Junior grade, if you do not at once enter it."

"I am afraid we shall both feel very green and new," Ruth said. "You see, neither Helen nor I have ever been to a school like this before. My friend is Helen Cameron and my name is Ruth Fielding."

"Ah! you're going to room together. You have a nice room assigned to you, too. It's on my corridor—one of the small rooms. Most of us are in quartettes; but yours is a duet room. That's nice, too, when you are already friends."

She seemed to have informed herself regarding these particular newcomers, even if she *had* met them quite by accident.

Helen, who evidently quite admired Mary Cox, now ventured to say that she presumed most of the girls were already gathered for the Autumn term.

"There are a good many on hand. Some have been here a week and more. But classes won't begin until Saturday, and then the work will only be planned for the real opening of the term on Monday. But we're all supposed to arrive in time to attend service Sunday morning. Mrs. Tellingham is very strict about that. Those who arrive after that have a demerit to work off at the start."

Mary Cox explained the system under which Briarwood was carried on, too, with much good nature; but all the time she never addressed the French teacher, nor did she pay the least attention to her. The cool way in which she conducted the conversation, commenting upon the school system, the teachers, and all other matters discussed, without the least reference to Miss Picolet, made Ruth, at least, feel unhappy. It was so plain that Mary Cox ignored and slighted the little foreign lady by intention.

"I tell you what we will do," said Mary Cox, finally. "We'll slip out of the stage at the end of Cedar Walk. It's farther to the dormitories that way, but I fancy there'll be few of the girls there. The stage, you see, goes much nearer to Briarwood; but I fancy you girls would just as lief escape the warm greeting we usually give to the arriving Infants," and she laughed.

Ruth and Helen, with a vivid remembrance of what they had seen at Seven Oaks, coincided with this suggestion. It seemed very kind of a Junior to put herself out for them, and the chums told her so.

"Don't bother," said Mary Cox. "Lots of the girls—especially girls of our age, coming to Briarwood for the first time—get in with the wrong crowd. You don't want to do that, you know."

Now, the chums could not help being a little flattered by this statement. Mary Cox was older than Ruth and Helen, and the latter were at an age when a year seemed to be a long time indeed. Besides, Miss Cox was an assured Junior, and knew all about what was still a closed book to Ruth Fielding and Helen Cameron.

"I should suppose in a school like Briarwood," Ruth said, hesitatingly, "that all the girls are pretty nice."

"Oh! they are, to a degree. Oh, yes!" cried Mary Cox. "Briarwood is very select and Mrs. Tellingham is very careful. You must know *that*, Miss Cameron," she added, point-blank to Helen, "or your father would not have sent *you* here."

Helen flushed at this boldly implied compliment. Ruth thought to herself again that Mary Cox must have taken pains to learn all about them before they arrived, and she wondered why the Junior had done so.

"You see, a duo-room costs some money at Briarwood," explained Miss Cox. "Most of us are glad, when we get to be Juniors, to get into a quarto—a quartette, you understand. The primary

girls are in big dormitories, anyway. Of course, we all know who your father is, Miss Cameron, and there will be plenty of the girls fishing for your friendship. And there's a good deal of rivalry —at the beginning of each year, especially."

"Rivalry over what?" queried Ruth.

"Why, the clubs," said Mary Cox.

Helen became wonderfully interested at once. Everything pertaining to the life before her at Briarwood was bound to interest Helen. And the suggestion of society in the way of clubs and associations appealed to her.

"What clubs are there?" she demanded of the Junior.

"Why, there are several associations in the school. The Basket Ball Association is popular; but that's athletic, not social. Anybody can belong to that who wishes to play. And we have a good school team which often plays teams from other schools. It's made up mostly of Seniors, however."

"But the other clubs?" urged Helen.

"Why, the principal clubs of Briarwood are the Upedes and the Fussy Curls," said their new friend.

"What ridiculous names!" cried Helen. "I suppose they _mean_ something, though?"

"That's just our way of speaking of them. The Upedes are the Up and Doing Club. The Fussy Curls are the F. C.'s."

"The F. C.'s?" questioned Ruth. "What do the letters really stand for?"

"Forward Club, I believe. I don't know much about the Fussy Curls," Mary said, with the same tone and air that she used in addressing the little French teacher.

"You're a Upede!" cried Helen, quickly.

"Yes," said Mary Cox, nodding, and seemed to have finished with that subject. But Helen was interested; she had begun to like this Cox girl, and kept to the subject.

"What are the Upedes and the F. C.'s rivals about?"

"Both clubs are anxious to get members," Mary Cox said. "Both are putting out considerable effort to gain new members—especially among these who enter Briarwood at the beginning of the year."

"What are the objects of the rival clubs?" put in Ruth, quietly.

"I couldn't tell you much about the Fussy Curls," said Mary, carelessly. "Not being one of them I couldn't be expected to take much interest in their objects. But *our* name tells our object at once. 'Up and Doing'! No slow-coaches about the Upedes. We're all alive and wide awake."

"I hope we will get in with a lively set of girls," said Helen, with a sigh.

"It will be your own fault if you don't," said Mary Cox.

Oddly enough, she did not show any desire to urge the newcomers to join the Upedes. Helen was quite piqued by this. But before the discussion could be carried farther, Mary put her head out of the window and called to the driver.

"Stop at the Cedar Walk, Dolliver. We want to get out there. Here's your ten cents."

Meanwhile the little foreign lady had scarcely moved. She had turned her face toward the open window all the time, and being veiled, the girls could not see whether she was asleep, or awake. She made no move to get out at this point, nor did she seem to notice the girls when Mary flung open the door on the other side of the coach, and Ruth and Helen picked up their bags to follow her.

The chums saw that the stage had halted where a shady, winding path seemed to lead up a slight rise through a plantation of cedars. But the spot was not lonely. Several girls were waiting here for the coach, and they greeted Mary Cox when she jumped down, vociferously.

"Well, Mary Cox! I guess we know what you've been up to," exclaimed one who seemed older than the other girls in waiting.

"Did you rope any Infants, Mary?" cried somebody else.

"'The Fox' never took all that long walk for nothing," declared another.

But Mary Cox paid her respects to the first speaker only, by saying:

"If you want to get ahead of the Upedes, Madge Steele, you Fussy Curls had better set your alarm clocks a little earlier."

Ruth and Helen were climbing out of the old coach now, and the girl named Madge Steele looked them over sharply.

"Pledged, are they?" she said to Mary Cox, in a low tone.

"Well! I've been riding in the Ark with them for the last three miles. Do you suppose I have been asleep?" returned Miss Cox, with a malicious smile.

Ruth and Helen did not distinctly hear this interchange of words between their new friend and Madge Steele; but Ruth saw that the latter was a very well dressed and quiet looking girl—that she was really very pretty and ladylike. Ruth liked her appearance much more than she did that of Mary Cox. But the latter started at once into the cedar plantation, up a serpentine walk, and Helen and Ruth, perforce, went with her. The other girls stood aside—some of them whispering together and smiling at the newcomers. The chums could not help but feel strange and nervous, and Mary Cox's friendship seemed of value to them just then.

Ruth, however, looked back at the tall girl whose appearance had so impressed her. The coach had not started on at once. Old Dolliver did everything slowly. But Ruth Fielding saw a hand beckoning at the coach window. It was the hand of Miss Picolet, the French teacher, and it beckoned Madge Steele.

The latter young lady ran to the coach as it lurched forward on its way. Miss Picolet's face appeared at the window for an instant, and she seemed to say something of importance to Madge Steele. Ruth saw the pretty girl pull open the stage-coach door again, and hop inside. Then the Ark lumbered out of view, and Ruth turned to follow her chum and Mary Cox up the winding Cedar Walk.

CHAPTER V

"THE DUET"

Helen, by this time, having recovered her usual self-possession, was talking "nineteen to the dozen" to their new friend. Ruth was not in the least suspicious; but Mary Cox's countenance was altogether too sharp, her gray eyes were too sly, her manner to the French teacher had been too unkind, for Ruth to become greatly enamored of the Junior. It did really seem very kind of her, however, to put herself out in this way for two "Infants."

"How many teachers are there?" Helen was asking. "And are they all as little as that Miss Picolet?"

"Oh, *she*!" ejaculated Mary Cox, with scorn. "Nobody pays any attention to her. She's not liked, I can tell you."

"Why, she seemed nice enough to us—only not very friendly," said Helen, slowly, for Helen was naturally a kind-hearted girl.

"She's a poverty-stricken little foreigner. She scarcely ever wears a decent dress. I don't really see why Mrs. Tellingham has her at the school at all. She has no friends, or relatives, or anybody that knows her——"

"Oh, yes she has," said Helen, laughing.

"What do you mean?" inquired Mary Cox, suspiciously.

"We saw somebody on the boat coming over to Portageton that knew Miss Picolet."

"Oh, Helen!" ejaculated Ruth, warningly.

But it was too late, Mary Cox wanted to know what Helen meant, and the story of the fat man who had played the harp in the boat orchestra, and who had frightened the French teacher, and had afterward talked so earnestly with her on the dock, all came out in explanation. The Junior listened with a quiet but unpleasant smile upon her face.

"That's just what we've always thought about Miss Picolet," she said. "Her people must be dreadfully common. Friends with a ruffian who plays a harp on a steamboat for his living! Well!"

"Perhaps he is no relative or friend of hers," suggested Ruth, timidly. "Indeed, she seemed to be afraid of him."

"He's mixed up in her private affairs, at least," said Mary, significantly. "I never could bear Miss Picolet!"

Ruth was very sorry that Helen had happened upon this unfortunate subject. But her chum failed to see the significance of it, and the girl from the Red Mill had no opportunity of warning Helen. Mary Cox, too, was most friendly, and it seemed ungrateful to be anything but frank and pleasant with her. Not many big girls (so thought both Ruth and Helen) would have put themselves out to walk up to Briarwood Hall with two Infants and their baggage.

Through breaks in the cedar grove the girls began to catch glimpses of the brown old buildings of Briarwood Hall. Ivy masked the entire end of one of the buildings, and even ran up the chimneys. It had been cut away from the windows, and they showed brilliantly now with the descending sun shining redly upon them.

"It's a beautiful old place, Helen," sighed Ruth.

"I believe you!" agreed her chum, enthusiastically.

"It was originally a great manor house. That was the first building where the tower is," said Mary Cox, as they came out at last upon the more open lawn that gave approach to this side of the collection of buildings, which had been more recently built than the main house. They were built around a rectangular piece of turf called the campus. This, however, the newcomers discovered later, for they came up in the rear of the particular dormitory building in which Mary declared their room was situated.

"You can go to the office afterwards," she explained, kindly. "You'll want to wash and fix up a little after traveling so far. It always makes one so dirty."

"This is a whole lot better than the way poor Tom was received at his school; isn't it?" whispered Helen, tucking her arm in Ruth's as they came to the steps of the building.

Ruth nodded. But there were so many new things to see that Ruth had few words to spare. There were plenty of girls in sight now. It seemed to the girl from the Red Mill as though there were hundreds of them. Short girls, tall girls, thin girls, plump girls—and the very plumpest girl of her age that Ruth had ever seen, stood right at the top of the steps. She had a pretty, pink, doll-like face which was perpetually a-smile. Whereas some of the girls—especially the older ones—stared rather haughtily at the two Infants, this fat girl welcomed them with a broadening smile.

"Hello, Heavy," said Mary Cox, laughing. "It must be close to supper bell, for you're all ready, I see."

"No," said the stout girl. "There's an hour yet. Are these the two?" she added, nodding at Ruth and Helen.

"I always get what I go after," Ruth heard Mary say, as they whisked in at the door.

In the hall a quiet, pleasant-faced woman in cap and apron met them.

"This is Helen Cameron and Ruth Fielding, Miss Scrimp," said Mary. "Miss Scrimp is matron of our dormitory, girls. I am going up, Miss Scrimp, and I'll show them to their duet."

"Very well, Miss Cox," said the woman, producing two keys, one of which she handed to each of the chums. "Be ready for the bell, girls. You can see Mrs. Tellingham after supper."

Ruth stopped to thank her, but Mary swept Helen on with her up the broad stairway. The room the chums were to occupy (Mr. Cameron had made this arrangement for them) was up this first flight only, but was at the other end of the building, overlooking the campus. It seemed a long walk down the corridor. Some of the doors stood open, and more girls looked out at them curiously as they pursued their way.

Mary was talking in a low voice to Helen now, and Ruth could not hear what she said. But when they stopped at the end of the corridor, and Helen fitted her key into the lock of the door, she said:

"We'd be delighted, Miss Cox. Oh, yes! Ruth and I will both come."

Mary went away whistling and they heard her laughing and talking with other girls who had come out into the corridor before the chums were well in their own room. And what a delightful place it seemed to the two girls, when they entered! Not so small, either. There were two single beds, two dressing tables, running water in a bowl, two closets and two chairs—all this at one end of the room. At the other end was a good-sized table to work at, chairs, a couch, and two sets of shelves for their books. There were two broad windows with wide seats under them, too.

"Isn't it just scrumptious?" cried Helen, hugging Ruth in her delight. "And just think—it's our very own! Oh, Ruthie! won't we just have good times here?"

Ruth was quite as delighted, if she was not so volubly enthusiastic as Helen. It was a much nicer room, of course, than the girl from the Red Mill had ever had before. Her tiny little

chamber at the Red Mill was nothing like this.

The girls removed such marks of travel as they could and freshened their dress as well as possible. Their trunks would not arrive at the school until morning, they knew; but they had brought their toilet articles in their bags. These made some display—on Helen's dresser, at least. But when their little possessions came they could make the room look more "homey."

Barely had they arranged their hair when a gentle rap sounded at the door.

"Perhaps that's Miss Cox again," said Helen. "Isn't she nice, Ruth?"

Her friend had no time to reply before opening the door to the visitor. It was not Miss Cox, but Ruth immediately recognized the tall girl whom Mary Cox had addressed as Madge Steele. She came in with a frank smile and her hand held out.

"I didn't know you were going to come to my corridor," she said, frankly. "Which of you is Miss Fielding, and which is Miss Cameron?"

It made the chums feel really grown up to be called "Miss," and they liked this pretty girl at once. Ruth explained their identity as she shook hands. Helen was quite as warmly greeted.

"You will like Briarwood," said Madge Steele. "I know you will. I understand you will enter the Junior classes. I have just entered the Senior grade this year. There are lots of nice girls on this corridor. I'll be glad to introduce you after supper."

"We have not been to the office yet," said Ruth. "I believe that is customary?"

"Oh, you must see the Preceptress. She's just as nice as she can be, is Mrs. Tellingham. You'll see her right after supper?"

"I presume so," Ruth said.

"Then, I tell you what," said Madge. "I'll wait for you and take you to the Forward Club afterwards. We have an open meeting this evening. Mrs. Tellingham will be there—she is a member, you know—so are the other teachers. We try to make all the new girls feel at home."

She nodded to them both brightly and went out. Ruth turned to her chum with a smile.

"Isn't that nice of her, Helen?" she said. "We are getting on famously—— Why, Helen! what's the matter?" she cried.

Helen's countenance was clouded indeed. She shook her head obstinately.

"We can't go with her, Ruth," she declared.

"Can't go with her?"

"No."

"Why not, pray?" asked Ruth, much puzzled.

"We can't go to that Forward Club," said Helen, more emphatically.

"Why, my dear!" exclaimed Ruth. "Of course we must. We haven't got to join it. Maybe they wouldn't ask us to join it, anyway. You see, it's patronized by the teachers and the Preceptress herself. We'll be sure to meet the very nicest girls."

"That doesn't follow," said Helen, somewhat stubbornly. "Anyway, we can't go, Ruth."

"But I don't understand, dear," said the puzzled Ruth.

"Why, don't you see?" exclaimed Helen, with some exasperation. "I told Miss Cox we'd go with her."

"Go where?"

"To *her* club. *They* hold a meeting this evening, too. You know, she said there was rivalry between the two big school clubs. Hers is the Upedes."

"Oh! the Up and Doings," laughed Ruth. "I remember."

"She said she would wait for us after we get through with Mrs. Tellingham and introduce us to *her* friends."

"Well!" gasped Ruth, with a sigh. "We most certainly cannot go to both. What shall we do?"

CHAPTER VI

THE ENTERING WEDGE

Since Ruth Fielding had first met Helen Cameron—and that was on the very day the former had come to the Red Mill—the two girls had never had a cross word or really differed much on any subject. Ruth was the more yielding of the two, perhaps, and it might be that that was why Helen seemed so to expect her to yield now.

"Of course, Ruthie, we can't disappoint Miss Cox," she said, with finality. "And after she was so kind to us, too."

"Are you sure she did all that out of simple kindness, Helen?" asked the girl from the Red Mill, slowly.

"Why! what do you mean?"

"Aunt Alviry says one should never look a gift-horse in the mouth," laughed Ruth.

"What *do* you mean?" demanded her chum.

"Why, Helen, doesn't it seem to you that Mary Cox came out deliberately to meet us, and for the purpose of making us feel under obligation to her?"

"For pity's sake, what for?"

"So that we would feel just as *you* do—that we ought if possible to attend the meeting of her society?"

"I declare, Ruth Fielding! How suspicious you have become all of a sudden."

Ruth still laughed. But she said, too: "That is the way it has struck me, Helen. And I wondered if you did not see her attention in the same light, also."

"Why, she hasn't asked us to join the Upedes," said Helen.

"I know. And neither has Miss Steele——"

"You seem to have taken a great fancy to that Madge Steele," interrupted Helen, sharply.

"I think she is nice looking—and she was very polite," said Ruth, quietly.

"Well, I don't care," cried Helen. "Miss Cox has shown us much more kindness. And I promised for us, Ruth. I said we'd attend her club this evening."

"Well," said her chum, slowly. "It *does* look as though we would have to go with Miss Cox, then. We'll tell Miss Steele——"

"I believe your head has been turned by that Madge Steele because she's a Senior," declared Helen, laughing, yet not at all pleased with her friend. "And the F. C.'s are probably a fussy crowd. All the teachers belonging to the club too. I'd rather belong to the Upedes—a real girls' club without any of the teachers to boss it."

Ruth laughed again; but there was no sting in what she said: "I guess you have made up your mind already that the Up and Doing Club is the one Helen Cameron wants to join."

"And the one Ruth Fielding must join, too!" declared Helen, in her old winning way, slipping her arm through Ruth's arm. "We mustn't go separate ways, Ruthie."

"Oh, Helen!" cried Ruth. "Don't talk like that. Of course we will not. But let us be careful about our friendships here."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," said Ruth, smiling, "that we must be careful about joining any crowd of girls until we know just how things are."

"Well," said Helen, dropping her arm and walking to the other end of the room for no reason whatsoever, for she walked back again, in a moment, "I don't see why you are so suspicious of Mary Cox."

"I don't know that I am," laughed Ruth. "But we have no means of comparison yet——"

A mellow bell began to ring from some other building—probably in the tower of the main building of Briarwood Hall.

"There!" ejaculated Helen, in some relief. "That must be to announce supper."

"Are you ready, Helen?" asked Ruth.

"Yes."

"Then let us go."

There was a card on which were printed several simple rules of conduct tacked to the door. The chums had read them. One was that rooms should be left unlocked in the absence of the occupants, and Ruth and Helen went out into the corridor, leaving their door open. There were other girls in the passage then, all moving toward the stairway. Some of them nodded kindly to the Infants. Others only stared.

Ruth saw Miss Steele in advance, and whispered to Helen:

"Come, dear; let us speak to her and tell her we cannot accept her Invitation for this evening."

But Helen held back. "You can tell her if you like," she said, rather sullenly.

"But, let us be nice about it," urged Ruth. "I'll tell her we overlooked the fact that we were already engaged for the meeting of the Up and Doing Club. I'll explain."

Helen suddenly seized her chum's arm more tightly. "You *are* a good little thing, Ruthie," she declared. "Come on."

They hurried after the Senior and caught up with her at the foot of the stairs. She was not alone, but Ruth touched her arm and asked to speak with her.

"What's the matter, Infants?" demanded the Senior, but smiling at them.

Helen flushed at the expression, but Ruth was too earnest in her intention to smooth over the difficulty to notice so small a thing.

"Oh, Miss Steele," she said, "I am sorry to beg off from the kind invitation you gave us. We cannot go with you this evening. It seems that it was already understood with Miss Cox that we should go with her."

"Oh!" exclaimed Madge Steele, a little stiffly, "you are already pledged, then?"

"Yes, we are pledged to attend the meeting of the Up and Doing Club this evening. It was very kind of Miss Cox to invite us," said Ruth, calmly. "And it was kind of you to invite us to the F. C.'s, too. But we cannot attend both meetings—not in one evening."

Madge Steele was looking at her earnestly and found that Ruth neither dropped her gaze nor appeared confused by her scrutiny. Helen was the one who seemed confused.

"It is not our usage to interfere with those who are pledged to other school clubs," said Miss Steele, speaking distinctly. "I understand, then, that you are *not* pledged?"

"Only to attend this meeting as visitors of Miss Cox," said Ruth, simply.

"Very well, then," said Madge Steele, her pleasant face breaking into a smile again, "I shall hope to see you at some future meeting of the Forward Club. Here we are on the campus. It is cool and shady here, even in the hottest weather. We think it is a decidedly pleasant place."

She walked beside them, conversing pleasantly. Helen recovered her good temper and ventured a remark about the fountain which graced the center of the campus. It was a huge marble figure of a sitting female, in graceful draperies and with a harp, or lyre, on the figure's knee. The clear water bubbled out all around the pedestal, and the statue and bowl were sunk a little below the level of the greensward, like a small Italian garden.

"What is the figure supposed to represent, Miss Steele?" asked Helen.

"You are allowed three guesses—and then you won't know," laughed the Senior. "You can see by the stains and moss on it that the fountain has been there a great many years. Long before Briarwood Hall was a school. But it is supposed to represent either *Poesy*, or *Harmony*. Nobody knows—not even Mrs. Tellingham."

The bell stopped tolling with three, sharp, jerky taps. Madge Steele quickened her pace along the path and the newcomers followed her. Other girls were pouring into the building nearest to the main structure of Briarwood. A broad stairway led up to assembly rooms; but out of the lower hall opened a large dining room, in which were ten or twelve long tables, and at which the girls were already being seated by some sort of system.

"I don't know where you will be seated," said Madge Steele, hastily. "I am at the second Senior table. Here comes Miss Picolet. She will attend to you Infants."

"Oh, it's the little French teacher," said Helen.

Ruth met the little lady with a smile. Miss Picolet nodded to them both and put out her tiny hand. She really was no taller than Helen.

"I am glad, young ladies, to see you in such good company. Miss Steele is well worth cultivating," she said. "Come this way. You will be seated in the Junior division. It is probable that you will be placed in that grade permanently. Mrs. Tellingham will see you in her office in the next building immediately after supper."

Ruth and Helen followed the doll-like teacher to their seats. The girl whom Mary Cox had called "Heavy" (and, indeed, it was a most appropriate name) was already seated, and was right at Ruth's elbow.

"Oh, I hope they'll be seated soon," Ruth heard this over-plump girl murmur. "This is cup-custard night, and I'm so-o hungry."

The tables were laid nicely. There were several waitresses, and besides Miss Picolet, there were at least four other ladies whom Ruth knew must be teachers. The hall was by no means filled. There were not more than a hundred and fifty girls present. The door at the far end opened and a handsome, white-haired, pink-cheeked lady entered. She mounted a slightly raised platform and stood for a moment overlooking the room.

"It's Mrs. Tellingham," whispered the fat girl to Ruth, seeing the question in the latter's face.

The Preceptress was a really handsome lady—perhaps forty-five, perhaps ten years older. Her perfectly white hair, thick and well arranged, seemed to have been the result of something besides age. Here face was quite free from any age-marks. There was a kind look in her eyes; a humorous expression about her mouth. Helen leaned toward Ruth and whispered:

"I know I shall just love her, Ruth—don't you?"

"And you won't be alone in that, Infant," said the girl on Helen's other hand. "Now!"

Mrs. Tellingham raised her hand. The school arose and stood quietly while she said grace. Another motion of the hand, and they sat down again. The bustle of supper then began, with the girls talking and laughing, the waitresses serving a plain, hot meal, and everybody in apparent good-nature, and happy. Ruth could scarcely pay attention to the food, however, she was so much more interested in these who were to be her school-fellows.

CHAPTER VII

THE UPEDES

It was all so new and strange to Helen and Ruth that neither had considered the possibility of homesickness. Indeed, how could they be homesick? There was too much going on at Briarwood Hall for the newcomers to think much of themselves.

The plump girl next to Ruth seemed of a friendly disposition, for when she had satisfied the first cravings of her appetite—oh, long before she came to the cup-custard!—she said:

"Which are you—Cameron, or Fielding? I'm Stone—Jennie Stone."

Ruth told her their names and asked in return:

"Are you on our corridor, too? I know you are rooming in the same building as Helen and I."

"Yes," said the fat girl. "I'm in a quartette with Mary Cox, Lluella Fairfax and Belle Tingley. Oh, you'll see plenty of us," said Heavy. "And I say! you're going to the Upede meeting to-night; aren't you?"

"Why—yes. Do you all belong?"

"Our quartette? Sure," said the plump girl in her off-hand way. "We'll show you some fun. And I say!"

"Well?" asked Ruth.

"How often are they going to send you boxes from home?"

"Boxes from home?" repeated the girl from the Red Mill.

"Yes. You know, you can have 'em sent often if you keep up with your classes and don't get too many demerits in deportment. I missed two boxes last half because of black marks. And in French and deportment, too. *That* was Picolet's doing—mean thing!"

"I had no idea that one would be allowed to receive goodies," said Ruth, who of course expected nothing of the kind from home, but did not wish to say so.

"Well, you want to write your folks that you can receive 'em right away. A girl who gets things from home can be very popular if she wants to be. Ah! here's the custard."

Ruth had difficulty in keeping from laughing outright. She saw plainly that the nearest way to Miss Jennie Stone's heart lay through her stomach.

Meanwhile Helen had become acquainted with the girl on the other side who had called them "Infants." But she was a good-natured girl, too, and now Helen introduced her to her chum as Miss Polk. She was a dark-haired, plain-faced girl and wore eye-glasses. She was a Junior and already Helen had found she belonged to the F. C.'s.

"I guess most of the stiff and starched ones belong to that Forward Club," whispered Helen to her chum. "But the jolly ones are Upedes."

"We'll wait and see," advised Ruth.

Supper was over then and the girls all rose and strolled out of the room in parties. Ruth and Helen made their way quietly to the exit and looked for the office of the Preceptress. The large building with the tower—the original Briarwood Hall—was partly given up to recitations and lecture rooms and partly to the uses of the Tellinghams and the teachers. Besides this great building there were two dormitory buildings, the gymnasium, the library building, and a chapel which had been built only the year before by subscriptions of the graduates of the school and of the parents of the scholars then attending. But it was growing dusk now and the two friends could not see much of the buildings around the campus.

Mrs. Grace Tellingham and her husband (the Doctor never by any chance came first in anybody's mind!) had started the school some years before in a small way; but it had grown rapidly and was, as we have seen, very popular. Many girls were graduated from the institution to the big girls' colleges, for it was, in fact, a preparatory school.

The chums went in at the broad door and saw a library at the right hand into which a tidy maid motioned them, with a smile. It was a large room, the walls masked by bookshelves, all filled so tightly that it did seem as though room for another book could not be found. But Mrs. Tellingham was not there.

Bending over the table, however, (and it was a large, leather-covered table with a great student lamp in the center, the shade of which threw a soft glow of light in a circle upon it) was a gentleman whose shoulders were very round and who seemed to be so near-sighted that his nose must have been within an inch or so of the book which he read. He was totally unconscious of the girls' presence, and he read in a half whisper to himself, like a child conning a lesson.

Ruth and Helen looked at each other, each thinking the same question. Could this be Doctor Tellingham, the great historian? They glanced again at the hoop-shouldered man and wondered what his countenance was like, for they could not see a feature of it as he read. But Ruth *did* notice one most surprising fact. The stooping gentleman wore a wig. It was a brown, rather curly wig, while the fringe of natural hair all around his head was quite white—of that yellowish-white that proclaims the fact that the hair was once light brown, or sandy in color. The brown wig matched the hair at one time, without doubt; but it now looked as though two gentlemen's heads had been merged in one—the younger gentleman's being the upper half of the present apparition.

For several minutes the chums stood timidly in the room and the old gentleman went on whispering to himself, and occasionally nodding his head. But at length he looked up, and in doing this he saw the girls and revealed his own countenance.

"Ah-ha!" he ejaculated, and stood upright. He was not a small man, but he was very bony. He had a big, long, smoothly-shaven face, on which his beard had sprouted in patches only, and these shaven patches were gray, whereas the rest of his face was smooth and dead-white. Indeed he had so much face, and it was so bald, that if the brown wig had chanced to tumble off Ruth thought that his appearance would have been actually terrifying.

"Ah-ha!" he said again, and smiled not unkindly. The thick spectacles he wore hid his eyes, however, and to look into his big face was like looking at the white wall of a house with the windows all shuttered. "You want something!"

He said it as though he had made a most profound discovery. Indeed, they found afterward that Doctor Tellingham always spoke as though he were pronouncing a valedictory oration, or something quite as important as that. The doctor never could say anything lightly. His mind was given up entirely to deep subjects, and it seldom strayed from his work.

"You want something," he repeated. "Stop! never mind explaining. I shouldn't be able to aid

you. Mrs. Tellingham—my wife, my dears—will be here anon."

He at once bobbed down his head, revealing nothing to the eyes of the two girls but the brown wig and the hair that didn't match, and went on whispering to himself. Helen and Ruth exchanged glances and Helen had difficulty in keeping from laughing outright.

In a moment more Mrs. Tellingham came into the room. At close view Ruth saw that she was even more attractive than she had seemed at a distance. Her countenance was firm without being stern—the humor about the mouth relieved its set expression.

"My dear! my dear!" ejaculated the Doctor, raising his head so that the long, bald expanse of his face came into view again for a moment, "somebody to see you—somebody wants something."

Mrs. Tellingham approached Helen first and took her hand. Her handclasp was firm, her manner one to put the girl at her ease.

"You are Mr. Macy Cameron's daughter?" she questioned. "We are glad to see you here. You have found your room?"

"Yes, Mrs. Tellingham," replied Helen.

The Preceptress turned to Ruth and shook hands with her. "And you are Ruth Fielding? Do as well this first half as your last teacher tells me you did, and we shall be good friends. Now, girls, sit down. Let us talk a bit."

She had a quick, bright way of speaking; yet her words were not wasted—nor her time. She did not talk idly. Nor did the two chums have much to say but "Yes" and "No." In the course of her remarks she said:

"This is your first experience, I understand, away from home and in a school of this character? Yes? Ah, then, many things will be new and strange to you, as well as hard to bear at first. Among two hundred girls there are bound to be girls of a good many different kinds," and she smiled. "You will find some thoughtless and careless—forgetting what they have been sent to the school for. Avoid that class. They will not aid you in your own intention to stand well in the classes.

"Keep before you the fact that your friends have sent you here for improvement—not to kill time. All girls like fun; I hope you will find plenty of innocent amusement here. I want all my girls happy and content. Use the advantages of our gym; join the walking club; we make a point of having one of the best basketball teams in this part of the State. Tennis is a splendid exercise for girls, and we have an indoor as well as outdoor courts. Yes, do not neglect the good times. But remember, too, that amusement isn't the main issue of life at Briarwood Hall. Let nothing interfere with the study hour. Keep the rules—we strive to have as few as possible, so that there may be less temptation to break them," and the Preceptress smiled her quick, understanding smile again.

"By the way, there are social clubs in the school. To-night—have you been invited to any gathering?"

"Both the Forward Club and the Up and Doings have invited us to attend their meetings," said Ruth, quietly.

"Ah!"

"We are going to the Up and Doings, Mrs. Tellingham," said Helen.

"Ah!" was again the lady's comment, and they learned nothing from her countenance. Nevertheless, Ruth thought it better to explain:

"We were very kindly received by Miss Cox, and shown our room by her, and she invited us to her club first of all."

"Indeed! We shall be glad to have you come to our club, too, before you make up your minds to join any," said Mrs. Tellingham, with an accent on one word that made both Ruth and Helen mark it well. The F. C.'s were plainly approved by the Preceptress.

"There!" she continued, nodding smilingly at the chums. "I am sure we shall get on together. You will become acquainted with both your school-fellows and your instructors in course of time. There are not so many at Briarwood Hall but that we are still one great family. One thing girls come away from home for, to an institution like this, is to learn self-control and self-government. If you need help do not be afraid to go to your instructors, or come to me. Confide in us. But, on the other hand, you must learn to judge for yourself. We do not punish an act of wrong judgment, here at Briarwood." And so the Preceptress bade them good-evening.

"Isn't she nice?" whispered Ruth, as she and Helen made their exit from the room.

"Ye-es," admitted her chum. "But you can see she is dreadfully 'bossy.'"

At that Ruth laughed heartily. "You foolish child!" she said, shaking her chum a little. "Isn't she here to 'boss'? My goodness! you didn't expect to do just as *you* pleased here at Briarwood; did you?"

Helen Cameron had been used to having her own way a good deal. Being naturally a sweet-tempered girl, she was not much spoiled. But Mrs. Murchiston had been unable to be very strict with the twins when Mr. Cameron was so indulgent himself.

Mary Cox and "Heavy" Stone were waiting on the steps for the friends as they came out. There was another group of girls on the path, too, who eyed Ruth and Helen interestedly as the latter came down the steps with the two Juniors. "'The Fox' has been in the poultry yard again, and has caught two chickabiddies," laughed one of these idle girls.

Ruth flushed, but Helen did not hear the gibe, being much interested in what Mary Cox was saying to her. Ruth walked beside the good-natured Jennie Stone.

"My, my!" chuckled that damsel, "aren't those Fussy Curls jealous? They had to take the teachers into their old club so as to be more numerous than the Upedes. But I guess Mary Cox will show 'em! She *is* a fox, and I guess she always will be!"

"Is that what they call Miss Cox?" asked Ruth, not a little troubled.

"Oh, she's foxy, all right," said this rather slangy young lady. "She will beat the Fussy Curls every time. She's President of the Upedes, you know."

Ruth was still troubled, and she hastened to say:

"You know, we haven't been asked to join the club, Miss Stone. And my chum and I are not sure that we wish to join any of the school clubs at first. We—we want to look around us, you know."

"That's all right," said Jennie Stone, cordially. "You'll be put up for membership when you want to be. But we'll show you some fun. No use getting in with those poky F. C.'s. You'll never have a bit of fun if you train with them."

They went back to the building in which they had supped and upstairs to one of the assembly rooms. The stairway and hall were well filled with girls now, and several of them nodded smilingly to Ruth and Helen; but their escorts did not let the chums stop at all, ushering them at once into the room where the Up and Doing clan was gathering.

Mary Cox left Heavy to introduce the newcomers while she went at once to the rostrum and with two or three of the other girls—who were evidently officers of the club, likewise—held a short executive session in secret. By and by Mary rapped on the desk for order, and the girls all took seats. Ruth, who was watchful, saw that the company numbered scarcely a score. If these were all the members of the club, she wondered how many of the Briarwood girls belonged to the rival association.

The meeting, as far as the business went, was conducted briskly and to the point. Then it was "thrown open" and everybody—but the visitors—talked just as they pleased. Helen and Ruth were made to feel at home, and the girls were most lively and good-natured. They heard that the Upedes were to have a picnic at a grove upon the shore of Lake Triton on the Saturday week, and that Old Dolliver and his ramshackle stage, and another vehicle of the same caliber, were engaged for the trip.

"But beware of black marks, girls," warned Mary Cox. "Picolet will be watching us; and you know that, this early in the term, two black marks will mean an order to remain on the school premises. That old cat will catch us if she can."

"Mean little thing!" said Heavy, wheezily. "I wish anybody but Miss Picolet lived in our house."

From this Ruth judged that most of these Up and Doings were in the dormitory in which she and Helen were billeted.

"I don't see what Mrs. Tellingham keeps Picolet for," complained another girl.

"For a spy," snapped Mary Cox. "But we'll get the best of her yet. She isn't fit to be a teacher in this school, anyway."

"Oh, she's a good French teacher—of course. It's her native tongue," said one of the other girls, who was called Belle Tingley.

"That's all very well," snapped Mary. "But there's something secret and underhand about her. She claims to have nobody related to her in this country; but if the truth were known, I guess, she has reason to be ashamed of her family and friends. I've heard something——"

She stopped and looked knowingly at Ruth and Helen. The former flushed as she remembered the man in the red waistcoat who played the harp aboard the steamboat. But Helen

seemed to have forgotten the incident, for she paid no attention to Mary's unfinished suggestion.

It worried Ruth, however. She heartily wished that her chum had said nothing to the Cox girl about the man who played the harp and his connection with the little French teacher.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MARBLE HARP

The social meeting of the Up and Doing Club lasted less than an hour. It was quite evident that it had been mainly held for the introduction of Ruth Fielding and her chum into the society of the Briarwood girls. Those gathered in the assembly room did not number any Seniors, but were all of the Junior grade, and all older than Ruth and Helen. "Primes" were not allowed by Mrs. Tellingham to join any of the class-governed societies.

In spite of the fact that Ruth suspected Mary Cox of deliberately throwing herself in the way of Helen and she on their arrival at the school, with the sole object of getting them pledged to this society, the girl from the Red Mill could not fail to appreciate the good-natured attempts of the Upedes to make them both feel at home in their new surroundings. They *must* be grateful for that.

Nor were they urged at this time to join the club. At least, nobody said more to Ruth about joining than had the stout girl, Jennie Stone, on their way to this meeting. The party broke up in such good season, that it was scarcely dark when the chums left the room in the dining hall and strolled back to their dormitory with their new friends. The lamps around the campus were being lighted by a little old Irishman, who wore a wreath of short, gray whiskers and hair about his face —a regular frame. His long upper lip and his chin were shaven, and this arrangement gave him a most comical appearance.

"You're late again to-night, Tony," Jennie Stone remarked, as she and Ruth came down the steps of the dining hall together.

The little Irishman backed down the short flight of steps he carried, with a groan. He had just lighted the final lamp of the series that surrounded the campus.

"And well I might be—well I might be," grumbled the man. "'Tis me needs fower pair of hands, instead of wan pair, and as many legs as a cinterpig." Tony evidently meant *centipede*. "'Tis 'Tony, here!' and 'Tony, there!' iv'ry blissid minute av th' day. An' 'tis movin' trunks an' boxes, and the like—Mis' Grace should hire a nelephant at this time of the year, an' so I tell her. An' what with these here foreigners too—bad 'cess to them! I have to chase ev'ry rag tag and bobtail on the place, so I do——"

"Not tramps again, Tony?" cried Jennie Stone.

"'Tis worse. Musickle bodies, they be. Playin' harps an' fiddles, an' the loikes. Sure, 'twill be hand-organs an' moonkeys to-morrer, belike. Ah, yes!"

"Maybe some of these traveling musicians can play the marble harp yonder," said Heavy, with a chuckle, pointing to the now half-shrouded figure in the center of the campus.

"Oh, wirra, wirra! don't be sayin' it," grumbled the old man. "There's bad luck in speakin' of *thim* folks."

Jennie Stone squeezed Ruth's arm, still laughing, as they went on and left the old Irishman. "He's just as superstitious as he can be," she whispered. "He really believes the old story about the harp."

"He ought to believe in a harp," laughed Ruth, in return, "he being Irish. Tell me, who is he?"

"Anthony Foyle. He's the only workman about the place who sleeps on the premises. His wife's our cook. They're a comical old couple—and she *does* make the nicest tarts! They'd melt in your mouth if you could only make up your mind to hold them long enough on your tongue," sighed Heavy, rapturously.

"But what's the story about the marble harp?" queried Ruth, as they came to the dormitory and joined the other girls. "You mean the harp held by that figure at the fountain?"

"Hello!" cried Belle Tingley. "Heavy's trying to scare the Infant with the campus ghost story."

"Oh! a real ghost story!" cried Helen. "Do let's hear it."

"Come into our room, Cameron," said Lluella Fairfax, lazily, "and I will tell the tale and harrow up thy young soul——"

"And make thy hair stand on end like quills upon the fretful 'porkypine,'" finished Mary Cox. "Yes! let Lluella tell it. It is well for Infants to learn the legends as well as the rules of Briarwood Hall."

Helen was used to being called "Infant" by now and didn't mind so much. She was so much taken with their new friends and the Upedes in general that she went right into the room occupied by Mary Cox and her chums, without a word to Ruth, and the latter followed with Heavy, perforce.

The windows of the "quartette" looked out upon the campus. The lights in the other dormitory shone brightly and the lamps around the open space, which the buildings of Briarwood surrounded, glimmered in the dark. Voices came up to them from the walks; but soon these ceased, for the girls were all indoors. The campus was deserted.

"Don't let's light the lamp," said Lluella. "I can tell stories better in the dark."

"And ghost stories, too," laughed Helen.

"Not so much of a ghost story—at least, there's nothing really terrible about it," returned Miss Fairfax, slowly. "I suppose there are not many people who talk about it, outside of our own selves here at Briarwood. But once—before the school came here—the marble statue down there was the talk of the whole countryside. I believe Mrs. Tellingham doesn't like the story to be repeated," added Miss Fairfax. "She thinks such superstitions aren't good for the minds of the Primes and Infants," and the story-teller laughed.

"However, it is a fact that the original owner of Briarwood Hall had a beautiful daughter. She was the apple of his eye—all beautiful daughters are apples of their fathers' eyes," said Lluella, laughing. "Jennie is *her* father's apple——"

"Adam's apple," suggested Mary Cox.

"Such a size for an Adam's apple would choke a giant," murmured Belle Tingley, for the three were always joking poor Heavy because of her over-plumpness.

"Don't you bother about my father," said Jennie, calmly. "He gives me a dollar every month for chocolate creams, and you girls help eat them, I notice."

"Hurrah for the Stone *pere*!" cried Mary Cox. "Go on, Lluella."

"You sound as though you cheered for a sea-wall of masonry, or some such maritime structure," complained Jennie. "'Stone *pere*,' indeed!"

"She sha'n't have any of the next box of creams, Heavy," said Lluella, soothingly.

"And I'm not sure that *you* will, either," replied the fat girl. "*Do* tell your story, Miss!" and Heavy yawned monstrously.

"How *dare* you yawn before 'taps'?" cried Belle. "I'll douse the water-pitcher over you, Jennie."

At this threat the fat girl sat up promptly and again urged Lluella to continue her tale. So Miss Fairfax continued:

"This rich old gentleman with the apple in his eye—in other words, a beautiful daughter—had a great deal more money than sense, I think. He engaged a sculptor to design a fountain for his lawn, and the draped figure you have seen upon that pedestal down yonder, is supposed to be the portrait of the beautiful daughter cut into enduring marble by the man who *sculped*. But, unfortunately for the old gentleman's peace of mind while he *sculped* the marble the artist likewise made love to the young lady and they ran away and were married, leaving the old gentleman nothing but the cold marble statue playing the marble harp, in place of a daughter.

"The father's heart at once became as adamant as the marble itself, and he refused to support the sculptor and his wife. Now, either the runaway couple died miserably of starvation in a garret, or were drowned at sea, or were wrecked in a railroad accident, or some other dreadful catastrophe happened to them—I'm not sure which; for after a time there began to be something strange about the fountain. The old man lived here alone with his servants for a number of years; but the servants would not remain long with him, for they said the place was haunted."

"Oh my!" exclaimed Helen.

"That's right, Miss Cameron. Please show the proper amount of thrilling interest. They said the fountain was queer. The water never poisoned anybody; but sometimes the marble strings of the marble harp in the marble hand or the marble daughter would be heard to twang in the night. Weird music came from the fountain at ghostly hours. Of course, the little harp the statue holds is in the form of a lyre; and what the people were who told these stories about the ghostly twanging

of the instrument—you may draw your own conclusions," laughed Lluella Fairfax.

"However, the old gentleman at last broke up his household, or died, or moved to town, or something, and Briarwood was put up for sale and the school came here. That was a good many years ago. Dr. Tellingham's wig matched his fringe of hair when the school first began here, so that must have been a good while ago. The twanging of the marble harp has been heard down through the school ages, so it is said—particularly at queer times——"

"Queer times?" asked Ruth.

"Why, when something out of the common was about to happen. They say it twanged the night before our team beat the basket-ball team from Varden Preparatory. There was a girl here once who ran away because her folks went to Europe and left her behind at school. She was determined to follow them, and she got as far as New York and stole aboard a great steamer so as to follow her parents; only the steamship she boarded had just come in instead of just going out. They say the marble harp twanged *then*."

"And when Heavy failed to oversleep one morning last half the marble harp must have twanged *that* time," declared Mary Cox.

A gentle snore answered from the window seat, where Jennie Stone had actually gone to sleep.

"Wasted humor," said Mary, laughing. "Heavy is in the Land of Nod. It's been a hard day for her. At supper she had to eat her own and Miss Fielding's share of the cup-custards."

Ruth and Helen had already risen to go.

"You'll remember, Infants," said Lluella, "when you hear the twang of the ghostly harp, that something momentous is bound to happen at Briarwood Hall."

"But more important still," warned Mary, "be sure that your lights are out within twenty minutes after retiring bell sounds. Otherwise you will have that cat, Picolet, poking into your room to learn what is the matter."

CHAPTER IX

THE GHOSTLY TRIBUNAL

"Aren't they just fine? Isn't it just fun?"

These were the enthusiastic questions that Helen Cameron hurled at Ruth when they returned to their own room. The girl from the Red Mill was glad that their school life had opened so pleasantly; but she was by no means blinded—as Helen seemed to be—to the faults of their neighbors in the room they had just left.

"They have been very friendly and we have no complaint to make, that is sure, Helen," she said.

"How exasperating you are at times!" exclaimed her chum. "Just the same, I am glad we didn't go with those poky Fussy Curls to *their* meeting."

Ruth made no reply to this. The bell in the tower had tolled nine, and they knew that there were twenty minutes only in which to get ready for retiring. Those girls who had lights after twenty minutes past nine were likely to be questioned, and any who burned a lamp after half after nine would find a demerit against their names in the morning.

The chums hurried, then, to get ready for sleep. "Don't you hope we'll dream something very nice?" whispered Helen as she plunged into bed first.

"I hope we will," returned Ruth, waiting to see her comfortable before she turned out the light and bent over her chum to kiss her. "Good-night, Helen. I hope we'll be just as good friends here, dear, as we have been since we met."

"Of course we will, Ruthie!" declared Helen, quite as warmly.

"We will let nobody, or nothing, come between us?" said Ruth, a little wistfully in the dark.

"Of course not!" declared Helen, with added emphasis.

Then Ruth crept into her own bed and lay looking at the whiter patch of the nearest window long after Helen's gentle, regular breathing announced her chum asleep. There were few other

sounds about the dormitory. A door shut softly in the distance. Somewhere a dog barked once. Ruth was not sleepy at all. The day's doings passed in a not unpleasant procession through her mind.

It seemed a week—yes! a month—since she had left the Red Mill that morning. She again went over the pleasant road with the Camerons and Mrs. Murchiston to Cheslow. She remembered their conversation with good Dr. Davison, and wondered if by any possibility the time would come when poor Mercy Curtis could go to school—perhaps come to this very Briarwood Hall.

The long ride on the train to Lake Osago was likewise repeated in Ruth's mind; then the trip by boat to Portageton. She could not fail to recount the mysterious behavior of the big man who played the harp in the boat orchestra, and Mademoiselle Picolet. And while these thoughts were following in slow procession through her mind she suddenly became aware of a sound without. The nearest window was open—the lower sash raised to its full height. It was a warm and windless night.

The sound was repeated. Ruth raised her head from the pillow. It was a faint scratching—at the door, or at the window? She could not tell.

Ruth lay down again; then she sat upright in her bed as the sound continued. Every other noise about the house now seemed stilled. The dog did not bark. There was no rustle in the trees that shaded the campus. Where was that sound? At the door?

Ruth was not afraid—only curious. If somebody was trying to attract her attention—if somebody wished to communicate with her, to get into the room——

She hopped out of bed. Helen still slept as calmly as though she was in her own bed at home. Ruth went softly to the door. She had latched it when they came in. Now she pushed the bolt back softly. Was there a rustle and a soft whisper behind the panels?

Suddenly, as the fastening was removed, the door was pushed inward. Ruth stepped back. Had she been of a very nervous disposition, she would have cried aloud in fright, for two figures all in white stood at the door.

"Hush!" commanded the taller of the two shrouded figures. "Not a word."

Thus commanded, and half frightened, as well as wholly amazed, Ruth remained passive. The two white figures entered; two more followed; two more followed in turn, until there were eight couples—girls and all shrouded in sheets, with pillow-case hoods over their heads, in which were cut small "eyes"—within the duet room. Somebody closed the door. Somebody else motioned Ruth to awaken Helen.

Ruth hesitated. She at once supposed that some of their school-fellows meant to haze them; but she did not know how her chum would take such a startling awakening from sound sleep. She knew that, had she been asleep herself and opened her eyes to see these shrouded figures gathered about her bed, she would have been frightened beyond expression.

"Don't let her see you first!" gasped Ruth, affrightedly.

Instantly two of the girls seized her and, as she involuntarily opened her lips to scream, one thrust a ball of clean rags into her mouth, thrusting it in so far that it effectually gagged her, nor could she expel the ball from her mouth. It was not a cruel act, but it was awfully uncomfortable, and being held firmly by her two assailants, Ruth could do nothing, either in her own behalf, or for Helen.

But she was determined not to cry. These big girls called them "Infants," and Ruth Fielding determined not to deserve the name. She had no idea that the hazing party would really hurt them; they would have for their principal object the frightening of the new-comers to Briarwood Hall; and, secondarily, they would try to make Ruth and Helen appear just as ridiculous as possible.

Ruth was sorry in a moment that she had breathed a syllable aloud; for she was not allowed to awaken Helen. Instead, a girl went to either side of the bed and leaned over Ruth's sleeping chum. The tall, peaked caps made of the pillow-cases looked awful enough, and Ruth was in a really unhappy state of mind. All for Helen's sake, too. She had opened the door to these thoughtless girls. If she only had not done it!

Suddenly Helen started upright in bed. Her black eyes glared for a moment as she beheld the row of sheeted figures. But her lips only opened to emit a single "Oh!"

"Silence!" commanded one of the figures leaning over the bed, and Ruth, whose ears were sharpened now, believed that she recognized Mary Cox's voice. She immediately decided that these girls who had come to haze them were the very Juniors who had been so nice to them that evening—"The Fox" and her fellow-members of the Upedes. But Ruth was more interested just then in the manner in which Helen was going to take her sudden awakening.

Fortunately her chum seemed quite prepared for the visitation. After her first involuntary cry, she remained silent, and she even smiled across the footboard at Ruth, who, gagged and held captive, was certainly in no pleasant situation. The thought flashed into Ruth's mind: "Did Helen have reason for expecting this visit, and not warn *me*?"

"Up!" commanded the previous speaker among the white-robed company. "Your doom awaits you."

Helen put her bare feet out of bed, but was allowed to put her slippers on. The chums were in their night apparel only. Fortunately the air breathed in at the open window was warm. So there was no danger of their getting cold.

The two new girls were placed side by side. Helen was not gagged as Ruth was; but, of course, she had uttered only that single startled cry when she awoke. There was great solemnity among the shrouded figures as the chums stood in their midst. The girl who had previously spoken (and whom Ruth was quite positive was Mary Cox—for she seemed to be the leader and prime mover in this event) swept everything off the table and mounted upon it, where she sat cross-legged—like a tailor, or a Turk.

"Bring the culprits before the throne!" she commanded, in a sepulchral voice.

Helen actually giggled. But Ruth did not feel much like laughing. The ball of rags in her mouth had begun to hurt her, and she was held tightly by her two guards so that she could not have an instant's freedom. She was not, in addition, quite sure that these girls would not attempt to haze their prisoners in some unbecoming, or dangerous, way. Therefore, she was not undisturbed in her mind as she stood in the midst of the shrouded company of her school-fellows.

CHAPTER X

SOMETHING MORE THAN GHOSTS

Helen pinched Ruth's arm. It was plain that her guards did not hold Helen as tightly as they did Ruth. And why was *that*? Ruth thought. Could it be possible that her chum had had warning of this midnight visitation?

Not that Ruth felt very much fear of the outcome of the exercises; but the possibility that her old friend had kept any secret knowledge of the raid from her troubled Ruth immensely. Since they had come among the girls of Briarwood Hall—and that so few hours before—Ruth felt that she and Helen were not so close together. There was danger of their drifting apart, and the possibility troubled Ruth Fielding exceedingly.

The thought of it now, however, was but momentary. Naturally she was vitally interested in what was about to be done to her by the party of hazers.

"I am pained," said the girl sitting on the table, "that one of the neophytes comes before us with a bigger mouthful than she can swallow. If she understands fully that a single word above a whisper—or any word at all unless she is addressed by the Sisters—will be punished by her being instantly corked up again, the gag may be removed. Do you understand, Neophyte? Nod once!"

Ruth, glad to get rid of the unpleasant mouthful on any terms, nodded vigorously. Immediately her captors let go of her arms and one of them pulled the "stopper" out of her mouth.

"Now, remember!" uttered the girl on the table, warningly. "A word aloud and the plug goes back." Helen giggled again, but Ruth didn't feel like laughing herself. "Now, culprits!" continued the leader of the hazing party, "you must be judged for your temerity. How *dared* you come to Briarwood Hall, Infants?"

"Please, Ma'am," whispered Helen, who seemed to think the whole affair a great lark, "our guardians sent us here. We are not responsible."

"You may not so easily escape responsibility for your acts," hissed the girl on the table. "Those who enter Briarwood Hall must show themselves worthy of the high honor. It takes courage to come under the eye of Mrs. Tellingham; it takes supernatural courage to come under the eye of Picolet!"

"If she wasn't out of the house to-night you may believe we wouldn't be out of bed," murmured another of the midnight visitors, whom Ruth was quite sure was Belle Tingley.

"And I hope you made no mistake about *that*, Miss!" snapped the girl on the table. "*You* went to her door."

"And knocked, and asked for toothache drops," giggled another of the shrouded figures.

"And she wasn't there. I pushed the door open," muttered the other girl. "I know she went out. I heard the door open and shut half an hour before."

"She's a sly one, she is," declared the girl on the table. "But, enough of Picolet. It is these small infants we have to judge; not that old cat. We say they have shown temerity in coming to Briarwood—is it not so, friends and fellow members—ahem! is it not so?"

There was a responsive giggle from the shrouded figures about the room.

"Then punishment must be the portion of these Infants," declared the foremost hazer. "They claim that they were sent here against their will and that it was not reckless bravery that brought them to these scholastic halls. Let them prove their courage then—what say the Sisters?"

The Sisters giggled a good deal, but the majority seemed to be of the opinion that proof of the Infants' courage should be exacted.

"Then let the Golden Goblet be brought," commanded the leader, her voice still carefully lowered, for even if Miss Picolet was out of the dormitory, Miss Scrimp, the matron, was asleep in her own room, likewise on the lower floor of the building. Somebody produced a vase which had evidently been covered with bright gold-foil for the occasion. "Here," said the leader, holding the vase out to Helen. "Take this Golden Goblet and fill it at the fountain on the campus. You will be taken down to the door by the guards, who will await your return and will bring you back again. And remember! Silence!"

The lights all around the campus had gone out ere this. There was no moon, and although it was a clear night, with countless stars in the heavens, it seemed dark and lonely indeed down there under the trees between the school buildings.

"Do not hesitate, Infant!" commanded the leader of the hazing party. "Nor shall you think to befool us, Miss! Take the Golden Goblet, and fill and drink at the fountain. But leave the goblet there, that we may know you have accomplished the task set you!"

This was said most solemnly; but the solemnity would not have bothered Helen Cameron at all, had the task been given to somebody else! The thought of venturing out there in the dark on the campus rather quelled her propensity for giggling.

But there seemed to be no way of begging off from the trial. Helen cast a look of pleading at her chum; but what could Ruth do? She was surprised that the task had not been given to her instead; she believed that these girls were really more friendly in feeling toward Helen than toward herself. At least, it was Mary Cox on the table, and Mary Cox had shown Helen much more attention than she had Ruth.

Two of the sheeted visitors seized Helen again and led her softly out of the room. A sentinel had been left in the corridor, and the word was whispered that all was silent in the house; Miss Scrimp was known to be a heavy sleeper, and the French teacher was certainly absent from her room.

The girls led Helen downstairs and to the outer door. This opened with a spring lock. The guards whispered that they would remain to await her return, and the new girl was pushed out of doors, with nothing over her nightgown but a wrapper, and only slippers on her feet.

Although there was little breeze now, it was not cold. But it was dark under the trees. Ruth, who could look out of the windows above, wondered how her chum was getting on. To go clear to the center of the campus with that vase, and leave it at the foot of the figure surmounting the fountain, was no pleasant experience, Ruth felt.

The minutes passed slowly, the girls in their shrouds whispering among themselves. Suddenly there came a sound from outside—a pattering of running feet on the cement walk. Ruth sprang to the nearest window in spite of the commands of the hazing party. Helen was running toward the house at a speed which betrayed her agitation. Besides, Ruth could hear her sobbing under her breath:

"Oh, oh, oh!"

"You've scared her half to death!" exclaimed Ruth, angrily, as the girls seized her.

"Put in the stopper!" commanded the girl who had seated herself on the table, and instantly the ball of rags was driven into Ruth's mouth again and she was held, in spite of her struggles, by her captors.

Ruth was angry now. Helen had been tricked into going to the fountain, and by some means the hazers had frightened her on her journey. But it was a couple of minutes before her chum was brought back to the room. Helen was shivering and sobbing between the guards—indeed they held her up, for she would have fallen.

"What's the matter with the great booby?" demanded the girl on the table.

"She—she says she heard something, or saw something, at the fountain," said one of the other girls, in a quavering voice.

"Of course she did—they always do," declared the leader. "Isn't the fountain haunted? We know it is so."

This was all said for effect, and to impress *her*, Ruth knew. But she tried to go to Helen. They held her back, however, and she could not speak.

"Did the Neophyte go to the fountain?" demanded the leader, sternly.

Helen, in spite of her tears, nodded vigorously.

"Did she drink of the water there?"

"I—I was drinking it when I—I heard somebody——"

"The ghost of the very beautiful woman whose statue adorns the fountain," declared Mary Cox, if it were she, in a sepulchral voice.

Ruth knew now why the story of the fountain had been told them earlier in the evening, but personally she had not been much impressed by it then, nor was she frightened now. She was only indignant that Helen and she should be treated so—and by these very girls for whom her chum had conceived such a fancy.

Helen was still trembling. They let her sit down upon her bed, and Ruth wanted to go to her more than ever, and comfort her. But the girl on the table brought her up short.

"Now, Miss!" she exclaimed. "You are the next. The first Infant has left the Golden Goblet at the fountain—you *did* leave it there; didn't you, you 'fraid-cat?" she demanded sharply, of Helen. Helen bobbed her head and sobbed. "Then," said the leader of the hazing party, "you go and bring it here."

Ruth stared at her in surprise. She did not move.

"Take out her gag. Lead her to the door. If she does not come back with the Golden Goblet, lock her out and let her cool her temper till morning on the grass," said the girl on the table, cruelly. "And if she stirs up trouble, she'll wish she had never come to Briarwood!"

CHAPTER XI

THE VOICE OF THE HARP

"Among two hundred girls there are bound to be girls of a good many different kinds." So had said Mrs. Tellingham when Ruth Fielding and her chum presented themselves before the Preceptress not many hours before. And Ruth saw plainly that some of these shrouded and masked figures, at least, were of the kind against whom Mrs. Tellingham had quietly warned them. These were not alone careless and thoughtless, however; but the girl whom Ruth believed to be Mary Cox, their whilom friend and guide, was cruel likewise.

Ruth Fielding was no coward. She believed these girls had arranged to terrify their victims by some manifestation at the fountain—why, otherwise, had they sent Helen there and now were determined to make Ruth repeat the experience? Nor was it necessary for the leader of the crew of hazers to remind the girl from the Red Mill how unpleasant they could make it for her if the dared report them to the teachers.

"Now, First Neophyte!" exclaimed the leader of their visitors. "Where did you leave the Golden Goblet?"

"On the pedestal, right between the feet of the figure," sobbed Helen.

"You hear?" repeated the other, turning her shrouded face to Ruth. "Then go, drink likewise of the fountain, and bring back the goblet. Failure to perform this task will be punished not only in the present, but in the future. Take her away—and remember your orders, guards."

The door was opened ever so quietly and the sentinel outside assured them that nobody had stirred. All had been so far conducted so carefully that even the other girls not in the plot were not awakened. As Ruth was led past the door of the larger room, which she knew Mary Cox and her three chums occupied, she heard the unmistakable snoring of a sound sleeper within. It made her doubt if, after all, those four who had appeared so friendly to Helen and herself that evening, were among the hazers; and she heard one of her guards whisper:

"Miss Picolet never has to look into *that* room to learn if they're asleep. Listen to Heavy, will you?"

But this puzzlement did not stick in Ruth's mind for long; the guards hustled her down the stairs and the outer door was opened.

"If the cat should suddenly come back, wouldn't we just *catch* it?" whispered one girl to the other.

"Now, don't you be forever and ever going to that fountain," said the other to Ruth. "For if you are long, we'll just shut the door on you and run back."

As she spoke she let go of Ruth's arm and jerked the gag out of her mouth. Then the two pushed the new girl out of the door and closed it softly. Ruth could hear them whispering together behind the panels.

Like Helen, she had been given her bath-gown. She was not cold. But it was truth that the memory of her chum's state of mind when she had come back from the visit to the fountain, gave Ruth Fielding an actual chill. Helen had set out upon *her* venture without much worriment of mind; but she had been badly frightened. Ruth believed this fright had been wickedly planned by the hazing crew of girls; nevertheless she could not help being troubled in her own mind as she looked out into the dimness of the campus.

Not a sound rose from this court between the buildings. A few dim night-lights were visible in the windows about the campus; but the lamps that illumined the walks and the park itself were burned out. The breeze was so faint that it did not rustle the smallest branches of the trees. There was not a sound from anywhere upon the campus.

Remembering the promise of the two girls who had thrust her out of the house, Ruth thought it best for her to get the unpleasant business over as quickly as possible. Although she could not see the sunken fountain from the steps of the dormitory where she stood, she knew which path to take to get to it the quickest. She started along this path at once, walking until she was surely out of view of the girls in the windows above, and then running to the fountain. She had some objection to giving her new schoolmates the satisfaction of seeing that she was at all frightened by this midnight jaunt.

She sped along the path and there was the statue looming right before her. The trickle of the water, spouting into the basin, made a low and pleasant sound. Nothing moved about the fountain.

"Perhaps, after all, Helen only *imagined* there was somebody here," thought Ruth, and she pattered down the steps in her slippers, and so climbed upon the marble ledge from which she could reach the gilded goblet which was, as Helen had declared, placed between the feet of the marble statue.

And then, suddenly, there was a rustle near at hand. Was that a whisper—a sharp, muffled gasp? Ruth was startled, indeed, and shuddered so that the "goose-flesh" seemed to start all over her. Nevertheless, she clutched the goblet firmly and held it beneath one of the spouts of the fountain. She was convinced that if there was anybody behind the figure of marble, he was there for the express purpose of frightening her—and she was determined not to be frightened.

The goblet was quickly filled and Ruth held it to her lips. She might be watched, and she was determined to obey the mandate of the masked leader of the hazing party. She would not give them the right to say that *she* was panic-stricken.

And then, with an unexpectedness that held her for an instant spellbound, she heard a hasty hand sweep the taut strings of a harp! She was directly below the figure and—if the truth must be told—she looked up in horror, expecting to see the marble representation of a harp vibrating under that sudden stroke!

There was no movement, of course, in the marble. There was no further sound about the fountain. But the echo of that crash of music vibrated across the campus and died away hollowly between the buildings. It had been no sound called up by her imagination; the harp had been sounded with a sure and heavy hand.

Ruth Fielding confessed her terror now on the instant. When power of movement returned to her, she leaped from the basin's edge, scurried up the steps to the path, and dashed at top speed for the dormitory, bearing the goblet in one hand and catching up the draperies of her long garment so as not to ensnare her feet.

She reached the building and dashed up the steps. The door was ajar, but the shrouded guards were nowhere visible. She burst into the hall, banged the door after her, and ran up the stairs in blind terror, with no care for anybody, or anything else! Into the room at the end of the corridor she hurried, and found it——

Deserted, save for her chum, Helen Cameron, cowering in her bed. The masked and shrouded figures were gone, and Ruth found herself standing, panting and gasping, in the middle of the

room, with the half-filled goblet in her hand, her heart beating as though it would burst.

CHAPTER XII

THE MYSTERY DEEPENS

There was some movement downstairs now. Ruth Fielding heard a door open and a voice speak in the lower corridor. Perhaps it was Miss Scrimp, the matron. But every one of the skylarkers had cut to bed, and the dormitories were as still as need be.

"Oh, Ruth!" gasped Helen, from her muffling bed clothes. "Did you hear it?"

"Did I hear what?" panted Ruth.

"Oh! I was so frightened. There is something *dreadful* about that fountain. I heard whisperings and rustlings there; but the harp——"

"They did it to scare us," declared Ruth, in both anger and relief. She *had* been badly frightened, but she was getting control of herself now.

"Then they frightened themselves," declared Helen, sitting up in bed. "You heard the harp?"

"I should say so!"

"We were all at the window listening to hear if you would be frightened and run," whispered Helen. "Oh, Ruthie!"

"What's the matter, now?" demanded her chum.

"I—I tried to help them. It was mean. I knew they were trying to scare you, and I helped them. I wasn't so scared myself as I appeared when I came in."

"WHAT?"

"I don't know what's made me act so mean to you this evening," sobbed Helen. "I'm sure I love you, Ruth. And I know you wouldn't have treated me so. But they said they were just going to have some fun with you——"

"*Who* said?" demanded Ruth.

"Mary Cox—and—and the others."

"They told you they were coming to haze us?"

"The Upedes—ye-es," admitted Helen. "And of course, it wouldn't have amounted to anything if that—— Oh, Ruth! was it truly the harp that sounded?"

"How could that marble harp make any sound?" demanded Ruth, sharply.

"But I know the girls were scared—just as scared as I was. They expected nothing of the kind. And the twang of the strings sounded just as loud as—as—well, as loud as that fat man's playing on the boat sounded. Do you remember?"

Ruth remembered. And suddenly the thought suggested by her frightened chum entered her mind and swelled in it to vast proportions. She could, in fact, think of little else than this new idea. She hushed Helen as best she could. She told her she forgave her—but she said it unfeelingly and more to hush her chum than aught else. She wanted to think out this new train of thought to its logical conclusion.

"Hush and go to sleep, Helen," she advised. "We shall neither of us be fit to get up at rising bell. It is very late. I—I wish those girls had remained in their own rooms, that I do!"

"But there is one thing about it," said Helen, with half a sob and half a chuckle. "They were more frightened than we were when they scuttled out of this room before you returned. Oh! you should have seen them."

Ruth would say no more to her. There had been no light lit in all this time, and now she snuggled down into her own bed. The excitement of the recent happenings did not long keep Helen awake; but her friend and room-mate lay for some time studying out the mystery of the campus.

Miss Picolet was out of her room.

The old Irishman, Tony Foyle, had mentioned chasing itinerant musicians off the grounds that very evening—among them a harpist.

The evil-looking man who played the harp on board the steamship, and who had so frightened little Miss Picolet, had followed the French teacher ashore.

Had he followed her to Briarwood Hall? Was he an enemy who plagued the little French teacher—perhaps blackmailed her?

These were the various ideas revolving in Ruth Fielding's head. And they revolved until the girl fell asleep from sheer exhaustion, and they troubled her sleep all through the remainder of the night. For that the man with the harp and Miss Picolet had a rendezvous behind the marble figure on the campus fountain was the sum and substance of the conclusion which Ruth had come to.

In the morning Ruth only mentioned these suppositions to Helen, but discussed them not at all with the other girls, her new school-fellows. Indeed, those girls who had set out to haze the two Infants, and had been frightened by the manifestation of the sounding harp upon the campus, were not likely to broach the subject to Ruth or Helen, either. For they had intended to surround their raid upon the new-comers' peace of mind with more or less secrecy.

However, sixteen frightened girls (without counting Ruth and Helen) could not be expected to keep such a mystery as this a secret among themselves. That the marble harp had been sounded—that the ghost of the campus had returned to haunt the school—was known among the students of Briarwood Hall before breakfast time. Jennie Stone was quite full of it, although Ruth knew from the unimpeachable testimony of Jennie's nose that *she* was not among the hazers; and the sounding of the mysterious harp-strings in the middle of the night really endangered Heavy's appetite for breakfast.

The members of the Upedes who had been so pleasant with them at the evening meeting seemed rather chary of speaking to Ruth and Helen how; and, anyway, the chums had enough to do to get their boxes unpacked and their keepsakes set about the room, and to complete various housekeeping arrangements. They enjoyed setting up their "goods and chattels" quite as much as they expected to; and really their school life began quite pleasantly despite the excitement and misunderstanding on the first night of their arrival.

If the crowd that Ruth was so sure had hazed them were slow about attending on the two Infants in the West Dormitory (as their building was called) there were plenty of other nice girls who looked into the duet in a friendly way, or who spoke to Ruth and Helen on the campus, or in the dining room. Miss Polk and Madge Steele were not the only Seniors who showed the chums some attention, either; and Ruth and Helen began secretly to count the little buttons marked "F. C." which they saw, as compared with the few stars bearing the intertwined "U" and "D" of the Upedes.

Just the same, Helen Cameron's leaning toward the lively group or girls in their house who had (it seemed) formed their club in protest against the Forward Club, was still marked. The friends heard that the last named association was governed by the Preceptress and teachers almost entirely. That it was "poky" and "stuffy." That some girls (not altogether those who formed the membership of the Upedes) considered it "toadying" to join the Forward Club. And on this second day Ruth and Helen saw that the rivalry for membership between the clubs was very keen indeed. A girl couldn't have friends among the members of both the F. C.'s and the Upedes—that was plain.

Many new girls arrived on this day—mostly from the Lumberton direction. That was another reason, perhaps, why Ruth and Helen were shown so little attention by the quartette of girls next door o them. They were all busy—even Heavy herself—in herding the new girls whom they had entangled in the tentacles of the Upedes. The chums found themselves untroubled by the F. C.'s; it seemed to be a settled fact among the girls that Ruth and Helen were pledged to the Upedes.

"But we are *not*," Ruth Fielding said, to her friend. "I don't like this way of doing business at all, Helen—do you?"

"Well—but what does it matter?" queried Helen, pouting. "We want to get in with a lively set; don't we? I'm sure the Upedes are nice girls."

"I don't like the leadership of them," said Ruth, frankly.

"Miss Cox?"

"Miss Cox—exactly," said the girl from the Red Mill.

"Oh—well—she isn't everything," cried Helen.

"She comes pretty near being the boss of that club—you can see that. Now, the question is, do we want to be bossed by a girl like her?"

"Then, do you want to be under the noses of the teachers, and toadying to them all the time?"

cried Helen.

"If that is what is meant by belonging to the Forward Club, I certainly do not," admitted Ruth.

"Then I don't see but you will have to start a secret society of your own," declared Helen, laughing somewhat ruefully.

"And perhaps *that* wouldn't be such a bad idea," returned Ruth, slowly. "I understand that there are nearly thirty new girls coming to Briarwood this half who will enter the Junior classes. Of course, the Primary pupils don't count. I talked with a couple of them at dinner. They feel just as I do about it—there is too much pulling and hauling about these societies. They are not sure that they wish to belong to either the Upedes or the F. C.'s."

"But just think!" wailed Helen. "How much fun we would be cut out of! We wouldn't have any friends——"

"That's nonsense. At least, if the whole of us thirty Infants, as they call us, flocked together by ourselves, why wouldn't we have plenty of society? I'm not so sure that it wouldn't be a good idea to suggest it to the others."

"Oh, my! would you dare?" gasped Helen. "And we've only just arrived ourselves?"

"Self-protection is the first selfish law of nature," paraphrased Ruth, smiling; "and I'm not sure that it's a bad idea to be selfish on such an occasion."

"You'd just make yourself ridiculous," scoffed Helen. "To think of a crowd of freshies getting up an order—a secret society."

"In self-protection," laughed Ruth.

"I guess Mrs. Tellingham would have something to say about it, too," declared Helen.

It was not the subject of school clubs that was the burden of Ruth Fielding's thought for most of that day, however. Nor did the arrival of so many new scholars put the main idea in her mind aside. This troubling thought was of Miss Picolet and the sound of the harp on the campus at midnight. The absence of the French teacher from the dormitory, the connection of the little lady with the obese foreigner who played the harp on the *Lanawaxa*, and the sounding of harp-strings on the campus in the middle of the night, were all dovetailed together in Ruth Fielding's mind. She wondered what the mystery meant.

She saw Tony Foyle cleaning the campus lanterns during the day, and she stopped and spoke to him.

"I heard you tell Jennie Stone last night that you had to drive street musicians away from the school grounds, sir?" said Ruth, quietly. "Was there a man with a harp among them?"

"Sure an' there was," declared Tony, nodding. "And he was a sassy dago, at that! 'Tis well I'm a mon who kapes his temper, or 'twould ha' gone har-r-rd wid him."

"A big man, was he, Mr. Foyle?" asked Ruth.

"What had that to do wid it?" demanded the old man, belligerently. "When the Foyles' dander is riz it ain't size that's goin' to stop wan o' that name from pitchin' into an' wallopin' the biggest felly that iver stepped. He was big," he added; "but I've seen bigger. Him an' his red vest—and jabberin' like the foreign monkey he was. I'll show him!"

Ruth left Tony shaking his head and muttering angrily as he pursued his occupation. Ruth found herself deeply interested in the mystery of the campus; but if she had actually solved the problem of the sounding of the harp at midnight, the reason for the happening, and what really brought that remarkable manifestation about, was as deep a puzzle to her as before.

CHAPTER XIII

BEGINNINGS

Youth adapts itself easily and naturally to all change. Ruth Fielding and her chum, before that second evening at Briarwood Hall drew in, felt as though they had known the place for months and some of the girls all their lives. It was thus the most natural thing in the world to assemble at meals when the school-bell tapped its summons, to stand while the grace was being said, to chatter and laugh with those at the table at which they sat, to speak and laugh with the waitresses, and with old Tony Foyle, and with Miss Scrimp, the matron of their house, and to bow

respectfully to Miss Picolet, Miss Kennedy, the English teacher; Miss O'Hara, before whom Ruth and Helen would come in mathematics, and the other teachers as they learned their names.

Dr. Tellingham, although affording some little amusement for the pupils because of his personal peculiarities, was really considered by the girls in general a deeply learned man, and when he chanced to trot by a group of the students on the campus, in his stoop-shouldered, purblind way, their voices became hushed and they looked after him as though he really was all he pretended to be—or all he thought he was. He delved in histories—ate, slept, and seemed to draw the breath of his nostrils from histories. That the pamphlets and books he wrote were of trivial importance, and seldom if ever saw the light of print, was not made manifest to the Briarwood girls in general.

Ruth and Helen were not unpopular from the start. Helen was so pretty and so vivacious, that she was bound to gather around her almost at once those girls who were the more easily attracted by such a nature; while for Ruth's part, the little Primes found that she was both kind and loving. She did not snub the smaller girls who came to her for any help, and before this day was over (which was Friday) they began to steal into the chums' duet, in twos and threes, to talk with Ruth Fielding. It had been so at the school near the Red Mill, and Ruth was glad the little folk took to her.

Late in the afternoon the two friends from Cheslow went out to the main entrance of the grounds to meet Old Dolliver's stage from Seven Oaks. It had been noised abroad that a whole *nursery* of Infants was expected by that conveyance, and Mary Cox and Madge Steele, each with her respective committee, were in waiting to greet the new-comers on behalf of their separate societies.

"And we'll welcome them as fellow-infants," whispered Ruth to Helen. "Let's hold a reception in our room this evening to all the newcomers. What say, Helen?"

Her chum was a little doubtful as to the wisdom of this course. She did not like to offend their friends in the Upedes. Yet the suggestion attracted Helen, too.

"I suppose if we freshmen stick together we'll have a better time, after all," she agreed.

As the time for the appearance of the stage drew near, approximately half the school was gathered to see the Infants disembark from Old Dolliver's Ark. Mary Cox arranged her Upedes on one side of the path and they began to sing:

"Uncle Noah, he drove an Ark—
One wide river to cross!
He made a landing at Briarwood Park—
One wide river to cross!
One wide river!
One wide river of Jordan!
One wide river!
One wide river to cross!"

Old Dolliver, all one wide grin and flapping duster, drove his bony horses to the stopping place with a flourish.

"Here we be!" he croaked. "The old craft is jest a-bulgin' over with Infants."

Mary Cox pulled open the door and the first newcomer popped out as though she had been clinging to the handle when The Fox made the movement.

"The Infants got out, one by one—
One wide river to cross!
First Infant bumps into a great big Stone—
One wide river to cross!"

And there really was Heavy to receive the newcomer with open arms, who said, while the others chanted the refrain:

"My name's Jennie Stone, and you're very welcome to Briarwood, and what's your name, Infant?"

The girls in the stage-coach had been forewarned by Old Dolliver as to their probable greeting, and they took this all in good part. They disembarked with their bags and parcels, while Tony Foyle appeared to help Old Dolliver down with the heavier luggage that was strapped upon the roof and in the boot behind. Mary Cox continued to line out the doggerel, inventing some telling hits as she went along, while the Upedes came in strongly on the refrain.

There was much laughter and confusion; but the arriving Infants were lined up two by two between the long rows of Briarwood girls and were forced to march toward the Hall by this narrow path.

"Come! we are Infants, too," exclaimed Ruth, pulling Helen by the sleeve. "We will lead the march."

She drew her chum away with her, and they introduced themselves to the girls at the head of the column of freshies.

"We are Helen Cameron and Ruth Fielding," said Ruth, cordially. "We only got here yesterday, so we are Infants, too. We will take you to the office of the Preceptress."

So the chums bore their share of the indignity of being marched up through the grounds like culprits, and halted the file at the steps of the main building.

"We have Duet Number 2 in the West Dormitory," said Ruth, boldly, to the new-comers. "When you have found your rooms and got settled—after supper, that will be,—you are all invited to come to our room and get acquainted with the other Infants. We're going to get as many together this evening as we can. Now, *do* come!"

"Oh, Ruth!" whispered Helen, when they were out of ear-shot of the others. "What will the Upedes say?"

"We're not interfering with either of the school clubs," declared her chum, emphatically. "But I guess it won't hurt us to become acquainted with those who are as new here as ourselves. The old girls don't feel strange, or lost; it is these new ones that need to be made to feel at home."

Timid for herself, Ruth had begun to develop that side of her character which urged her to be bold for the general good. She appreciated keenly how awkward she had felt when she arrived at Briarwood the day before. Helen, although not lacking in kindliness, was less thoughtful than her chum; and she was actually less bold than her chum, too.

Ruth made it a point to see and speak with all the new scholars whom she could find, repeating her invitation for a meeting in her room. Whether Helen helped in this matter she did not know. Her chum was *not* enthusiastic in the task, that was certain. And indeed, when the hour came, after supper, Helen was closeted with Mary Cox in the quartette room next door to the chamber and study which she and Ruth Fielding shared together.

That Ruth felt more than a little hurt, it is unnecessary to say. She had felt the entering wedge between them within a few hours of their coming to the school. The Upedes were much more friendly to Helen than to herself, and Helen was vastly interested in Mary Cox, Belle Tingley, Lluella Fairfax, and some of the other livelier members of the Up and Doing Club.

But, after a while Helen strolled into her own room and mingled with the Infants who had there assembled. They had come almost to their full strength. There were no sessions of either the F. C.'s or the Upedes on this evening, and Miss Picolet, to whom Ruth had spoken about the little reception to be held in her room, approved of it. Helen was bound to be popular among any crowd of girls, for she was so gay and good-tempered. But when somebody broached the subject of school clubs, Ruth was surprised that Helen should at once talk boldly for the Upedes. She really urged their cause as though she was already a member.

"I am not at all sure that I wish to join either the Forwards or the Up and Doings," said Ruth, quietly, when one of the other Infants asked her what she intended doing.

"But you'll have no friends here—not among the Juniors and Seniors, at least—if you don't join some club!" Helen exclaimed.

"There are enough of us right here to found a society, I should say," laughed Ruth. "And we're all in the same boat, too."

"Yes!" agreed Sarah Fish, one of the Infants just arrived. "And what do these older girls really care about us? Very little, I am sure, except to strengthen their own clubs. I can see that," she continued, being a very practical, sensible girl, and downright in speech and manner. "Two of them came into our room at once—the girl they call The Fox, and Miss Steele. One argued for the Forwards and the other for the Up and Doings. I don't want either."

"I don't want to join either," broke in another girl, by name Phyllis Short. "I think it would be nicer for us Infants, as they call us, to keep together. And we're no younger than a good many of the Juniors!"

Ruth laughed. "We expect to take all *that* good-naturedly. But I don't like the idea of being driven into one society, or the other. And I don't mean to be," she said, emphatically.

"Hear! hear!" cried Miss Fish.

"Well, I don't think it will be nice at all," said Helen, in some heat, "to refuse to associate with the older girls here. I, for one, want to get into the real school society——"

"But suppose we start a club of our own?" interrupted the practical Sarah.

"Why, what could just a handful of new girls do in a society? It would look silly," cried Helen.

"We won't keep the older girls out of it, if they want to join," laughed Sarah.

"And there has to be a beginning to everything," rejoined Phyllis Short.

"I don't believe those Upedes have many more members than are right in this room to-night," said Ruth, quietly. "How many do we number here—twenty-six?"

"Twenty-six, counting your room-mate," said Sarah.

"Well, you can count her room-mate out," declared Helen, sharply. "I am not going to make myself a laughing-stock of the school by joining any baby society."

"Well," said Phyllis Short, calmly. "It's always nicer, *I* think, to be a big frog in a little puddle than to be an unrecognised croaker in a great, big pool."

Most of the girls laughed at that. And the suggestion of a separate club for the Infants seemed to be well received. Ruth, however, was very much troubled by Helen's attitude, and she would say no more beyond this:

"We will think of it. There is plenty of time. Only, those who feel as we do——"

"As *you* do!" snapped Helen.

"As *I* do, then, if you insist," said Ruth, bravely, "would better not pledge themselves to either the F. C.'s or the Upedes until we have talked this new idea over."

And with that the company broke up and the new girls went away to their rooms. But Helen and Ruth found a barrier raised between them that evening, and the latter sprinkled her pillow with a few quiet tears before she went to sleep.

CHAPTER XIV

THE SWEETBRIARS

Mail time!

Until Saturday morning Ruth and Helen had not realized how vital that hour was when the mail-bag came out from the Lumberton post office and the mail was distributed by one of the teachers into a series of pigeonholes in a tiny "office" built into the corridor at the dining-room door. The mail arrived during the breakfast hour. One could get her letters when she came out of the dining-room, and on this Saturday both Ruth and Helen had letters.

Miss Cramp, her old teacher, had written to Ruth very kindly. There was a letter, too, from Aunt Alvirah, addressed in her old-fashioned hand, and its contents shaky both as to spelling and grammar, but full of love for the girl who was so greatly missed at the Red Mill. Uncle Jabez had even declared the first night that it seemed as though there had been a death in the house, with Ruth gone.

Helen had several letters, but the one that delighted her most was from her twin brother.

"Although," she declared, in her usual sweet-tempered manner, "Tom's written it to both of us. Listen here, Ruthie!"

The new cadet at Seven Oaks began his letter: "Dead [Transcriber's note: Dear?] Sweetbriars," including Ruth as well as Helen in his friendly and brotherly effusion. He had been hazed with a vengeance on the first night of his arrival at the Academy; he had been chummed on a fellow who had already been half a year at the school and whose sister was a Senior at Briarwood; he had learned that lots of the older students at Seven Oaks were acquainted with the Seniors at Briarwood, and that there were certain times when the two schools intermingled socially.

"Dear old Tom!" exclaimed Helen. "Nice of him to call us 'Sweetbriars'; isn't it? I guess there's a good many thorns on *this* 'sweetbriar'; 'eh, Ruthie?" and she hugged and kissed her chum with sudden fierceness.

"And Tom says he can get permission to come over and see me some Saturday afternoon if Mrs. Tellingham will allow it. I'll have to get her to write to Major Paradell, who commands at Seven Oaks. My! it sounds just as though poor old Tom was in the army; doesn't it?" cried Helen.

"It will be nice to have him over," said Ruth, agreeing. "But I suppose we'll have to meet him in the office? Or can we walk out with our 'brother'?" and she laughed.

"We'll go to Triton Lake; Tom will take us," said Helen, decidedly.

"I guess Mrs. Tellingham will have something to say about that, my dear."

Helen seemed to have forgotten the little difficulty that had troubled her chum and herself the night before, and Ruth said nothing further about the Infants forming a society of their own. At least, she said nothing about it to Helen. But Sarah Fish and Phyllis Short, and some of the other Infants, seemed determined to keep the idea alive, and they all considered Ruth Fielding a prime mover in the conspiracy. It was noised abroad that neither the F. C.'s nor the Upedes were getting many new names enrolled for membership.

Saturday morning the remainder of the expected new girls arrived at Briarwood, and with then came the last of the older scholars, too. There was an assembly called for two o'clock which Mrs. Tellingham addressed. She welcomed the new-comers, greeted the returning pupils, and briefly sketched the plans for the school year then beginning. She was a quick, briskly-speaking woman, who impressed the most rattle-pated girl before her that she meant to be obeyed and that no wild prank would go unpunished.

"Proper amusement will be supplied in due time, young ladies. For the present we shall all have enough to do getting settled into our places. I have heard something regarding picnics and outings for the near future. Postpone all such junketing until we are pulling well together. And beware of demerits. Remember that ten of them, for whatever cause, will send a girl home from Briarwood immediately."

This about the picnics hit the Upedes. Ruth and Helen knew that they were planning just such amusements. Helen took this interference on Mrs. Tellingham's part quite to heart.

"Isn't it mean of her?" she asked of Ruth. "If it had been the Fussy Curls who wanted to go to Triton Lake, it would have been another matter. And—besides—I was going to write to Tom and see if he couldn't meet us there."

"Why, Helen; without asking Mrs. Tellingham?" cried Ruth.

"I suppose Tom and some of his chums could *happen* to go to Triton Lake the same day we went; couldn't they?" Helen asked, laughing. "Dear me, Ruthie! Don't you begin to act the Miss Prim—please! We'll have no fun at all if you do."

"But we don't want to make the bad beginning of getting Mrs. Tellingham and the teachers down on us right at the start," said Ruth, in a worried manner.

"I don't know but that you *are* a Miss Prim!" ejaculated Helen.

Ruth thought, probably, from her tone of voice, that Helen had heard some of her friends among the Upedes already apply that term to her, Ruth. But she said nothing—only shook her head. However, the girl from the Red Mill did her best to dodge any subject in the future that she thought might cause Helen to compare her unfavorably with the girls next door.

For Ruth loved her chum dearly—and loved her unselfishly, too. Helen and Tom had been so kind to her in the past—all through those miserable first weeks of her life at the Red Mill—that Ruth felt she could never be really angry with Helen. It only made her sorrowful to think that perhaps Helen, in this new and wider school life, might drift away from her.

The regular program of the working days of the school included prayers in the chapel before the girls separated for their various classes. These were held at nine o'clock. But on Sunday Ruth found that breakfast was an hour later than usual and that at ten o'clock several wagonettes, besides Old Dolliver's Ark, were in waiting to take those girls who wished to ride to the churches of the several denominations located in Lumberton. A teacher, or a matron, went in each vehicle, and if any of the girls preferred to walk in pleasant weather there was always a teacher to walk with them—for the distance was only a mile.

Dinner was at half-past one, and at three there was a Sabbath School, conducted by Mrs. Tellingham herself, assisted by most of the teachers, in the large assembly hall. At night there was a service of music and a lecture in the chapel, too. The teacher of music played the organ, and there was a small string orchestra made up of the girls themselves, and a chorus to lead the singing.

This service Ruth found delightful, for she had always loved music and never before had she had the opportunity of studying it under any teacher. Her voice was sweet and strong, however; and she had a true ear. At the end of the service Miss Maconahay, the organist, came and spoke to her and advised her that, providing she would give some time to it, there was a chance for her to become a member of the chorus and, if she showed improvement, she might even join the Glee Club.

On Monday school began in earnest. Ruth and Helen were side by side in every class. What study one took up, the other voted for. The fact that they had to work hard—especially at first—kept Ruth and Helen together, and during the first week neither had much time for any society at all. Between supper and bedtime each evening they faithfully worked at their lessons for the

ensuing day and every hour of daylight brought its separate duty. There seemed to be little opportunity for idle hands to find mischief at Briarwood Hall.

Mrs. Tellingham, however, did not propose that the girls should be so closely confined by their studies that their physical health would be neglected. Those girls who stood well in their classes found at least two hours each day for outdoor play or gym work. The tennis courts at Briarwood were in splendid shape. Helen already was a fair player; but Ruth had never held a racket in her hand until she was introduced to the game by her chum during this first week at school.

The girl from the Red Mill was quick and active. She learned the rules of play and proved that her eye was good and that she had judgment before they had played an hour. She knew how to leap and run, too, having been country bred and used to an active life.

"Oh, dear me!" gasped Helen, out of breath. "You are tireless, Ruth. Why, you'll be an athlete here."

"This is great fun, Helen," declared her chum, "I believe I can learn to play *this* game."

"Learn to play!" gasped Helen. "Why, all you want is practice to beat Tom himself, I believe. You'll be a crack player, Ruthie," prophesied her friend.

It was while they were loitering on the tennis courts after the game that Sarah Fish and Phyllis Short, with a number of the other Infants, joined them. Sarah came out bluntly with:

"When are we going to form our club, Ruth Fielding? I think we should do it at once. I've told both the Forwards and the Upedes that I am not in the market. I guess they'll let me alone now."

"I think they will," said Helen, sharply. "At least, the Upedes don't want you, Miss."

"You seem to knew exactly what they *do* want," said Sarah, good-naturedly. "Have you joined them?"

"I intend to," declared Helen.

"Oh, Helen!" ejaculated Ruth.

"Yes, I am," said Miss Cameron. "And I am not going to join any baby society," and so walked off in evident ill-humor.

Therefore the new club was not formed in the Number 2 Duet Room in the West Dormitory. The Infants considered Ruth the prime mover in the club, however, and that evening she was put in the chair to preside at the informal session held in the quartette in the East Dormitory occupied by Sarah Fish and three other Infants. She was made, too, a member of the Committee on Organization which was elected to draw up a Constitution and By-Laws, and was likewise one of three to wait on Mrs. Tellingham and gain permission to use one of the small assembly rooms for meetings.

And then came up the subject of a name for the society. It was not intended that the club should be only for new scholars; for the new scholars would in time be old scholars. And the company of girls who had gathered in Sarah's room had no great or important motive in their minds regarding the association. Its object was social and for self-improvement simply.

"And so let's find a name that doesn't sound bigger than we are," said Sarah. "The Forward Club sounds very solid and is quite literary, I understand. What those Upedes stand for except raising particular Sam Hill, as my grandmother would say, I don't know. What do *you* say, Ruth Fielding? It's your idea, and you ought to christen it."

"I don't know that I ought," Ruth returned. "I don't believe in one person doing too much in any society."

"Give us a name. It won't hurt you if we vote it down," urged Sarah.

Now Ruth had been thinking of a certain name for the new society for some days. It had been suggested by Tom Cameron's letter to Helen. She was almost afraid to offer it, but she did. "Sweetbriars," she said, blushing deeply.

"Dandy!" exclaimed Phyllis Short.

"Goody-good!" cried somebody else. "We're at Briarwood Hall, and why *not* Sweetbriars?"

"Good name for initials, too," declared the practical Sarah Fish. "Make two words of it—Sweet and Briars. The 'S. B.'s '—not bad that, eh? What say?"

It was unanimous. And so the Sweetbriars were christened.

CHAPTER XV

THE NIGHT OF THE HARPOCRATES

It was from Heavy Stone that Ruth first learned of an approaching festival, although her own room-mate was the prime mover in the fete. But of late she and Helen had had little in common outside of study hours and the classes which they both attended. Since the launching of the Sweetbriars Helen had deliberately sought society among the Upedes, and especially among the quartette who dwelt next door to the chums.

"And she is going to have almond cakes. She says she has an old nurse named Babette who makes the most de-lic-i-ous almond cakes—Is that so, Ruth Fielding?"

Heavy had been enthusiastically discussing this subject with her nearest neighbor on the other side from Ruth, at the dining table. But Ruth had caught the name of "Babette" and knew that Heavy spoke of Helen Cameron.

"Is what so?" she asked the plump girl.

"Why, it's about your spoon's box from home. I told *you*, you know, to be sure and have the folks send you one; but Helen Cameron's got ahead of you. And whisper!" pursued Jennie Stone, in a lowered tone, "tell her not to invite too many girls to the Night of Harpocrates. Remember!"

Ruth was a bit puzzled at first. Then she remembered that Harpocrates was the Egyptian god of silence, and that his sign was a rose. The expression "sub-rosa" comes from that root, or "under the rose." It was evident that there were to be "midnight orgies" when Helen's goodies came from home.

One of the quartettes on their corridor had indulged in a fudge party after hours already, and Ruth had been invited to be present. But she found that Helen was not going, so she refused. Besides, she was very doubtful about the propriety of joining in these forbidden pleasures. All the girls broke that retiring rule more or less—or so it seemed. But Miss Picolet could give such offenders black marks if she wished, and Ruth craved a clean sheet in deportment at the end of the half.

She wondered how and when Helen proposed to hold the "supper sub-rosa"; but she would not ask. Not even when the great hamper arrived (being brought up from Lumberton by Old Dolliver, who only drove his stage every other day to Seven Oaks at this time of year) did she ask Helen a single question. Tony Foyle brought the hamper up to Duet Two in the West Dormitory and it just fitted into the bottom of Helen's closet. Heavy could not keep away from the door of the room; whenever the door was opened and Ruth raised her eyes from the table where she was at work, there was the broad, pink and white face of the fat girl, her eyes rolling in anticipation of the good things—Mary Cox declared Heavy fairly "drooled at the mouth!"

The arrival of the hamper was not unnoticed by the sharp eyes of Miss Picolet; but advised by the wily Miss Cox, Helen unpacked a certain portion of the good things and, during the afternoon, asked permission of Miss Scrimp to make tea and invite some of the girls to the duet to sample her goodies. The French teacher was propitiated by the gift of a particular almond cake, frosted, which Helen carried down to her room and begged her to accept. Helen could be very nice indeed, if she wished to be; indeed, she had no reason to be otherwise to Miss Picolet. And the teacher had reason for liking Helen, as she had shown much aptitude for the particular branch of study which Miss Picolet taught.

But although most of the girls In the West Dormitory, and some others, were asked to Helen's tea (at which Ruth likewise did the honors, and "helped pour") there was an undercurrent of joking and innuendo among certain of the visitors that showed they had knowledge of further hidden goodies which would, at fit and proper season, be divulged. Jennie Stone, gobbling almond cakes and chocolate, said to Ruth:

"If this is a fair sample of what is to be divulged upon the Night of Harpocrates, I shall fast on that day—now mind!"

When the girls had gone Ruth asked her chum, point-blank, if she proposed to have a midnight supper.

"A regular debauch!" declared Helen, laughing. "Now, don't be prim and prudish about it, Ruthie. I won't have it in here if you don't want——"

"Why not?" demanded Ruth, quickly. "Don't think of going to any other room."

"Well—I didn't know," stammered her chum. "You being such a stickler for the rules, Ruth. You know, if we *should* get into trouble——"

"Do you think that *I* would complain?" asked Ruth, proudly. "Don't you trust me any more, Helen?"

"Oh, Ruthie! what nonsense!" cried her chum, throwing her arms about Ruth Fielding's neck. "I know you'd be as true as steel."

"I did not think the suggestion could have come from your own heart, Helen," declared Ruth.

So the second night thereafter was set for the "sub-rosa supper." Slily the chums borrowed such plates and cups as the other girls had hidden away. Not a few quartette rooms possessed tea-sets, they being the joint possession of the occupants of that particular study. At retiring bell on this eventful night all things were ready, including a spirit lamp on which to make chocolate, hidden away in Helen Cameron's shirt-waist box.

Ruth and Helen went to bed after removing their frocks and shoes only and waited to hear the "cheep, cheep" of Miss Scrimp's squeaky shoes as she passed up through the house, turning down the hall lights, and then went down again. The hour for the girls to gather was set for half-past ten. First of all, however, The Fox was to go down and listen at Miss Picolet's door to make sure that she had gone to bed. Then Miss Cox was to tap softly but distinctly at the door of each invited guest as she came back to their corridor.

Meanwhile Helen and Ruth popped out of bed (it had been hard to lie there for more than an hour, waiting) and began to lay out the things. The bedspreads were laid back over the foot of each bed and the feast was laid out upon the bed-clothes. Mary Cox warned them to have the spreads ready to smooth up over the contraband goodies, should the French teacher get wind of the orgy.

"Forewarned is forearmed," urged Mary Cox. "We know what old Picolet *is*!"

"But 'four-armed' doesn't always mean 'fore-handed'," chuckled Jennie Stone.

"Nor quadrumanous!" snapped the Fox. "If *you* had four hands, Heavy, there would be little chance for any of the rest of us at Helen's party. My goodness me! how you *would* mow the good things away if you had four hands instead of two."

"It isn't that I'm really piggish," complained Miss Stone. "It's because I need more nourishment; there is so much of me, you know, Mary."

"And if you hadn't been stuffing yourself like a Strasburg goose all your life, there wouldn't be so much of you. Ha! it's the old story of the hen and the egg—which was here first? If you didn't eat so much you wouldn't be so big, and if you weren't so big you wouldn't eat so much."

All this, however, was said after the girls had begun to gather in Number 2 duet, and Belle Tingley, who had drawn the unlucky short toothpick, was banished to the corridor to keep watch—but with a great plateful of goodies and the "golden goblet" used in the hazing exercises, filled to the brim with hot chocolate.

"Though, if Miss Picolet is awake she'll smell the brew and will be up here instanter," declared the Fox, crossly, as Belle insisted in having her share of the drinkables as well as eatables.

Miss Picolet was forgotten in the fun and the feasting, however. There were twenty girls in the room, and they had to sit on the floor in two rows while Ruth and Helen passed out the good things. And my! they were good! Lovely chicken salad mayonnaise, served on a fresh lettuce leaf (the lettuce being smuggled in that very day in the chums' wash basket)—a little dab to each girl. There were little pieces of gherkins and capers in the mayonnaise, and Heavy reveled in this dish. The most delicious slices of pink ham between soft crackers—and other sandwiches of anchovy paste and minced sardines. *These* were the "solids."

Cakes, sweet crackers, Babette's cookies and lady-fingers were heaped on other plates, ready to serve.

"My!" exclaimed Lluella Fairfax, "isn't that lay-out enough to punish our poor digestive organs for a month? The last time we were caught and brought up before Mrs. Tellingham she warned us that sweetcake and pickles were as immoral as yellow-covered novels!"

"And she proved it, too," laughed the Fox. "She declared that a girl, or woman without a good digestion could not really fill her rightful place in the world and accomplish that which we are each supposed to do. Oh, the Madam always proves her point."

"And I *was* sick for a week afterward," sighed Lluella. "And had to take *such* a dose!"

At that moment, without the least forewarning, there came a smart rap on the door. The sound smote the company of whispering, laughing girls into a company of frightened, trembling culprits. They hardly dared breathe, and when the commanding rap came for a second time neither Ruth nor Helen had strength enough in their limbs to go to the door.

CHAPTER XVI

THE HAWK AMONG THE CHICKENS

Lluella and The Fox, more used to these orgies than some of the other girls, had retained some presence of mind. Their first thought—if this should prove to be the teacher or the matron—was to try and save such of the feast as could be hidden. Each girl flung up a spread to the pillows, and so hid the viands on the two beds. Then Mary Cox went quickly to the door.

The cowering girls clung to each other and waited breathlessly. Mary opened the door. There stood the abashed Belle Tingley, her plate in one hand, the gilded vase in the other, and beside her was the tiny figure of Mademoiselle Picolet, who looked very stern indeed at The Fox.

"I might have expected *you* to be a ringleader in such an escapade as this, Miss Cox," she said, sharply, but in a low voice. "I very well knew, Miss Cox, when the new girls came this fall that *you* were determined to contaminate them if you could. Every girl here will remain in her seat after prayers in the chapel to-morrow morning. Remember!"

She whipped out a notebook and pencil and evidently wrote Mary Cox's name at the head of her list. The Fox was furiously red and furiously angry.

"I might have known you would be spying on us, Miss Picolet," she said, bitingly. "Suppose some of us should play the spy on *you*, Miss Picolet, and should run to Mrs. Tellingham with what we might discover?"

"Go to your room instantly!" exclaimed the French teacher, with indignation. "You shall have an extra demerit for *that*, Miss!"

Yet Ruth, who had been watching the teacher's face intently, saw that she became actually pallid, that her lips seemed to be suddenly blue, and the countless little wrinkles that covered her cheeks were more prominent than ever before.

Mary Cox flounced out and disappeared. The teacher pointed to the chums' waste-basket and said to Bell, the unfaithful sentinel:

"Empty your plate in that receptacle, Miss Tingley. Spill the contents of that vase in the bowl. Now, Miss, to your room."

Belle obeyed. So she made each girl, as she called her name and wrote it in her book, throw away the remains of her feast, and pour out the chocolate. One by one they were obliged to do this and then walk sedately to their rooms. Jennie Stone was caught on the way out with a most suggestive bulge in her loose blouse, and was made to disgorge a chocolate layer cake which she had sought to "save" when the unexpected attack of the enemy occurred.

"Fie, for shame, Miss Stone!" exclaimed the French teacher. "That a young lady of Briarwood Hall should be so piggish! Fie!"

But it was after all the other girls had gone and Ruth and Helen were left alone with her, that the little French teacher seemed to really show her disappointment over the infraction of the rules by the pupils under her immediate charge.

"I hoped for better things of you two young ladies," she said, sorrowfully. "I feared for the influence over you of certain minds among the older scholars; but I believed you, Ruth Fielding, and you, Helen Cameron, to be too independent in character to be so easily led by girls of really much weaker wills. For one may *will* to do evil, or to do good, if one chooses. One need not *drift*.

"Miss Fielding! take that basket of broken food and go down to the basement and empty it in the bin. Miss Cameron, *you* may go to bed again. I will wait and see you so disposed. *Alons*!"

But before Ruth could get out of the room, and while Helen was hastily preparing for bed, Miss Picolet noticed something "bunchy" under Ruth's spread. She walked to the bedside and snatched back the coverlet. The still untasted viands were revealed.

"Ah-ha!" exclaimed the French teacher. "At once! into the basket with these, if you will be so kind, Miss Fielding."

Had Heavy seen those heaps of goodies thus disposed of she must have groaned in actual misery of spirit! But Helen, being quick in her preparations for bed, hopped into her own couch before Miss Picolet turned around to view that corner of the room, and with Helen under the bedclothes the hidden dainties (though she *did* mash some of them) were not revealed to the eye of the teacher, who stood grimly by the door as Ruth marched gravely forth with the basket of broken food.

For a minute or two Helen was as silent as Miss Picolet; then she ventured in a very small voice:

"Miss Picolet—if you please?"

"Well, Mademoiselle?" snapped the little lady.

"May I tell you that my chum Ruth had nothing to do with this infringement of the school rules? That the feast was all mine; that she merely partook of it because we roomed together? That she had nothing to do with the planning of the frolic?"

"Well?"

"I thought perhaps that you might believe otherwise," said Helen, softly, "as you made Ruth remove the—the provisions," said Helen. "And really, she isn't at all to blame."

"She cannot be without blame," declared Miss Picolet, yet less harshly than she had spoken before. "An objection from her would have stopped the feast before it began—is it not, Miss Cameron?"

"But she is not so *much* to blame, Miss Picolet," repeated Helen.

"Of that we shall see," returned the little lady, and waited by the door until Ruth returned from the basement. "Now to bed!" ejaculated Miss Picolet. "Wait in chapel after prayers. I really hoped the girls of my dormitory would not force me to call the attention of the Preceptress to them because of demerits this half—and I did not believe the trouble would start with two young ladies who had just arrived."

So saying, she departed. But Helen whispered Ruth, before she got in bed, to help remove the remaining goodies to the box in the closet.

"At least, we have saved this much from the wreck," chuckled Helen.

Ruth, however, was scarcely willing to admit that that the salvage would repay them for the black marks both surely had earned.

CHAPTER XVII

GOODY TWO-STICKS

To tell the truth the young ladies of the West Dormitory who attended Helen's sub-rosa supper looked pretty blue when the rest of the school filed out of chapel and left them sticking, like limpets, to their seats. Mrs. Tellingham looked just as stern as Helen imagined she could look, when she ended a whispered conference with Miss Picolet, and stood before the culprits.

"Being out of bed at all hours, and stuffing one's self with all manner of indigestible viands, is more than a crime against the school rules, young ladies," she began. "It is a crime against common sense. Besides, I take a pride in the fact that Briarwood Hall supplies a sufficient and a well-served table. Fruit at times between meals is all very well. But a sour pickle and a piece of angel cake at eleven or twelve o'clock at night would soon break down the digestive faculties of a second Samson.

"However," she added grimly, "that will bring its own punishment. I need not trouble myself about this phase of the matter. But that distinct rules of the school have been broken cannot be ignored. Each of you who were visitors at the study of Misses Fielding and Cameron last evening after hours will have one demerit to work off by extra exercises in Latin and French.

"Miss Cox!"

She spoke so sharply that The Fox hopped up quickly, knowing that she was especially addressed.

"It is reported to me by Miss Picolet that you spoke to her in a most unladylike manner. You have two demerits to work off, instead of one."

Mary Cox ruffled up instantly. She flounced into her seat and threw her book aside.

"Miss Cox," repeated the Preceptress, sharply, "I do not like your manner. Most of these girls are younger than you, and you are their leader. I believe you are all members of the Up and Doing Club. Have a care. Let your club stand for something besides infractions of the rules, I beg. And, when you deliberately insult the teacher who has charge of your dormitory, you insult *me*."

"I suppose I'm to be given no opportunity of answering Miss Picolet's report, or accusation?" cried Mary Fox. "I don't call it fair——"

"Silence!" exclaimed the Preceptress. "You may come to me after session this afternoon. Miss Cameron may work off a full demerit, and before the Christmas Holidays, for being the prime mover in this orgy, I am told about," said Mrs. Tellingham, bitingly. "I understand there are some extenuating circumstances in the case of Ruth Fielding. She will have one-half mark against her record—to be worked off, of course. And, young ladies, I hope this will be the last time I shall see you before me for such a matter. You are relieved for classes."

Two unexpected things happened to Ruth Fielding that morning. As they came out from breakfast she came face to face with Mary Cox, and the older girl "cut" her plainly. She swept by Ruth with her head in the air and without returning the latter's nod, and although Ruth did not care much about Mary Cox, the unkindness troubled her. The Fox had such an influence over Helen!

The second surprising happening was the receipt of a letter from Mercy Curtis, the lame girl. Dr. Davison's protege wrote:

"Dear Ruth:

"Mrs. Kimmons, next door, is trundling her twin babies—awfully homely little mites—up and down her long piazza in my wheel-chair. To what base uses have the mighty fallen! Do you know what your Uncle Jabez—Dusty Miller—has done? He had waiting for me when I got home from the sanitarium a pair of the loveliest ebony crutches you ever saw—with silver ferrules! I use 'em when I go out for a walk. Fancy old miserable, withered, crippled me going out for a walk! Of course, it's really a hobble yet—I hobble-gobble like a rheumatic goblin; but I may do better some day. The doctors all say so.

"And now I'm going to surprise you, Ruth Fielding. I'm coming to see you—not for a mere 'how-de-do-good-bye' visit; but to stay at Briarwood Hall a while. Dr. Cranfew (he's the surgeon who helped me so much) is at Lumberton and he says I can try school again. Public school he doesn't approve of for me. I don't know how they are going to 'rig' it for me, Ruth—such wonderful things happen to me all the time! But Dr. Davison says I am coming, and when he says a thing is going to happen, it happens. Like my going to the Red Mill that time.

"And isn't old Dusty Miller good to me, too? He stops to see me every Saturday when he is in town. They miss you a lot at the Red Mill, Ruthie. I have been out once behind Dr. Davison's red and white mare, to see Aunt Alviry. We just gabbled about you all the time. Your pullets are laying. Tell Helen 'Hullo!' for me. I expect to see you soon, though—that is, if arrangements can be made to billet me with somebody who doesn't mind having a Goody Two-Sticks around.

"Now, good-bye, Ruthie,
"From your fidgetty friend,
"MERCY CURTIS."

This letter delighted Ruth, and she went in search of Helen to show it to her. The chums were due at their first recitation in a very few moments. Ruth found Helen talking with Mary Cox and Belle Tingley on the steps of the building in a recitation room in which Ruth and Helen were soon to recite. Ruth heard Belle say, earnestly:

"I believe it, too. Miss Picolet wasn't downstairs in her room at all. When she caught me she came from upstairs, and that's how I didn't give any warning. I didn't expect her from that direction and I was looking downstairs."

"She had been warned, all right," said the Fox, sharply. "It's plain enough who played the traitor. Nasty little cat!"

"I believe you," said Belle. "And she only got half a demerit. They favored her, of course."

"But why any demerit at all, if she was a spy for Miss Picolet?" demanded Helen, in a worried tone.

"Pshaw! that's all for a blind," declared the Fox.

And then all three saw Ruth at the bottom of the steps. The Fox and Belle Tingley turned away without giving Ruth a second glance, and went into the building. But Helen smiled frankly on Ruth as her chum approached, and slipped an arm within her own:

"What have you got there, Ruthie?" she demanded, seeing the open letter.

"It's from Mercy. Read it when you get a chance," Ruth whispered, thrusting it into her chum's hand as they went in. "It's just as you said—Dr. Davison is going to bring it about. Mercy Curtis is coming to Briarwood, too."

Helen said nothing at all about The Fox and her room-mate. But Ruth saw that the Upedes—especially those who had been caught in the French teacher's raid on Duet Number 2—whispered

a good deal among themselves, and when they looked at Ruth they did not look kindly.

After recitation, and before dinner, several of the girls deliberately cut her as Mary Cox had. But Helen said nothing, nor would Ruth speak first. She saw plainly that The Fox had started the cabal against her. It made Ruth feel very unhappy, but there was nothing she could do to defend herself.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE MYSTERY AGAIN

The organization of the Sweetbriars had gone on apace. Two general meetings had been held. Every new-comer to the school, who had entered the Junior classes, saving Helen Cameron, had joined the new society. The committee on constitution and by-laws was now ready to report and this very afternoon Ruth and two other girls waited on Mrs. Tellingham to ask permission to hold social meetings in one of the assembly rooms on stated occasions, as the other school societies did.

The trio of Sweetbriars had to wait a little while in the hall outside the library door, for Mrs. Tellingham was engaged. Mary Cox came out first and as she passed Ruth she tossed her head and said:

"Well, are you here to tattle about somebody else?"

Ruth was stricken speechless, and the girls with her asked wonderingly what the older girl had meant.

"I—I do not know just what she means," gasped Ruth, "only that she means to hurt me if she can."

"She's mad with you," said one, "because you started the S. B.'s and wouldn't join her old Upede Club.

"That's it," said the other. "Don't you mind, Miss Fielding."

Then the maid told them they could go into the library. Mrs. Tellingham looked very grave, and sat at her desk tapping the lid thoughtfully with a pencil. This was one occasion when Dr. Tellingham was not present. The countenance of the Preceptress did not lighten at all when she saw Ruth come in.

"What is it, Miss Fielding?" she asked in her brusque way.

Ruth stated the desire of the new society briefly, and she was positive before Mrs. Tellingham replied at all that the mention of the Sweetbriars did not please the lady.

"You girls will fill your time so full, with societies and leagues, and what all, that there will be little space for studies. I am half sorry now that I ever allowed any secret, or social clubs, to be formed at Briarwood. But while we have the Forward Club, I cannot well deny the right of other girls to form similar societies.

"But I am not pleased with the Up and Doing Club. I understand that every girl but one reported out of her room after retiring bell last evening, in the West Dormitory, was a member of the Up and Doings—and the other girl was you, Miss Fielding!" she added sternly. "And you are a member of this new organization— What do you call it? The 'S. B.'s,' is it?"

"The Sweetbriars," said Ruth bravely. "And I am sorry I did anything to bring any cloud upon the name of the new club. I promise you, Mrs. Tellingham, that I will do nothing in the future to make you sorry that you sanctioned the formation of *our* society."

"Very well! Very well!" said the Preceptress, hastily. "You may have the same rights, and under the same conditions, that the older clubs have. And now, Miss Fielding, stop here a moment, I have another matter to speak to you about."

The other girls went away and Ruth, somewhat troubled by the manner of Mrs. Tellingham, waited her pleasure. The Preceptress took up a letter from her desk and read it through again.

"Dr. Davison you know, Ruth," she said, quietly. "He and your uncle, Mr. Jabez Potter, have arranged to send here to school a lame girl named Curtis———"

"My uncle!" gasped Ruth. "O, I beg your pardon, Mrs. Tellingham. But are you sure it is my uncle who is sending Mercy Curtis?"

"With Dr. Davison—yes," the Preceptress said, in some surprise. "They have equally charged themselves with her expenses at Briarwood—if she can remain here. You know her, of course?"

"Helen and I have talked of her almost every day, Mrs. Tellingham," said Ruth warmly. "She is very quick and sharp. And she is much improved in disposition from what she used to be."

"I hear you speak of her so kindly, with pleasure, Miss Fielding," said the head of the school. "For it opens the way to a suggestion that Dr. Davison makes. He wishes Mercy Curtis to room with you."

"With Helen and me!" cried Ruth, in delight. "Of course, I slept in Mercy's room all the time she was at the Red Mill last summer, and we got on nicely together."

"But you do not know how Miss Cameron will receive the suggestion of having a third girl in your small room?"

"Oh, Helen is so kind!" Ruth cried. "I do not believe she will object. And she is sorry for Mercy."

"I know you have been Helen's constant companion. Do you think you have been as good friends as you were when you came to Briarwood, Ruth?" asked Mrs. Tellingham, with sharpness.

"Helen! Oh, I hope so, Mrs. Tellingham!" cried Ruth, in great distress. "I am sure I love her just the same—and always shall."

"But she evidently finds her friends among the Upedes. Why did she not join this new society that you have started?"

"I—I did not mean to start it without her," stammered Ruth. "It was really only my suggestion. The other Infants took it up——"

"But you named it?"

"I *did* suggest the name," admitted Ruth.

"And you did not join the Up and Doing Club with your chum."

"No, Mrs. Tellingham. Nor did I join the F. C.'s. I did not like the manner in which both societies went about making converts. I didn't like it the very first day we came."

"Miss Picolet, your French teacher, told me something about Mary Cox meeting the stage and getting hold of you two girls before you had reached Briarwood at all."

"Yes, ma'am."

"By the way," said the Preceptress, her brow clouding again and the stern look coming back into her face that had rested on it when Ruth had first entered the room, "you had met Miss Picolet before you arrived at the school?"

"She spoke to us in the stage—yes, ma'am."

"But before that—you had seen her?"

"Ye-es, ma'am," said Ruth, slowly, beginning to suspect that Mrs. Tellingham's curiosity was no idle matter.

"Where?"

"On the *Lanawaxa*—the boat coming down the lake, Mrs. Tellingham."

"Miss Picolet was alone aboard the boat?"

Ruth signified that she was.

"Did you see her speaking with anybody?"

"We saw a man speak to her. He was one of the musicians. He frightened Miss Picolet. Afterward we saw that he had followed her out upon the wharf. He was a big man who played a harp."

"And you told this to your school-fellows after you became acquainted here?"

Mrs. Tellingham spoke very sternly indeed, and her gaze never left Ruth's face. The girl from the Red Mill hesitated but an instant. *She* had never spoken of the man and Miss Picolet to anybody save Helen; but she knew that her chum must have told all the particulars to Mary Cox.

"I—I believe we *did* mention it to some of the girls. It impressed us as peculiar—especially as we did not know who Miss Picolet was until after we were in the stage-coach with her."

"Then you are sure you have not been one who has circulated stories among the girls about Miss Picolet—derogatory to her, I mean?"

"Oh, Mrs. Tellingham! Never!" cried Ruth, earnestly.

"Do you know anything about this silly story I hear whispered that the marble harp out there on the fountain was heard to play the night you and Miss Cameron arrived here?"

"Oh!" ejaculated Ruth.

"I see you know about it. Did you hear the sound?"

"Ye-es, ma'am," admitted Ruth.

"I will not ask you under what circumstances you heard it; but I *do* ask if you have any knowledge of any fact that might explain the mystery?"

Ruth was silent for several moments. She was greatly worried; yet she could understand how this whole matter had come to Mrs. Tellingham's knowledge. Mary Cox, angry at Miss Picolet, had tried to defame her in the mind of the Preceptress.

Now, what Ruth *knew* was very little indeed. What she *suspected* regarding a meeting between the French teacher and the man with the harp, at the campus fountain, was an entirely different matter. But Mrs. Tellingham had put her question so that Ruth did not have to tell her suspicions.

"I really know nothing about it, Mrs. Tellingham," she said, finally.

"That is all. I do not believe you—or Miss Cameron—would willingly malign an innocent person. I have known Miss Picolet some time, and I respect her. If she has a secret sorrow, I respect *it*. I do not think it is nice to make Miss Picolet's private affairs a subject for remark by the school.

"Now, we will leave that. Sound Miss Cameron about this Mercy Curtis. If you girls will take her in, she shall come on trial. It lies with you, and your roommate, Miss Fielding. Come to me after chapel to-morrow and tell me what you have decided."

And so Ruth was dismissed.

CHAPTER XIX

THE TRIUMVIRATE

Mercy Curtis came in a week. For Helen of course was only too delighted to fall in with Mrs. Tellingham's suggestion. Duet Number 2, West Dormitory, was amply large enough for three, and Ruth gave up her bed to the cripple and slept on a couch. Helen herself could not do too much for the comfort of the newcomer.

Dr. Davidson and Dr. Cranfew came with her; but really the lame girl bore the journey remarkably well. And how different she looked from the thin, peaked girl that Ruth and Helen remembered!

"Oh, you didn't expect to see so much flesh on my bones; did you?" said Mercy, noting their surprise, and being just as sharp and choppy in her observations as ever. "But I'm getting wickedly and scandalously fat. And I don't often have to repeat Aunt Alviry's song of 'Oh, my back and oh, my bones!'"

Mercy went to bed on her arrival. But the next day she got about in the room very nicely with the aid of two canes. The handsome ebony crutches she saved for "Sunday-Best."

Ruth arranged a meeting of the Sweetbriars to welcome the cripple, and Mercy seemed really to enjoy having so many girls of her own age about her. Helen did not bring in many members of the Upedes; indeed, just then they all seemed to keep away from Duet Two, and none of them spoke to Ruth. That is, none save Jennie Stone. The fat girl was altogether too good-natured—and really too kind at heart—to treat Ruth Fielding as Jennie's roommates did.

"They say you went and told Picolet we were going to have the party in your room," Heavy said to Ruth, frankly, "and that's how you got out of it so easily. But I tell them that's all nonsense, you know. If you'd wanted to make us trouble, you would have let Helen have the party in our room, as she wanted to, and so you could have stayed home and not been in it at all."

"As she wanted to?" repeated Ruth, slowly. "Did Helen first plan to have the supper in your quartette?"

"Of course she did. It was strictly a Upede affair—or would have been if you hadn't been in it. But you're a good little thing, Ruth Fielding, and I tell them you never in this world told Picolet."

"I did not indeed, Jennie," said Ruth, sadly.

"Well, you couldn't make The Fox believe that. She's sure about it, you see," the stout girl said. "When Mary Cox wants to be mean, she can be, now I tell you!"

Indeed, Heavy was not like the other three girls in the next room. Mary, Belle and Lluella never looked at Ruth if they could help it, and never spoke to her. Ruth was not so much hurt over losing such girls for friends, for she could not honestly say she had liked them at the start; but that they should so misjudge and injure her was another matter.

She said nothing to Helen about all this; and Helen was as firmly convinced that Mary Cox and the other Upedes were jolly girls, as ever. Indeed, they were jolly enough; most of their larks were innocent fun, too. But it was a fact that most of those girls who received extra tasks during those first few weeks of the half belonged to the Up and Doing Club.

That Helen escaped punishment was more by good fortune than anything else. In the study, however, she and Ruth and Mercy had many merry times. Mercy kept both the other girls up to their school tasks, for all lessons seemed to come easy to the lame girl and she helped her two friends not a little in the preparation of their own.

"The Triumvirate" the other girls in the dormitory building called the three girls from Cheslow. Before Thanksgiving, Ruth, Helen, and Mercy began to stand high in their several classes. And Ruth was booked for the Glee Club, too. She sang every Sunday in the chorus, while Helen played second violin in the orchestra, having taken some lessons on that instrument before coming to Briarwood.

Dr. Cranfew came often at first to see Mercy; but he declared at last that he only came socially—there was no need of medical attendance. The cripple could not go to recitations without her crutches, but sometimes in the room she walked with only Ruth's strong arm for support. She was getting rosy, too, and began to take exercise in the gymnasium.

"I'll develop my biceps, if my back is crooked and my legs queer," she declared. "Then, when any of those *Miss Nancy* Seniors make fun of me behind my back, I can punch 'em!" for there were times when Mercy's old, cross-grained moods came upon her, and she was not so easily borne with.

Perhaps this fact was one of the things that drove the wedge deeper between Ruth and Helen. Ruth would never neglect the crippled girl. She seldom left her in the room alone. Mercy had early joined the Sweetbriars, and Ruth and she went to the frequent meetings of that society together, while Helen retained her membership in the Up and Doing Club and spent a deal of her time in the quartette room next door.

Few of the girls went home for Thanksgiving, and as Mercy was not to return to Cheslow then, the journey being considered too arduous for her, Ruth decided not to go either. There was quite a feast made by the school on Thanksgiving, and frost having set in a week before, skating on Triton Lake was in prospect. There was a small pond attached to the Briarwood property and Ruth tried Helen's skates there. She had been on the ice before, but not much; however, she found that the art came easily to her—as easily as tennis, in which, by this time, she was very proficient.

For the day following Thanksgiving there was a trip to Triton Lake planned, for that great sheet of water was ice-bound, too, and a small steamer had been caught 'way out in the middle of the lake, and was frozen in. The project to drive to the lake and skate out to the steamer (the ice was thick enough to hold up a team of horses, and plenty of provisions had been carried out to the crew) and to have a hot lunch on the boat originated in the fertile brain of Mary Cox; but as it was not a picnic patronized only by the Upedes, Mrs. Tellingham made no objection to it. Besides, it was vacation week, and the Preceptress was much more lenient.

Of course, Helen was going; but Ruth had her doubts. Mercy could not go, and the girl of the Red Mill hated to leave her poor little crippled friend alone. But Mercy was as sharp of perception as she was of tongue. When Helen blurted out the story of the skating frolic, Ruth said "she would see" about going; she said she wasn't sure that she would care to go.

"I'm such a new skater, you know," she laughed. "Maybe I'd break down skating out to the steamboat, and wouldn't get there, and while all you folks were eating that nice hot lunch I'd be freezing to death—poor little me!—'way out there on the ice."

But Mercy, with her head on one side and her sharp blue eyes looking from Helen to Ruth, shot out:

"Now, don't you think you're smart, Ruth Fielding? Why, I can see right through you—just as

though you were a rag of torn mosquito netting! You won't go because I'll be left alone."

"No," said Ruth, but flushing.

"Yes," shot back Mercy. "And *I* don't have to turn red about it, either. Oh, Ruthie, Ruthie! you can't even tell a *white one* without blushing about it."

"I—don't—know——"

"I do know!" declared Mercy. "You're going. I've got plenty to do. You girls can go on and freeze your noses and your toeses, if you like. Me for the steam-heated room and a box of bonbons. But I hope the girls who go will be nicer to you than some of those Upedes have been lately, Ruthie."

Helen blushed now; but Ruth hastened to say: "Oh, don't you fuss about me, Mercy. Some of the Sweetbriars mean to go. This isn't confined to one club in particular. Madge Steele is going, too, and Miss Polk. And Miss Reynolds, Mrs. Tellingham's first assistant, is going with the party. I heard all about it at supper. Poor Heavy was full of it; but she says she can't go because she never could skate so far. And then—the ice might break under *her*."

"Whisper!" added Helen, her eyes dancing. "I'll tell you something else—and this I know you don't know!"

"What is it?"

"Maybe Tom will be there. Good old Tom! Just think—I haven't seen him since we left home. Won't it be just scrumptious to see old Tom again?"

And Ruth Fielding really thought it would be.

CHAPTER XX

AT TRITON LAKE

So on the morning following the feast-day there were two wagonettes waiting at the entrance to the Briarwood grounds to take the girls two miles by road to a certain boathouse on Triton Lake. When Ruth and Helen came out of their room, leaving Mercy cozily ensconced in the window-seat with her books and the box of bonbons, the door of the quartette was open and a faint groan sounded from within.

Helen's eyes twinkled, as she said: "The others have gone, but Jennie's up in dry-dock for repairs. No wonder she wouldn't promise to be one of the skating party. The pleasures of the table must be paid for—— How do you feel now, Heavy?" she added, putting her head in at the door.

"No better. Oh!" came back the complaining voice. "I *do* have such dreadful ill-fortune. I can't eat *just a little bit* without its distressing me abominably!"

The chums ran down to the wagonettes and found most of the girls who were going already there. Ruth, seeing that there was more room in the second carriage, whisked into it, and Helen was following her when Mary Cox came up.

"Going to get in here, Cameron?" she said. "Well, I'll get in with you—no, I won't!" she suddenly exclaimed, seeing Ruth peering out. "Come on to the other wagonette; Belle and Lluella are there."

For a moment Helen hesitated. Then Mary said, jerking at her sleeve:

"Come on! We want to start in a minute. I've heard from the boys and I want to tell you. They've sent a whole sleighload of things out to the *Minnetonka*—the boat that's frozen in, you know—and music, and we'll have great fun. Sh! Miss Reynolds don't know. She's such a fuss-budget! If she knew the boys were coming—well!"

"Oh, Tom, too!" gasped Helen, delighted. Then she turned and said, in a whisper: "Ruth!"

"Come on and let that tattle-tale alone!" exclaimed Mary Cox. "Tell her, and she'll run to Miss Reynolds with it."

Helen went with her.

Had Ruth Fielding possessed the power of movement just then, she would have gotten out of the wagon and run away to the dormitory. But she was stricken motionless as well as speechless

by her chum's defection, and before she could recover her poise the wagons had begun to move, rattling over the frozen road toward Triton Lake.

Ah! how it hurt! For weeks Ruth had endured slights, and haughty looks, and innuendoes from Mary Cox and her Upedes—and the girl from the Red Mill had accepted all uncomplainingly. She had heretofore believed Helen only thoughtless. But this was more than Ruth Fielding could bear. She was the last girl to get into the wagonette, and she turned her head away, that her companions might not see her tears.

The other girls chattered, and laughed, and sang, and enjoyed themselves. Ruth Fielding passed the few minutes which elapsed during the drive to the boathouse in trying to stifle her sobs and remove the traces of her emotion. She was tempted to remain in the wagonette and go back to the school at once—for the carriages would return to town, coming out again for the party of Briarwood students late in the afternoon.

This thought was her first intention; but as her sobs subsided she felt more the hurt of the treatment she had received. And this hurt stirred within her a self-assertion that was becoming a more prominent characteristic of Ruth every day. Why should she relapse into tears because her chum had done a cruel thing? Hurt as she was, why should she give The Fox the satisfaction of *knowing* she felt the slight?

Ruth began to take herself to task for her "softness." Let Helen go with the Upedes if she wished. Here were nice girls all about her, and all the Sweetbriars particularly thought a great deal of her, Ruth knew. She need not mope and weep just because Helen Cameron, her oldest friend, had neglected her. The other girls stood ready to be her friends.

They had not noticed Ruth's silence and abstraction—much less her tears. She wiped her eyes hard, gulped down her sobs, and determined to have a good time in spite of either the Upedes or Helen's hardness of heart.

The first wagonette reached the shore of the lake some time ahead of the second. And perhaps this fact, as well as the placing of Miss Reynolds in the latter, had been arranged by the wily Miss Cox.

"Oh, Mary Cox!" cried Helen, looking out, "there's a whole lot of folks here—BOYS!"

But when one of the boys came running to help her down the steps, Helen shouted with delight. She came "flopping" down into Tom Cameron's arms.

"How scrumptious you look, Nell!" cried her brother, kissing her frankly. "Here is Bob Steele—I want you to know him. He's my bunkie at Seven Oaks. Isn't his sister with you—Madge Steele?"

"Yes. Miss Steele's here," gasped Helen.

"But where's Ruth?" demanded the excited Tom. "Come on and get her. We want to get our skates on and make for the steamer. The ice is like glass."

"Why—Ruth's in the other wagonette," said Helen.

"She's not with you?" exclaimed Tom, rather chagrined. "Why, how's that?"

"We—we happened to get into different ones," said his sister.

To tell the truth, she had not thought of Ruth since leaving the school.

"Is that the other one coming—'way back on the road there?"

"Yes," said Helen. "Here's Miss Cox, Tom. Mary, this is my brother."

Bob Steele, who was a tall, blond fellow, was at hand to be introduced, too. His sister jumped out of the wagon and said: "Hullo, Bobbie! How's your poor croup?" Madge was a year and a half older than her brother and always treated him as though he were a very small boy in knickerbockers—if not actually in pinafores.

The girls giggled over this, and Bob Steele blushed. But he took his sister's chaffing good-naturedly. Tom Cameron, however, was very much disturbed over the absence of Ruth Fielding.

"We'd better hurry out on the ice. We've got an awful strict teacher with us," said Mary Cox, hastily.

"You take care of my sister, too; will you, Bob?" said Tom, bluntly. "I shall wait and bring Miss Fielding down."

"Oh, she'll look out for herself," said Mary Cox, slightingly. "We must hurry if we want any fun."

"Helen and I wouldn't have much fun if Ruth were left behind," declared Master Tom, firmly.

"Go on, Bob; we'll catch up with you."

"Hadn't you better come, too, Tom?" whispered Helen, doubtfully.

"Why, we want Ruth with us; don't we?" demanded the puzzled Tom, looking at her in wonder. "Go on, Nell. We'll be with you shortly."

"Why, I want to introduce you to the other girls," said Helen, pouting. "And I haven't seen you myself for so long."

"It's too bad you got separated from your spoon, Nell," said her brother, calmly. "But I shall wait and bring her."

The others—even Madge Steele—were already trooping down to the landing, where there were settees for the girls to sit on while their skates were being adjusted. Helen had to run after them, and Tom waited alone the arrival of the second wagonette from Briarwood Hall.

CHAPTER XXI

ON THE ICE

If Ruth Fielding's eyes were a bit red when the wagonette finally came to the landing, nobody would have suspected her of crying. Least of all Tom Cameron, for she jumped down with a glad cry when she saw him, and dropped her skates and shook both his hands in a most cordial greeting.

"Helen hinted that you might be here, Tom, but I could hardly believe it," she said.

"We want to hurry and catch up with them," he said. Some of the girls were already on the ice. "We'd better go."

But the other girls had alighted, and following them came Miss Reynolds. Now, Ruth liked Miss Reynolds very much, but the teacher came towards them, looking rather grave.

"This is Helen Cameron's brother Tom, Miss Reynolds," said Ruth. "He attends the Seven Oaks Military Academy."

"I see," said the teacher, quietly. "And where is Miss Cameron?"

"She has gone on with Bob Steele and his sister," explained Tom, seeing instantly that all was not right. "You see, some of us fellows got permission to come over here to Triton Lake to-day. Mr. Hargreaves, one of our tutors, is with us."

"I know Mr. Hargreaves," said Miss Reynolds. "But I had no warning—nor had Mrs. Tellingham, I believe—that any of the young gentlemen from Major Parradel's school were to be here."

"Well, it will make it all the nicer, I am sure," Tom suggested, with his winning smile. "We'll all—all us fellows, I mean—try to behave our prettiest, Miss Reynolds."

"Undoubtedly you will be on your good behavior," said the teacher, drily.

But Tom and Ruth could not hurry on ahead now. Miss Reynolds walked sedately with them down to the landing. By that time Mary Cox and most of the Upedes were on the ice—and they were joined by all the boys but Tom. The Fox had laid her plans well.

Mr. Hargreaves skated back to shake hands with Miss Reynolds. "This is a surprise," he said. "I am sure I did not expect to find you and your young ladies here, Miss Reynolds."

"Are you sure that the meeting is *quite* unexpected by both parties?" she returned, with a grave smile. "If we are surprised, Mr. Hargreaves, I fancy that our young charges may have been rather better informed in advance than we were."

The gentleman shrugged his shoulders. "I give that up!" he said. "It may be. I see you have your hands full here. Shall I take my—er—my remaining young man away with me?" he asked, looking aside at Tom, who was already fastening Ruth's skates.

"Oh, no," said Miss Reynolds, grimly. "I'll make use of him!"

And she most certainly did. Tom was anxious to get Ruth away at once so that they could catch up with the foremost skaters; but he could not refuse to aid her teacher. And then there were others of the girls to help. They were all on the ice before Master Tom could get his own

skates on.

Then there was a basket to carry, and of course Tom could not see the teacher or one of the girls carry it. He took it manfully. Then Miss Reynolds gave Ruth her hand and skated with her, and Master Tom was fain to skate upon Ruth's other hand. And so they went on slowly, while the lively crowd ahead drew farther and farther away. It was not an unpleasant journey out across the smooth lake, however, and perhaps the party who had but one boy for escort had just as pleasant a time in many respects as those in advance.

Ruth made her friend acquainted with all the Sweetbriars who were present and whispered to him how he had really named the new Briarwood society. That vastly tickled Tom and he made himself just as agreeable to the girls as he knew how. Miss Reynolds was no wet blanket on the fun, either, and she was as good a skater as Tom himself. Ruth had improved greatly, and before they reached the frost-bound *Minnetonka* the teacher relieved Tom of his basket and told him to give the girl from the Red Mill a lesson in skating with a partner—practice which she sorely needed.

It was spirited indeed to fly over the ice, guided by Tom's sure foot and hand. They described a great curve and came back to Miss Reynolds and the other girls, who progressed more sedately. Then Tom gave his hands to two of the older girls and with their arms stretched at full length the trio went careening over the ice on the "long roll" in a way that made Ruth, looking on with shining eyes, fairly hold her breath.

"It's wonderful!" she cried, when the three came back, glowing with the exercise. "Do you suppose I can ever learn that, Tom?"

"Why, Ruthie, you're so sure of yourself on the skates that I believe I could teach you to roll very easily. If Miss Reynolds will allow me?"

"Go on, Master Tom," the teacher said, laughing. "But don't go too far away. We are nearing the boat now."

The first party that had struck out from the shore had all arrived at the ice-bound *Minnetonka* now, and many of them were skating in couples thereabout. At the stern of the steamboat was an open place in the ice, for Ruth and Tom could see the water sparkling. There was little wind, but it was keen; the sun was quite warm and the exercise kept the skaters from feeling the cold.

"Hullo!" exclaimed Tom to Ruth, as they began to get into good stroke—for the girl was an apt pupil—"who is that old Bobbins has got under his wing?"

"Who is Bobbins?" asked Ruth, with a laugh.

"My bunkie—that's what we call our chums at Seven Oaks. Bob Steele."

"Madge Steele's brother?"

"Yes. And no end of a good fellow," declared Tom. "But, my aunt! don't his sister rig him, though? Asked old Bobbins if he had the croup?" and Tom went off into a burst of laughter.

"Do you mean the tall, light-haired boy?" Ruth queried.

"Yes. They're skating back toward the steamboat now—see, towards the stern."

"That is Mary Cox with your friend," said Ruth, a little gravely.

"Hullo!" ejaculated Tom, again.

He started ahead at full clip, bearing Ruth on with him. Something had happened to the couple Tom and Ruth had noticed. They swerved to one side and suddenly Bob Steele went down.

"His skate's broke!" erred Tom. "Hope old Bobbins isn't hurt. Great Scott! the girl's with him!"

Mary Cox had indeed fallen. For a moment the two figures, flung by the momentum of their pace, slid over the ice. There came a wild shout from those nearer the boat—then a splash!

"They're in the water!" cried Ruth, in horror.

She retarded Tom very little, but dashed forward, keeping in stroke with him. She heard Tom whisper:

"Poor old Bobbins! he'll be drowned!"

"No, no, Tom! We can get to them," gasped Ruth.

Indeed, she and her escort were the nearest to the open place in the lake into which Bob Steele and Mary Cox had fallen. If anybody in sight could help the victims of the accident Tom and Ruth could!

CHAPTER XXII

THE HARPIST ONCE MORE

Over all, Ruth wore a woolen sweater—one of those stretchy, clinging coats with great pearl buttons that was just the thing for a skating frolic. It had been her one reckless purchase since being at Briarwood, she and Helen having gone down into Lumberton on Saturday and purchased coats. While Ruth and Tom were yet some yards from the open water the girl began to unbutton this.

"Careful, Tom!" she gasped. "Not too near—wait!"

"It's thick 'way to the edge," he returned, pantingly.

"No, it isn't. That's why Mary Cox went in. I saw the ice break under her when she tried to turn and escape."

Thus warned, Tom dug the heel of his right skate into the ice as a brake, and they slowed down.

Ruth let go of his hand and wriggled out of her coat in a moment. Then she dropped to her knees and slid along the ice, while Tom flung himself forward and traveled just as though he were sliding down hill.

"Take this, Tom!" cried Ruth, and tossed the coat to him. "We'll make a chain—I'll hold your feet. Not too near!"

"Hold on, Bobbins!" yelled young Cameron. "We'll have you out in a minute!"

Mary Cox had screamed very loudly at first; and she struggled with her fellow victim, too. Bob Steele was trying to hold her up, but finally he was obliged to let her go, and she went under water with a gurgling cry.

"Grab her again, Bobbins!" called Tom, flinging Ruth's coat ahead of him, but holding firmly to it himself by the two sleeves.

"I've got her!" gasped Bob Steele, his teeth chattering, and up The Fox came again, her hair all dripping, and her face very pale.

"Good!" said Tom. "She's swallowed enough water to keep her still for a while—what? Come on, now, old boy! Don't wait! Catch hold!"

As Ruth had warned him, the edge of the ice was fragile. He dared not push himself out too far with the sharp toes of his skates. He dug them into the ice now hard, and made another cast with the coat.

His chum caught it. Tom drew them slowly toward the edge of the ice. Ruth pulled back as hard as she could, and together they managed to work their bodies at least two yards farther from the open water. The ice stopped cracking under Tom's breast.

There was the ring of skates and shouting of voices in their ears, and Ruth, raising herself slightly, looked around and screamed to the crowd to keep back. Indeed, the first of Tom's school friends would have skated right down upon them had they not thus been warned.

"Keep back!" Ruth cried. "We can get them out. Don't come nearer!"

Tom seconded her warning, too. But mainly he gave himself up to the work of aiding the two in the water. Bob Steele lifted the girl up—he was a strong swimmer even in that icy bath—and did it with one hand, too, for he clung to Ruth's coat with the other.

Mary Cox began to struggle again. Fortunately Bob had her half upon the ice. Tom reached forward and seized her shoulder. He dragged back with all his strength. The ice crashed in again; but Mary did not fall back, for Tom jerked her heavily forward.

"Now we've got her!" called Tom.

And they really had. Mary Cox was drawn completely out of the water. Mr. Hargreaves, meanwhile, had flown to the rescue with two of the bigger boys. They got down on the ice, forming a second living chain, and hitching forward, the tutor seized the half-conscious girl's hand. The others drew back and dragged Mr. Hargreaves, with the girl, to firm ice.

Meanwhile Tom, with Ruth to help him, struggled manfully to get Bob Steele out. That

youngster was by no means helpless, and they accomplished the rescue smartly.

"And that's thanks to you, Ruthie!" declared Tom, when the tutor and Miss Reynolds had hurried the half-drowned girl and young Steele off to the *Minnetonka*. "I'd never have gotten him but for you—and look at your coat!"

"It will dry," laughed the girl from the Red Mill. "Let's hurry after them, Tom. You're wet a good deal, too—and I shall miss my coat, being so heated. Come on!"

But she could not escape the congratulations of the girls and boys when they reached the steamboat. Even Mary Cox's closest friends gathered around Ruth to thank her. Nobody could gainsay the fact that Ruth had been of great help in the recovery of Mary and Bob from the lake.

But Helen! had the other girls—and Miss Reynolds—not been in the little cabin of the boat which had been given up to the feminine members of the party, she would have broken down and cried on Ruth's shoulder. To think that she had been guilty of neglecting her chum!

"I believe I have been bewitched, Ruthie," she whispered. "Tom, I know, is on the verge of scolding me. What did you say to him?"

"Nothing that need trouble you in the least, you may be sure, Helen," said Ruth. "But, my dear, if it has taken such a thing as *this*—which is not a thing to go into heroics over—to remind you that I might possibly be hurt by your treatment, I am very sorry indeed."

"Why, Ruth!" Helen gasped. "You don't forgive me?"

"I am not at all sure, Helen, that you either need or want my forgiveness," returned Ruth. "You have done nothing yourself for which you need to ask it—er, at least, very little; but your friends have insulted and been unkind to me. I do not think that I could have called girls *my* friends who had treated you so, Helen."

Miss Cox had retired to a small stateroom belonging to one of the officers of the boat, while her clothing was dried by the colored stewardess. Bob Steele, however, borrowed some old clothes of some of the crew, and appeared when the lunch was ready in those nondescript garments, greatly adding to the enjoyment of the occasion.

"Well, sonny, your croup *will* bother you sure enough, after that dip," declared his sister. "Come! let sister tuck your bib in like a nice boy. And *don't* gobble!"

Bob was such a big fellow—his face was so pink, and his hair so yellow—that Madge's way of talking to him made him seem highly comic. The fellows from Seven Oaks shouted with laughter, and the girls giggled. Mr. Hargreaves and Miss Reynolds, both relieved beyond expression by the happy conclusion of what might have been a very serious accident, did not quell the fun; and fifty or sixty young people never had such a good time before in the saloon of the lake steamer, *Minnetonka*.

Suddenly music began somewhere about the boat and the young folk began to get restive. Some ran for their skates again, for the idea was to remain near the steamer for a while and listen to the music before going back to shore. The music was a piano, guitar, violin, and harp, and when Ruth heard it and recognized the latter instrument she was suddenly reminded of Miss Picolet and the strange harpist who (she firmly believed) had caused the startling sound at the fountain.

"Let's go and see who's playing," she whispered to Helen, who had clung close to her ever since they had come aboard the steamboat. And as Tom was on the other side of his sister, he went with them into the forward part of the boat.

"Well, what do you know about *that*?" demanded Tom, almost before the girls were in the forward cabin. "Isn't that the big man with the red waistcoat that frightened that little woman on the *Lanawaxa*? You know, you pointed them out to me on the dock at Portageton, Helen? Isn't that him at the harp?"

"Oh! it is, indeed!" ejaculated his sister. "What a horrid man he is! Let's come away."

But Ruth was deeply interested in the harpist. She wondered what knowledge of, or what connection he had with, the little French teacher, Miss Picolet. And she wondered, too, if her suspicions regarding the mystery of the campus—the sounding of the harpstring in the dead of night—were borne out by the facts?

Had this coarse fellow, with his pudgy hands, his corpulency, his drooping black mustache, some hold upon Miss Picolet? Had he followed her to Briarwood Hall, and had he made her meet him behind the fountain just at that hour when the Upedes were engaged in hazing Helen and herself? These thoughts arose in her mind again as Ruth gazed apprehensively at the ugly-looking harpist.

Helen pulled her sleeve and Ruth was turning away when she saw that the little, piglike eyes of the harpist were turned upon them. He smiled in his sly way and actually nodded at them.

"Sh! he remembers us," whispered Helen. "Oh, do come away, Ruth!"

"He isn't any handsome object, that's a fact," muttered Tom. "And the cheek of him—nodding to you two girls!"

After the excitement of the accident on the lake our friends did not feel much like skating until it came time to go back to the landing. Mr. Hargreaves was out on the ice with those students of the two schools who preferred to skate; but Miss Reynolds remained in the cabin. Mary Cox had had her lunch in the little stateroom, wrapped in blankets and in the company of an oil-stove, for heat's sake. Now she came out, re-dressed in her own clothes, which were somewhat mussed and shrunken in appearance.

Helen ran to her at once to congratulate Mary on her escape. "And wasn't it lucky Tom and Ruth were so near you?" she cried. "And dear old Ruthie! she's quite a heroine; isn't she? And you must meet Tom."

"I shall be glad to meet and thank your brother, Helen," said The Fox, rather crossly. "But I don't see what need there is to make a fuss over Fielding. Your brother and Mr. Hargreaves pulled Mr. Steele and me out or the lake."

Helen stepped back and her pretty face flushed. She had begun to see Mary Cox in her true light. Certainly she was in no mood just then to hear her chum disparaged. She looked around for Tom and Ruth; the former was talking quietly with Miss Reynolds, but Ruth had slipped away when The Fox came into the cabin.

Mary Cox walked unperturbed to the teacher and Tom and put out her hand to the youth, thanking him very nicely for what he had done.

"Oh, you mustn't thank me more than the rest of them," urged Tom. "At least, I did no more than Ruthie. By the way, where *is* Ruthie?"

But Ruth Fielding had disappeared, and they did not see her again until the call was given for the start home. Then she appeared from the forward part of the boat, very pale and silent, and all the way to the shore, skating between Tom and Helen, she had scarcely a word to say.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE SECRET

For there was the burden of a secret on Ruth Fielding's mind and heart. She had slipped away when she saw The Fox appear in the outer cabin and, walking forward, had been stopped suddenly in a cross gallery by a firm touch upon her arm.

"Sh! Mademoiselle!"

Before she looked into the shadowy place she realized that it was the harpist. His very presence so near her made Ruth shrink and tremble for an instant. But then she recovered her self-possession and asked, unshakenly:

"What do you want of me?"

"Ah, Mademoiselle! Kind Mademoiselle!" purred the great creature—and Ruth knew well what his villainous smile must look like, although she could not see it. "May the unfortunate vagabond musician speak a single word into Mademoiselle's ear?"

"You have spoken several words into it already, sir," said Ruth, sharply. "What do you want?"

"Ah! the Mademoiselle is so practical," murmured the harpist again.

"Be quick," commanded Ruth, for although she had a strong repugnance for the fellow there was no reason why she should fear him, with so many people within call. "State your reason for stopping me, sir."

"The Mademoiselle is from the school—the institute where learning is taught the lo-fe-ly Misses?"

He thus made three syllables of "lovely" and Ruth knew that he leered like a Billiken in the dark.

"I am at Briarwood Hall—yes," she said.

"I have seen the kind Mademoiselle before," said the man. "On the boat on that other so-beeg

lake—Osago, is it?"

"On the *Lanawaxa*—yes," admitted Ruth.

"Ah! I am proud. The Mademoiselle remember me," he exclaimed, bowing in the dark alley.

"Go on," urged Ruth, impatiently.

"It is of the leetle lady—Mademoiselle Picolet—I would speak," he said, more quickly.

"Our French teacher—yes."

"Then, knowing her, will the Mademoiselle take a small note from the poor musician to the good Picolet? 'Tis a small matter—no?"

"You want me to do this without telling anybody about it?" questioned Ruth, bluntly.

"*Oui, oui*, Mademoiselle! You have the discernment beyond your years. Indeed!"

"I knew it must be something underhanded you wanted," declared Ruth, boldly.

He laughed and Ruth saw a small envelope thrust toward her in the dusk of the passage. "You will take it?" he said.

"I will take it—providing you do not come there again," exclaimed Ruth.

"Come where?" he demanded.

"To the school. To the campus where the fountain is."

"Ha! you know *that*, my pretty bird?" he returned. "Well! this will perhaps relieve the good Picolet of my presence—who knows?"

"Then I will take it," Ruth said, hastily, her hand closing on the billet.

"*Comme il faut*," he said, and went away down the passage, humming in his bassoon voice.

And so, as she sped shoreward between her two friends, Ruth had the little letter tucked away in the bosom of her frock. The secret troubled her. She was really glad to say good bye to Tom at the landing, and all the way back in the wagonette, although Helen sat close to her and tried to show her how sorry she was for her past neglect, Ruth was very silent.

For she was much disturbed by this secret. She feared she was doing wrong in carrying the note to Miss Picolet. Yet, under different circumstances, she might have thought little of it. But after her talk with Mrs. Tellingham about the mystery of the campus, she was troubled to think that she was taking any part in the French teacher's private affairs.

Helen was so filled with the excitement of the day, and of her long talk with her twin brother, that she did not observe Ruth's distraught manner.

"And we'll have such fun!" Ruth finally awoke to hear her chum declare in a whisper. "Father's always promised to get a place in the woods, and Snow Camp is a delightful spot."

"What are you talking about, Helen?" demanded Ruth, suddenly.

"I don't believe you've heard a thing I've been saying," cried her chum.

"I haven't heard everything," admitted Ruth. "But tell me now; I'll listen."

"It's about the Christmas Holidays. You shall go with us. We're going 'way up in the woods—to a hunting camp that father has bought. We were there for a week-end once when Mr. Parrish owned it. Snow Camp is the most delightful place."

"I am sure you will have a fine time," Ruth said, generously.

"And so you will, too," declared Helen, "for you're going."

"My *dear*! I am going home to the Red Mill at Christmas."

"And we'll go home for Christmas, too; but there are three weeks' holidays, and two of them we will spend at Snow Camp. Oh, yes we will!" Helen cried. "I'd cry my eyes out if you didn't go, Ruth."

"But Uncle Jabez——"

"We'll just tease him until he lets you go. He'll not object much, I'm sure. I should just cry my eyes out if you didn't go with us, Ruthie," she repeated.

The plan for the winter holidays sank into insignificance in Ruth's mind, however, when they

left the carriages and ran over to the West Dormitory just as evening was falling. Mercy waved a white hand to them from her window as they crossed the campus; but Ruth allowed Helen to run ahead while she halted in the lower corridor and asked Miss Scrimp if the French teacher was in her room.

"Oh, yes, Miss Ruthie," said the matron. "Miss Picolet is in. You can knock."

As Ruth asked this question and received its answer she saw Mary Cox come in alone at the hall door. The Fox had not spoken to Ruth since the accident on the ice. Now she cast no pleasant glance in Ruth's direction. Yet, seeing the younger girl approaching Miss Picolet's door, Mary smiled one of her very queerest smiles, nodded her head with secret satisfaction, and marched on upstairs to her own study.

"Enter!" said Miss Picolet's soft voice in answer to Ruth's timid rap on the panel of the door.

The girl entered and found the little French teacher sewing by the window. Miss Picolet looked up, saw who it was, and welcomed Ruth with a smile.

"I hope you have had a joyful day, Miss Ruth," she said. "Come to the radiator—you are cold."

"I am going to run upstairs in a moment, Mademoiselle," said Ruth, hesitatingly. "But I have a message for you."

"A message for me?" said the lady, in surprise.

"Yes, ma'am."

"From the Preceptress, Ruth?"

"No, Miss Picolet. It—it is a letter that has been given me to be handed to you—secretly."

The little teacher's withered cheek flushed and her bright little eyes clouded. By the way one of her hands fluttered over her heart, too, Ruth knew that Miss Picolet was easily frightened.

"A letter for me?" she whispered.

Ruth was unbuttoning her coat and frock to get at the letter. She said:

"There was an orchestra on that boat that was frozen into the ice, Miss Picolet. One of the musicians spoke to me. He knew you—or said he did——"

The girl hated to go on, Miss Picolet turned so pale and looked so frightened. But it had to be done, and Ruth pursued her story:

"I had seen the man before—the day we came to school here, Helen and I. He played the harp on the *Lanawaxa*."

"Ah!" gasped the French woman, holding out her hand. "No more, my dear! I understand. Let me have it."

But now Ruth hesitated and stammered, and felt in the bosom of her dress with growing fear. She looked at Miss Picolet, her own face paling.

"Oh, Miss Picolet!" she suddenly burst out. "What will you think? What can I say?"

"What—what is the matter?" gasped the French teacher.

"I—I haven't got it—it is gone!"

"What do you mean, Ruth Fielding?" cried Miss Picolet, springing to her feet.

"It's gone—I've lost it! Oh, my dear Miss Picolet! I didn't mean to. I tried to be so careful. But I have lost the letter he gave me addressed to you!"

CHAPTER XXIV

"WHO IS THE TATTLE-TALE?"

The next day the whole school were at their books again—the short Thanksgiving recess was ended. It had been just a breathing space for the girls who really were anxious to stand well in their classes at Briarwood Hall. Those who—like some of the Upedes—desired nothing so much as "fun," complained because the vacation had been so short, and dawdled over their books

again.

But there was no dawdling in Duet Two, West Dormitory. Had Helen been inclined to lapse occasionally, or Ruth sunk under the worriment of mind which had borne her down since the day of the skating party on Triton Lake, Mercy Curtis kept the two chums to the mark.

"No shirking, you young ones!" commanded the crippled girl, in her sharp way. "Remember the hare would have won the race easily if he hadn't laid down to nap beside the course. Come! some tortoise will beat you in French and Latin yet, Helen, if you don't keep to work. And go to work at that English composition, Ruthie Remissness! You'd both be as lazy as Ludlum's dog if it wasn't for me."

And so she kept them up to the work, and kept herself up, too. There wasn't much time for larking now, if one wished to stand well at the end of the term. The teachers watched for shirkers more closely, too. Even Mary Cox and her friends next door showed some signs of industry.

"Although it does seem as though we were always being worked to death," groaned Heavy, one day, to Ruth. "I feel as though my constitution was actually breaking down under the strain. I've written to my father that if he wants to see even a shadow of my former self at Christmas, he had better tell Mrs. Tellingham not to force me so!"

She sighed breezily and looked so hard at the piece of cocoanut pie beside Ruth's plate (having eaten her own piece already) that Ruth laughed and pushed it toward her.

"Have it if you like, Heavy," she said. "I am not very hungry."

"Well, there isn't quite so much of you to nourish, my dear," declared Jennie Stone, more briskly. "I really *do* feel the need of an extra piece. Thank you, Ruth! You're a good little thing."

"Miss Picolet will see you, Ruth," whispered Helen, on her other side. "She is disgusted with Heavy's piggishness. But Miss Picolet, after all, won't say anything to you. You are her pet."

"Don't say that, Helen," replied Ruth, with some sadness. "I am sorry for Miss Picolet."

"I don't see why you need be. She seems to get along very well," returned her chum.

But Ruth could not forget how the little French teacher had looked—how frightened she was and how tearful—the afternoon when Ruth had told her of the incident aboard the *Minnetonka*, and of her loss of the mysterious letter sent by the harpist. The little French woman had begged her not to blame herself for the loss of the letter; she had only begged her to say nothing to a soul about either the man or the letter. And Ruth had kept the secret.

Nearly a fortnight had passed since the occurrence, and it lacked not many days to the close of the term, when one evening, after a meeting of the S. B.'s in their usual room over the dining hall, Ruth had been delayed a bit and was hurrying out alone so as not to be caught out of the dormitory after warning bell, when old Tony Foyle hailed her.

"I was a-goin' to the West Dormitory to ax Miss Scrimp for to call ye, Miss Ruthie," said the old Irishman, who—like most of the help about the school—was fond of the girl from the Red Mill. "Ye're wanted, Miss."

"Wanted?" asked Ruth, in surprise. "Who by?"

"The Missus wants ye—Missus Tellingham. Ye're ter go straight to her study, so ye are."

Much disturbed—for she feared there might be bad news from home—Ruth ran to the main building and knocked on Mrs. Tellingham's door. At her pleasantly spoken "Come in!" the girl entered and found the Preceptress at her desk, while the old doctor, quite as blind and deaf to everything but his own work as usual, was bent over his papers at the end of the long table. But at this hour, and in the privacy of the place, he had cocked the brown wig over one ear in the most comical way, displaying a perfectly bald, shiny patch of pate which made his naturally high forehead look fairly enormous.

"Nothing to be frightened about, Miss Fielding," said Mrs. Tellingham, instantly reading aright what she saw in Ruth's countenance. "You need not be disturbed. For I really do not believe you are at fault in this matter which has been brought to my notice."

"No, Mrs. Tellingham?" asked Ruth, curiously.

"I have only a question to ask you. Have you lost something—something that might have been entrusted to you for another person? Some letter, for instance?"

The color flashed into Ruth's face. She was always thinking about the note the harpist had given to her on the steamboat to take to Miss Picolet. She could not hide her trouble from the sharp eyes of Mrs. Tellingham.

"You *have* lost something?"

"I don't know whether I should tell you. I don't know that I have a right to tell you," Ruth stammered.

Mrs. Tellingham looked at her sharply for a minute or so, and then nodded. Then she said:

"I understand. You have been put on your honor not to tell?"

"Yes, Mrs. Tellingham. It is not my secret."

"But there is a letter to be recovered?"

"Ye-es."

"Is this it?" asked Mrs. Tellingham, suddenly thrusting under Ruth's eye a very much soiled and crumpled envelope. And it had been unsealed, Ruth could see. The superscription was to "Mademoiselle Picolet."

"It—it looks like it," Ruth whispered. "But it was sealed when I had it."

"I do not doubt it," said Mrs. Tellingham, with a shake of her head. "But the letter was given to me first, and then the envelope. The—the person who claims to have found it when you dropped it, declared it to be open then."

"Oh, I do not think so!" cried Ruth.

"Well. Enough that I know its contents. You do not?"

"Indeed, no, Mrs. Tellingham. I may have done wrong to agree to deliver the letter. But I—I was so sorry for her——"

"I understand. I do not blame you in the least, child," said Mrs. Tellingham, shortly. "This letter states that the writer expects more money from our Miss Picolet—poor thing! It states that if the money is not forthcoming to an address he gives her before to-day—to-day, mind you, is the date—he will come here for it. It is, in short, a threat to make trouble for Miss Picolet. And the person finding this letter when you dropped it has deliberately, I believe, retained it until to-day before bringing it to me, for the express purpose of letting the scoundrel come here and disturb Miss Picolet's peace of mind."

"Oh, how mean!" gasped Ruth, involuntarily.

"Mean indeed, Ruth," said the Preceptress, gravely. "And you have yourself experienced some ill-usage from the person who has played spy and informer in this matter, since you have come to Briarwood Hall. I understand—you know that little can go on about the school that does not reach my ears in one way or another—that this same person has called you a 'tattle-tale' and tried to make your friends among the girls believe that you played traitor to them on a certain occasion. I have told Miss Cox exactly what I think of her action in this case," and she tapped the letter before her. "She has shown plainly," said Mrs. Tellingham, with sternness, "that she is a most sly and mean-spirited girl. I am sorry that one of the young ladies of Briarwood Hall is possessed of so contemptible a disposition."

CHAPTER XXV

GETTING ON

It was a frosty night and snow lay smoothly upon the campus. Only the walks and the cemented place about the fountain were cleaned. Tony Foyle had made his last rounds and put out the lights; but although there was no moon the starlight on the snow made the campus silvery in spots. But the leafless trees, and the buildings about the open space, cast deep shadows.

There was a light shining in a study window of the West Dormitory and that light was in the room occupied by the Triumvirate—Ruth Fielding, Helen Cameron and Mercy Curtis. The two latter were abed, but awake and wondering why Ruth had not returned, and what Miss Scrimp had meant by coming to the door and telling them to leave the light burning.

The clocks had long since struck eleven and it was close to midnight. The night was still, for there was no wind. It was possible that very few of either the scholars, teachers, or servants at Briarwood were awake. But almost directly under the light in the Triumvirate's room another light burned—in the study of the French teacher. She seldom retired early; that is one reason why those girls who considered Miss Picolet their enemy believed she was always on the watch.

Three figures came out of the basement door under the tower of Briarwood Hall—a lady

much bundled up, a girl ditto, and the old Irishman, Tony Foyle.

"Sure, ma'am, jest as I told ye this afternoon, the big felly that sassed me last fall, tryin' ter git in ter play his harp, and with his other vagabonds, was hanging around again to-day. I hear him an' his rapscallion companions is in Lumberton. They've been playing about here and there, for a month back. And now I see him comin' along with his harp on his back—bad 'cess to him! P'raps they're walkin' across to Sivin Oaks, an' are takin' in Briarwood as a 'cross-cut'."

"Hush!" whispered the Preceptress. "Isn't that somebody over yonder—by the fountain?"

They were all three silent, keeping close in the shadow. Some object *did* seem to be moving in the shadow of the fountain. Suddenly there sounded on the still night air the reverberating note of a harp—a crash of sound following the flourish of a practised hand across the wires.

"Bless us and save us!" muttered Tony. "'Tis the marble harp. 'Tis a banshee playin'."

"Be still!" commanded Mrs. Tellingham. "It is nothing of the kind, you very well know, Tony. Ah!"

She had looked instantly toward the illuminated window of the French teacher's study at the other side of the campus. The shade had snapped up to the top of the casement, and the shadow of Miss Picolet appeared. The French teacher had heard the voice of the harp.

"Oh, poor little thing," murmured Mrs. Tellingham. "This seems like spying and eavesdropping, Ruth Fielding; but I mean to stop this thing right here and now. She shall not be frightened out of her wits by this villain."

They heard no further sound from the harp at the fountain. But the door of the West Dormitory opened and the little figure of Miss Picolet appeared, wrapped in some long, loose garment, and she sped down toward the fountain. Soon she was out of sight behind the marble statue.

"Come!" breathed the Preceptress.

They heard Miss Picolet and the man chattering in their own language—the man threatening, the woman pleading—when the trio got to the fountain. Ruth was a poor French scholar, but of course Mrs. Tellingham understood what they said. And the Preceptress glided around the fountain and confronted the harpist with a suddenness that quite startled him.

"You, sir!" exclaimed the lady, coldly. "I have heard enough of this. Don't be frightened, Miss Picolet. I only blame you for not coming to me. I have long known your circumstances, and the fact that you are poor, and that you have an imbecile sister to support, and that this man is your disreputable half-brother. And that he threatens to hang about here and make you lose your position unless you pay him to be good, is well known to me, too.

"We will have no more of this fellow's threats," continued Mrs. Tellingham, sternly. "You will give him none of your hard-earned money, Miss Picolet. Tony, here, shall see him off the grounds, and if he ever appears here again, or troubles you, let me know and I shall send him to jail for trespass. Now, remember—you Jean Picolet! I have your record and the police at Lumberton shall have it, too, if you ever trouble your sister again."

"Ah-ha!" snarled the big man, looking evilly at Ruth. "So the little Mademoiselle betrayed me; did she?"

"She has had nothing to do with it—save to have had the misfortune of losing the letter you gave her to deliver to Miss Picolet," Mrs. Tellingham said, briefly. "I had her here to identify you, had Miss Picolet not come out to meet you. Now, Tony!"

And big as the harpist was, and little as the old Irishman seemed, there was that in Tony Foyle's eye that made the man pick up his harp in a hurry and make his way from the campus.

"Child! go in to bed," said Mrs. Tellingham. "Not a word of this, remember. Thank goodness, *you* are one girl who can keep a secret. Miss Picolet, I want to see you in my study. I hope that, hereafter, you will give me your confidence. For you need fear no dismissal from the school over such a misfortune as is visited upon you."

She took the sobbing, trembling French teacher away with her while Ruth ran up to Duet Two in the West Dormitory, in a much excited state of mind.

Fortunately both Helen and Mercy had dropped to sleep and none of the other girls seemed to have heard the harp at midnight. So there was no talk this time about the Ghost of the Campus. To the other girls at Briarwood, the mystery remained unsolved, and the legend of the marble harp was told again and again to the Infants who came to the school, with the added point that, on the night Ruth Fielding and Helen Cameron had come to the hall, the marble harp was again heard to sound its ghostly note.

No thought of such foolish, old-wives' fables troubled Ruth Fielding's dreams as she lay down on this night which had seen the complete exposure of the campus mystery and the laying of the

campus ghost. She dreamed, instead, of completing her first term at Briarwood with satisfaction to herself and her teachers—which she did! She dreamed of returning to the old Red Mill and being joyfully received by Aunt Alviry and Uncle Jabez—which she did! She dreamed, too, of joining Helen Cameron and her mid-winter party at Snow Camp and enjoying quantities of fun and frolic in the wintry woods; which, likewise, came true, and which adventures will be related in good time In the next volume of this series: "Ruth Fielding at Snow Camp; Or, Lost in the Backwoods."

"I am so glad it is over!" said Ruth to herself, as she retired. "I hope there is no more trouble."

And here let us for the time being say good bye to Ruth Fielding and her chums of Briarwood Hall.

THE END

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